

**Interview Transcription: Kate Stephenson***Assistant Professor, Department of English*

**KATE STEPHENSON:** The courses I teach are first year writing seminars and they're entitled Writing about Food Equity. In these classes, the students work with community partners once a week, in addition to coming into class and talking about, discussing academic texts that we read together. In one of the classes, the students are paired with the Haven, which is our local homeless shelter, and also with Loaves and Fishes, which is a food pantry. The class is divided—half go one place and half go to another, which is also kind of a nice way to get more of a sense of the work that's going on in the Charlottesville area. And then the second class is paired with a community garden and the PB&J Fund, which is an educational kitchen for low-wage families and students. In that class again, the students are divided between these two partners, not exactly evenly, but it gives us fodder for experiential differences and conversations that I think really add to the academic part as well.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What do students do in the class?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** In the actual classroom, of course, one of our main goals is the teaching of writing. Students are all first years, so they are learning to write for college, basically. And to do that, we obviously practice a lot. We have lots of writing workshops where the students are discussing their writing with their peers as well. And then the background or the content that they're writing about is the experiences at the community partners and the text that we're reading in the classroom, some of which are sort of very academic texts about systemic racism, about privilege, about food equity, about housing affordability. And then some are TED talks or actual visits from community members that come in and talk to us about what is the Haven doing or we've also had some writers from our Haven Writer's Circle come in and talk to the students, too, about their experiences. It's hopefully a chance for students to learn that there all kinds of knowledge out there. It's not always stuff that we find in peer reviewed journals in the library.

And so my hope is that in this class, they're looking into all these different kinds of knowledge, the way it's generated, and then being able to not just converse about it and know about it, but then begin to generate some kind of new thinking, some kind of new knowledge in collaboration with the people they're meeting. Because for a lot of UVA students, they're much more diverse than we give them credit for, I think, but for a lot of the students in my classroom, especially since many of them are first years, they don't know much, if anything, about the Charlottesville community. They don't know much at all about this new place that they're living, working, and learning in. I think this class is just one way to introduce them to what's going on around them.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What are you hoping for the writing itself? What are your goals or their goals for the writing in this class?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I think that really goes to kind of the heart of the course and why this idea for a community engagement course writing seminar emerged, and that was that I've taught writing for,

gosh, almost 20 years now. And for many of those years, I taught classes, like writing about the Harlem Renaissance, or writing about food and literature, or writing about photography. And these were all really interesting topics, at least I thought that. Most of the students seemed engaged, but I really wanted the students to feel more of a connection to their writing.

One of the main goals of this class is for students to leave knowing, realizing, feeling that their writing can do something beyond the walls of the classroom, that they can use writing to create change, that it can be a tool for activism. And also, just the principles of writing that we hope our students will employ for the rest of their time in college, right? We talk about what it means to conduct research responsibly. What is a good source? How do we evaluate that? How do we use evidence cogently? And in my class, in particular, too, we talked about different kinds of evidence. Again, that is not always the sort of scholarly generated academic text that we might be most expecting in a university setting.

The goals of my class in terms of being a writing class are very similar to any writing class that you would see probably at any university, right? We want them to be competent, graceful, passionate writers. But I think what I hope this class gives them that's a little different is this idea that writing is a public conversation. It's a social act. And it's something that I hope they can use in that way, not just for the next three years, but throughout their lives, right, that that writing is a tool for not just their voice, but to give voice to other vulnerable populations, or marginalized people that maybe aren't heard as often as they should be.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Are the pieces disseminated beyond the classroom? I remember I attended a work symposium that you did, but is that part of the course for what they do? They know that what they write will be read by an outside audience?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** Exactly. They know from the beginning of the class that the projects we do will move beyond the walls of the classroom. And that happens in several different ways. First of all, we have a community writing symposium at the end of each semester, and we invite community members and other classes, administrators, faculty. It's voices from all around the Charlottesville community and the university.

At that symposium, the students present their final projects. The final projects have been sort of used or published outside the class as well. For example, one student wrote several blogs for the community garden website last semester. We've had several documentaries that have been used on the partners' websites. There have been other kinds of projects, too, that were more specific kind of research projects that the community partner asked for help with. We've had some photo essays that have been used in newsletters or, again, on website. So, moving into the community in ways that before I did classes like this, the student writing stayed between me and the students.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** We get to mid-March 2020. You get an email from President Ryan stating that in one week, your course will be transitioned online. How did you first react to that news? How did the students react to it? And how did the community partners react?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** When I learned that we were moving our classes online, I think my first reaction was, oh my gosh, I don't know what I'm going to do. Because my class is so dependent on the students not only being in Charlottesville but being able to go to these community partners and work and interact with people there. That was my first reaction.

My second reaction was, oh my gosh, we promised all these things to our community partners that now I don't know how or if we're going to be able to deliver them. One of my classes was working with a writing group at the Haven to create an online zine, featuring the writing of guests there. And so, immediately I thought, how can we continue this kind of work? And that was really one of the saddest parts of the semester was having to email and call the community partners and my contacts there and just realize that they also were at the edge of their limits, that their worlds have changed and many of those partners, for example, Loaves and Fishes, couldn't use any volunteers for many months. They were relying on six staff members to feed something like 400 families a week.

When I learned we were moving online, it was just sort of this moment of horror. I didn't know what I was going to do. But also, part of me wondering, oh, maybe my students will be happy, right? They just got two extra hours at least a week in their schedule, because now they don't actually have to do anything beyond the sort of written coursework. And so, I wondered, maybe some of them will be pleased about that, but that wasn't the case. I think, actually, I was amazed, both amazed and saddened by how upset they were, that these relationships and that this work was over. Many of them emailed me individually and then when we had live seminars, they would ask, what's going on at the Haven? Or have you heard from Rob? Have you seen Joe and Josie (who were two of our very regular writers at the writers' group)?

So, even after only working there about four weeks, they had made some connections that were meaningful to them, that made moving online really hard. Because all I could do from that point on was just sort of update them myself. I could tell them, oh, I talked to so and so and this is what they're doing, or, at the Haven, we now have housed 30 people for 30 days. That's actually really a lot of progress and something that's good and beneficial for those guests, but in terms of the real core of the class, it I felt like it was gone.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What did you do? How did the class change?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I think the class changed in a lot of ways. I think moving online wasn't in the end as detrimental as I expected it to be. We sort of quickly pivoted from looking at food equity and the unhoused in Charlottesville to looking at those populations in the students' own local communities.

Their final project was to choose a group, a vulnerable group, and talk about the ways in which the pandemic had affected that group in their local community. It allowed us to kind of pivot and think about still community-engaged work, but it was clearly more observational. They were not leaving their homes to do any of this. It was more sort of academically research-based in terms of there wasn't as much human interaction. But we were still able to think about some of the same issues like why are people of color being much more affected by this pandemic than white people. We were able to still dig deep into issues of social justice and racism and poverty. But instead of focusing just on the Charlottesville community, they were bringing in experiences, research, and ideas from wherever they were living currently, which was actually really interesting because I had students from all over the country and the world. I had students in New York City, North Carolina, Texas, Panama, China, Georgia, Korea. So, we were getting stories and observations about the ways in which these communities were functioning all over the country and the world. So, I think in some ways, this was an interesting pivot. It's not what I would choose every semester, but it enabled us to still think about the same issues and still think about community. But we just had to redefine that a little bit.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** That sounds like your community even expanded.

**KATE STEPHENSON:** Absolutely. It did. And it made for some really fascinating conversations, too. A student who actually ended up staying in Charlottesville until the last two weeks of the semester and then she flew back to China, so she had really interesting observations about the different ways the pandemic was being treated and handled in those two countries. And just the differences between some of the students that ended up staying in Charlottesville versus those that were in New York City. I mean, I had two students in New York City, and it was at times, just, we would get on to our live seminar and immediately people would look at those two students and say, how are you? How are things going? And I think that was another real moment of connection that I hadn't expected, that actually dispersing in some ways made us feel connected in unexpected ways as well.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Isn't that one of the paradoxes of this whole isolation? People in many ways feel more connected than they did before the isolation.

**KATE STEPHENSON:** And I think we're appreciating the connections that we have when we're in person much more than we did before as well. Yeah, this movement online really made me think, too, about the challenges that a lot of our students face in their home lives. There was such a difference for some of my students in the ways or the environments they learned in when they were here on grounds versus what they returned to at home. A lot of my students had significant responsibilities. When they returned home, one of my students was taking care of her two elderly grandmothers. Another student was the oldest of five and her parents were both in the healthcare industry. She was a student full time, but she was also in charge of four younger siblings who are no longer in school. And so, there were these life challenges that I think our students, when they're learning on grounds, are shielded from. And I think that really changed my teaching as well, in terms of just compassion for my students, just respect for them as well.

And just, I was just amazed, by the end of the semester, their resiliency and their diligence and just their commitment because in so many ways, online learning, it's harder than learning face to face in terms of motivating yourself and still finding an energy to care. I really was moved by that watching my students.

The difference, too, for some students, going home was a real safe haven. But for others, that did mean a lot of responsibility. And for some of my students, it was really, or this still is really a time of anxiety and fear. I had one student whose parent is a grocery store worker, an essential worker that is going to work every day and was not protected in the beginning. I think things have gotten a lot better. And that was something that was interesting, too. We could see over the course of the six or eight weeks that we were together online, how things changed as well. And I had several students with families in the healthcare industry. That going home for some was really kind of a source of fear and anxiety instead of safety and focus.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** As you think about the students' learning in the class, the subject of writing or writing about food equity, how did this crisis affect their understanding of the discipline itself do you think?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I think, that's a great question. I think in terms of understanding the discipline, I think for a lot of the students, especially those that were in maybe more than difficult home situations, writing became either one a source of anxiety, right—how am I going to get this done when I've got all these other responsibilities—or a source of kind of coping as well. I think I struggled with that final

assignment, thinking maybe this is the last thing we want to really be writing and thinking about this pandemic right outside our door. But I think it turned out to be really helpful for a lot of students, seeing writing as a meaningful way to couple narratives, their own story, the stories that we're seeing around them with research that they still have to incorporate into these final projects. Balancing these different kinds of knowledge, I think was really helpful, hopefully, and I think just the act of writing in this environment became much more important. And I think the students were much more interested in hearing each other's stories than maybe during a sort of more traditional moment.

I was worried about the ways students were going to cope with their home lives. And so, we only met once a week in a live seminar and the other day we devoted to discussion board work. I put pretty detailed, substantial prompts on the discussion board that related to the academic texts we were reading. That actually, I thought, was going to, I don't know, be compromised in some way, like not as much fun. Some might find it sort of busy work. But I was surprised how seriously they took it.

And I also had not thought about how democratizing that discussion board can be. One of my light bulb moments this semester was how much I kind of privilege the gregarious students in class who are very outgoing and excited to participate and how often those voices are the ones that are heard the most. And when we moved to the discussion board, I realized how many smart, compassionate, productive voices have been in the shadows. And that for me was sort of an awful teaching moment, but also a really important one because I think moving forward, I'm going to keep a lot of that discussion board work central to the class, because I feel like it gave those students who are maybe a little more shy, or a little less willing to articulate their ideas in real time, it really gave them a voice that they haven't, that maybe I haven't been listening closely enough to.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Were there any other insights that you gained into the discipline itself of writing or yourself as a writer or specifically writing about food inequality?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I would say, just back to that point of writing as a means of creativity and self-expression and coping in times of trauma, I think we often look to the arts for that. And so, giving students the means and the opportunity to write. I think often people might go play their guitar or they might go paint, but for a lot of people, writing is one of those experiences that can be both fun. But maybe for a lot of people, it can also be anxiety provoking. I think for students just being given that opportunity and chance to write, maybe shows them that it can be just as helpful as some of these other art forms and expressing and sharing ideas.

The other thing I learned, too, is just something that I always tell my students that we think through the act of writing, that for many of us, we don't know what we think until we write it down. And when we write things down, they suddenly become clearer than if we just talked about them. I found that happening in the class as well, again, especially on the discussion board, that students wrote more in the online version of this class than they do in the traditional class because of that increased discussion board work. And in a lot of ways, I felt like that really enacted or modeled an academic conversation in written form.

I often tell my students that academic writing is really a conversation, right? Few academic papers, few research projects actually solve a problem forever, right? It's just adding something to a conversation. And so, I think in the online environment, we're much more able to use writing to model that kind of academic conversation. In some ways, I guess I was strangely surprised that the online learning and teaching was more productive in some ways than the traditional classroom setting, at least for a writing

seminar because I felt like the students got to see my writing more. They got to see each other's writing more. And I think moving forward, too, that's something I'm going to try lean on in traditional, real-time teaching, that we do more of this sort of public writing.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** It sounds like you gained in that, but you lost in terms of the intimacy, the experiential component with the community.

**KATE STEPHENSON:** It depends how you define community. We definitely lost in terms of getting to know the Charlottesville community and getting to know the particular community partners that were slated to work with. And probably also we lost community in the classroom, too, but I think that we were able in some ways to continue and preserve that. And partly I think that came through the online seminars and just I tried in the beginning of each seminar to give the students a chance to just check in with each other. And I would always send out an email on Sunday nights telling them what was going to happen for the week and kind of a little preview, right, what we would be doing, what work they needed to think about, the questions we'll be discussing in class. And I always sent out a, I didn't call it this, but I have since learned the term community builder. I would always send out a prompt. So, think about something creative you did this week and tell us about it. Or what new thing did you learn this week? Or what thing did you watch on Netflix that we should all watch? Just kind of prepping them for some very short question that we could all open with, and I think that helped to sort of keep that human connection alive that I worried we would lose when we moved online.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** There's a framework known as the Community of Inquiry framework that was developed specifically for online teaching, going all the way back to the early 90s. It's divided into three parts: the cognitive presence, the teaching presence, and the community presence, but the word presence is in all of those. Online teachers have been thinking for many years about the vital importance of creating community online. And so, you intuitively got that right. Being very intentional about that is something that they talk about a lot. And so, you were already doing that intuitively.

**KATE STEPHENSON:** Well, part of that comes from the fact that I taught online before I came to UVA. So, I had a little bit of experience with that, but I think that that word presence, and I would maybe also add like immediately, too. I worked really hard at the end of the semester to be present for the students as individuals as well. If I noticed that someone didn't post on the discussion board on time or someone missed a live seminar, I would reach out to them individually by email. And I think maybe that's something that most of us did intuitively. But doing it right away, right after class or being even more available.

I found myself, online teaching for me took a lot more time than teaching in person and part of that was the follow up. If I didn't see someone in class, it was suddenly much more important to me to know that they were okay, first of all, and then just to reach out, not with if you don't do this by this deadline, but just reaching out, are you okay, is there anything I can do to help you complete this assignment. And I think that goes a long way, and then making people feel connected when they're in seminar or on the discussion board. But yeah, that immediacy and the connection is really important. If you're not in classes, it's so easy just to stop showing up, I think.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** As you think about this past semester, what does a successful class look like? Or what does it look like to be successful, for you as a teacher? Did any of that change, your definition of teaching success change as a result of what happened this semester?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I don't think my definition changed, but I think it intensified. One of the mantras that I kind of repeat to my students throughout the semester is that in my class, we learn with our minds, with our hearts, and our bodies. And I think my students come into my class really, really comfortable learning with their brains, right? They know where to find sources, and they know how to put together a reasonably competent paper. But many of them have not ever been taught or asked to learn with their hearts and their bodies as well.

And I think that being online opened us up to really learning with our hearts and growing compassion and empathy in really pretty moving ways. I think too, that this is in many ways cliché, but that notion that our students in 10 years aren't going to remember the facts they learn in our classes, but they will remember the experiences, the feelings, the connections that they make. And so, to me successful teaching is arming them with the skills, the writing skills to be able to express those moments, right, when they have opened their hearts and minds so that they can share that with other people. But I think successful teaching is no different online than it is in person that comes down to creating that connection, creating a passion for subject matter, and just creating compassion and connections with other people too. And I think that can happen in different, but just as moving ways online as it can in person.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** So, how about you personally? You've talked a little bit about the students, you've talked a little bit about you as a teacher. Any life lessons that you learned as a human being, as a mother, as a daughter, as a citizen, as a result of what we went through this past semester?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I don't know that I'm done learning. I feel like the first few weeks into this pandemic, I honestly didn't really think a whole lot about myself. I felt like I was trying to keep my students calm. My 36 first year students who weren't really used to living away from home or on Grounds or really being college students yet, I was worried about keeping them calm. I was worried about my own kids. And I think I'm still figuring all this out. I found the first six weeks I had a really hard time concentrating. I thought oh my gosh, six weeks, or however long this lasts with no social activities. I mean, in a good week, I read two or three books a week, right? I was like, oh my gosh, I'm going to read so much. And I did not read one book in those six weeks outside of work, which I think really speaks to just the underlying anxiety and distraction a lot of us are feeling. And I think I'm starting to move out of that now, hopefully, but I'm still looking for those lessons and trying to kind of process and think about what those might be.

But I think, in some ways, just the cliché of slowing down, and connecting, and listening. Those are some of the lessons that I'm reminded of, I think. I know I'm supposed to be doing those, but when social life and all these other things fall away, I think just listening to the world, to the people in my life, that's probably the biggest lesson I'm learning right now.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** There are community-engaged teachers who are going to be transitioning these courses online or to a hybrid version of whatever it looks like. Based on your experiences, what advice would you have for those community-engaged teachers who will soon be teaching their courses online?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** I guess two layers. The first layer is just to think about what the core, the heart of your class is and to try to see how you can preserve that in an online environment. Because I think there are ways usually to do that.

And then the second level is just much more practical. I think being intentional about that human connection, and also thinking, too, about choice. And how actually, we might think in crisis like this we want to give our students more choice, more flexibility, more agency. In fact, I think we want to do the opposite sometimes. That in an online environment, especially during a crisis, we actually want to reduce the number of choices we give our students. And I think a lot of us saw the anxiety choice can induce when students were trying to decide whether they wanted a grade, or they wanted credit for the class. So, I actually intentionally reduced choice in my classes. If there were a variety of prompts for them to write about, I reduced it down to one. Instead of designing their own projects at the end of the class, I gave them one topic that everyone would write about, sort of from different perspectives. I was consciously trying to reduce the choices they had and be as clear and transparent as I could be. But at the same time, I was trying to give them more agency by letting them decide how they were going to complete the assignments. In terms of submitting them, I was much more flexible with the due dates. I was also much more flexible in a lot of ways. With my time, I offered more office hours. I actually looked at more writing than usual in terms of students wanting to turn in drafts before they got their grades. I looked at a lot more writing that way. But I think to me that was kind of counterintuitive to actually reduce the amount of choice that they had at this moment in an effort to kind of make them feel more comfortable.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** You reduced the amount of choice in what they chose but increased the choice and how they could do it.

**KATE STEPHENSON:** And I think too, I was also really honest with them about the problems I was facing. Like, for example, right now, in this interview, we've been together for like 15 minutes. And when I'm teaching for 15 minutes, I'm up and walking around the classroom. I'm talking to students. We're in group work, we're in pairs sometimes, but when we're doing this interview, I'm not just sitting still, I'm sitting still in a really small space, making sure I'm looking at a tiny camera. And that's really hard for most people. That's just something I would tell them; this is really uncomfortable to sit here in the Zoom class for an hour and 15 minutes and not be able to walk around. Or, I'm really struggling because it's taking me a lot longer to read all these discussion board posts and write back to them and respond to them than if we were just chatting in class. So, I was trying to kind of tell them my struggles, and then I found that they would tell me theirs back. It was also like a nice way for me to figure out, okay, am I assigning too many readings, or what's really frustrating them in this online world, and it was often a lot different than I thought it would be.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma?

**KATE STEPHENSON:** That's a really hard question. To be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma I think to me means being more connected to not just the students, but also the community partners than even during sort of real time. I think I felt more worried about the lives of my students and the ways they were coping, their mental health, their adjustment, as opposed to kind of just worrying about the course concepts and what they were learning.

I guess what it means is really responding and caring about the whole person in ways that we probably do a little bit all the time, but it just felt much more amplified recently. I will say, Andy, I wonder if you had this experience. I will say this is the first time in 20 years when I said goodbye to my students, I was almost in tears and it's weird because I actually probably knew them less, right? We spent less time



together, but maybe it was just the turmoil and the times, but it was a really hard end to the semester. We couldn't sort of have Bodo's Bagels, right?

I want to know what other people did. I'd love to just have a conversation about that last day of class. I ended up writing them a letter, which I thought this is either going to be like really hokey or it's going to work, and it probably was more hokey than successful, but I didn't know what to do. I mean, at the end of the semester, there's this sort of celebratory feel and we bring them food, or we read each other's work or something.