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Eileen Gregory: On Education

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Interview with Dr. Eileen Gregory

JP: Today is Thursday, 19\textsuperscript{th} (of October, 2017) and I’m here with Dr. Eileen Gregory. Thank you for sitting down with me.

Dr. Gregory: You bet. You bet. Happy to.

JP: So, to start off, why did you decide to become an English professor?

Dr. Gregory: All right. I think because of an inspiring teacher. I think that’s often a motive and she really had very high aims for her – it’s Dr. Cowan. She had very high aims for her students and we just kind of naturally assumed that we were going to become college teachers. Also, just that I did have a feeling after a certain point, as an undergraduate, that I had received so much. You know, I was just full of all this passion for my subject and I had received so much. You know, you just kind of naturally WANT to pass it on. It’s just kind of a natural thing to want to because you want to talk about it and you want somebody to share in the passion.

JP: How long have you been a professor here?

Dr. Gregory: 44 years.

JP: 44 years? Wow! What advice would you have for a first-year teacher or professor?

Dr. Gregory: Okay, I do think – you know, you’re coming out of an education background in which you are taught methods and kind of have a framework for approaching the classroom and all of that, but even so, when push comes to shove you are there in front of students. And I guess, you know, looking back to my very first teaching experience, you kind of begin with models of teachers that you’ve known that have been effective and that really have affected you. It’s hard not to have their example in mind. You know, how would so and so do this? Often, it’s a little bit paralyzing because that teacher was so spectacular. You feel always like you’re never going to match them but I think we just have a lot of models. So, I don’t think there is anything wrong with that, you know, that you begin with images of the teachers that you know.

Also, I think one thing that has kept me from still loving what I do is that it’s important to connect individually with your students as much as possible and get to know them individually. It’s very hard to do that. Well, you’re in education so you’re going to be dealing with lower school students, right?
JP: Yeah, actually, I’m in a high school.

Dr. Gregory: Oh, in high school?


Dr. Gregory: Oh, I see. Math? Uh-huh. Well, you know, I think the thing that matters the most to young people at any age and especially at that age and in college, is when a teacher really recognizes who they are. They recognize what their potential is. They are looking at me. They are seeing me. So, I do think that’s what gives you, you know, allows you to have heart but it also really makes it effective for the students. I was a science major when I was in high school and coming into college and I had wonderful physics and chemistry and math teachers that recognized me. Yeah, me… me, personally.

So, those, for me, are the two things. Don’t hesitate to model yourself after your teachers and, you know, discipline and all that, I don’t know what to tell you about but those two things are important.

JP: One of the things we’ve been talking about recently in class is how to integrate, like you said, an emphasis on recognizing the student and their potential along with the curriculum and kind of the balance that those have. In teaching the core curriculum in the grade books works. What is your response to students who don’t really see the purpose for studying grade books versus just kind of a general English curriculum?

Dr. Gregory: Well, I do think that a curriculum needs justification. I mean, that is it ought not just be accepted as a given and, you know, the answer to a student who is bewildered about it and saying, well, this is just the way it is and these are great works. We’re reading them because, you know, somebody said they were good. That is just NOT – I do NOT use the word great and I try not to use the word classical. But I think it’s – I want us to be reading them. I did think about this question and, you know, the way I say it is that these ideas, these books, made you who you are. They shaped your world. They shaped who you are.

I mean, so we think of things the way that we do in part because of these writers and thinkers of various kinds. So, it’s not just that your world exists because of them and is the way that it is because of them but YOU are the way you are. You are the way that you understand, you know, more like the way that you understand
thinking. So, it’s kind of like not wanting to know them firsthand is kind of like not wanting to know your grandparents. It’s kind of like that’s where I come from. So, to me, another way of putting this is ancestry. It’s your genealogy.

But I do think that at the high school level, I mean, you’re doing math and so that’s kind of specialized thing but at no point can a teacher just kind of tell a student we’re reading it because we’re reading it, you know. You really need to make a case for it and take the question seriously.

JP: Right. I mean, it’s especially true in math where a lot of students are kind of, you know, why are we learning this? That’s something that I kind of struggled with going into my student teaching.

Dr. Gregory: Right.

JP: But I do think you’re right. You need some sort of answer. It can’t just be we’re doing it just because.

Dr. Gregory: Right. Right. We can’t FUNCTION without math.

JP: Right. Right. So, in the sense that these works are kind of a foundation for our modern understanding, how do you think students have reading habits as these books have changed over the course of your tenure?

Dr. Gregory: Well, to tell you the honest truth and this is true about writing too, I don’t think, in my experience, that student’s reading habits have necessarily changed or that their writing has gotten worse. I feel like there are two scenarios. There’s an academics – you know, when academics get together they only thing they can agree to talk about is how bad students are. So, I don’t like that. I mean, I HATE it. I hate when teachers get together and, you know, they’re doing this and they’re doing that. It’s kind of like old codgers grumbling.

The default attitude is that things are getting worse generation, so the default attitude is a declined model and I just don’t buy that. I just never experienced it. Students, when I first see their writing as freshmen, it leaves a lot to be desired but I think I’ve had the same impediments, you know, that same hump to get over with freshmen as long as I’ve been teaching here and before I taught here. It’s because they need to learn, you know, and write. So, I don’t think – I mean, we’re privileged at UD in the sense that we get students who already have basic preparation even so.
So, in terms of reading, I do understand that it may be some students just haven’t had a lot of experience reading the kind of books they read in the core that are really very dense and very demanding. They’re reading Plato’s Republic the first semester, you know, and The Alien the first semester but I think those ARE difficult books. It doesn’t surprise me at ALL that the students have difficulty reading them. So, I guess I’ve never been concerned with that question, you know, with a decline in habits. I mean, again, it’s partly just that we have a privileged arena here at UD.

I do think technology is adding a level of distraction that I don’t know quite what the end result of that will be but that’s not really necessarily reading and writing.

Right. Do you see any change in perspective on these types of books... these kinds of fundamental ideas in both their writing and their interpretation of them as they read? Because, obviously, there is kind of – or at least there is talk about a big shift in perspective from a modern generation versus an older one. Do you see that at all in your classroom?

I don’t. This is the thing, JP, the students who come here come here because they want to, or their parents want them to. So, I don’t know whether the answers are accurate answers in terms of the wider culture because I don’t think the curriculum such as we have has been in common place for decades and decades. So, I think the typical situation of not having a curriculum in a college university has been in place for about 50 years (since the 60s), so it’s really in the 60s and 70s the curriculum began to be just tossed out. And along with that, any kind of expectations of being a kind of cannon of works that you ought to know.

So, I think that attitude still prevails at-large and that most people, even if they ARE readers, and if they are fairly well-educated in terms of a good college, they know only contemporary things and they think only about contemporary things. I don’t know whether that’s really your question.

I mean, it’s kind of going against the grain to ask people to read and it’s even disapproved of for political reasons to ask them to read, you know, Dante or Homer.

Yeah, yeah. Looking at –
Looking at higher education, as a whole, do you think students view college differently now than when you began teaching? Do you think that they look at it more as kind of an expectation for them or still kind of as a privilege to come to a place like this?

I think that has been shifting more in the past couple of decades than before, especially since 2008 because there was a HUGE outcry then about liberal arts education being worthless and a waste of time. The only thing valuable was some sort of vocational training, so skills education and a real concerted attack on liberal arts education publicly all over the place was not abetted. I mean, it was abetted, in fact, by the government, by the Education Department in emphasis that Obama put on things but I’m sure the same thing that were really continuing from Bush.

So, the kind of – whenever politicians are thinking about education they are not thinking about a traditional education at all. They’re thinking about basics such as reading and writing. They’re thinking about jobs. They’re thinking about jobs, so I do think that students and parents are very, very concerned about jobs. Maybe more than I have seen in the past. It may pass because I think there’s a lot of counterarguments being made about the value of certain kinds of education. But, I mean, I think the whole idea of a university education is really in transition, you know. I mean, it’s big scale transition we’re under. So, I don’t know in 50 years whether we’ll even HAVE universities, so we’re really in a transitional time.

Right. Kind of going off that, if you could have some sort of say in what college education would look like down the road, what would you think a couple of major points would be that you’d like to see going forward?

Are you talking about college education generally?

As a whole or even just at UD, the next ten or so years down the road, based on your experiences and moving forward.

Well, there are two different things I would wish for. You know, it’s hard to talk in general about what I would want from a college education because it’s SO huge. I mean, the universities are so huge. They offer such a diversity. Excuse me, I’ve been talking all day.

No, that’s fine.
Dr. Gregory: The one thing that we do here, which is good, is we teach students to be reflective. You know, if they don’t learn to be reflective when they’re in their own families or influences coming into college, then we teach them a way, kind of a discipline of really thinking through questions, thinking through issues, you now, questioning and doubting themselves and their own attitudes. So, I do think that it’s important. I think, however, education generally – well, if there is anything that at a state university, say, or at a large university, people STILL associate with liberal arts virtues.

Well, it’s called critical thinking and I hate the phrase because, I mean, I’m not really thinking about that. That means you can analyze a social circumstance be skeptical of it and not swallow things that are given to you by politicians and stuff like that. But moral reflectivity, you know, moral reflection is just not that common. Anyway, it’s hard for me to generalize about education. We have enough of that. I mean, we do that and what I would hope for us is at the other end I think we need to embrace the contemporary moment more and really articulate to students and encourage them to consider WHY what they’ve learned is important in relation to the contemporary world. So, I think we just have too much of a divide between everything you’ve learned here and then a contemporary world. So, you know, where ELSE except in encountering the issues in the contemporary world would you find the greatest value in liberal arts education? So, we just don’t do enough of it and I wish we had more variety in teaching religion as well. You know, it’s just that our students need to know world culture, world religion more than we teach. So, our focus has been western but we just have almost nothing, you know, one or two courses. So, those are the things I wish we could grow into.

JP: Kind of going off that, what role do you think faith plays at the University of Dallas begin a Catholic university and a lot of the student population being Catholic? What role do you see that playing in the classroom setting?

Dr. Gregory: In the classroom?

JP: Yeah.

Dr. Gregory: Well, to tell you the truth, I hope it doesn’t play a lot. I hope it doesn’t have a lot of visibility in the classroom except in theology classes where it can’t be avoided. When you’re in history class you’re talking about – I mean, you’re always reading writers who are speaking from some sort of context of faith. Our work is intellectual. So, I mean, I do feel fortunate in being at a Catholic
school because I think strangely the Catholic faith has always been to intellectual inquiry and it has been my experience that there is a certain kind of – even though the church puts restrictions as to the kinds of things that are heretical and not heretical, and there are certain kinds of limits, apparently, as to where you can go, you can go pretty far in terms of intellectual inquiry.

But there is just a spirit of being able to ask questions about things. I think that’s very liberating and, in fact, it doesn’t exist when you don’t have faith. You just don’t ask, or you don’t have a context of faith, you just don’t ask questions. It’s my faith, it’s your faith, it’s my idea, it’s your idea, so you’re not really thinking in the context of let’s talk about this or is that really true or why do you think that way? So, for me, it’s a wonderful context in which to conduct a liberal education. But, to me, the cultivation intellectual life is our job. It’s my job. It’s not my job to talk about, to promulgate faith. We read writers who are, like Dante, who is totally within it but it’s an imagination of faith. It’s an imagination of the afterlife. I don’t know whether I believe in Dante. I mean, I believe in him as much as – but I believe in Homer. When I’m reading Homer, I believe in the Homeric gods, you know. It’s hard for me to believe in Milton’s God but, again, I’m saying – so, you understand what I’m trying to get at?

JP: Yes.

Dr. Gregory: I think in the classroom, you know, it ought to be there inasmuch as our subject matter leads us and as much as it has a presence within the thing that we’re teaching. Then we view it somewhat critically. So, in history, for instance, you are constantly talking about any of these faiths from the historical perspective and they’re very limited and there are lots of bloody mistakes along the way.

JP: Very tied in with the idea of a cover of self-reflection and critical thinking, you would say?

Dr. Gregory: Right. Right, uh-huh.

JP: What is your goal for your students? When you begin a year or halfway through the year, what do you hope for them to take away from a class that you would teach?

Dr. Gregory: Yeah, I gave some thought to that question and I think, you know, teachers have subject matters and so at one level I WANT them, you know, I’m teaching literature and I really want them to love the books that we’re reading. I want them – I’m the kind of teacher
who just likes to have them really enter into the imagination of the
work and see its richness because I really think the works are just
amazing. But beyond that, you know, I’m going back to what I
said before. I want them to have the capacity for reflection. As a
literature teacher, I want them to have a passion for language. They
love English and that’s when teaching writing comes into it.

The care with writing… just caring about your own writing, much
less caring about just the amazing things that writers of English do
with the language. So, that’s my particular disciplinary motive.
That’s what our junior poet project really does. Students fall in
love with their poet’s work and they live in the language. Then, of
course, I want them to mature distinctly into who they are, you
know, and that’s why I’m going back to getting to know students
individually at least as much as you can because you want them to
– they are each distinct, so all of the writing that we ask you to and
the thinking that we ask you to do is partly so that you can find
your own position and your own place in relation to what you’re
reading.

JP: What has continued to motivate you to keep teaching throughout
these years? What makes you come back every year?

Dr. Gregory: Yeah, well, I just have a lot of fun. It’s a lot of work but, I mean,
I’ve thought about this because I’ve thought a lot about retiring.
I’m at the retirement age and, I mean, at the beginning of the year
thinking should I retire this year? Should I retire maybe next year?
I get into a classroom and I’m just having such a blast and so
there’s just – a classroom is just a wonderful container. It’s just a
wonderful container. I mean, and unlike any other experience you
have in life where you are the teacher, you’re in charge of it, you
can make something happen, you can illuminate something, you
can bring something to clarity, and if you’re really lucky, you’ve
got a whole class coming with you.

So, it’s being in the presence of, for me, these wonderful writers
that are SO amazing, so large, and then it’s also just having this
experience of really great students, you know. I mean, I’ve got a
Lit. Trad. 4 Class right now that I just have so much fun. I just
LOVE it, so it’s hard for me to think of giving that up.

JP: Yeah, definitely.

Dr. Gregory: I mean, I have been in context in my first years of teaching when I
had – in my first year of teaching I had all 8:00 classes, all
freshman composition, and the students in those classes wrote in
about four different dialects and it’s very demoralizing. I mean, so the experience I have had is a very privileged experience. But, you know, I think even then those extremely hard and extremely demoralizing where the rubber hits the road as the student is really thinking that the student really has been liberated somehow just in terms of something was crippling them in the writing and they can kind of get past it. So, that’s it.

JP: That’s awesome. Well, is there anything you’d like to add?

Dr. Gregory: I think I’ve said my say.

JP: Okay. Awesome, awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time.

Dr. Gregory: Yeah, you bet. You bet.

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Duration: 31 minutes