Exploring the Value of Professors' Investment in Personal Connections with Students

by
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Abstract

In a classroom setting, it can be easy for instructors to fall into a rut or lull with course content and/or teaching style. However, many professors put in daily effort to connect with students and keep their classes engaging not just so their students can learn better, but also so the pupils can grow as people. This project aims to examine the professor perspective of this relationship: what professors themselves learn and gain when they invest in personal connections with students. Much research has already been done on the quantitative benefits students receive from one-on-one connections with their professors. Not as much has been done on the teaching end or the abstract, less definable end, so this investigative project centers around professors' perspectives on the qualitative benefits of investing in personal connections with their students.

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I have always known that education is valuable. My mother has always said when one graduates, it demonstrates not just that they know the academic material, but they have gained a multitude of soft skills, as well — time management, teamwork, how to listen to and cooperate with authority figures. I know from personal experience the extent to which my professors have helped me learn those skills. As my mother is a college lecturer herself, I have also seen behind the scenes how thoroughly college instructors enjoy what they do. I wondered, however, how much of that fulfillment comes directly from the personal connections with students like me who see their relationships with professors as a cornerstone of their college experience. Selfishly, this thesis was designed to find out what exactly professors gain from connecting with us students. We get to know professors from the other side of the lectern, but when that gap is bridged, I theorized, professors stand to gain just as much as students do.

In the world of academia, professors are often reduced to the letters after their name, the course(s) they teach, publications listed on their curriculum vitae, and/or expertise they have gained in their chosen field. These accomplishments often receive more attention than the invaluable bonds between professor and student. This thesis will serve to amend this culture by examining how professors benefit — both in and outside the classroom — when they invest in personal connections with their students.

There is a large existing body of research that shows the quantitative benefits for students when they have a warm yet professional relationship with instructors. Studies have found a correlation between a lack of student-teacher relationships and an increase in the need for classroom discipline. When elementary and middle school teachers rate their classroom dynamic as effective, especially regarding personal closeness with their

students, they use fewer disciplinary techniques and, in turn, rate their time in the classroom as even more effective. One 2023 study found that student-teacher relationships have a positive snowball effect on both teachers and pupils' instruction and transition times in class (Dean and Gibbs, 2023). When teachers and students connect with one another on a human level, the classroom climate is improved. When they treat each other with respect, open-mindedness, and attention, class time is more productive, students are more well behaved, and teachers are more effective and less stressed.

This concept applies not only to grade-school-age students, but to those in higher education, as well. "Relationships are at the very center of every higher education classroom," states a featured scholar in *Relationship-Rich Education* (Felten 81). Another study from 1997 found a correlation between college students with strong academic performance and a secure attachment style to their professors, as opposed to an anxious or avoidant attachment to them (Lopez). The study supports the claim that positive, healthy professor-student relationships directly correlate to students having higher GPAs, lessened anxiety, and more involvement with the university community (Lopez 280).

Most research on professor-student connections focuses on how it affects students, especially using quantitative, easily measurable data. When teachers take initiative to invest in personal bonds with students, students' grades increase, classroom efficacy improves, and the need for classroom discipline decreases. However, there is a hole in the current research this thesis seeks to fill: how professors are affected by these bonds with their students.

Informed by this evidence, this thesis is a qualitative investigation exploring how instructors at Middle Tennessee State University benefit from investing in personal connections with their students.

Ideally, this thesis will promote viewing professors more as people with well-rounded personalities and lives and less as two-dimensional characters teaching a class. The hope for this project is to encourage professors to connect on a more human level with students, promoting both a positive, productive classroom environment and secure, mutualistic classroom relationships. Creating a healthy student-professor dynamic is a long-term goal and an outcome that could be realized at MTSU, but the reality is that students and professors alike must put forth the effort themselves to achieve that goal on an individual level. This project will demonstrate what is to be gained if professors and students decide to do so.

Supporting questions this thesis will explore include, but are not limited to:
What is the value of building a relationship between students and professors?
Does career and/or personal fulfillment improve with strong student-professor relationships?
What steps do professors take to bond with their students?
How can professors benefit from being more open with their students?

This investigation analyzes the qualitative results from one-on-one interviews with six faculty members at Middle Tennessee State University.

The interviews center around professors' perspectives on their connections with students, including their teaching philosophies, how they have fostered those connections, and how they have benefited from those relationships. The goal of

conducting interviews, rather than obtaining more statistics-based data, is to delve deep to learn about professors' point of view when it comes to connecting with students on a human level.

This investigative discussion will provide a valuable piece to the puzzle of human relationships within the context of higher education while encouraging meaningful relationships between professors and their students. The project will not only encourage students to view their professors as people — rather than mere vessels of knowledge — but it will also urge professors to consider making their time spent in front of students warmer and more personal. Both parties will benefit from classroom time if professors are viewed as the round characters they are, rather than sentries whom students must pass on their way to a letter grade at the end of the semester.

Methodology

A total of six professors employed at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) were interviewed about their personal connections with students. The information and perspectives conveyed in the interviews were compared, and common threads and differences were found and reported in the following study.

The professors were selected based on several factors. They were professors whom I have had over the past four years, and they were chosen for this study based on my own experience with their courses and teaching style. I chose professors who clearly put forth effort to get to know their students — myself included, and who went the proverbial extra mile to connect with students.

The selection process was admittedly subjective, but for the nature of this project, it had to be. I chose to interview professors with whom I had personally connected; this

way, results were vetted for accuracy. Finding interview participants based on word of mouth, through snowball sampling, or through professor performance review websites like ratemyprofessors.com would have not been as reliable. If I could not personally cite actions professors took to foster a warm, professional bond with students, I would not know the validity of choosing professors whose classes I had not taken.

Selecting professors was a straightforward task. I chose first the professors with whom I had formed a clear outside-the-classroom connection. The first professor for this category was Leon Alligood, a now-retired journalism professor who was the faculty advisor for *Sidelines*, MTSU's online newspaper, for which I have worked for more than two years. The second was Dr. Rhonda McDaniel, who taught a Buchanan (an MTSU-specific Honors cohort) section of an English course my sophomore year. She and I spoke several times about our shared love of gardening, and I brought a plant to class one day to give to her. Both of these situations clearly indicate a comfortability between student and instructor, and for this reason, these two professors meet this criterion to participate in this study.

The second way I chose participants was by selecting those who had shown extraordinary kindness. This was also a simple task; two years ago, over the course of two semesters, I had to ask for Title IX accommodations. Dr. Ann McCullough, a French professor whom I had for multiple semesters, was quick to adapt and accommodate — a kind and professional act that clearly humanizes the role of professor. Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster, who taught the Buchanan section of macroeconomics, did the same, modifying the mode of his final exam to be more accessible. Both of these professors' actions stood out to me then and have stuck with me until now; they clearly invested extra time and

energy to show kindness to a student, and that speaks volumes about their character and willingness to connect with students in a difficult time.

The third and final group of participants were selected based on their clear expertise and personalization of classroom dynamics and assignment feedback. Dr. Jennifer Woodard, a professor I have had for multiple semesters, teaches several conceptual courses in the journalism department, one of which is on race, gender, and class in the media. These can be difficult ideas to discuss in any setting, let alone an academic one, but she deftly navigated classroom discussions by encouraging students to speak their mind and giving very thorough individualized feedback both in and outside the classroom. Dr. Michael Principe, who taught a Buchanan section of a philosophy course, did something similar. He gave thought-out responses to homework and tied in individual student responses to the next day's lesson. Both of these participants model how to maintain a level of student individuality in a college course, and that speaks to their ability to connect with students not just to make them *feel* heard, but to actually listen to them.

Once potential participants were chosen, I emailed each of the candidates, summarizing the topic and aim of my thesis and explaining why they were selected. We set up one-on-one interviews, and I prepared my questions. The interview questions are listed in Appendix A.

The interviews lasted anywhere from just over 20 minutes to an hour and a half. Natural follow-up questions arose for each of the professors, but the skeleton of the interviews was consistent for all participants. I took handwritten notes and recorded the audio of each interview (with the participants' consent) to reference later for accuracy.

The findings portion of this thesis includes results from the interviews as a whole. Common themes between the interview subjects were found, and trends are noted and analyzed. These themes were noted based on records — written and audio recorded — of the interviews.

In the discussion portion of this thesis, connections are made between what techniques professors use to connect with their students, how participants' teaching philosophies have evolved over the years, and how professors have benefited from these one-on-one connections with their students.

The final portion of the methodology is the creative culmination of this thesis: a personal reflection on my thesis experience and how it relates to my program of study, journalism. The 500-word story comprises the conclusion of this paper and was published in the spring 2024 edition of *Sidelines Magazine* the inaugural magazine edition of MTSU's online newspaper. The goal of publishing a reflection on the process and outcomes of this thesis is to show readers and fellow students that they can combine their passions in a multitude of ways – seeing journalism as an art, completing their Honors thesis, reflecting on the interview process, and writing about it can be done all at once. The reflection is found in Appendix B.

Just as goes for any human relationship, this investigation is qualitative. The goal is not to provide a bulleted list of what can be gained if one becomes a professor or to give a tutorial on how to connect with students, but to analyze an overlooked aspect of college classroom dynamics.

Findings

Conducting these interviews, primarily in professors' offices, I saw them in what could be argued is their home away from home. Since MTSU faculty are required to hold office hours, many take the time to decorate their workspaces with art and throw pillows. Others do not decorate at all but have shelves overflowing with books and manuscripts. The offices of the professors I interviewed were each as different as the people who work in them. Dr. Principe, in the quiet James Union Building, sat relaxed during our 20-minute interview and gave straightforward responses. Dr. McCullough and I spoke for 90 minutes, taking rabbit trails to discuss sexism and capitalism, occasionally interrupted by her cat crawling up to join the Zoom call. The environment and demeanor of the interviews were as different as any six people can be. But just like their offices, each professor demonstrated a clear enthusiasm for their area of study — and, far from my surprise, for their students.

Early in the interview process with the six professors, saturation was reached. Many common themes were noted between their responses on the following topics: strategies to connect with students, teaching philosophies and their evolution over time, and what they have gained from investing in personal bonds with students.

There are many ways to build rapport with students. Several of the study participants understood that these techniques are intuitive and based on natural human care and empathy, but they also take work. Professors must be purposeful with how they connect with their students in order to do so effectively. "My entire underlying philosophy of dealing with people — in any place, any situation — requires that I deal with each person as an individual," said Dr. McDaniel. The first way the study

participants said they do this is by learning names and getting to know their students. This is reportedly the number-one technique "to cultivate a relationship-rich classroom," according to *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College* by Felten and Lambert (85). Every one of the professors I interviewed said they did this, and four of the six responded they did something specific to get to know their students. The latter was often based on their field: for journalism, Leon Alligood sends his students articles based on their reporting focus; for economics, Dr. Sprick Schuster asks students for examples of economic principles relating to their own lives.

Three study participants said they specifically use buffer time before and after class to chat with students or give one-on-one feedback on assignments. According to Felten and Lambert, returning to each student assignments with positive, tailored feedback is the number-two way to create a relationship-rich classroom environment.

Two of the interviewed professors mentioned how they use self-deprecating or self-aware humor to bond with students. Not only does this break the ice and put students at ease, but it also brings to light both the humor and the gravity of being in the classroom. Conveying this relationship dynamic through hyperbolic self-praising jokes and, conversely, self-depreciating humor, these professors use humor to foster a warm classroom atmosphere and poke fun at the complex social dynamic of a classroom, ultimately showing authenticity and trustworthiness, both of which help foster connections between people (Lehman, 2019). Whatever the specific mode of building rapport with their students, professors clearly took intentional steps to identify differences in learning styles and personalities of their students, then meet them halfway to connect with them individually.

On the topic of teaching philosophies, four of the six participants emphasized that theirs have changed over time. This idea was along the vein of having started out more rigid — with hyper-specific, fast-paced lesson plans and lofty goals of every student leaving the classroom an expert at the end of the semester — then becoming more flexible and open-minded regarding both short- and long-term class goals. In regard to current teaching philosophies, all of the participants stated, in some way, they do not know everything. “I'm not one of those professors, you know, who thinks they have all the answers,” said Leon Alligood. What was most interesting was the awareness that each subject demonstrated in their ability to zoom out; they all touched on the fact that they do not know everything. Conscientiousness of the “big picture,” personal mistakes, and the experience of being human — as opposed to an omniscient being in front of the classroom — is an important quality mentioned or implied by all of the interview subjects. Some of the professors conveyed this idea by emphasizing the fact that we are all human, and none of us knows everything. “I have more questions than answers, and that's pretty much the way it is throughout life,” said Leon Alligood. For others, this humility took the form of trust: They have learned over time they don’t know everything, and that is a good thing. Where early in their teaching careers, they would have an entire semester of lessons planned out, they now let student feedback, questions, and comments drive the lesson (or at least be incorporated into the lesson), and the same material is covered in a more organic way.

The idea of a classroom’s being a liminal, or in-between, space — where teacher and student must work together but also have a clear hierarchy — was common across five of the six interviewed professors. Dr. McCullough put this concept in terms of

sociological domains. Dominant sociological domains are where there is a clear power imbalance, like a classroom. Commonality domains are where all parties are on the same sociological level, like spending time with friends. Clearly, there is a power dynamic in a classroom, but when it is both the students' and the professor's goal to have pupils understand course material, they are working together, not unlike in a commonality domain. Dr. Sprick Schuster described this liminal position using logical reasoning. He said if he is talking and students are not, then what he has to say must be important enough for students to listen to. "If I think what I have to say matters, then I have to assume that I'm having an impact." However, that does not mean students also do not have important things to say, so there must be a give and take when in front of the classroom — making it known that students should listen, but also giving them a reason to. One professor agreed the classroom was a sort of liminal space. He originally thought, when he began teaching, that every student would thoroughly read every lengthy assigned reading, take copious notes, and leave the semester complete experts on the subject material. Unsurprisingly, this did not happen. Instead, the professor realized that the goal of the class was not to make every student a master on the subject, but to witness and encourage whatever growth does occur. Thus, the classroom as yet another type of liminal space: one where not only the professor-student relationship is layered, but so is the relationship between student and material.

Along the same vein, five professors specifically addressed the role of power dynamics in their connections with students and agreed they were aware they had to walk the line of connecting with a student without letting it influence their professionalism. The remaining professor acknowledged that being involved in extracurricular

organizations or clubs can affect students, but not in the way of getting "in" with him to receive a better grade — actually, the opposite. He said sometimes, the students who were most involved with the organizations he advises or is also a part of feel more pressure to perform well in class — an unexpected result of the power dynamic in professor-student relationships. One professor, who is a Black woman, had a different take on power structure in the classroom. Instead of it being a given that student perceive a power dynamic between themselves and her, they actually speak to her using her first name or a nickname instead of the proper honorific — taking away her authority as a professor from the get-go. Because of past experiences with discrimination from students, she must first clearly establish a power difference to gain students' respect, then they can speak to each other as people, *then* they can form a more personal bond with one another. Another professor discussed how it is easier to form personal connections with graduate students (due to age) and students whom she does not currently have in class because the difference in power is not so prevalent. Overall, the term "power dynamic" may seem to bring one idea to mind, but professors have diverse understandings of their relationships with students and how other aspects of their identities and ideologies influence their perspective on the issue.

When I asked the interview subjects, "What is the value of investing in personal connections with students?" every one of them paused before answering. I made sure to clarify I was not asking for them personally, as this was after I had asked about their own perspectives on/experiences with the topic, but conceptually. One professor touched on the academic and career-centric benefits that can arise from professor-student bonds, but he went on to include more humanistic, abstract values like the other five did. Answers

ranged from “joy” and “friends” to the most common response, which was the value of connecting with another human being. “Oh my goodness, what have I *not* gained?” said Dr. McDaniel in a lighthearted but valid answer to the question. Two professors emphasized the fact that being in the classroom together is a limited period, so the value of that moment in one’s life comes, at least partly, from its inevitable end. Others discussed the value of togetherness both in and outside the classroom — that learning is a cooperative activity, regardless of who is on which side of the pulpit. The other angle that was emphasized was the value of long-term professor-student bonds. Professors mentioned how it is a privilege to see someone’s worldview evolve and expand over time, how the joy of teaching is witnessing a student’s “aha!” moment they have worked toward, and how nice it is to keep in touch long after students graduate. While the responses to this simple question varied, the spirit was the same across all of them: it is a valuable thing to invest in connections with students because it is valuable to have and to have formed connections with other people.

Discussion

In editing interview transcriptions for privacy and clarity, I revisited — in near painstaking detail — the audio recordings of my conversations with the six professors. Throughout my journalism career, editing or transcribing audio has been some of my favorite work. The listener hears and becomes more familiar with subjects’ different ways of speaking, their verbal pauses of choice, their phrasing, the particular way they stumble over their words or pause so as to avoid doing so. Editing the transcriptions allowed me to ruminate on the message of what the professors expressed in our interviews while getting to know how they express ideas — their aural fingerprint. It also

brought peace of mind to know that this project was based on something so simple — two people talking. That is the beauty of this project, I believe, and the beauty of classroom connections themselves. Both are as simple and as challenging as a conversation.

The six interviews with professors reached saturation very early on. Findings across the interviews were similar on the topics of building rapport with students, teaching philosophies, the classroom as a liminal space, and the general value of investing in personal connections with students. Findings significantly differed only on the topic of power dynamics.

The strongest thread between the interviewed professors and the topics we discussed was balance: between challenging students' academic performance and being lenient when needed; between being an authoritative versus approachable presence; between knowing that what a professor says has the ability to inspire and inform, but also being aware that what they say to their students is simply that — something one human being says to another. "You never know what you might say that might encourage someone, so I try to be really careful with my speech. I don't want to tear anybody down," said Dr. Woodard. The subjects consistently demonstrated and explained that proactivity and conscientiousness are crucial aspects of teaching, acknowledging that what they say to a student has the power to build them up or tear them down. This idea gives more weight to what they say in the classroom, but that weight is balanced by the idea that professors are merely human. These interviews demonstrated how much wisdom is required to be a successful professor, and how much of that wisdom requires and comes from balancing the dozens of intricacies and idiosyncrasies that come up

every day in the classroom. These interviews also demonstrated how little truly wise people realize how wise they are. That energy is channeled not into having the perfect, succinct answer to an interview question about teaching philosophy, but into putting that teaching philosophy into action.

In all, the findings were more abstract than anticipated. It took more time and effort than anticipated to get and fully understand responses to the meatier, more amorphous questions. This is because I anticipated responses to be short, one-word ideas — and some of them were — but many of the interviewees answered the vaguer questions with stories or anecdotes. This was helpful in the interviews because it allowed the subjects to fully explain their thoughts and allowed me to fully understand the point they were wanting to make. At the same time, however, it made it difficult to pinpoint exactly what *is* the value of professors' connecting with their students.

This challenge confirms that these interviews were warranted. Studies have proven that certain rapport-building techniques mentioned above are useful for fostering professor-student relationships, especially giving personalized ("agentic") feedback and demonstrating mutual respect by learning names and giving students space to share their own ideas in class (Griffiths et al., 2023; de Villiers, 2021). The same goes for lightheartedness and self-deprecating humor; one 2012 study shows acknowledgement of one's flaws or humanness is perceived as humility and strengthens trust between leader and follower (Owens and Hekman, 2012).

However, these studies reinforce the gap this investigation aims to fill. The 2023 study on agentic feedback focused on how student performance improves when professors give them tailored feedback; its goal was not to explore what professors gain

from doing so (Griffiths et al., 2023). The 2021 study on leader humility did not explicitly address those in higher education, despite professors being a prime example of leaders who must demonstrate humility to be effective. Leon Alligood, one of the professors I interviewed, discussed his difficulty during the era of online classes due to Covid-19. A 2023 study addressed the liminal nature of the online classroom during this period and how it affected student agency and self-efficacy, but it again did not highlight instructors' perspectives on the situation (Kwon and Lee, 2023). Alligood said one thing he missed during the Covid-19 pandemic was the buffer time — the few minutes before and after class where greetings, chats, and questions are exchanged. These are the type of human moments whose value is hard to define and therefore are neglected in studies on classroom dynamics. To amend that, we must consider how are professors are doing not just regarding their job performance or their students' graduation rates, but in how well they are able to connect with their students. I believe this project helped fill that need.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this research was the small sample size. My ability to verify own personal experiences with these professors was important for this project, but I have had only so many professors throughout my undergraduate years, so the number of people I could choose from was already small. This came as an asset to the project because it ensured the validity of results, but it also limits the extent to which the findings of this project can apply to outside research, whether existing or future. This limitation can be addressed in future research by: a) increasing the number of interviews conducted or b) adding a survey where professors can more quickly and easily respond to qualitative

questions, thus increasing the sample size. Either option would improve the validity and significance of findings and their applicability to other research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on the topic of professors' investment in personal connections with their students, per my recommendation, would either be more specific or much broader. One 2020 study examined "The Vulnerability Paradox," which states that although it seems counterintuitive, instructors admitting their weaknesses and personal shortcomings actually strengthens classroom relationships and trust (Romney and Holland, 2020). I would like to see more in-depth research specifically on how sharing personal stories and anecdotes in class helps build trust, from both student and professor perspectives. Conversely, more broadly, a study aiming to examine how faculty members' involvement in extracurriculars can lead to personal closeness with students would be a strong study on a topic similar to this study.

Another suggestion for future research would be to interview professors who purposely do not connect with their students on a personal level – who keep class strictly professional. Why might that be? Did something happen where they used to connect with their students more but now do not? Is it easier to keep a clear divide between their business and personal lives? These findings could be used as a counterclaim or as their own study to find how professors benefit when they clearly delineate between their personal connections and their classroom connections.

Conclusion

Embarrassingly, I've always been a teacher's pet. I know from my own experience that having a warm yet professional relationship with professors is beneficial

for students. Class discussions are more fruitful, doors for academic or professional opportunities can be opened, and before- and after-class chitchat is more fun when there's a rapport between student and instructor. But for my thesis, I wanted to find out how professors feel about this dynamic. Am I crazy? Have I spent my whole academic life engaging in this weird parasocial relationship with professors who are nice because it's part of the gig? I thought I might be the student equivalent of those customers who think a barista or bartender is their best friend, when in reality, they're just trying to make a living.

What I learned through interviews with professors was valuable, but what I enjoyed most about the research was the human element of it. My journalism degree and thesis have served as the backdrop for human connection: the entire reason I entered this field. I am glad I got to combine my academic studies with the honors program through this project.

Journalism gave me the opportunity to sit down and have delightful, thought-provoking conversations with professors, most of whom I hadn't seen since my freshman year. I wouldn't have made time to reconnect with these instructors if it weren't for the journalism thesis. That connection — which also took the form of closure — is more valuable than any research findings or paper required for graduation.

This thesis showed me that journalism itself is an art form. The beauty is in the process of talking with people, listening to understand another's perspective — chuckling about the similarities between us and prodding at the differences.

In our field, journalists are exposed to a unique side of people. We see the guarded side, because what they say is on the record unless specified otherwise *before*

they say it, but we also see a vulnerable side. Whatever we're asking them about in an interview is at the heart of whatever broader topic we're writing about. Interviews can bridge the gap between people because their priority is to frame the world from the subject's point of view — as difficult and as simple as that is.

The same dynamic is present in the classroom. We students see a guarded side of our instructors. Lectures are a sort of performance art, just as interviews can be. The person speaking — whether in an interview or at the front of a lecture hall — is in a vulnerable position. In both cases, it's worthwhile for both parties to let their guard down a little bit. If you do, there is much to be gained.

In each of the interviews I conducted, every single one of the professors paused before answering, "What is the value of investing in personal connections with students?" As they were thinking, I joked, "It's hard to define the value of human connection." That is the crux of this thesis: when professors and students invest in their relationship with one another, it's hard to define why. But a lot of good can come of it.

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Appendix A

List of Interview Questions

This is the skeleton list of the questions I asked professors in our interviews. There were individualized follow-up questions for each subject; these are documented in the interview transcripts in later appendices.

How long have you been teaching?

How many of those years have been at MTSU?

Could you describe your teaching philosophy?

What do you do to bridge the gap between you and your students?

How do you invest in personal connections with your students?

What does that look like on your end?

What rewards have you reaped as a professor and as a person from these relationships?

Has there ever been a time you wished you had approached a situation differently, like you were

too strict and wished you had taken a more human approach?

What is the value of investing in personal connections with students?

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Appendix B

Below is the creative element of this thesis — a personal reflection on my thesis experience as it relates to journalism, my field of study — as it was published in *Sidelines Magazine*.

Journalism as the Art Form
By: Zoe Naylor

As a senior in college, I've spent the last semester completing my honors thesis. The idea evolved over more than six months, but I eventually landed on a journalism project where I would explore professors' perspectives on the value of investing in personal connections with their students.

Embarrassingly, I've always been a teacher's pet. I know from my own experience that having a warm yet professional relationship with professors is beneficial for students. Class discussions are more fruitful, doors for academic or professional opportunities can be opened, and before- and after-class chitchat is more fun when there's a rapport between student and instructor.

But for my thesis, I wanted to find out how professors feel about this dynamic. Am I crazy? Have I spent my whole academic life engaging in this weird parasocial relationship with professors who are nice because it's part of the gig? I thought I might be the student equivalent of those customers who think a barista or bartender is their best friend, when in reality, they're just trying to make a living.

What I learned through interviews with professors was valuable, but what I enjoyed most about the research was the human element of it. My journalism degree and thesis have served as the backdrop for human connection: the entire reason I entered this field.

Journalism gave me the opportunity to sit down and have delightful, thought-provoking conversations with professors, most of whom I hadn't seen since my freshman year. I wouldn't have made time to reconnect with these instructors if it weren't for the journalism thesis. That connection — which also took the form of closure — is more valuable than any research findings or 20-page paper required for graduation.

My journalism thesis showed me that journalism itself is an art form. The beauty is in the process of talking with people, listening to understand another's perspective — chuckling about the similarities between us and prodding at the differences.

In our field, journalists are exposed to a unique side of people. We see the guarded side, because what they say is on the record unless specified otherwise *before* they say it, but we also see a vulnerable side. Whatever we're asking them about in an interview is at the heart of whatever broader topic we're writing about. Interviews can bridge the gap

between people because their priority is to frame the world from the subject's point of view — as difficult and as simple as that is.

The same dynamic is present in the classroom. We students see a guarded side of our instructors. Lectures are a sort of performance art, just as interviews can be. The person speaking — whether in an interview or at the front of a lecture hall — is in a vulnerable position. In both cases, it's worthwhile for both parties to let their guard down a little bit. If you do, there is much to be gained.

Appendix C

Below is a transcript of the first of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names have been omitted for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

So, first question, how long have you been teaching and how many of those years have been at MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

OKAY, I have been teaching for 24 years, and 21 of those years have been at MTSU. The other three were as a GTA at Western Michigan.

INTERVIEWER:

Could you describe your teaching philosophy?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes, my teaching philosophy is focused on helping students to connect and, since mostly I teach literature, mainly it begins with assuring students that they can work with literary works and that they don't need to be afraid of them. And so in order to do that, they have to actually get into the works. And so my teaching focuses on teaching students how to do close reading, how to engage with the text. Sometimes it's a matter of preparing them ahead of time for what they're going to encounter in the text — either historically, culturally, or when it comes to the kind of language that they might encounter in the text — so that when they get to it, they have the resources that they need to be able to work with it. And then the other aspect is a matter of seeing what I do, because I teach in the humanities, is helping my students connect to the human aspect of what's in the literature,

and to recognize that. Because I teach old, really old stuff that they're not as far apart away from the human beings who produced and enjoyed that literature as they might initially think. And so it's about acclimating people to the literature and the cultural context of it so that they feel comfortable with it and can actually begin learning how to see themselves and find the things, those connections in the literature. There's a whole separate aspect that concerns writing and the matter of writing is a more complex and much more contested area these days, but what I strive to do in my teaching when it comes to the writing is to, again, provide a structure that students can work with and produce the kind of writing — learn how to do the kind of writing — that will a) help them think better, but b) make it through both college and professional situations when they move beyond, and so sometimes, that's a matter of focusing on a structure. There might be a habitual thing that a student does that impedes communication and their writing, and if so, then I just try to work with them on that one thing throughout the semester. I don't try to cover all the bases. By the time they get to me in a sophomore class, especially general education class, I just try to focus on one or two things that I want them to work on that semester and not try to, you know, make everything a goal for that semester.

INTERVIEWER:

Rather than mile wide inch deep.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, right. And so both of these aspects, when it comes to both writing and dealing with written texts and literature works, is a matter of finding out what's going on with each student so that I can move that student from where they come into the class to something

that makes them feel more confident in what they're doing — both reading and writing — by the end of the class.

INTERVIEWER:

Assessment. Noticing where a student is.

INTERVIEWEE:

Attention. It takes attention it takes investing in getting to know what's going on with each student when it comes to how they write and how they engage with the material that they're reading. And so one of the tried and true methods that I have for that is the daily questions and comments.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh my word, I completely forgot about that.

INTERVIEWEE:

Mm-hmm. It is actually one of the best ways of connecting with students and doing a lot of class-focused things. The daily questions and comments obviously serves as an accountability tool, but less than that, it is an assignment that beyond just encouraging students to actually read the assignment for class, it encourages them to think about what they're reading. What questions do you have about this? If you don't have questions, what are your comments? How are you responding to this text? And while it is possible for someone to be very superficial about it, most of the time, I'd say 90 to 95% of the time in each class, students are really getting into it. However, they really get into it once they realize that it's not just something that I'm looking to see if they did it, it's something that I respond to. If we don't go over something in class, I hand write a response on their paper. And if it *is* something that we go over in class, then oftentimes it's because

somebody asked a question about. It. And they ask questions about it because since they have to do this assignment, they actually come to class with something to say and with something to ask. And that encourages classroom participation more. And because they've become curious about something, they want to know, and if it doesn't seem like I'm going over it in class, they ask about it because now they want to know. So those are all methods that I use to engage the students with what's going on. It also enables me to become familiar with their writing. In the process of answering back, it lets the students know that I'm paying attention to their particular questions and interests, and as I hand the papers back in class, it's a really fast way of learning themes — which is another important aspect of things. It has always been important to me to know my students' names and for them to know that I know their names.

INTERVIEWER:

Why do you think it is that? Students, on the whole, don't treat those Q/Cs as completion work or busy work. Why do you think it is they're able to delve into it?

INTERVIEWEE:

It is because I very quickly established the fact that I'm responding to you individually. And sometimes I get people who want to ask discussion questions from SparkNotes rather than create their own questions. What they don't realize is that I can identify those really quickly because if it would require a long essay or a small book for me to respond to their question, then that obviously came from either an essay prompt or a discussion prompt in something else. Genuine questions, the authentic questions that students ask, tend to be much more direct and much less argument-focused.

INTERVIEWEE:

And so, you know, being able to recognize that simply means that I can respond to that. I would really rather want to, you know, find out what your personal questions are about this text. I'm not looking for you to create an essay question for the exam because some people do that — some professors asked for that. I don't. I just want to know their personal engagement, and I have the opportunity to say that if I get that kind of response. I also — very early on in the class, either the second or third day of class — have everyone take out their questions. And I'll go around the room and ask everyone to share one of their questions or comments, and I use that to drive the class rather than necessarily following the lesson plan because what I have discovered over the years is that if I do that, they're asking all the questions that I wanted to go over in my plan anyway. And yet I'm not the one who's driving — it's responding to them and going with their questions. Between that and personally responding on every piece of homework that I hand back — and I try to hand them back quickly so that they realize that you're getting a personal response to this — that helps them to take that process seriously. The third thing I do with that is oftentimes when they come into class, I'll break them down into small groups and have them try to answer each other's questions or respond to each other's comments. And so it's not like they're being accountable directly to *me*, but they're being accountable to each other for having it done. But they're also getting the opportunity to check their questions against other people's readings, and without me even telling them, I very soon see the groups grabbing their books and looking up, “Okay, where was this in there?” which is precisely the kind of thing they need to do to become good readers. And yet, they're doing it with each other, rather than me standing up there saying, “Now you need to do this,” or, me saying, “Go to this place in the text.” They

really lead themselves, and it just sort of follows organically from what I've asked them to do and asking them to answer each other's questions and respond to each other's comments.

INTERVIEWER:

I love that. It sounds like you have a strong grasp on the fact that students are people and that there's not this huge gap between professor and student. How else do you invest in personal connections with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, I already mentioned learning names; eye contact in class I think is very important. As we're discussing things in class, or if somebody has a question, or just as folks come into the class, or if I'm calling the roll at the beginning of the semester, they'll respond, and I'll look at them. “Okay: that face, this name.” I'm horrible with names. And so I have to do all these things to help me connect names with faces. So that's something that I do. As I return the homework paper, each time they say “Thank you,” I say, “You're welcome.” You know, there's a response there that that goes on. But I also try to make sure that I indicate on the first day when I'm going over the syllabus, “Okay, These are my policies.” I mean, I've got definite due dates, and I don't, as a rule, except late work, but I do say, “You know, I am a reasonable person. If there's something that comes up, talk to me. And we'll work something out.” And so I want to encourage folks with the real-world fact that they're going to have to make deadlines and they're going to have to make choices about doing those kinds of things — that's an aspect of life in the real world and dealing with real people: that they're going to have to establish a good way of doing things *now* while the cost is relatively low if they don't make it. But at the same time, in

the real world, beyond the classroom — and I know there are folks who hate the term "real world," "outside of academia" — but academia really is its own thing. In jobs, positions, and so on outside of academia, if you've got an issue where you can't meet a deadline wherever you're working, you also need to develop the skill of being able to talk to the people that you're accountable to about it. And so, you know, I encourage all of my students at all levels: these are the policies for the class, but if you've got something impacting you — if you are, you know, a caregiver, for either someone very young or someone very old, and you need some flexibility, come talk to me about that. We can work these things out, and I work them out on a case-by-case basis and that, I think, helps to reinforce good things that will stand people in good stead beyond to the university. But it does so, you know, in a place where hopefully I've already been able to develop a relationship in the class that says you can approach me and you're not going to get shut down.

INTERVIEWER:

Have you had any relationships with students that have sort of bridged that gap — outside the classroom, like they're needing help or — any mentorships, any students you're a mentor for? Sort of like classroom relationships that have made it outside the classroom. Could you tell me about some of those?

INTERVIEWEE:

Sure, most of them are relationships that developed in the classroom context, oftentimes because of a shared interest in anything medieval because that's what I do. That's what I teach and so, there was one student — shortly after I came here, while that relationship hasn't continued to now, continued for quite a long time after the class, but — who would

come in during my office hours and sit and talk. Just sit and talk while he was waiting for his next class, and then, you know, it turned into — once he was no longer my student, and once it was no longer going to be the situation where I might be in a position to give him a grade — okay, then, you know had him and his partner and their child over for supper and to watch movies, went to the Renn Fair together. It's like the first the first and only time that I've been to the Renaissance Festival. But, you know, it was a good experience, and we had a nice day together, and so on. And then, you know, they sort of went on their way. But several years after that, he was working for FedEx and delivering in the area and came and knocked on the door and just wanted to say hi.

INTERVIEWER:

That's sweet, I love that.

INTERVIEWEE:

So that was one with an undergraduate. I tend to maintain more of the graduate student relationships simply because I tend to work more closely with them and provide letters of recommendation and have them as research systems and so on. So there a number of folks like that — and again, these are things that, while I'm in a position to be able to give them a grade or something like that, those opportunities are very limited because of the power dynamic between professor and student grades. However, once that is no longer a dynamic, once that is no longer part of the picture, then there is one student from early in my days here at MTSU that I still get to go walking with every now and again.

INTERVIEWER:

You go walking with them? Just for a stroll? That's delightful.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. That's actually one of the ways that we got established in more of an outside-classroom relationship because, while she was working on her dissertation and I was starting to do graduate advising, she came in. She said, “I'm just, I'm stuck, and I don't know what to do.” And for me, whenever I've been stuck — working on a paper, working on my book, working on my dissertation, whatever it was — just stopping and going for a walk was always a great thing. Just getting out of the inside, getting out, breathing fresh air and *doing* something, those were always the places where I would find my breakthrough. So I said, “Well, how about if we just meet at the Greenway and go walking Saturday morning, and you tell me about what you're finding to be difficult to do?” We would go on these walks and she would just talk, but that got her through. And I wasn't even on her committee. You know, it’s just, “Okay, you're a graduate student. You've been in my class. I think you're doing interesting work. I need to walk anyway. So let's walk together.”

INTERVIEWER:

I need to walk, you need to talk. Let's do them both together.

INTERVIEWEE:

Exactly, exactly. So that kind of a situation has come up. And then also there have been students — graduate students — who have done critter sitting for me. Once I find someone who takes care of my cat and my cat has accepted, I'm going to stick with that person until they are no longer available.

INTERVIEWER:

That's sweet.

INTERVIEWEE:

And as long as they're willing.

INTERVIEWER:

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

Even after they graduate, as long as they're willing.

INTERVIEWER:

I love that. Besides having a cat sitter, what have you gained? Not on the professor level, but on the human level, from investing in these connections with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Oh my goodness, what have I *not* gained? Okay, so I haven't gained monetarily, but I have gained simply in terms of being able to continue to see the growth of the person. I mean, the student that I started walking with to get her through this block in her dissertation is now also a good friend. And I have other graduate students also that have become or are turning into, just good friends. I enjoy having those friends outside of the academic situation. Sometimes they result in me being invited to wherever it is that they're employed to do special speaking or, you know, observe ways that they're teaching people about things. I don't know if you know (faculty name).

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

He was one of my first students when I came here.

INTERVIEWER:

No way.

INTERVIEWEE:

As an undergraduate. He was my student. He was in one of the first Britt one classes that I taught here at MTSU. He and his wife (name) were in that same class. When he did his master's in English, he was also a student of mine. As a master's student, and when he taught over at (school name), he used to invite me over every semester when his senior class was doing "Beowulf" because Old English is my thing.

INTERVIEWER:

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

And he would invite me to observe their presentations that they were making on "Beowulf," and at the end, he would always ask me to read from Beowulf in Old English. So it was always great to go over there and just observe, what he was doing and how he was doing things with his class. And then to see him come back to MTSU after he got his doctor's, it was just you know, wonderful — and still being able to work with him in that regard, too, and (name), too, while she was here at the Writing Center, that was great.

INTERVIEWER:

That's super cool. (name) was there my first semester…

INTERVIEWEE:

No, but that's a pretty amazing connection. I didn't realize you had that connection.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, it's really cool.

INTERVIEWEE:

Cool. That's awesome, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, I love that. Okay, so, not for you personally, but conceptually: What do you think is the value of investing in personal connections with your students — with students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Let me think about that for a moment.

INTERVIEWER:

Take your time.

INTERVIEWEE:

One thing is that I think they have a greater desire to learn. If they have a personal connection of some sort, it had doesn't have to be a big, deep thing. But if they know that the professor acknowledges them as a person and is able to help them make those connections with whatever it is that they're in the classroom to learn, then I think that creates an interest in them in learning and doing well in that class. And I say that based on the number of student responses and student evaluations that have specifically said things like, “I thought this class was going to be a waste of time, and it wound up being one of my favorites.” Unsolicited feedback that I was happy to see because, you know, I want them to like the class because I love the material, and I want them to find the material valuable, and my job is to help them do that. And one of the best ways to do that is to let them know that I'm invested in them.

INTERVIEWER:

That's awesome. Has there ever been a time that you were maybe too much of a stickler, you were sticking to the rules too much, and you didn't have a good balance between professor and human? Was there a time you wished you'd done something differently?

INTERVIEWEE:

Most of the times like that tend to be when I've either misread a student and how they would respond to something I would do. But in terms of being too much of a stickler, too much "by the rules," no, I can't say that I have ever regretted either the policies that I have in class or those occasions when I have given people failing grades. It is really hard to fail in one of my classes. You almost have to deliberately try to do it. The simple way to pass is to show up for class and read the assigned material. If you do that, you're almost guaranteed to make a passing grade. What happens is with people who, you know, refuse to read the material and try to bluff their way through the homework and then they get to an exam or a paper or something like that that they can't bluff, and it catches up with them. But no, I don't really have big regrets about any of those times that have called for "tough love" sort of things.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes sense. If you lay the foundation in a way that you agree with, you know. Yeah, that makes total sense.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, I've never had to follow a rule — like *university* rule — that I have kicked myself for because the university doesn't micromanage my classes. And that's a good thing, you know, the professors have a lot of what's called "academic freedom." And so as long as we're not being unreasonable or abusive or something like that, then we can generally structure our classroom and our syllabus however we like. In the time that I have been here, I can only think of two occasions where a student has ever appealed a grade for my

class. And neither one of them got very far either time because I tend to speak with some clarity in my syllabuses.

INTERVIEWER:

There you go, yeah, makes sense. Were those times — that you misread a situation or a person or a student — was that a personality thing?

INTERVIEWEE:

Mhm. Yeah, it's like, "Okay, my sense of humor is not working with this student, and now it's unsalvageable. Okay, I blew that one." And you just acknowledge that you blew it. You try to salvage what you can of the relationship during the semester, but sometimes, you know, you've blown it, and there is no recovery.

INTERVIEWER:

You just gotta stop digging. That's your job in that moment.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, that's right.

INTERVIEWER:

One of my French professors, Dr. McCullough — I don't know if you know her — she was telling us a story one time about when she was getting an evaluation done in class. You know, her sense of humor is very goofy — poking fun, lots of teasing, that's her style — and she was trying to get a student to remember the gender of a couple of nouns. It was "question" and one was female, but then "problem: in French is male, so she made a joke: "Problem: It's masculine because men are always the problem." And the professor let her have it. In the notes, he was like, "This is *not* appropriate." He didn't get too

intense or anything, but he was like, “I'm going to be very clear: this is not an okay thing.”

INTERVIEWEE:

The only other time that I really get in trouble is if somebody is asking me something on the fly in the hall and I try to go from memory rather than going back to where I said something and actually looking at, “This is what I said.” Going by memory, that can get me in trouble.

INTERVIEWER:

That's interesting because from a student perspective, I had one time I went up to one professor towards the end of the semester. She has a very flexible syllabus — that's how she's designed her course schedule — and she says *that*. So, I asked her verbally, like, “Hey, is the due date for this huge term project still November 21st?” And she said, “Look in the syllabus. Look it up,” and I was like, “Okay, there's no need to get an attitude about it, okay? We're just checking, sorry,” but then that makes total sense. It's covering both of our butts. That makes sense.

INTERVIEWEE:

That's why, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Was there anything you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

I guess the only thing that I would add is that my entire underlying philosophy of dealing with people — in any place, any situation — requires that I deal with each person as an individual and on a personal level. It also demands the degree of humility that says, “I

might have the PhD, but as a human being, I'm no different from you." And that is what shaped my teaching philosophy; it's what shapes everything I do in the classroom. So that's my starting place.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you so much.

INTERVIEWEE:

My pleasure. Certainly, certainly. I hope it proves useful.

Appendix D

Below is a transcript of the second of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names and identifying information have been removed for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

First question is, how long have you been teaching, and how many of those years have been at MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

Sure. So I've been a professor since 2014. I started at Colgate University up in Hamilton, New York, so it's a liberal arts college, and I was there for five years until I joined MTSU in fall of 2019. So I'm running out my 10th year teaching total. You know, I taught in grad school; that's a little different, right?

INTERVIEWER:

For sure. You said Hamilton, New York?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

I have a friend at, I think it's Hamilton College? In Clinton. Are those close?

INTERVIEWEE:

Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, right? Yeah, they're really close. So much so that every time we're on the hiring committee, someone will inevitably say, “I'm looking forward to teaching at Hamilton College!” At this point, it happens so often, we don't even punish people. Because yeah, they're literally 30 miles away. Half the professors in

the ECON department have spouses living or working at Hamilton because they're very similar schools. If you look at rankings, they're both sort of like top tier, so yes, they are so similar, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

I should have asked this first – is your last name hyphenated?

INTERVIEWEE:

It's not.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. Sorry about that.

INTERVIEWEE:

That's totally fine. No, no. Social Security Administration will let you choose whatever name you want, and so when we got married, we were kind of like— it an aesthetic thing, and we thought nothing about the ramifications of it. So, yeah. Much like Colgate, it's like it happens so often that like, who am I to get offended by it? So no, no. Honestly, you're apologizing for something that I guarantee you I didn't even notice. I'm assuming that you must have hyphenated it in an e-mail? But that didn't register.

INTERVIEWER:

As long as it's not Doctor Smith, you know.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, exactly…No hyphen.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, got it. Got it. Thank you. Could you tell me about your teaching philosophy?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. I think there's two primary challenges. One is that students learn differently, and so any single approach isn't going to work for somebody, right? Or, you know, there's gonna be some in the class for whom it doesn't work. And I can't close that gap entirely. Like, there's just certain ways that I learn, or, the way I teach is reflected by how I learn, and so therefore, a clone of me would do really well in my class, right? And I try to adjust based on interactions with students. I try to find different ways of delivering content. But part of that also is encouraging student interaction. You know, there is sort of this question of, "What value do I offer beyond a YouTube video?" And I say this, like, I watch YouTube videos all the time — whenever I'm trying to figure out how to teach something, right? So, I know that it's helpful. So then one of the questions that I think is something that we have to think about just as a profession is, "What value are we offering? What are we adding beyond just pure delivering content?" Right? So encouraging students in that moment to think about questions, to bring things in terms of their own experience into class — encouraging students to try to contextualize concepts. Like, opportunity cost is a big thing in economics, and so the nice thing about it is that every single person who's in class within the past week and within the past day has experienced opportunity costs in their lives. So if I can get them to think about that, I can then teach them about opportunity costs in a way that's going to be really helpful for them both in both in class, but also hopefully moving forward. So part of it is: the only thing that I can do that they can't just get from watching a video is drawing them to that point and say, "Okay, think about what you ate yesterday," or thinking about all these different scenarios to try to get them to that. But that involves drawing them out — drawing students out — or at least drawing enough students out that there's a totem — like somebody else can say, "Okay,

I'm too timid to ask a question, or I think I'm gonna ask a stupid question, but that person over there doesn't mind, so they're asking a question. 'That's a question I would have asked!'" Right? So I think that helps both in terms of getting students there, but also I think I've increasingly come to the conclusion that just showing them that I'm making the effort to meet them halfway is really helpful, especially with introductory classes. If they're in their second semester — or first or second semester — I think it's important for them to see that we're willing to put in time in this moment. It's not just like, "I'm here because I have to be." I *do* have to be, but if they can see that I'm really trying to connect with them, like I'm trying to understand how they learn. Because there will be students who learn in such a different way or learn in a way that I can't very easily conceptualize, I can't pretend I'm gonna connect with all students equally.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

But I think one thing that all students can see: students can tell what a professor is invested. And I can think about situations in my own life where I can feel, "Oh, I can tell, the students can tell that I phoned in today," or, "They can tell that," I don't know, "my kid kept me up," right? So I think that, just in terms of the highs and lows of my own trajectory, right? So I can only map [sic], I know what it's like when you're taking it with a bunch of different professors, some of whom you know that this person is really phoning it in. So I think you know that feeling, like the person's investing is helpful because it encourages you to invest too.

INTERVIEWER:

What does that require on your end, that investment?

INTERVIEWEE:

So for me, one thing I've learned about the way I teach is that — this sounds like a cop out, and it felt like a cop out for so many years, is that — a lot of professors here who are really, really good at teaching — a ton of preparation goes into it, and I think that's awesome. What I've learned is that there is a ton of preparation before I get into class. It's helpful in a general sense, but I feel like if I was to break out my time — and let's say the average professor's time in, let's say like the month before the semester or the month after a semester starts — I think most professors build a much more rigid framework, which is super, super helpful in helping the semester go smoothly for me. I found that if I build a really rigid framework, I end up sort of tearing it down partly over the semester anyway. I end up sort of undoing some of things that I've done, and then it ends up actually looking really kind of ham-fisted — like it looks like I'm changing course, but a lot of it is like I'm trying to reflect. I'm trying to like — which semester did you take my class?

INTERVIEWER:

It would have been two years ago this spring.

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay. And you were in, you were in the Buchanan section?

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

INTERVIEWEE:

Who were some of the people in your class?

(This segment of the interview has been omitted to protect the privacy of other students.)

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, okay. Yeah. I want to say that I thought this was your class, where you guys just asked a ton of stuff where I was like, “Oh, man, this is, really challenging.” Like you were thinking about it in really different ways. And so, given both the way that I teach or I think, this is difficult. There's sort of a “chicken and egg” thing here. I have certain strengths. I have certain weaknesses. And so, one of my weaknesses is an inability to stick to a script — like in grad school, I tried to supplement my income by doing Kaplan tutoring. I got fired. I got fired from Kaplan like three different times because they had a certain script they wanted you to follow. You know how whenever you're really ill-suited for a specific task, you start questioning your own intellect? You're like, “I can't do this basic stuff.”

INTERVIEWER:

I actually ran into that as a tutor. I'm at the Writing Center right now. That's funny you mentioned tutoring because there are certain points you have to hit in a tutoring session. You know — you make a plan, you set an agenda, and then you wrap up, give a 10-minute warning — and I ended up forgetting to set the plan or I would let it have a natural rise and fall instead of being like, “We have five minutes left.”

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, right. Exactly. So for me, I still remember a few times — when I was being evaluated, especially — I would just seize up. It's like, “Wait, what? How am I—” and suddenly, I literally can't think of the next word. I can't say the next word. So I've learned that that's one thing that for me, I don't know how to do it that way, but what that ends up meaning is that I'm much more flexible once the semester starts. So I feel like what I try

— and it took me several years when it came to intermediate micro or intermediate macro to know how to do that with our framework that still adheres to very rigid pedagogical goals. So like, I have a certain number of chapters I want to get through, so I can't just throw, “It's, oh, whatever!” like, you know, this is like some sort of “Dead Poet’s Society” sort of thing. That's a cop out, like that's lazy. And so I think for me, a lot of it was trying to figure out how I could structure it so that it didn't feel scripted. One, because I don't respond very well to scripted stuff. And two, I just don't know how to do it. I don't know how to be even a *competent* professor or instructor if it's heavily scripted. And so for me, a lot of it is like, I end up — I think — doing more work on my curriculum as the semester goes on than I think maybe other professors do. Although, that’s not to say that professors don't spend a ton of time doing stuff, but I think I end up changing [pause]. I'll present the cynical *and* hopefully the optimistic view of it. Some people might say “Well, you're just changing things arbitrarily.” Hopefully what I'm doing is I'm responding to feedback from students and catering or tailoring the course to them. So that's my goal.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes total sense. So one of the reasons I selected you to interview was because I just thought you were a warm professor. You have a very—

INTERVIEWEE:

Thank you.

INTERVIEWER:

Kind presence. You know, you can tell when someone's just here because they have to be, like you said, and I didn't read you as that. So what do you do as a professor to bridge that gap between the professor and the students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Part of it might just be a personality thing, right? So like, it could just be that. My experience has been that people don't choose academia because they really social people. This is not to say that there aren't — there's plenty of really social people in academia, but if you think about any sort of skill set, right? If there's a job that, on the margin, rewards certain characteristics or doesn't punish certain characteristics, right, then people are going to sort into that, right? Like I'm thinking about journalism, right, and it's like, how many? There's what, Bobbi Althoff. And then she's like, the only sort of awkward interviewer that I can imagine, right? like that's in like you know whatever,

INTERVIEWER:

Right, right, right, right, right.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, she's just making it work. But for the most part, people select away from that if they're in journalism, right? And so, I think part of it is that I think I'm a little bit unusual in terms of academics, just a little bit. There's plenty of academics who I think are really social — kind of don't know how to shut up — but I do think that a lot of times, academics sometimes aren't great at reading a room, and I think that there's value to that, in especially undergrad classes, all classes. And so I think part of it might just be my personality, but, I mean, a lot of it's just typical, it's like a set of four or five different rules, right? You look people in the eye. You don't look at any single person for too long,

right, and you try to spread it around. I try to use humor just enough, but not enough that I don't want anyone to think that I'm trying to be their friend, right? But I do want people thinking that, yeah, I want to try to thread that needle of people feeling like they can come talk to me, but not that I'm trying to be their friend, cause I feel like that's—

INTERVIEWER:

Friend*ly*. Not—

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And part of that's at least — I think generally academics are getting better about it? But when I was in college, rules about behavior weren't as codified as they are now, right? And so, at least part of it is wanting to make sure that students don't feel like I'm — I'm talking around something here — but like, part of it is that, right? It's like trying to very clearly signal that I care about you as a *student*, right?

INTERVIEWER:

Because you *are* my student, right.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes, but I think I'm always really nervous about that being misread as anything other than that, right? And so I think that also, again, puts nice guardrails in terms of what I do and what I do in class, right? And so it ends up, I think, I guess I'm saying that I'm not really sure — outside of just a few simple rules.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes total sense. So you've mentioned very small-scale eye contact.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Like, sort of presentation techniques, how you present yourself. How about when you're actually teaching the course material? Things like making jokes or telling personal stories, is there anything you specifically try to do because it helps you form a human connection with your students, rather than being a super dry, boring professor?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, I feel like there's a few jokes that I kind of go to. One of them, I actually don't know, I think this one may have dawned on me later after I had your class. I think it did. But one of the things that's really difficult about ECON — and as an aside, when I tell people that I'm an ECON professor, I get one or two responses, and it's never a neutral response. It's like, "Oh, cool, I really like ECON!" or, "I hated that class in college," which, I love that people feel comfortable saying that. I don't know if that's the way it is in other scenarios. I don't think it is, actually. I have an art history degree; I don't think, if I looked around my history classes, there were a bunch of people were there because they had to be. They were there because they wanted to be. A lot of people in classes, they have to be right. So it took me a while to sort of figure out how I can demystify some of the components of ECON. Okay, so the phrase that I use every semester now is that ECON is like: me mansplaining your behavior back to you. Because it's like, I asked you what you did, and you tell me, and then I tell you why you did that. And that's such a dumb scenario without some sort of context because you're like, "Who are you to say that?" right? And that's totally justifiable, right? And so, I think the humor is like, say, I think both— Okay. I don't do it 'cause I think it's funny — I don't think I clear that bar very often — but I think part of it is a little bit to make fun of myself, but to also make

fun of the profession a little bit because I do think that. I don't even know how the average person thinks about ECON, so I don't know what any one student is going to have in their minds, in terms of what we're doing. You know, a lot of the content is going to seem confusing enough as it is, and so I think part of it is acknowledging that there's limitations in what ECON can do. It's really, really important because I think too often it feels like we're saying, "Hey, here are markets, right?" Yes, of course. "Every single day you make decisions, but now let me explain to you why you do them." No one wants to hear that. And so acknowledging that, there's an acknowledging that there's limitations in what we're doing and that no one really knows you better than you, right. And so we're not, I'm not actually trying to mansplain it. I'm trying to sort of work around that by saying there's certain predictable behaviors on average we can elicit from that we can. We can anticipate. So I think part of it is to knock everybody down a peg who needs to be knocked down a peg — which is me and ECON — but also there is, I think beyond that, I tell some personal stories because I try to get the ball rolling, right. But also I think it's helpful sometimes to show students that I'm learning from these things, too. Like, okay, I'll give you another example. I think my hair is probably longer than than when you had me, when I had you in class. I realized over the summer that, or, over the winter, actually, that once I moved to Tennessee, where the water is very soft, or it's very nice, Middle Tennessee, it's very nice water. Not too hard, not too soft, which means that it washes out of your hair, but then your skin doesn't dry out. Right? Every time I go to my in-laws in Kansas City: very, very hard water. I get there, and I'm like, I asked — I remember, I was in my late 30s when I realized — I was like, "Honey, do I look sick? Like am I getting really old?" And she's like, "No, it's just your skin. Your hair looks terrible." Like she

backed it up, but I suddenly realized that, “Oohhh. When I moved to Tennessee, I started growing my hair out.” I have very thick hair, so it responds very badly to harsh water. And I've been doing this for 15 years, and here's an example of me responding to incentives. I didn't even realize I was doing it! Right? Like no part of me was like, “I'm going to consciously grow my hair out because now I can,” right? It's just that never, over the months during COVID when I was growing them out, did I have to wash my hair in harsh water, and suddenly I have this crazy-looking hair, right? So I remember sharing that with my students this semester and my goal there. That was a situation where it was very clear about what my goal was: I wanted to give an example of something where people can respond to incentives without even knowing it, which I think is actually critically important. ‘Cause most people don't stand in a grocery store aisle saying, “The nutritional value here is 5% higher, but the cost is 6%.” No one does that. So trying to explain to people that they still respond to incentives is actually really, really important, but also showing them that I'm still thinking about these things, I'm still learning things. Or I use examples from previous classes. I'm sure that I’ve used an example that someone in your class gave, right? So I think part of it is to show them that I'm slightly ahead of them along some path. I'm not just dragging them along, it's just like, I'm thinking through this stuff too, and I make realizations sometimes because of the things *you* all say, right? So selfishly, I'm a better professor each time because the previous class gave me some weird ways of thinking about things or challenged some questions. I was going through my notes the other day where I because I I was making them sort of. I was trying to change them in response to something that someone had said in the previous class that

was a really good, sort of nuanced way of looking at something. So part of it is just, selfishly, I get a lot out of students asking questions, right?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, that touches on my next question: how have you benefited from yourself and your students opening up through those examples and anecdotes?

INTERVIEWEE:

Part of it is that I just enjoy thinking— Every year, or a couple times a year, there will be a moment where I can see a student trying to formulate a question. And then maybe if I read it correctly, and maybe pause, then they'll be like, "Oh my gosh, I get it!" Right? Like that very, very cinematic type of thing. Hopefully it happens more than just the times that I see it, but, yeah. I mean, part of it is just like, that's really fun. Selfishly, I get to give you a little bit of more of my worldview, right? That so, you know, I don't think of academia as a battle by any means, but there's certain ways in which I think ECON can make people's lives better.

INTERVIEWER:

Sure.

INTERVIEWEE:

And so, helping people do that. And I think it's just in and of itself valuable. But for me, selfishly, seeing those moments, right, are really, really important. I think back to my art history degree. I feel like actually he kind of doesn't have as many opportunities for that because I don't think the profession is student oriented as much as it should be. But I do think a lot of times in my humanities classes or even —I was a photo J, specifically, that's what I was doing—

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, cool.

INTERVIEWEE:

There were several moments there were I could see this jump in the way — this advancement in the way I thought about something. And then realizing and then sharing that with the professor was really, really— I literally remember still. There's a Franz Kafka short story, “The Hunger Artist,” where I still remember learning that as an undergrad and the — brief aside, the structure of the story is: it's very neutral in its use of pronouns. So at first, the hunger artist is very anonymous, and then, it's Franz Kafka, so at the end, they die.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh. Spoiler!

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahaha, yeah, right. Sorry, sorry. But then, at the very end, I don't remember if they use first person, like an “I” pronoun, but there's this very subtle but very dramatic shift in its use of pronouns. It drives home this feeling of isolation and loneliness, right? Which, you know, enhances that effect. Right now, I'm not a very good reader, but I still remember that moment in class with some — he was actually a grad student, so I don't know if he's teaching anymore, but —I remember seeing how excited *he* was for *me*, right? That I was clearly having this moment, this realization of the structure of the story that changed the way I thought about it in this really fundamental way. And so it's really fun when that happens, right? And so that's part of it. Yeah. And then part is just, I believe in the subject. I believe that there's a ton of value in thinking about things this way for both

people who are going to pursue ECON degrees or finance, but also maybe especially for people who are pursuing other subjects.

INTERVIEWER:

I love that. I love that you can remember a time when you were on the receiving end.

INTERVIEWEE:

Ohh, there's a tie. I— oh gosh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

As of right now, do you have any mentees or personal connections with students that have made it outside the classroom?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. I've taught several honors theses, and that's been really fun to have that interaction where you come every week and you make this sort of slow, immediately kind of arduous process of like trying—

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, that proposal semester. Ugh.

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahaha, yeah. Yeah. So I'm sure you— that's actually really nice because it's more realistic than these “aha!” moments that, like, obviously I think about those, right. Those sort of help motivate me if I get complacent, but more value’s probably added in these honors theses where it's frustrating, and I am probably less forgiving than I should be because it’s an honors thesis! You should catch on quicker than this. So I tend to be kind of unforgiving, like I need to get better about it. But it's also helpful because it's like, people make progress, right? And it's also this reminder that, yeah, I remember that

moment reading “The Hunger Artist,” right? But clearly, most of my life has been shaped by a huge number of really small, incremental changes, right? And so the honors thesis is actually a really good reminder of *that.* Because like, that's how you can add value: by helping students so many times — on, and on and on in all these sort of small, incremental ways. And it may never, it may never really be this “aha!” thing, and it may never be as good as you think it could be, right? In fact, I mean, it—

INTERVIEWER:

It probably won't be.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. And that's totally fine. Right. Because it *is* about the progress, and it's really nice to see that. And since I do teach graduate school, I have sat on dissertation committees, and so with that one, I see a lot more of that as well because then it's a little closer to my research in terms of like, “Okay, I'm using my research to very directly influence something here.”

INTERVIEWER:

So I'm sure your students really appreciate you as a thesis director because I know I appreciate mine. I actually haven't thought about what that process means to the director because it's kind of like, it's like all the work and then your name goes on the title page? What does that experience mean to you?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. I don't know. So this is something that I've sort of struggled with because, I think, it's the one time where you get, like, really frustrated. Which is — that's not a bad thing, right? It's like if I expect something of you, I'm going to be annoyed if we set a

time to meet every week, and one week, you show up late, you haven't done anything. Deep down, I know that happens to me, right? I have co-authors where I do exactly that, whereas like I'm an hour late to get on the Zoom call with him, and I haven't done anything, “It just happens,” right. So I guess it’s very Sisyphean, in that sense — where you're like, I do it because I know it's valuable, and it is nice to be able to help research in that. But in terms of deliverables, I personally am really bad about thinking about that. So, like, I think the university owes me money that I keep forgetting to file a claim for because that's how little I think about that part of it, it’s so—

INTERVIEWER:

“Deliverables” is what you get in the end?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah, which isn't to say that I'm not being unselfish. It's just that what I get out of it, I've already gotten out of it, right? Like the being able to interact with the student and shape their— that's value in and of itself. And, you know, you get that in a number of different ways, right? I don't know, network building, whatever? Right? But the final result — I think this is mostly true — the main deliverable I get out of it — and I guess I'm not even sure “deliverable” is the right word — but aside from just, I enjoy doing it, is that— You mentioned my name’s being on something. Yes, of course it is. I’ve literally never thought about that. But like the Honors College is very good about, like— I always want to be in the good graces of the Honors College, if that makes sense. I want them to like me. And so the Honors College, I really believe in here. Part of it's because honors colleges at large state schools are structured in a model of liberal arts colleges. So the Honors College here, the Honors College at Mizzou, the Honors College that was in,

it all makes a lot of sense to me because I've spent so much time in that liberal arts tradition. So part of it is like, “Hey, if this is something the Honors College expects of me, well, good.” I want to be a good soldier, and I like it when they like me. I like it when Dean Phillips, “Congrats!” sends me some kind of— it’ll be like, “Oh, great! Well, you like me!” Yeah, so, I guess in that sense, I'm probably just like the students.

INTERVIEWER:

Haha, sounds like it! You're frustrated, you like getting congratulations,

INTERVIEWEE:

Haha, exactly. I'm frustrated, sometimes I do not like the person sitting across the table in that moment, yeah, haha. Yeah, so a big part here is that I've got two young kids. I'm the primary. So my wife's the primary earner; I’m the primary parent. So for me, there's tremendous value in flexibility, personally. I think I've given you maybe some high minded— here's just some nuts and bolts: here is how this makes my life easier. The more the Honors College likes me, basically my service to the university — I have to provide service to the university in a lot of different ways. And because I'm a member of the Honors College, that's always an opportunity for me. So, for example, I think the year after you started, I started starting on the Buchanan selection committee, which is a huge time drain. You know how much went into it, right? Like you had to submit a bunch of stuff, and there's about 130 applicants to sort of make that first cull, and then we have to get that down to about 35. It's a huge— it’s like, “Hey,” I always get an e-mail—

INTERVIEWER:

Reading through and everything.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. And of course, because unfortunately, man. I actually, because of you all — I blame you all — because I think the Buchanan section is my favorite class I've ever taught. Like, just hands down, right? There's competition within that? No. I can call my wife, like I'm not, it's incredible. So I taught that first before I was on the selection committee. I was like, I can't phone this in. I know the value of it too much. Oh, shoot, I can't — this isn't a normal university committee that maybe I can phone it in a little bit. So for me, my obligations at the university are research, teaching, and service. Providing service through the Honors College is one of the most important ways that I personally achieve that service goal. And I like it because the students are incredible, and I think I like to sort of get my stamp on the brightest, right? It's like, "Hey, no, don't think *that*, think *this*," right? So honors theses and that selection committee, that's part of it, right? It's a way of achieving that: of satisfying that service requirement in a way that I really enjoy. I hate committees; I hate meetings. I hate meetings so much, so if you tell me that I have to spend twice as much time doing an honors thesis instead of sitting at a committee meeting, great. I don't care. I'd rather do that.

INTERVIEWER:

Makes total sense. I'm with you there. That's crazy, being on the selection committee.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. Well, it's so impressive. Like, it's crazy how impressive the candidates are.

INTERVIEWER:

You're like about to ramp up or? It's February, so—

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, so we submitted our recommendations. It's weird. I'm actually really curious. It's been radio silence — I guess I can tell you, hopefully being sufficiently vague.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, don't use names, right.

INVERVIEWEE:

Haha, yeah. "So let me let me pull up…" hahaha.

INTERVIEWER:

FERPA.

INTERVIEWEE:

Haha, yeah. But we submitted our recommendations, and usually it's a committee, I think three people, and we submit our recommendations, and then there's a few weeks of, like, horse trading. Not horse trading, but, like trying to figure out this year. The dean was like, "Okay. Cool, alright." And I was like, "Did we all give you the *same* list?" Like what happened here? So I'm getting the impression that there must have an easier process this time than last. But if you've ever had a moment of imposter syndrome as a Buchanan scholar, don't. Your application was evaluated so closely—

INTERVIEWER:

Wow.

INTERVIEWEE:

—and you were, you know, enough better. So, anyway.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, good to know that. Now I'm almost done!

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, exactly.

INTERVIEWER:

So zooming out a little bit: not necessarily for you specifically, but conceptually — what do you think is the value of investing in personal connections with students? Also, I realized, at the beginning of this, I didn't define the term “personal connections.” I don't know if you want—

INTERVIEWEE:

Please.

INTERVIEWER:

So, there's a spectrum of how close a student gets with a professor. Obviously I'm talking about above-board stuff, but anyone that you can run into and have a conversation outside of class? Or if there's a mentor relationship there, kind of anyone you would think to write your letter of rec, that's what I'm talking about, if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay.

INTERVIEWER:

Like maybe conversations happen organically during class, or after class, or before? Yeah, just something that goes beyond the “Professor.” “Students.”

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay. So let me think about this.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, take your time.

INTERVIEWEE:

Alright. So I think there's four specific things that I can speak to. So one, and this is maybe the sort of the most banal, is that I enjoy like the time I spend with other people, right? So I think there's value in creating that with any other human being. I guess I'm a total hippie in this regard, but I think part of this is like that's just really valuable, you know. And I think we can all think to moments— Basically you never know when something's gonna be really important or not. Okay, this is a dark example, but I have an uncle who died very young when he was like 19, and my dad was 15 at the time. I was not yet born, but he's told me about this a lot. He's told me about, he remembers so vividly the interactions he had with people in this very small town in northeast Missouri, (unintelligible). His brother died, so I think some people knew, some people didn't. But he talks about the things that he remembers, the things that stuck with him were really banal. Let's use that word again. The thing that touched him the most was that the bank closed the day after his brother died, just like, so you never know. Part of it's like you never know what's meaningful, what's not, right? And so, you have so little control over, on an interpersonal level, the sort of amulets that people take with them, right? And so, just, I guess don't be an asshole, right? Because most of the time that you're not, apologies for the language, but most of the time, you're an asshole to somebody, they're going to brush it off, right? But, if you're an asshole to everybody, everything, you're going to be just weighing people down with those negative experiences. Because it's like, if you're cocky enough to think people care about what you think, then it's gonna happen more, right? So I'm egotistical enough to think that everything that I say is at least slightly more important than everything I'm letting other people say. Or at least the things that I'm interrupting them to say.

INTERVIEWER:

Because you wouldn't interrupt them if they weren't.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. It's. Yeah, exactly. It's like, I interrupted you to say that, but exactly. It's like, you know diminishing marginal return. Even I acknowledge that at some point the marginal return of my continued speech is lower, so I will deign to let you talk. But no, I'm making fun of myself, I am. I'm a little bit egotistical. I like to hear myself talk, right, but I'm also rational enough to feel, like, "Well, if I think what I have to say matters, then I have to assume that I'm having an impact." So why on Earth would I want that impact to be negative? So honestly, I think that's part of it. Yeah, so I do think that that's part of it, is that I don't know what memories you're gonna have of me, right? But I want them to be positive because why on Earth would I want someone else to be in pain or suffer in any small way if I can avoid it? There's, you know, there's all sorts of reasons to be mean in certain situations, but—

INTERVIEWER:

On the whole.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, so that's part of it. But that's more just my philosophy with life, I guess. But then, I think three more. So another part of it is like investing in the future, right, thinking about ways in which I can positively affect the trajectory of my community. Teaching people principles that help them make decisions. Alright, the example I've been giving a lot lately is that if someone comes to me and says, "I'll pay you $50 to clean my house," and I say "Well, no, I would never do that," which at this point in my life I wouldn't! If

someone came to me and said $50, clean my house — small house — but no, absolutely not. Well then, why wouldn't I pay someone else $50 to clean my house? It's the same thing. It's the tradeoff between a house being cleaned and— so thinking about opportunity costs in that way just helps me live a better life. I feel like, if the ways in which I can turn seemingly difficult decisions into simpler things, right, it helps you. It helps you make decisions that are better. It helps reduce decision fatigue, which we know is a thing, right, so if I can help people in that way, then I'm advancing their understanding of ECON. Then the other thing is, the last two are that we do care about having a network, right? I don't know where people are going to go, right, but it's interesting that, you know, at Colgate — Colgate, it's not Hamilton College. Hamilton is where all the hippies go. So I'm making assumptions about your friend. But Colgate's where all the people who are going to go into, like, investment banking go, or consulting. So Colgate's all like Ernst & Young and places like that, like Boss Consulting. So it's like, funny how I've got students from Colgate that I, you know, keep in touch with to some extent who are making their own way, so I have a network there, right. And then within MTSU, I've got students that have graduated or are going on, so, selfishly, that helps me expand my network, right. And then it helps me think about my research, right; I can't think of the specifics, like, "Oh, I thought of this research idea." No, I definitely can't. There's definitely very specific research ideas that I'm realizing— I've got my list of unrealized topics up here that have been borne out of discussions from students.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell me about some of those?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. Okay, so I have this notion. Actually, as a journalist, maybe you can help me, tell me if I'm way off on this. Alright, so I was looking at some data, and I was trying to make sense of it. And then after talking about a similar subject to a class, it sort of galvanized what was going on. Alright, so just bear with me for a second. Suppose that you're surveying a bunch of people asking them something like, “Who are you gonna vote for for president?” And then some event happens that changes the average person's opinion, like a newspaper endorsement.

INTERVIEWER:

Scandal. Oh.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. No, it could be anything. Right. Let's say scandal; that’s actually better. So suppose that there's a scandal that lands, you know. Monday. Well, let's say Wednesday. Then in the morning, these papers going to have a scandal like Gary Hart Hut-style scandal. So you're surveying people throughout the week, right? You survey some people on Tuesday, some people on Thursday. Let's keep Wednesday for, you know, so you—Sorry. Some people on Tuesday, some people on Thursday. People on Tuesday were more likely to, let's say, support the candidate that has a scandal because they don't know the scandal. People on Thursday more likely to being against that person. Okay, that's totally fine. That's the effect of the scandal. Then let's say you then pull them again weeks later. Now at this point, everyone's learned about the scandal. So on average, they should have the same opinion. But I've seen evidence that they don't. So the people who were surveyed on Tuesday still are acting as if the scandal didn't happen. Basically, they still have higher opinions.

INTERVIEWER:

Because they're sticking with their— Because they remember?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. So, okay, this is one of those things where economists— It's not rational in the way that economists don't normally think about it. So it's a sort of research question that economists don't come to very easily. But yeah, like you're thinking just how do people behave, right? It's like.

INTERVIEWER:

When they know they're being, I don't mean to cut you off.

INTERVIEWEE:

No, no, please, please.

INTERVIEWER:

It's like when those personality tests, they purposely ask the same question on question #2 and then question 57 and then 65 or whatever, but they word it slightly differently just to gauge if your response is actually what it is.

INTERVIEWEE:

Got it, got it.

INTERVIEWER:

I've taken the Myers-Briggs personality test, and I've noticed that, and I've been like, “Okay, well, I, know this is supposed to catch me. But I know that, and I've done that consciously, like I've remembered.

INTERVIEWEE:

And so, yeah, that actually has really prevalent implications about even things like polling, right? So we're in a very polarizing political environment for all sorts of reasons, but part of it could be that we're constantly evaluating. Like we're constantly being evaluated for our opinions or constantly being labeled, which tends to silo us, right? It also has a huge impact if we're trying to understand the effect of lots of things. One of the first things researchers will do is they try to control for pre-intervention differences, right? So let's say you're randomly assigned to the treatment control group, but you're still worried, right? You're still worried about, "Maybe the assignment wasn't really random," so you're trying to evaluate the effect of an intervention, and so you surveyed them beforehand. But that may end up locking in their effects, so that could actually lead to a mismeasurement of treatment effect. But you actually illustrated sort of exactly what exactly why talking to students was helpful, right, because as an intelligent student, or especially one who, if you're thinking about people, asking how people respond to questions, that's a much more intuitive answer to *you* than it is to an ECON professor. So that sort of thing is really, really helpful. So yeah, that, there's—

INTERVIEWER:

Because there's a combination of perspectives?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. Yes. So one thing I learned in ECON, sorry, in journalism school, was: there were two New York Times decisions in the '90s that I know they've talked about a lot. They were the result of really in-depth newsroom discussions. And that was whether or not the deaths of Selena, so the Tejano singer, who died in '96, and Dale Earnhardt, who died I think in 2001, whether or not their deaths were front-page news. In the end, so

looking back, *absolutely*. Like 100% front-page names, no doubt about it. At the time, there was a question about that which reflects like — I'm trying to paint the New York Times in a positive angle because of the end results — but some people who were questioning it were people who didn't know who Selena was or didn't follow NASCAR. And apparently with Selena, it was less of an issue, because apparently there were several Hispanics in the newsroom, people who were from Texas, or people who were like, "No, no, no, this is a stupid question to ask. It's *obviously* front-page news."

INTERVIEWER:

Absolutely.

INTERVIEWEE:

Like, "Yeah, I hear what you're asking, just, I cannot tell you enough, this is front-page news."

INTERVIEWER:

Like, "Thank you for asking, here's the answer."

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. And so then apparently a similar discussion happened with Dale Earnhardt. In both cases, they made what I think is probably the right decision in terms of prioritizing the news and put them on the front page, but in both cases, it was clearly just having diversity of voices because. Yeah. You don't know what's not. You don't know what you don't know, right? So, yeah, that's incredibly important. I could get a little cynical about the ECON profession and say that sometimes we get we have blinders on. We try to answer very narrow questions be*cause* there are institutional rewards for answering narrowly defined questions that are maybe like "the topic of the moment," so

we end up sort of chasing our tails a little bit instead of asking sometimes really strange questions or seemingly counterintuitive ones. But the counterintuitive ones, they don't come from inside the system. Alright, haha, so I think I hit all four. It took me long enough, but—

INTERVIEWER:

Unfortunately, I have only three.

INTERVIEWEE:

Alright. Okay. Well, I can do this: interpersonal relationships, build a network— oh, yeah. Oh, you're right. Yeah. And then, similarly, it helps me become at a better teacher, like it just helps.

INTERVIEWER:

That was the whole first— ? Okay, gotcha. Nice, makes total sense. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

I never left anything going unsaid, haha. So no, I'm good.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, I am curious. What can you tell me about the if you have a minute, another minute, can you tell me about the conversations that sparked those research ideas?

INTERVIEWEE:

Let's see. So the one about anchoring beliefs, that came about because I was doing a group activity, and so I'd already— The example that I gave about newspaper endorsements, that was from data that I was working on already, and so I already had this in the back of my head. But then when we were doing some sort of class activity where I

think it was something like: you give people private evaluations, right? You basically give people private evaluations and make them potential sellers, potential buyers. And so basically the market will clear, typically, right? Meaning that all you need your own private evaluation and the market, and then the market will clear, and you can draw this supply and demand curve. But inevitably, there's people who maybe didn't understand the assignment, right. And so we usually do it in waves, and there was one student I remember, who, I asked him several times something. And so at one point, he mentioned that he answered something that way because he answered that way at the same time previously. I was like, “Oh, yeah. Okay. Interesting.” It was a survey-type— I wasn’t doing a survey, but for him, you know, I *was*, right? Yeah, so—

INTERVIEWER:

Interesting. That was a student?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Was it an ECON major?

INTERVIEWEE:

I don't know. Yeah, I don't know. It's weird. I feel like there aren't a ton of ECON majors here, which is actually, like I said, it actually ends up being that—

INTERVIEWER:

You're just infecting everybody like that.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, exactly, yeah. And also it's like, I feel like there's less of— the peer effects are a little different. They're not nonexistent, but, how many journalism students were in your ECON class?

INTERVIEWER:

None.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right? So, if you were worried about, like, making a fool yourself, like, who are these jokers? I mean, Buchanan's a little different, but yeah. Yes, it ends up being— People, it sort of encourages people to be like, "Hey, I'm the guy who does this!" right? "I'm the one who fixes up big trucks, so I'm talk about that!" Like, great! As opposed to—

INTERVIEWER:

That's truck guy! That's what he's talking about.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly where it's like, if you're all defined primarily by your major, there's a tendency to just sort of stay within the group just a little bit, so.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, absolutely. Good luck.

Appendix E

Below is a transcript of the third of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names and identifying information have been removed for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

To start, how long have you been teaching, and how many years have you been at MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

MTSU puts me officially at 30 years as of last year. It's really more like 27 because they count the three years that they paid for my master's. So, we can say officially 30, but 27.

INTERVIEWER:

You just want to celebrate again in another three years, haha. Could you describe your teaching philosophy?

INTERVIEWEE:

No, I refuse. Yeah, you know, my teacher philosophy is based on this idea of engaged pedagogy. I want my students to learn a lot by doing. I like to give them just a brief introduction to whatever the skill is or whatever that it is that we're doing, if it's a skills-based kind of class, and then I want to spend a lot of our time actually doing and with me coaching. So with skills-based courses, that's my teaching philosophy. Like I said, it's an engaged pedagogy kind of thing. And our seminar courses, then it's more like *Teaching to Transgress* — that's a book by Bell Hooks, who I really, really enjoy, and what she does is she encourages students to — and one of the things that I hope that *I* do is I encourage my students to — have their own voice: to actively engage with whatever it is

that we're looking at, and to critically analyze it, and understand it for themselves, to talk to me about it, and, you know, take into account what I'm saying, but ultimately, I want them to be responsible for their own critical assessment of whatever it is that we're looking at.

INTERVIEWER:

Why is that important to you?

INTERVIEWEE:

It's important to me that students have their own voices because of who I am. So, I am an African American woman, and historically, in the United States and our Western culture, both women and African Americans have been deprived of their voices. So, it's a personal thing to me to empower my students to speak, to have their own voice. And that voice, it doesn't even have to be speaking per using their mouths. It can be speaking in a critical essay. It can be speaking in just a raised eyebrow, but I want them to feel empowered to speak in whatever language works for them, and to know that that speech is honored and important and valued.

INTERVIEWER:

What do you do in the classroom to instill that in students and to demonstrate that ideology?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, I hope one of the things that I do is that I model it. So, I believe that— You know, I like to speak and encourage them. Sometimes I'll do it with maybe a quote that we look at at the beginning of class — something that's empowering or silly — and then I'll ask someone to read it. And I'll ask the students to each speak to me, or they don't have to *all*,

but I'll open the floor to discussion for them to talk to me about current events in the way they see it, right? And to then try and guide that into a discussion with each other. And that's in all of my classes — that's how I like to operate. I want them to have an active engagement with what's going on, but also an active engagement with each other because I think a lot of learning comes through engaging with your colleagues and with your classmates.

INTERVIEWER:

Mm. How do you— Zooming out from the classroom, how do you invest in your students as people?

INTERVIEWEE:

I have an open-door policy, my students know. I *hope* they know that they can come see me any time — office hours or if I'm in here, you know, knock, or if the door is open, come on in. The better students know to seek me out and that I'll be real responsive to them. And the ones that seek me out — and usually it's them seeking me out — I offer myself, but when I make myself available to you, when you come to me, then you know you're gonna get that mentoring or whatever it is that you're needing from me in that moment, then that's what I'm going to try and give back to them. I have relationships with students from years and years and *years* back. Like I said, I've been here, what, 27, 30 years. I've been invited to students' weddings because they feel like I'm an auntie to them. Some feel like I'm their mom, and I'm like, "Well, that's later," as I've gotten older because I guess it's more of a mom thing. I prefer the auntie thing, you know, being (unintelligible) auntie. I don't really want to mother you, but I do want to nurture you. I do want you to feel empowered to come to me, and you know, if you have tears, I've got

some tissue back here, or, you know, if you want to discuss grad schools or just life in general, then hopefully you see me as a person that you can have that conversation with. I've had students who have felt open about coming out to me — not to everyone, but just in this safe environment. I want to create a safe environment for my students. I have friendships now with students, so once they graduate or in grad school, then our relationship can be a little different from the undergraduate. In the undergraduate, not their auntie. In grad school, then I can become more of a friend and especially after. I have one student, oh my gosh, we've been together through— She's now graduated from our program. She has her doctorate and is teaching. I've been invited to their weddings because, like I said, I'm auntie. And I love that. You know, I love— I had one come back this summer, and I'd actually forgotten her name, but she came back this summer to look for me because I'd said something in class that had encouraged her and made her know that she could accomplish a graduate program. And she said it would have been hard enough for her to come to college, and so she'd been in my Race, Class and Gender course, and I didn't get to meet her, but Dean Keel, I gave her my number, and they called me so I could chat with her, and I remembered her as soon as we started talking. But she said I said in class that education and my PhD was something nobody could take from me. And if I could do this coming out of little Watertown, then so could they. And she said she really took that to heart. She actually married another student from that same class, and they've got beautiful kids, and now she's like a community environmental activist, you know? So you never know what you might say that might encourage someone, so I try to be really careful with my speech. I don't want to tear anybody down, you know, because that type of thing can impact you forever. So I hope that I use my

words in a way that builds students up or at least helps them to question things, but that doesn't destroy their curiosity. It's really important that as a teacher you never do that, you don't do that type of harm to a student.

INTERVIEWER:

That's important, yeah. What does it look like going from having a student in class to being invited to their wedding?

INTERVIEWEE:

Haha. You know, usually we've established a relationship at that point. So one of my students…wouldn't mind me using him. So, I had (the student) in Radio News Reporting, and he's a shy student — always got this hoodie on, you know, sitting in the corner — and I'm like, I'm trying to encourage him, draw him out. I'm like, "Oh, let me see your writing," and then found out that his dad had worked at CNN, and he wanted to be a producer. And then he joined NABJ, and so I was advising NABJ, so a relationship built there. And then, it came to he was an officer, so we were always in here chatting and discussing life topics, discussing career topics, so the relationship grows in that way. And then it grew to the point where, like I said, he's now a nephew, you know. So now he's my nephew, and he knows he can come in, and he can talk to me about, "I'm in love..." and, "This girl is it." And I'm like, "Okay, well, what makes her special?" or— And then I get a phone call, you know, "I'm getting married," and, "in Memphis. I really want you to be there. I want you to be at *everything*," and I was going, but it turned out my husband had a crisis, and we couldn't get down there. So it really broke my heart that I missed his wedding, but it's that kind of thing. With another student, she called me, and she had a quiet wedding — got married at the Justice of the Peace — but then immediately, you

know, texts me and then she called me. She's like, "…I did it!" You know? So, and we've been through— We had been through *myriad* boyfriends, haha, situations, you know. And I'm like, "You are awesome. Respect yourself. You deserve to be treated like a queen. You are a queen, so you deserve the best, just remember that. You deserve the best and deserve someone who will treat you like the best. Or, you know, it just develops over time. Yeah, it's not something that jumps in; it's a relationship. It's about relationships, and I think that's probably the thing I miss the most is that I don't have the opportunity to build those types of relationships with as many students because I teach one course now, as opposed to three or four.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, really?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, as an administrator now. So I'm 50% administration as Assistant Dean, so in order to have time to do the Assistant Dean work, then I have to— And the faculty work, then I have to cut back on some of the teaching. Otherwise, I'll be stretched too thin.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So.

INTERVIEWER:

Why is that important to you — to invest in those personal relationships with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

That's the whole point of teaching, right? I mean, to have those personal relationships to watch your students grow, to see them advance, to have your mind blown about when you offer them some assignment and then they really blow it out the water. It's so tremendous and it captures all of the things that you've been talking about. I mean, I think that is, like, the high point of being a teacher — when you see those types of growth in your student. You can't see that kind of growth without establishing a relationship. And for me, I want to see that growth *in* the classroom, but I also want to see it out*side* the classroom. I want to encourage you to join different organizations because those are the ways that are going to help advance your career, right, and help you to see if this is really what you want to do. I want to encourage you to make sure that you know the names of your professors! Without that, establishing that relationship, you can't— How are you gonna to get a reference, right? I want you to know who your Dean is and the name of your college and the name of your degree. There's some little things that you really need to be cognizant of, right? So that's all part of relationship building. When we build a relationship, too, it helps you to invest in Middle Tennessee State University or whatever school you're at. Having a relationship with your professor helps you to establish your roots, helps you with retention, and helps you to graduate. So it's not just for me, but it's also for the student that we're building those relationships because the student who has the strongest relationship with professors, with the university, with those organizations, is going to be the one who's most successfully (sic) stays here and graduates. I believe relationships lead to graduation.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. There's a significant body of research out there, but it's completely in accordance with that, yeah. Yeah. Not to tell you "You're right, you know what you're talking about!"

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahaha!

INTERVIEWER:

I've read two whole papers on it! Haha. But, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Well.

INTERVIEWER:

How do those personal relationships affect your experience as a professor *in* the classroom?

INTERVIEWEE:

They make me careful. They make me careful of my students' feelings, their ideas. They make me value their ideas and their personalities in a way that maybe I didn't so much when I first started teaching because you don't know what you don't know. You can *read* about engagement. You can read about teaching to transgress. You can read Paulo Freire and his books about oppression and teaching, but it's not until you actively engage in the classroom that you really understand how precious your students are. Each and every one of them is full of so much potential, and it's our job to safeguard that potential and to help it grow. That's what relationships has taught me is the value of the student, the value of their ideas, and to make sure that I treat them as valuable people, individuals.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. Did you ever have a time where you wished you had prioritized a student as a person over the student as a student?

INTERVIEWEE:

That's a good question. No. You know, I think I, pretty quickly with my career, came to that idea that you know what I'm here about the student. It certainly wasn't the money, haha. Teaching at all levels is a calling — except maybe in the business school, I don't know, haha. They make significantly more. When you think about K through 12 education, it's definitely a calling. College, some people don't think of it *as* much as a calling, and you have different levels of universities: research one universities versus teaching universities versus community colleges. Research one universities put a higher value on the research that the professors are turning out. But a university like this one really values teaching, and that's one of the reasons why I stay. It's one, is that value that they put into teaching and to building those relationships with their students. So, like you said, I think I came into it really quickly, that, "You know what, this is about. This is about— It's not about me. This is about, 'What can I do to help them?' or, 'How can I—" Because that's what feels good, you know? Even when I was in undergrad, coaching, I would coach people in my hallway in my dorm, you know. They'd come to me for writing help or to look over their papers or to copy edit something, so I don't know. Maybe it's just something that's in a person.

INTERVIEWER:

It's there or it's not.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, maybe. I don't know. I don't know if it— Can you teach caring? And I don't know that you can. And I'm sure you've experienced professors who you could tell they were all about the research and not so much wanting to be in the classroom with you because you can feel it. Students can feel it.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, I was talking to my dad one time because I was prepping for a job interview, and I was like, “I feel if they ask me what my strengths are, I really want to talk about my soft skills.” He was like, “No, I mean, I think you should go with a combo of soft and hard skills.” And I was like, “Okay, so soft skills, definitely, like, my enthusiasm, empathy. And then maybe after I explain a little bit, I can touch on hard skills.” He was like, “I don't think those are soft skills.” I was like, “What do you think soft skills are?” He said, “Like copy editing, conciseness.” I was like. “No, no, no, no.” Like you just said, you can't teach someone to care. Soft skills are things you can't— No. No, no, no.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. Although we can teach you to be more aware of your soft skill needs and maybe to fake it a little bit more until they take root, haha.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. So not (you) the professor, but (you) the person. What have you gained from these relationships with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Oh, my gosh.

INTERVIEWER:

Besides the title of “auntie.”

INTERVIEWEE:

Ahaha. That’s, uh— It's kind of a hard question. Let me think about it for a minute.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, take your time.

INTERVIEWEE:

What have I gained from these relationships besides my honorary auntie title. I don't know. That's everything. Auntie, big sister, honorary mom. But what do I— I don't know. Maybe that speaks more to what they gain. What do I gain from that? Oh, joy! You know, I mean, there's a joy that comes from seeing your students accomplish things. There is a reward and a confidence in myself as a teacher. There's a huge self-esteem build from those relationships, those successful relationships. But can you call it a relationship is not successful? So I really feel— When you teach, and you enjoy teaching, and you build those relationships, there's something that it feeds inside of you — a need to nurture, a joy that comes in seeing accomplishments. It feeds those types of personal things inside of you.

INTERVIEWER:

Makes sense. Yeah, it is kind of hard to put it into words.

INTERVIEWEE:

It really is.

INTERVIEWER:

How do you explain the value of friendship?

INTERVIEWEE:

I don't know. You know, I said one of my students is going to speak at my sister's church. But, like I said, she and I have known each other for so long that she's family now. You know, I've some students get so close to me that, you know, I take them home for Thanksgiving, so, you know, it's like, "Oh, you don't have any place to go. You're from Memphis? Well, here's my address. No, you don't have to bring anything. You bring yourself. There's plenty of food, so, you know. Come on."

INTERVIEWER:

I love that. Last couple of questions. Going back to academics — you touched on this a bit, but — how do these personal connections affect your classroom efficacy?

INTERVIEWEE:

So like I said, as a Black woman, there's a certain amount of control that has to be there — an authority. So, I have to establish that authority, which is one of the reasons why you might call your male professors — White male professors, especially — by their first name, but that's not acceptable in my classroom. For me to establish my credibility and authority as an expert in what this field that you're in and in the topic that I'm teaching, I need you to call me (honorific, followed by name) both for you and for me. I might be the first African American woman that you've seen in a position of authority, or even I might be your first Black teacher. So, because of the way society has presented both women and African Americans, then there is this credibility issue at stake if I don't establish my credentials. So, one of the first things that happens is I, in a really nice kind of way, explain where my degrees are from and what they're in and write on the board, usually, (honorific followed by name). These aren't things that are just singular to me but things that lots of BIPOC members of the profession go through to establish credibility. But, on

the other hand, I also— I need you to respect my authority, but I also want you to understand that I respect who *you* are. So at that point, I'm trying to also, on the very first day, I want to know your name. I want you to talk to me. Come to voice. I want you to tell me what's important to you. So, right there, I'm establishing that your voice is important and that I'm listening to what you have to say. That is what I want the whole class to feel like: is we respect each other, and we listen to each other, and we're going to learn from each other. Is that kind of what you're looking for?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's interesting how, like, recognizing someone's authority but viewing them as a human being, not as a professor, those can kind of seem mutually exclusive, but within the context that you were talking about, it's kind of, you *have* to have one in order to have the other.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes. You really do. You really do.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you want to speak to that at all? Hahaha.

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahaha. Being in the BIPOC community, there's so many historical issues when you're teaching at a predominantly White institution that can come into play — biases that your students aren't even aware of but that you are aware of because you've dealt with them all your life. So, you come up with strategies for coping and for surviving and to help both yourself and your students thrive. You don't want to insult your students; you want to help them to *learn* that these biases are *taught* and aren't something that they have to

carry with them forever. So, I'm very aware of who I am, and students, I think when they first— A lot of students, especially Southern students, will see a Black woman before they see a professor, and so I have to establish the professor so that we can get past, you know, the Black woman and get into the relationship.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, and that has to do with the historical inaccuracies about race that are inherent, unfortunately, in being in the South. Not that the North is that much better, because it's just different: same types of racial biases, just sometimes more subtle. The microaggressions are interesting to deal with, but by establishing authority and credibility, I can head off some of those microaggressions before they even begin.

INTERVIEWER:

From students?

INTERVIEWEE:

From students, yes. Most *definitely* from students. (pause.) I've had students say to me, "Hey, (nickname), blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I'm like — usually male students — like, "First of all, my family and my friends call me (nickname). You are neither. So it's (honorific), okay?"

INTERVIEWER:

Do you say it like that? That's the spiel?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes. Yeah. My family and my friends have permission to call me (nickname). You are neither *yet*.

INTERVIEWER:

Wow.

INTERVIEWEE:

So. I've been at this for a minute, so I learned. There were things that happened when I was first teaching that would, you know, I'd hold it all in and go home and cry because, like, good God, what have I gotten myself into? This is painful. Teaching can be painful — the disrespect, you know? It's not that it had nothing to do with my credentials, but simply because I was a Black woman and trying to teach in a predominantly White institution in the South. So. It's gotten much better since my early years, you know, as I've gotten older. It's also, as I've gotten older, it's less likely that students come on to me, too, so, hahaha, so there's that too.

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh! *More* likely?

INTERVIEWEE:

Less likely as I've gotten older. Yeah, our ages are further apart now, so.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh my goodness.

INTERVIEWEE:

So that used to be kind of funny. So I would get the occasional card or note at the end of the semester, I was like, "Okay, I'm getting married here," with that too, but.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, that's wild. “Hey, honey, got another one!”

INTERVIEWER:

So yeah, have you ever had to— I don’t— I can't think of the right way to say this, but, like, have you ever had to just, like not write off a student, but write off the possibility of a personal relationship with them because they couldn't, like, meet you where you were and have that respect?

INTERVIEWEE:

Mhm. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Sometimes you have to. It's gotten easier as I've gotten older. It was much harder in the beginning. I mean, I instead of concentrating on the 99, you know, I concentrate on the one, you know, that I couldn't reach. And so now, I've learned, and I advise teachers, young teachers, you concentrate on those 50 that you're reaching and not those three that despise you regardless, no matter what you do, because that's a recipe for disaster as far as your inner self. And you can't do that and stay in the profession. I've had a student had to write off because she stalked me. You know, it was a very rough semester. She stalked me off semester, tried to find a counselor for her, filed an assault, said I assaulted her, had to deal with the police. Of course, you know, none of these things— All these things were happening in her head. She thought that— Had gone to the Provost, the Vice Provost and told the Vice Provost that my family, my mother and father — my parents are in their 80s and live in Watertown, but anyway — that my parents and family were stalking her, that I had them following her. So she had some type of psychotic break that had and I had to write her off. I couldn't— It was— I couldn't deal with it. I had tried to get her into counseling. I tried my best to do all the right things. It wasn't working. So yeah, it got scary. So, and most were never that extreme. But, you

know, I've come up against some racial intolerance that, you know, there's nothing I'm going to do if you simply don't like me as your professor because of my skin color, okay? Dislike me because you hate my— The way I teach, or you hate how the examples are, or you don't like the way I grade. Yeah, I can work with that, but I cannot work with you disliking me because I'm a Black woman. Mm, I'm gonna have to write you off with that, you know? So.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Yeah, "That's a *you* thing," like—

INTERVIEWEE:

That's definitely a you thing, or I've written off students who didn't want to work. You know, I tried to help you. I've offered my help, I've sent you emails, and you still don't want to do the work. You're not turning it in. Okay, well, I've done all that I can do. You know, I had one last semester. I've done all that I could do. I've met with you personally. I've chatted with you in the hallways. I've sent you letters. You are still coming to class, but you refuse to turn in this work. I'm gonna have to fair you. So that's usually what I run into, is that type of thing. I'm like, "Would you withdraw or something?" like, "What can I do to help you be successful?" "Okay, at this point in the semester, I cannot help you be successful." So, you run into that, and if you've done all the things that you know to do, then you can sleep.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Is there anything you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you so much.

INTERVIEWEE:

You're welcome.

Appendix F

Below is a transcript of the fourth of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names and identifying information have been removed for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, my first question is: how long have you been a professor, and how many of those years have been at MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, I'm wrapping up year 37 at MTSU, and I suppose I was a professor one other year before that.

INTERVIEWER:

Where was that?

INTERVIEWEE:

Vanderbilt.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh! Why'd you come to MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

Oh, they offered me a job. I was a temp. It was a temp job at Vanderbilt, so I didn't leave Vanderbilt to come here. So, but yeah, 37, just about 37 years here.

INTERVIEWER:

Very cool. Could you describe your teaching philosophy? No pun intended.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, this is probably connected to some of the other stuff you want to talk about. I mean, I try to be real in the classroom. That doesn't mean I'm necessarily, like, givin' my view about everything — although occasionally I do that — but, you know, I don't think of myself as an information delivery system, right? That is, I'm not, like I'm not trying to mimic an online class here. You know, this is *these* particular people in this room, and this is me, and we're going to, you know, see how it goes. And it's going to be a particular thing, and, you know, and I hope that folks have an experience through that. I mean, yes, I want them to learn some philosophy and all, but they experience that something as, at some level, important. Something that they experienced as a student, that matters to them.

INTERVIEWER:

Nice. What do you do to invest in personal relationships with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, I would say that emerges. So, you were talking about Philosophy Beers and stuff like that. I didn't (unintelligible) the student group, which I was very active with. We have the philosophy lecture series and I think all of that is about building community, and I'm a part of that community, so. And within that community, I mean, I'm not— I don't— Yes, I'm a professor, but I'm not just like wearing my professor hat, right? Like, you know, the Sir pizza thing, that's just a social space, and, you know, and philosophy gets talked about, but other things get talked about too. And so, all those things, I think— I mean, community is really important. And to have folks who have some kind of— I

mean, community isn't just people who *know* each other, right? It's: you've got some kind of common sensibility, maybe a common project, and so that's not something I'm *just* doing to help students. So I think this gets to your larger thing. I mean, I love that too. I mean, I feel great when we have that, you know, it feels like we got community here. We got— Maybe other faculty come to Philosophy Beers sometimes, and so yeah. I don't know if I'm answering your question or not.

INTERVIEWER:

No, I think that makes total sense. It's not just about a professor-student relationship, it's—

INTERVIEWEE:

Right.

INTERVIEWER:

It's about a human?—

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, yeah. And again, I mean, ideally, I think that's part of what, *all* students should have that. And, I think maybe. The world is new, and so there's less of that around. It's more, I don't know, check the boxes and move on.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Formulaic or bureaucratic — any of those ugly adjectives. Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. What about in the classroom? What do you do to make sure that your students are seen as people?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well. Of course, like, I, you know, different classes go different ways. You know, I like to have a lecture/discussion class, ideally. It goes different ways at different times, but, you know, you try to, you want to respect what students say. And that's not just you respect them in part by, like, unpacking what they say and things, too. You don't just say, "Oh, good," or something, right? That is like, yeah, okay, you got a thing—

INTERVIEWER:

Participation.

INTERVIEWEE:

We can, let's *talk* a little bit. And I'm comfortable enough just saying, sometimes, well, like, "I, (name), I feel this about that," you know. In that context, you know, this is *my* sensibility. It doesn't have to be yours, and maybe my talking about this this way gives you some kind of perspective on something. But yeah, I mean, treating students like they're people, haha, and not just students I think is very important. And I think it's hard for me *not* to do that actually, haha, so.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, it would be harder to not do that, haha, than to— Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right.

INTERVIEWER:

How does that influence your classroom efficacy or the classroom dynamic?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, when it's working well— So, you know, I would have to do some, a lot, of math to figure out how many classes I've taught but, sometimes it works better than other times. When it's working well, students are engaged with the material, they come to the classroom having had thoughts about the material, or about the example we talked about, or whatever it might be. And, yeah, I mean, again, you know, I do hope that that leads to knowing *somethin'* about the material we're going over, although as far as the material would go— Well, so it's different whether it's intro or an advanced class. In an intro class, yeah, I give tests and things like that, but, like, getting all the minutiae about a philosophical position isn't the primary task. I don't feel that. Some general sensibility about ongoing debates that have to do with the human condition and hopefully what happens in the room engages people. And I'm sure it does sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't, but.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, that makes total sense. The actual application of the concepts, not—

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, right. Yeah, I mean, just that it affects your worldview in some way. That it's some kind— You know, best-case scenario, this class is an event in your life that has meaning. Best-case scenario.

INTERVIEWER:

Mm. Yeah, that's interesting. I haven't used the word “event” to describe a course before, but it is a thing that happens.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

To me, and that I'm participating in. That's interesting.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

I like that. From your perspective, what rewards have you reaped as a professor and as a person from investing in your students like that?

INTERVIEWEE:

To the extent that we do create community, I mean I'd use the word, you wind up being part of a *narrative*, and narratives give meaning, so. These narratives of a student organization or the wider department, and that's, I mean, I think that's essential to a meaningful life: that you're part of a story or a set of stories. And I feel like I've gotten that from these contexts that involve students. I mean, also, I got students, former students, they're friends of mine — goin' *way* back, haha. You know, and sometimes, it surprises me that yeah, I've got former students who are in their 50s!

INTERVIEWER:

Haha, oh no!

INTERVIEWEE:

And they weren't like the old returning students, hahaha.

INTERVIEWER:

That's the part we don't think about.

INTERVIEWEE:

That’s interesting. When you teach for 37 years, so, that happens.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Can you tell me about how some of those have developed over the years from having them in class, learning their name, to today?

INTERVIEWEE:

Well, it's different things. I mean, usually, people I've maintained more of a relationship with, we've got other commonalities, so I mean, I've had a lot of students who do music in some sort, and we have that connection. I mean, Saturday I'm gonna to go see a former student’s band play at The 5 Spot in Nashville; he's probably close to 50. But, yeah. You develop relationships. I mean, three of my students, at three different occasions, I've performed their wedding ceremonies.

INTERVIEWER:

You've married a couple?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, I've been the minister to marry a couple, in each case where one of the— Well, in one case *both* of them were my students, I guess, that's right. They had both been my students.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh!

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. They're all divorced now, though.

INTERVIEWER:

No. Are you serious?

INTERVIEWEE:

No, no, one of them isn't. No, one of them is not divorced. Take that back. One of them is not divorced.

INTERVIEWER:

So it's not *all* because of the person who did the ceremony, got it, okay.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. That's right. That's right. But yeah, so, that's just, you know, because I had some kind of connection with them. And I don't know, that's, maybe part of that is also like carrying the authority of professor-ness,

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh, I hadn't thought about.

INTERVIEWEE:

So that, that makes it like seem like a— But yeah, these people are all still friends of mine. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Nice. You mentioned the authority. Has, sort of, the inherent nature — like the inherent power dynamic between a professor and student — has that been, like, on your mind ever when it comes to forming relationships with students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, but maybe not lots, honestly. It comes with just seeing students as people, I think. You know, you do— I am aware. And there's a way you interact, especially for doing, like, Engaging with Philosophy or something that— You got to not— So somebody says something I really disagree with, and they lay out a bad argument, and we're just hanging

out, you know, I don't want to, like, come in guns ablazing to shoot them down, right? That's not helpful, and so. Whereas I *might* do that like if I'm with colleagues or at a philosophy conference, it's like, “No, you're wrong.” And then we're going to do it, but, you know, so you do, you got to recognize who you're talking to and, you know, that kind of thing. But, yeah, probably not. Don't think about it that much.

INTERVIEWER:

That's probably good.

INTERVIEWEE:

I don't know if it's good or not, honestly. I don't know. I have thought about, “Is that good?” I don't know. Because, as I was saying before, it's like, I just don't feel like I'm wearing my professor hat all the time. So.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. So, what have you gained as a human being from connections with your students? You touched on this a little bit, but.

INTERVIEWEE:

I mean, I think I kinda, I mean: community, friendship, just ongoing connections to people. You know, with some former students now for very long periods of time, you know, that we're *friends*. You know, I don't know exactly. You know, some people — I don't necessarily feel, but — some people say, “(name), they keep you young!” I don't know that I feel that, though, either. I can stay young by myself, but I don't, I don't know. I don't know if I got much to add to that.

INTERVIEWER:

Gotcha. Gotcha. Hard to put a definition of friendship.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, well, that's right. And there's different kinds of friendship. You know, people, they have this kind of experience where people, you know, move away but, like, they're still your friends, and you see them sometime or connect on social media and stuff like that, so.

INTERVIEWER:

For sure. So, this might be a moot question, but, have you ever had an experience where you wore the professor hat or you were too much of a stickler about the rules and you wished you hadn't?

INTERVIEWEE:

Hm. I gotta believe there must be something like that I'm trying to think of a case like that. I mean, I *do* wear the professor hat. I mean, I've had a few cases of cheating that I had to deal with and like, I'm not gonna give you a pass 'cause, you know, I like you or something. I did have a plagiarism case. It was fairly early in my time here. And that, he was a major — philosophy major — and, you know I had to call him out on it and all that. And, but it's interesting. I don't know that this guy is a *friend* of mine, but I did see him years later, and he wanted to make a point to tell me that I handled that situation well, and he respected it, and he's actually a teacher now. Haha.

INTERVIEWER:

Haha, uh oh.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, yeah, I mean, you certainly got to do that. You got to do that and, like, grade papers and stuff. And I think I'm— Yeah, on that score, I don't have any problem. You know,

you come to Philosophy Beers, that doesn't mean I'm grading your paper any differently. You know, I tell them that. I tell them, “So, okay, this is a possible pitfall.” Like, to the extent you're having relationship or they're in the student organization you're advising, and they're talking to you, that *can* put a student in a situation where they feel more pressure to do a good job because “I got a relationship with this person now.” Now, maybe that's good to have a little pressure sometimes, but it can also be bad, right? And, like I've had to say to students, “Look,” or their paper’s late, it's like, “Get the paper done,” right? “I'm not going to think any less of you. You don't have to write a great paper. A good paper is one that’s done.” Like, this is not going to affect how, you know, how I feel about you or what I think about you particularly. So there's that kind of stuff too.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes total sense. I hadn't really thought about the opposite end of that.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Of that pressure.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Huh.

INTERVIEWEE:

So there's an article, a philosophy article. This guy argues— It's published — I don't think I have the book here, but — it's, like, on the university ethics or something. He argues that professors should not be friends with their students. Now there's lots of reasons you might— He says, "Well, a lot of people would say these are reasons," and he shoots 'em all down. It's like, "No, that's fine. That's fine. That's fine." And then the final one is — it seems weird to me — he says if you're friends with your students, you'll wind up teaching them *more* than the students you're not friends with. Hence, they will have an unfair advantage. I don't know. I'll teach anybody anything. Or, like these things, like these groups, all these, these social, they're open to anybody. You know, it's not like, "Hey, you got the special invite, right?" That's not what it is. I feel okay about that stuff, and I certainly wouldn't want to *hold back* on teaching somebody something, haha.

INTERVIEWER:

Right. Yeah, that's interesting. Because I'm thinking about it from a student perspective, kind of as a chronic teacher's pet. Like, if there's a teacher I really like or a professor whose style I really click with or whatever, I'll make more of an effort. Like, I've asked for homework before—

INTERVIEWEE:

Right.

INTERVIEWER:

from my favorite professors because I trust them,

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

and I know that whatever reading they're going to give me is going to help me. And so, it's like, well, do I have an advantage because I asked for it, you know?

INTERVIEWEE:

But, well, you have some advantage, but that's an earned advantage. I think, you know, you want more work? I'll give you more work!

INTERVIEWER:

That's interesting that he used that—

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, no, it seemed— I didn't respond to that that well. It's like, "Oh, yeah, I'll hold back. I'll hold back. I'll hold back so I don't teach extra here."

INTERVIEWER:

(unintelligible) Yeah, yeah, that makes total sense. How did you get started doing Philosophy Beers?

INTERVIEWEE:

So we've been doing that almost as long as I've been here. So, many years ago, so it happened— The first Gulf War, which, the ground troops went in in January —not thinking exactly what year that is right now — 30, 45 years ago, ground troops went in, and just talking to some students and, like, we were kind of— There were some protests maybe gonna happen, and just decided not to *start* Philosophy Beers, but to go out. So, a handful of students and (name) and I, we went out and, you know, had some beer, had pizza, and, you know, hung out. And there was kind of a feeling in the group, "Well, that was nice. That was fun. Let's do that again." And we did it again, and it didn't take too

long till it was like, “Okay, well, here's this thing. It happens every week.” So yeah, that's how it started.

INTERVIEWER:

That’s awesome. Pretty straightforward. People hangin’ out, and they want to keep doin’ it, so they keep doin’ it. Nice.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Is there anything you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

I don't think so, but I enjoyed reflectin’ on that.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you very much — for defining your teaching philosophy for 20 minutes, haha.

Appendix G

Below is a transcript of the fifth of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names and identifying information have been removed for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, I don't need you to say and spell your first and last name — think we're good on that, but — could I have you describe what your teaching philosophy was?

INTERVIEWEE:

My teaching philosophy, so I was there at MTSU about eight years as an adjunct and teaching one course per semester — the fall and spring — and then 15 and a half years where I was teaching every semester and had, you know, a full teaching load. And my philosophy changed over time, as I think. Because you go in with expectations and then you see, you know, you spend some time trying to cram a round peg into a square hole until you finally realize, "You know, this doesn't work." So, maybe the problem is not the students, it's maybe you, and maybe you need to change. *I* need to change to meet my students' needs and expectations and— Yeah. So the basic thing, my basic philosophy of teaching was to first off try to engage students to see that they are part of something bigger than themselves. And that, you know, they have dreams and goals and hopes — and that's fine; everybody should plan — but also, they should realize that they're going to learn things about themselves that in many cases will be hard lessons to learn, you know. I once had aspired to be a, you know, a musician, you know. Well. I could hold my own in high school, but I quickly realized, no, I'm just not a professional musician. It's not something— It's not a language that I want to donate to, to contribute, I don't know,

10, 20,000 hours to become an expert and then still to be held— To be seen as lacking compared to others. So my philosophy of teaching is basically to try to get students engaged to see that they know what they think they are, but in many respects, they don't know what they don't know

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

and to try to lead them in that direction. Now, and I think the best professors do this in all classes from chemistry to anthropology — in my case, journalism — you know, to make students realize that they make a difference with ever how many billions of people there are on Earth. Sometimes you feel insignificant, and you can't make, you know, “What difference can I make?” But I've tried to teach students — and it's not through any direct tutorials, but through indirect discussions and just my view on life — that if they ask me, I will tell them. Margaret Mead once said — a social anthropologist — said that no one should, and I'm paraphrasing, no one should undermine the power of one individual who's dedicated to doing the right thing. And I'm paraphrasing very but the gist of it is that the power of the power of one individual *can* make a difference. Matter of fact, that is how changes are made. Somebody makes a difference who is an influencer, and that changes the other people's minds. That's how we've gotten to the civil rights. That's how we've gotten through sexual orientation issues. Anything that society has looked at and debated and talked about and change is made, it’s because of one individual, many times. And *always*, it's many single individuals doing, thinking the same thing and coming up with the same idea that “This is unfair. We need to change it because we're better than

that.” So I tried to include that into my teaching as well, and to being a good citizen as a journalism teacher, I always tried to impress upon students — the journalism students — that democracy’s in their hands. You know, there is power in truth. And who's going to tell the truth? Journalists are prepared, they're *taught* to tell the truth. Whereas other folks on the World Wide Web are not necessarily— They're promoting agendas and propaganda rather than truth. As far as my, you know, my basic (sic) as a journalism professor, I taught writing and, you know, this was probably my biggest change because I wanted to make everybody a good writer. And I realize that that's pretty impossible to do. I can give tips and tricks. I can tell them how to, you know, show them how to use fewer words. Be economical with your verbiage. To see things, look at things in a different light. Show examples, reading examples, and say, “See what this person did? How can you apply this to your story that you're working on?” But I don't think I can teach someone to be a good writer. I think that writing is much more an intuitive process.

INTERVIEWER:

So—

INTERVIEWEE:

I think that the best writers, I think, come to it through a lot of self-exploration. Flannery O'Connor has a saying — which, it was in my office at work, at MTSU, and I now have it here, and I have to read it. “I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say.” You know, I have to put it down. I'm not— I would not be a great debater. Matter of fact, I was a pre-law student for a time, for a while. I realized I don't think really fast on my feet, and, you know, I don't want someone, you know, their life in my hands, and

I'm failing in court to convince the jury that somebody's innocent. Just because I'm not flippant and fast on my feet and quick with a quote or quick with a quip, you know.

INTERVIEWER::

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, I realized that, you know, knowing what you believe means you have to spend some time on it. And I think every writer, if they're not thinking about a particular thing that they're writing, then they're thinking about, if they hear something on the news, they were— They're thinking, "Alright, how would I cover that? Who would I talk to? How would I approach it?" that sort of thing. And those are the types of skills that I hope I gave my students, you know. Just, you know, and also to read. Reading is going to writing school. If you're going— If you're reading, you're picking up on nuances, and how to introduce characters, and how to talk about difficult subjects. You're talking about how to deal with emotional subjects, where someone may be, you know, at their wits' end because they've lost a loved one and there you are knocking on their door to find out, you know, to get their side of things, their view of things — which, you know, at that time, there *is* only one view. Your heart has been broken, and your world has been turned upside down. But anyway, so I tried to, through as much real-life experiences, give my students that opportunity to get out and to talk to people that they would never talk to, you know. And, decidedly, most definitely since I've started adjuncting, the Internet, and particularly our phones, have taken away a lot of person-to-person interaction. I think, you know, eyeball-to-eyeball interactions. Yes, you can do, get a good interview over the phone and it's— Good reporters do it every day, but there's still something great about

having that eyeball-to-eyeball reaction. One of my former students called me yesterday and was telling me about a job that she had been offered, and she turned it down. And it was a pretty— Would have been a pretty good pay raise for her, but there, it's called, what's it called, the Graham family who owned the Washington Post has started this thing now called City Cast. And there's a City Cast reporter editor — slash editor — in a lot of major cities, and they're coming to Nashville. And it's basically producing a 20-minute podcast every day. Hahaha.

INTERVIEWER:

Whoa.

INTERVIEWEE:

And they're going to, they're going to pay you, you know, over 70K and you're probably, you're pretty much going to be a one-person show. But they're not paying you to go out in the field. It's all going to be through Zoom, through the phone, and the former student said, “I would love to do that job if I could go out in the field and do it, but I don't want to do it. I don't want to be chained to a desk eight hours a day Zooming, you know. I can't, that's—." To me, that's— You know, I once thought that the worst thing that hell would be defined by is music that I despised, and I had to listen to it 24 hours a day. I think hell now would be a 24-hour or an *eternal* Zoom call, hahaha.

INTERVIEWER:

Which is what that would be for 70K, wow.

INTERVIEWEE:

Do what?

INTERVIEWER::

Which is what that would be, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, yeah. So. Anyway. And I was so proud to hear, you know, because that's— That woulda been a big pay increase, and, but you got— And this is another thing I've told students time and time again: you got to be happy. You got to find something that you're going to be happy with for the next 30 years and probably in, more likely, 40 years, you know. And if you can't be happy with that decision, at some point, probably five to 10 years down the road, you're going to be looking for, to make a change, you know? And sometimes even when you know that this is what you're supposed to be in, the fire goes out, you know. And when the fire goes out, particularly in journalism, you know, you're not gonna be doing your best work. You know, you're going to be giving the readers, viewers, listeners your best, and then editors are going to say, "You're not giving us your best," and you— So, you move on to something that *will* do that for you. Sometimes it's other kind of writing, whether it's fiction or writing nonfiction in a longer narrative form or going to totally something else: teaching or selling insurance, you know.

INTERVIEWER::

Haha.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. So, so my philosophy of teaching, to sum it up is to make it as practical, make it as experiential as possible — leading students to carry the heavy load of learning a lesson, you know? And I don't know if I ever did it with you; I've done it with many, many other students, to say, "Okay, tell me what you learned about going to, on this assignment, what did you learn,"

INTERVIEWER::

Mmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

“That's going to transcend just this assignment? What’s something that you're going to apply down the line?” And that's where the rubber meets the road, I think, as far as teaching journalism because if students can understand where they went, where they could have improved, then that next interview— You know, ours is a cumulative business. You know, journalism, you do a story today, and then you may do a story tomorrow on the same subject, and maybe it has a life of three or four days, but what are you going to do in six months or a year or five years or 10 years? You're going to be coming back to that and revisiting that, you know. I just venture to say that probably 30 to 40% of all the stories I've ever written are stories that I'm just revisiting stories that I've already written, you know? That satisfies the need — my need — for “Whatever happened to so-and-so?” but *I'm* the only one that doesn't have that need (sic). Readers and viewers and listeners have that need *too.* They want to know, “Whatever happened to _?” Which explains all the stupid Internet sites “Whatever happened to celebrity X or celebrity Y?” you know,

INTERVIEWER::

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Or, “You won't believe what happened to celebrity X or celebrity Y!” You know, and that goes to the dark side of our nature, I suppose. But, ours is the curiosity of “Whatever happened to,” and reporters can do that well, tell stories well.

INTERVIEWER:

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

Does that give you a good enough answer?

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, absolutely, yeah. For sure.

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay.

INTERVIEWER:

You mentioned earlier: in your early teaching years, there was a sort of “square peg” situation. Can you tell me about some of those and how they spurred your development?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, I just don't— I guess I just— I was naive enough to think people would read a story and would react to that story the same way I reacted, you know. And if you've never, you know, if you've never seen someone suffer from cancer or have a terrible thing like a wreck that takes someone from you, you know, if you don't have those kinds of life experiences that you've seen, then you have no baseline with which to judge an article that may be oozing with emotion, okay? And so it was very, very frustrating. You know— Like I can remember saying, “I don't understand why you don't get this,” you know? And the same thing with, you know, longer— In my— I taught Feature Writing as an adjunct, and I would give them Pulitzer Prize-winning pieces to read. I mean multiple, you know, 10,000-word pieces to read. And, you know, I'd have one or two who would read all the way, and that would — all the way through these — and the rest of them were

reading the first couple of pages, and it was quite obvious. And so, I realized these folks don't— It's not that they *can't* have the same passion that I have. It's just that they have no real-life experiences with which to gauge the stories that are being told to them. And so I then moved on to, instead of the Pulitzer Prize pieces, move on to short pieces. I may have read in one of your classes the piece about that Spencer, not Spencer. His last name is Hines, I believe, can't remember his first name. Anyway, he wrote back in 1930-something about a racehorse that died? You know, and it's probably a thousand words, but man—

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh, was this the losing racehorse?

INTERVIEWEE:

The racehorse who died, who broke his leg during the race?

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, it wasn't the racehorse who always lost? It wasn't that one?

INTERVIEWEE:

I remember that one. No, this was a— Yeah, and they had the funeral for him. No, this was a story about a racehorse that was, you know, sired by these Kentucky Derby winners. Had a very long pedigree and was in his first race and about halfway through, stumbles, breaks his leg. And there's nothing you can do. They pulled him— He limped off, the jockey was just wailing because he knew what was coming next. You get the veterinarian who's making the call to the owner saying, “What do you want me to do?” They have to check with the insurance company because horses are property and they're insured. So, the decision is made that the horse has to be killed right there, so they— In

the stables, he's shot, you know. They have this pistol with a cup over it at the end, over the muzzle, and they put the cup on the horse's head and shoot. And it immediately falls, and it's dead. But in a thousand words, it just takes you on all kinds of emotions. I had students who would cry as I read the story to them, you know, because they just, you know, they had never been impacted so quickly by so few words. And that was a great day. I mean, from there, we could start building. “Okay, you know, well, let's look carefully at how, how did he create this tension? How did he— What words did he use to keep the story moving? What was—" You know, it was the economy of words to tell the story, you know, it's the best storytelling. The best preachers who tell stories are the ones who tell short ones. The worst preachers are the ones who have to give you every *bit* of information, and sometimes they forget where they're going with a story. My father was very good at telling stories and his sermons. That was probably one of the reasons why people liked him so much. That, and that he was a great, great listener. You know, he could listen and nod his head, and people would think, when he left, that he had given them such insight, but all he did was just listen. Just listen to people.

INTERVIEWER:

Aw.

INTERVIEWEE:

But yeah, those early days, I just had to hike— This is going, I don't want this to sound the wrong way — my expectations were too high. You know, I thought that they would be just like me. And by that time, I'd had 20 — I'm sorry, 18 — 18 years of experience in writing and also recognizing good, good talent in writing. And they weren't bringing that to the table, you know. I was bringing a four-course meal, and all they wanted was a

sandwich and a bowl of soup. You know, that's all that they could understand at that time. So. And again, I don't want to say that I had dumb students because I didn't. I had really good students, but they just weren't they just weren't up to where I was as far as life experiences. So I had to change. And I'm thankful I did; otherwise, I probably would have given it up, and I would have missed having a second career as a professor, which, you know, I think I would have been poorer for it.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes total sense, yeah. So, when you were actually in the classroom or day-to-day, what were the everyday things you did to foster personal connections with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

I tried to do this with every class — even my gen. ed class that I did — is to basically learn *something* about them. Learn where they're from, and we begin with this on day one. Because as a reporter at the Tennessean — at the Banner and the Tennessean — I've done stories in all 95 counties in Tennessee plus my time going to cover stories in other states and also going overseas with the 101st Airborne. So, when someone said that they were from Hohenwald, I would say, “Oh, do you know the editor of the newspaper there?” Yeah, you know, and they would — first of all, their face would light up because they would think, “Why the hell does he know where Hohenwald, Tennessee is?” But, you know, just to try to get some personal information, connection to them, and then I would expound on that through the semester. I always had a habit of on the first day of class taking notes about individual students: where they were from, what year they were in in school, you know. And as I would learn some stuff, I would build — sometimes I’d write it down, sometimes I just keep it in my head — build this wealth of information

about individual students so that I— so that when opportunities came along, like, oh, I remember (name). I remember when she first came along. She's very interested in political reporting — and still is, unless she's changed — very interesting.

INTERVIEWER:

Through and through.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. So, I don't know. I just would start sending her stories, from Washington Post story or New York Times story, just to, you know, "It's not an assignment," I said, "Hey, I thought you'd be interested in reading this," and I did that, I don't know. It just seems like second nature. I just would do it and do it in the moment if I'd read a story in the New York Times, I'd say, "Oh, so-and-so would *love* to see this" and I would call up their emails and send it to them. I have no idea if they ever read it, hahahaha, but that's not my job. My job is to *lead* them to the water! So. Making those personal connections. As to their interest in journalism, that's fine, but that also led to, you know personal interactions that led to *beyond* journalism. You know, people would talk to me about their careers, you know, what they want to do, how do they get there? "Do I really have what it takes to get me— This is where I want to be; do I have what it takes to get there?" You know? Those are conversations that I think are vital for student success. Students need to understand how somebody else other than their mother and themselves view them, you know? And a grade is one thing.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

To me, grades are — were — never a marker of how talented someone was or is. I always viewed grades as “This is where they are right now, but I know that they can be better.”

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, and a number of times — well, more than a number; it was probably every semester — I always had students who would *stick* out of my mind that I knew that there was a reservoir of talent *there* underneath. But I wasn't seeing it. And so, at the end of the semester, after the grades have been posted, I would just send a short e-mail saying, “Great to have you in class. I just sense that you got something there, and I, you know, if I have you in class again, great. I want to see your best that you can give me.” But, you know, I've always believed in the power of someone being told that “Hey, I believe that you've got what it takes.” And so I've always tried to do that, to tell people that as much as I can. So those kinds of interactions, I think, were probably some of the best teaching that I did at MTSU. And it's broadly because we're not talking about Socrates here, hahaha. We're not talking about the Socratic method of giving a lecture — which is good, and I had many, many, many good experiences doing that kind of teaching. But that personal, if you want to call it “touch,” you know, getting to know them, you know, yeah. Those were meaningful to me, and I think they were meaningful to the students as well. Many of those folks are still— I’m in contact with, you know, either on Facebook or whatever, and it's been nice since I retired to hear from many students. We think of the Internet as being a grapevine that's instantaneous, but apparently it takes a while for news

to get out, hahaha. So, people, you know, students have been writing to me and saying, "Hey, thank you for helping me in this class," or whatever and just catching me up on what they're doing. I heard one, I just heard from the student the other day…(This portion of the interview has been omitted for the privacy of former students).

…And so, I wrote her a note when I was leaving, saying, "Hey, just wanted to reach out because, you know, you are a good writer and I know that you're in college now to get your counseling degree, and I think it's wonderful because you were always a great listener. You know, that was something that I remember observing about." And she just wrote me back this note that just said, you know, she was overwhelmed because she didn't think that I had noticed that peculiarity about her: that she was a great listener. And if you're going to be a therapist, listening is pretty much what you do. You don't pontificate too much until you have to. Primarily it's, you know, for an hour or 60 minutes, you're sitting listening to someone. And as you listen, you offer something that may help them help them out. So, anyway, she's going to do great, you know…I'm sure she's learned some things that are going to help some people down the road.

INTERVIEWER:

For sure, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So yeah, so I don't know. All these things that you think, you know, whenever I— I try to remember something about every student so that when I talk to them, when I reconnect with them, I can have some sort of baseline that I can question, that I can ask about or inquire about. So. Anyway. And I mentioned my father was a minister, and he was a great listener, and I think I got that gene. You know, I think I got that ability to not think I

have all the answers and to just let somebody else talk and to listen to counsel, advise — if they want it.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know.

INTERVIEWER:

That's important.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Two sides to this question, what have you gained both as a professor — former professor, when you were in the classroom — and as a person from investing in these relationships with your students?

INTERVIEWEE:

I'm pausing because I'm trying to find the word — the perfect word. And I'm not finding one because it's so— It's just very meaningful to know that I have crossed paths with an individual and that we made a connection. And that hopefully something I said, did, wrote was meaningful and that could be applied to their life that they can remember. We come into the world without an instruction manual, okay? No one is given a plan for their lives. To be honest, if we did, we would — most of us would be working to change it as quickly as possible. But we don't want to be directed, you know, we don't want to know that this is how we're going to be directed. We want to explore and make our own way,

and I think helping students to realize that even though I'm 50 years older than them, I have the same fears, hopes, and dreams as they do. Mine are, you know, different because of the age. But at 70, do I think I have all the answers? No, no, not at all. In fact, I have more questions than answers, and that's pretty much the way it is throughout life. Teaching resiliency has always been part of my process because students, everyone has to learn that you've got to be resilient because life tends to sucker punch you when you least expect it. And if you're not careful, you can find that that one sucker punch will lead to substance abuse, or to depression, to just poor decision making, and that will be the pivotal event that will change your life for the worst, you know. So when something bad happens, being resilient can help you make that proverbial glass of lemonade that you make when life gives you lemons. So. I had something else I wanted to say. You know, I got off on resiliency and it distracted me — which has nothing to do with my age, okay?

INTERVIEWER:

I'll take your word for it. I'll take your word for it.

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahahaha.

INTERVIEWER:

How about how your classroom dynamic was affected by these personal relationships?

INTERVIEWEE:

Ohh, particularly in my gen. ed class — which was, what did we call, what — Intro to Media and Entertainment — usually had between 40 and 50. My goal — I always set a personal goal of: by midterm, to knowing the first names of at least half the students. And you could see it on their faces when I would say, “Well, Joseph, what do you think about

that?" You know. And of course, there's this reaction. "Holy crap, they're calling on— He's calling on *me*," but it's also, "He knows my *name*." So, yeah. And I did other things, too, mostly in my gen. ed class; it was the largest class. I'd always, at the end of the syllabus, put a quiz, and it would not have a heading on it. It would just be down at the bottom, "The first person who can answer these five questions from the syllabus would get $10." Okay? And, I think the longest we went before somebody, you know— I would send it, and then usually within a couple hours, I would get the first response, so I'd get the winner, but then they would— Half to 2/3 of the class would respond before the first day of the semester, you know. And I would give them a clue that's saying, "Hey, reading the syllabus can pay, can be rewarding."

INTERVIEWER:

Hahaha, ohh my.

INTERVIEWEE:

Hahaha. And I would send that message out a couple of couple of times and, you know, yeah, I mean everybody — those that participated — at least they read the syllabus that could answer the questions, and one person got $10. Yeah, and it was $10 out of my pocket. I certainly didn't expect MTSU to do that. But, that was just the way that I could connect with that class — let them know. Let them know that I'm approachable, friendly. I'm not, you know, I'm not one of those professors, you know, who thinks they have all the answers and don't like to be contradicted during class, so I resolved never to be that that kind of professor. I always wanted to be someone who's approachable. Yeah, I can't think of anything else right now.

INTERVIEWER:

That's important. Just last couple of questions here: was there ever a time that you wished you had been more human with your students — wished you had prioritized them as a person over them as a student?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. (Pause.) Wow. COVID immediately came to mind because we were doing Zoom, you know, and in spring of 2020, we didn't come back for after spring break. And then we didn't come back for classes in the summer or the fall of 2020. In the spring 2021, we did to some degree, but fall of '21 was the first time that we still came back — even though some people we still had to do it on Zoom. I don't know, spring of 2020, in particular, all of 2020. Lord, I mean, I'm sitting— I was sitting right here in my upstairs office, trying to make journalism come alive and knowing that what I could— What I normally offered students was real-life experiences, getting, cajoling them to getting out, going down to the farmers' market and interviewing somebody, you know, talk to a real life person rather than doing a phone interview or an e-mail interview. And those options weren't available. Only phones and Zooms were available, and I don't know. That was just very, very— It got to me. And I was— It became— My teaching became rote. I did not feel like I knew my students. Yeah, it was— I saw one of my students. But I must have been doing something right, 'cause I was at The Boulevard Bar and Grille one day eating lunch, and one of my students from that fall of 2020 was my server. And she said, "Do you remember me?" And I naturally had to say, "I'm sorry—"

INTERVIEWER:

The worst way to start that. I've been guilty of that before. Okay, haha.

INTERVIEWEE:

Hah. “I was in your 1020 class in the fall of 2020 when we were on Zoom,” and I guess she remembered me because she was Jewish. Well, she had written to me and saying, “Hey, I can't be in class because,” and I forget which Jewish holiday it was. And I remember it wasn't Hannukah. It had to have been one in the early fall, and I can't remember now. (Pause.) I can't remember. Anyway, so, I said “Sure.” I wrote back to her saying “That's perfectly understandable. You can see the Panopto version of this class online.” And I, you know, I looked up how you say “Happy Hanukkah,” it wasn't Hanukkah, but, “How do you say— How do you wish somebody good tidings on this particular Jewish holiday?” and it, you know, it made a difference. And I don't know if she thought that I was that smart that I would know or that I was perhaps even Jewish. I don't know; we didn't get that far. But the fact that she remembered me in at The Boulevard Bar and Grille and that she said, “I really enjoyed you class,” you know, I don't— It made me feel good. But that was— That whole time was very— It was just debilitating. It was just like the air had been sucked out of the room, and teaching was not fun. And I really wanted to— I remember after every class I would go outside, and I'd just walk my property, you know, just thinking, “Good Lord. I just, you know, I didn't do anything there. I blabbed on for 45 minutes, and nobody caught on to anything.” So, if I'd had to do that for another semester, I’d probably quit, but fortunately, things got back to normal. But. Yeah, that was that was the time when I felt like I was really not bringing my A game — and didn't care, you know, didn't care. That's when teaching became a paycheck, and I, you know, I probably could survive it today, but I wouldn't want to, ahaha. I wouldn't want to go back there. I don't know if anybody would want to go back there.

INTERVIEWER:

No way.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. And there have been some technological advances that make teaching online a whole lot better today than it was back then. I mean, good God in— I don't know. Because we came back— We went on spring break, and about Monday or Tuesday of that week, they said, “MTSU will add another week of spring break. Classes will not resume until two weeks later.” And then we got another e-mail at the end of the first week that said, “You will be going to online-only classes for the remaining remainder of the semester.” Well. There was no Zoom. I mean, nobody knew, nobody had ever heard of Zoom. Yeah, and all of a sudden, we had to learn this whole new language of using video technology and streaming to teach, and it was— It was very, very difficult. It's probably the hardest thing that I ever did as a professor, and. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Hm. Oh yeah, that was a dark time.

INTERVIEWEE:

It was.

INTERVIEWER:

I think that— Oh, sorry.

INTERVIEWEE:

Were you a student?

INTERVIEWER:

Mm-hmm. So I was a freshman, 2020. Fall 2020 was my first semester of college, and I think that might be part of why, you know how people say, “Oh, those four years, they went by in the blink of an eye!” or, “Wow, it just feels like yesterday I was starting school.” I think that's part of the reason why it doesn't— It feels the *opposite* for me. I feel like I've been in school for a decade because it started so different than how it is now, and then the past two years have just been— Like the actual speed has felt how it feels regularly.

INTERVIEWEE:

Your cohort, I dare say is going to be the subject of numerous doctoral dissertations in the next 10 to 15 years.

INTERVIEWER:

I would not be surprised. Even here — and we were talking about this the other day — (names) were both in high school for at least a year of COVID. And I was like, “What did you do? How did it work?” And they were like, “We went to school. We wore masks. We were online in 2020, and then we wore masks.” And they were just so nonchalant about it. And that's the way I'm nonchalant, “Oh, first year was online. Bloop,” right? But yeah, crazy.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, you don't— We never know the things that we're going to tell our grandchildren until, you know, 10 or 15 years later. And because, yeah, it's, you know, it was a huge factor. Huge factor. My granddaughters were in junior high, and — yeah, they were in junior high and middle school — and yeah, that's going to be a time that they're going to talk about forever.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

I think having such times in your life makes you appreciate. I mean, I was just so glad not to wear masks. So, (unintelligible). So proud not to wear masks and see people you know. Well, I didn't know what *you* looked like for a long time because we were all wearing masks, you know? Had no idea you had such a smile! Hahaha. And that was the way it was for a lot of— And yeah, I never will forget: one student from that time came to my office and was just carrying on, and I knew I recognized the voice. I recognized some of the anecdotes he was telling me about. Could not put a name, you know, because I was seeing his full face instead.

INTERVIEWER:

You should have asked him to go like this.

Speaker

Yeah, ahahaha!

INTERVIEWER:

“Then I'll recognize you.”

INTERVIEWEE:

Just give me the eyes-only look and let me let me see what you look like, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh so it did it come to you, or did he have to reintroduce himself?

INTERVIEWEE:

It finally, fortunately, it did. His name could come to me. Yeah, and he was a good student — very, very good student. Yeah, but I was just— And I don't know, the mind is just such a crazy, crazy thing we don't, like— But to be honest, I wasn't remembering his full face. I was remembering the look of the mask and the eyes, you know.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Ohh that's funny.

INTERVIEWER:

Crazy days. Is there anything you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

Good question. You know, my students have always been good to stay in touch with me, even if it's just on Facebook and we never, you know— But I get to vicariously enjoy their life, whatever it is. And that's that. Previous generations of teachers did not have that, you know, so it's good to be able to have those connections. And with a few, you know — well, more than a few — I still have, you know, we'll go six months without talking, and then we'll spend an hour and a half having a discussion on the Internet, and that's great. You know, that's great that they I can still be a part of their lives. I will say, remember that thing I made for my office, that “Thank-you”? Okay. Well, I moved it in intact here to my house, and I started tearing it apart — the back off and everything. I think I just could not do it. I just— So right now it's in my attic up on the wall. Just, I don't know, I just couldn't. It just seemed like I, perhaps at some point, I'll go in there and say, “Yeah, I've seen this enough. I love these people and they were part of my life, but I

got to have this space for something else." But for the time being, that's where you guys are: in my attic, all those pictures, and it— And every time I go in there, I will inevitably look up and see something, "Oh, yeah, I remember *that* time or *this* time," or, "I remember what that student was writing about when I took that picture." And that's, yeah, that's special to have those connections. And I guess the thing about being a professor that surprised me so much was the depth of friendship I could have with students. And now, that's very meaning to me. I know that, you know, I'm in that stage now where our lives are really going to start diverging here as you graduate and move on. But I take great happiness in knowing that for the time that our lives were in connection, that we were able to learn together, you know, cause I, you know, I think I've said in something that I wrote the other day that I think I learned more than I taught, and I think that that's because I'm, you know, I'm still learning things, too. So that's very meaningful to me as well, to have those relationships go— Follow me through. So when I'm in the nursing home, I hope that some students will still be following me on Facebook if I'm still on — if I can remember to be on Facebook — and that, you know, we'll still have those connections about what happened back in the fall of 2019 or 2020 or whatever. You know, we had that — shared experiences — and that's what personal relationships are all about, those shared experiences.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. Yeah, on any level.

INTERVIEWEE:

Correct. Yeah. And yeah, it's just not in the classroom. It's in the workspace, you know. We just had our 26th reunion of the Nashville Banner two weekends ago. The Banner,

you know, the ones who were there at the end, you know, when the Banner closed in 1998. And so we had our 26th reunion.

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, I hadn't seen some of those people in since the 25th reunion.

INTERVIEWER:

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

The previous year. And we had lost one person. One person had died since, in that interim. And so, you know, having that shared experience. That's the currency of life, you know. We can go back and point to the time when, you know— And, you know, it's all about telling stories about when so-and-so did this or so-and-so did that, but it's also about that time when we were together, shared the same purpose. And our purpose was to scoop the Tennessean, who was the bigger, badder brother who lives above us on the fourth floor of 1100 Broadway. And we were on the third floor of 1100 Broadway, so, you know. And those, that's good. You know, I didn't understand reunions for a long time, you know? And I did a lot of — especially World War 2 veterans — coming together for a reunion, and I didn't get it, you know? Until I only, just suddenly (unintelligible), "Oh. I get it now. They're reliving their past through their shared experiences, that they all share the same language." You know, they know sometimes all it takes is saying one word, and that brings up— Everybody knows what story they're talking about.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, yeah. Yeah, so that feeling of connectedness, that's what makes humans so special, I think. I'm sure some other mammals probably do that. And actually, I think, I just saw a fascinating documentary on whales the other night that indicate that whales, they recognize each other and when one whale, who's been on one side of one ocean, strays over into another ocean, meets a whale that they knew, and they share this communication together of dancing together in the water and with the sounds that they make, so that's— Which is fascinating to me. And of course, trees talk to one another now. Forest talk to one another, you know, in ways that we never understood before. Now, it's not language that we can interpret and understand, but it's a language that they share — of soil and the energy of photosynthesis and all that. It's fascinating what all that we're finding out today. Anyway, I'm blabbering on as professors usually do.

Appendix H

Below is a transcript of the last of six interviews with professors who participated in this project. Names and identifying information have been removed for privacy. Transcriptions have been edited for clarity.

INTERVIEWER:

So, first question: how long have you been teaching, and how many of those years have been at MTSU?

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay, let's see. Well, I started teaching in grad school. Well, we'll start with the full-time stuff. I think I started teaching full time in 2004, or, sorry, no, God, not 2004. Yeah, let's start with the full-time: 2004, and then I've been at MTSU since 2008.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. So you did start in 2004?

INTERVIEWEE:

I did, yeah. That was my first full-time gig.

INTERVIEWER:

Nice. Could you describe your teaching philosophy?

INTERVIEWEE:

Ohh wow, you're starting with the hard stuff. Everyone has to do a teaching philosophy when they start, when they go out on the job market to get their first, you know, post-grad school teaching position, and everyone hates doing it because anything you write sounds really trite. And also, you can't really write a teaching philosophy when you first start teaching. I mean, you have to have a fair amount of experience before you can really, I

mean, really— At the beginning, I think you're just sort of, you're copying the techniques of other teachers who have had good results. So the whole teaching “philosophy-writing thing” early on is, you know, kind of nonsensical. So, but I would say over time— Well, then, there's another complicating factor, too. When you first start out professionally, you're thinking a lot about yourself. And you know how you can sort of, you know, build up your own, you know — and I guess this is true in any profession — where you can build up your own professional standing, and you have to do that because you're not going to have anything to share with anybody else if you don't build something for yourself first, you know. I'm always saying to students, “Don't worry about being a little bit selfish when you first start out, just so long as you know, over time you, you know, recalibrate that.” So when you first start teaching, there you go into the classroom, whether you realize it or not — you know, you just don't have the maturity to realize it, and I don't think I did — you're thinking a lot about how that experience and that interaction can benefit you as a professional. So I was always thinking about “What new course can I teach that will look good on my CV?” You know, branching out in terms of the topics that I'm offering and, you know, getting buy-in from the students. You know, there's a sort of, you know, any human interaction kind of requires that kind of emotional manipulation you want to get on somebody's, you know, good side so that they'll play the game with you. I'm being a little bit cynical, but, you know, I'm not sure that, you know, most of this is very conscious. I think it's pretty subconscious. But, you know, humans have a have an instinct to be accepted by the group, and you can't do much if you're not accepted by the group. So. Okay, so my original question, what is my teaching philosophy? So, over time it's evolved, you know, as I get older and I don't have to be

quite so self-centered in my own professional life. I think the teaching philosophy is to make sure that to the extent you're able to, you are individualizing the student — and there are there are a lot of systemic issues that will work against you. And so that's why I say, you know, “To the extent that one is able,” because I'm fortunate to be in a discipline where it's recognized that we need to have smaller classes in order to function. You can't teach, you know, 40 people to speak a language at the same time, but, of course, I've got colleagues who are standing in front of a hundred or more people in a lecture type situation, so their teaching philosophy is going to have to be different than mine — not because they necessarily want it to be, but because the constraints demand a different approach. But for me, I'm fortunate enough to go into it feeling like I'm doing— Like, that I've got the best possible philosophy. And by “individualizing,” I mean that students come into the classroom with different goals and, of course, different strengths and weaknesses. So, often it's going to be about tweaking, you know — sometimes you get a more homogeneous group like our culture class from last spring — I think that was last spring — you guys were a pretty homogeneous group in the sense that no one had goals that deviated considerably, and you were all right at the same place where you were crossing over from intermediate high to advanced low level, so I didn't really have to individualize things, but sometimes that has to happen. Some students need more and different work. Some students need, you know, can be strong in some areas and weak in others, and what they really want to do is they can either spend their time getting even stronger in the areas where they're strong, or they can pull up where they're weak. And I kind of give them that choice to do that. But again, so the individualizing thing is if you're lucky. Not all teachers get to do that. So that's a big pillar of it, I think. I think

secondly, too, I like to operate with a certain level of transparency, which works great with adult students. I don't know if somebody could have a more transparent teaching pedagogy in high school — I suppose in some situations — where they can walk in and say, “Here's what I want you to do, and here's why I'm asking you to do it.” And adults tend to respond pretty positively to that. I don't know if adolescents would or not, you know, rather than it being— You know, I had professors when I was an undergrad who did more of a revelatory kind of pedagogy where they would, you know, walk you through — and this could take, you know, weeks, or it could take the whole semester — they would walk you through certain preliminary information, then start drawing the connections between those different elements. And then over the course of the semester, their hypothesis about whatever it is they were teaching on would be revealed. And there's something kind of like, “Tada! This is where we got to.” And you know, “This is the kind of revelation that I wanted to walk you toward and that hopefully you had.” And I think that can be really effective in a lot of disciplines. I could see a history professor doing that really well. I tend not to be that way. I tend to be more, you know, with each, you know, segment of the course, saying to students, “Here's what I'm trying to get you to do.” And that can be hard to explicate initially — especially if that's some sort of paradigm shift related to a cultural point — to kind of say to adult students, “Alright, I'm preparing you for a paradigm shift.” You know, people generally don't like paradigm shifts. They're usually not that fun. I mean, every now and then, you might have one that's sort of fascinating, like, “Wow, I see the world in a completely new way,” you know, “I'm born again,” you know, “I feel so alive.” But usually, paradigm shifts are a lot

like orthodontia. You know that at the end of it, there might be something good about it, but in the process of your teeth getting moved around, it's pretty unpleasant.

INTERVIEWER:

It's just: week by week, you're sore.

INTERVIEWEE:

We're like, yes, exactly. But I still like to do that sort of thing. You know, just to say, “I'm trying to convince you of this.” And, you know, some faculty will go in and say, “Ohh, I don't have an agenda. I just, I teach my students to think.” I'm not sure how genuine that really is because there are certain ways I see the world that I would like my students to share with me — that violence is a perversion; it's not natural to the human animal. Obviously we, you know, humans engage in violence a lot, but I believe that it's a perversion, not what we're supposed to be doing. I mean, you know, just basic things like that that I'd love it if my students agreed with me on. Or that, you know, culture is the standard by which all other cultures should be measured. I'd love it if students got on board with that.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. That makes sense.

INTERVIEWEE:

So I, you know, I can't celebrate. Even if a student is a thinking student, I can't necessarily celebrate every outcome of that, even though— I mean, Elon Musk is quite a thinker, but I'm not sure I completely agree with every conclusion that he arrives at. And I'm not gonna say, “Yay, good for you for thinking!”

INTERVIEWER:

Right. What are we doing with that? Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. And if it's something that I deem to be kind of nefarious, I am going to try to talk a student out of it.

INTERVIEWER:

That makes sense. You mentioned keeping a level of transparency with your students. Does that— How much does that also apply to connecting with them on a personal level? You talked about how it applies to the course content, but.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. You know, I think that my goal with, you know, personal interactions with students is hopefully longer term. And social media helps with that, you know, so that people can— I can still find them, and they can still find me. It doesn't mean we necessarily need to talk every year, but I like maintaining, you know, try to establish a longer-term rapport because there are things that, you know, I can get out of that. Because I've talked to students and said, “Okay, it's been 10 years since we read that book together. Do you even remember it?” or, you know, “Is there something I should have done differently?” And this is Gary (a cat), and he will ignore me all day long until I'm talking to somebody on the phone or over Zoom, and then he demands my complete attention.

INTERVIEWER:

He’s just all over you, oh.

INTERVIEWEE:

Gary, did you want to did you want to say anything? Did you? I know you've been fed recently, so that's not your problem.

INTERVIEWER:

He's so cute.

INTERVIEWEE:

He's a large boy.

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh my goodness.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. So maintaining a longer term— Yeah, that's helpful for me because I can collect some anecdotal longitudinal data of what I'm doing, but you know, I also just like students to get a sense that it's, you know, they can always come back for that sort of, I don't know, life reassurance. I mean, I've had a lot of students over the years say, “I've been graduated for two, three, four years now, and I don't have everything figured out. I'm still going from one job to the next,” or, “I've decided to maybe do a graduate degree in this or that, and my, you know, my parents are scoffing at that,” and just sort of being able to talk some of those things out and to reassure someone, and, “You're the fifth person who's contacted me this week who's been graduated for two or three years and who, you know, isn't in that place where either they thought that they would be, or maybe that their parents thought that they would be,” and to be able to say to them, “This is completely normal.” It's not like you get a bachelor's degree, and somebody waves a magic wand over you and says, “Okay, the rest of your professional life is going to be established and easy.” It's just— Adding bachelor's degree doesn't make life easy. It

might make it life easi*er* in some ways, but it doesn't make it easy. So I find that a lot of my most significant conversations with students — that's hopefully helpful to them and very gratifying and sometimes helpful to me — comes after they graduate. So maybe that's what I'm trying to do? Like if I'm going to some effort to create personal connections with students, maybe it's because I know that something good's gonna come out of it, you know, later on.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. Why is it that—

INTERVIEWEE:

I really like seeing how students' brains evolve when they're 30 and 35 and 40. When I first started teaching, I was the same age as my students. So I've got some 50-year-old students, and their journeys have been fascinating.

INTERVIEWER:

Wow. That's crazy to think that you were the same age as your students. That's wild.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, which isn't uncommon. You know, when people go to grad school, you might be a *couple* of years older when you start teaching. Like, I went straight into a master's program out of undergrad and started teaching my second semester, so I was 22, I guess. And, you know, I had 22-year-olds in the group. And, you know, you just, you interact with them differently. I interacted them with them differently when I was 22 than I do now with the age of 50. You know, obviously it's a little bit more "big sisterly" rather than kind of a, you know, more of an authority figure, I guess, but there's still that social contract that you establish within the first few days of the semester, which was easier for

university students, with the university students, than with high school because they don't have to be there. So, just by stepping foot in the classroom, they're expressing a willingness to engage in a social contract with the professor. I don't know how high school teachers do it who are just starting out, and they're still in their 20s, ‘cause establishing a social contract with, you know, 15-year-olds is— Hahaha, I don't know how they do it. They do it! But that's not, you know, experience that I have.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Why is it important to you to keep in long-term contact with students?

INTERVIEWEE:

So you know, it's partly for me. It's just curiosity, you know, also, maybe in some ways. Like on a personal level, it helps me gauge my own evolution, you know. Thinking about, you know, student might say, “Well, you were always telling us this.” “Am I still emphasizing that with students? Or have I moved on to something else?” You know, partly just in a completely egocentric way, maybe it holds a mirror back up to me, into my own evolution? And then that gives me a chance to think about, “Well, why did I abandon that idea?” or, “Why did I abandon that approach?” Or, “I'm still doing that. Why am I still doing that? Is there a good reason why I'm still doing that?” So it facilitates some reflection, I guess, on my part.

INTERVIEWER:

Makes total sense. So when you're actually in the classroom, could you tell me about some things you do to bridge the gap between you and your students so you're not coming off as the cold, stoic professor?

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, some of it's probably subconscious, but I'll try to think, you know, what are some things that I'm consciously doing in order to establish the trust? Because, you know, obviously you can't really learn from somebody if you don't trust them. I don't think you necessarily have to like them. I think back to professors I've had where I didn't particularly like their personalities, but I trusted that their goals were honorable. And so, I guess the establishing of trust— Maybe one thing that I consciously do is to make it clear that I don't think I know everything. Because who responds well to somebody who acts like a freaking know-it-all? I certainly didn't as a student; I still don't. So I guess a certain level of making sure students understand that I don't think that I'm super special because it's— All of those things are gonna create, you know— There are all these chemicals in the brain, and some facilitate getting information into long-term memory, and some chemicals impede that. So, you know adrenaline, for example. You don't want your students to have an adrenaline response to anything that you do in class. So what that means is that you don't want to— And teachers have different views of what that means. *My* view of that is that you don't want to do anything shocking, surprising, or too unpredictable. You know, I mean, a little excitement is good, kind of like, "Okay, everyone! Today we're going to look at this!" I mean that's fine, but, you know. This is kind of an extreme example, and I hate to even tell the story. It's about a friend of mine in grad school, and we were all, you know, just learning to teach. And he had a good rapport with his class — they were laughing from day one. It was going well, but he was a little bit of a trickster, which, you know, normally was okay, you know. He did it to his fellow grad students as well — little things, you know, where he might— You turn away for a minute, and he takes your pen, and then you turn back and you're like, "Where the hell's

my pen?" You know, like you think, "Am I crazy? Didn't I just have a pen there?" Little things like that that he would do. One day he went a little too far, by his own admission, I mean. And he, you know, learned from it, and I'm sure he's never done anything like it again. But he was in a French 1010 class, and I suppose they were learning, you know, words for "stand up," "sit down," those sorts of, you know, "move around" type of things. And he was calling on students individually to, you know, stand up, sit down, and whatever. else it was he was drilling. And he was standing, he happened to be kind of standing right behind a student, and I think told everybody to sit down and then pulled the chair out from behind this student. Yes, exactly. And of course, the student, you know, went to the ground and he, my friend, said that the second he did it — like it was just this impish impulse to do that — and the second he did it, he knew that it was so wrong. And when he was telling — and I respect him for telling us the story of what he had just done because we had the same look on our faces that you just have — I mean we're, "Holy shit, a) you did *not* just do that to another human being, and b) you did it to a *student*." I mean, like a student in class. Like, what purpose does that serve? So he realized that he had gotten carried away, you know, they were having a great day in class, and he got carried— And he was young! He was 20-something. And we all, you know, live and learn. My mother used to say that. So. And he realized the second he did it, that that was just the *dumbest* thing he could possibly do. And, you know, was profusely apologetic not just for that student but with the whole class, "I'm so sorry." But it cost him because obviously what he did was create an adrenaline response in his students, so for the rest of the semester, even though he was profusely apologetic at that moment — and later on mentioned it a couple more times, "I still am so embarrassed I did that. I

cannot believe I did that," — even though he went back to it and expressed his contrition again later on, he still didn't quite get back 100% trust from the students, and that cost him in terms of the atmosphere. It cost him in terms of having a great atmosphere in the class, and it cost the students because some of them, at least, were probably having a mild adrenaline response when they come into class because they had seen that thing, that unexpected thing that had happened to that student, and they always— In the back of your mind, then, I mean human trauma: you think, "Is something humiliating going to happen to me in that same context?" So you do everything you can to keep an adrenaline response from happening. So if somebody asks a question and you can tell that while they're asking it, or maybe right after they ask it, they're judging themselves, "Oh my God. That was a really dumb question. I cannot believe I asked that, that question. Everyone's gonna think I'm an idiot," the teacher really has to jump in quickly and validate that question however they can. So, you know, "Ohh, good question. I'm glad you asked that 'cause I bet other people have been wondering that too." Or, you know, "I remember having that same question when I was, you know, learning the grammar point," something that validates the student because you need to make sure that you don't provoke an adrenaline response in that student or in anybody else who's observing it. So, adrenaline response hopefully is non-existent in a classroom, but you do want a little cortisol. So, cortisol is that chemical that — it doesn't make you panic or doesn't make your heart beat, you know, out of your chest the way adrenaline does. It doesn't give you fight or flight — but it gives you that sort of, "I'm going to pay attention because there's something that I need to make sure that I, you know, learn, or absorb, or do," or something like that. So that balance — between no adrenaline but just enough cortisol —

is important. So you want to— Like any sort of competition in class, you know, you're reviewing for an exam and you do a little game show-type thing: that's a perfect use of cortisol ‘cause everyone wants to win the game, but you don't feel that if you lose the game, that you're going to be humiliated in some way, you know. Like, “Okay, I'll lost the game, whatever,” but the winner of the game is like, “Woohoo!” You know, “I win a rubber ducky!”

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm. Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So keeping the— Doing things that inspire some cortisol but stay away from adrenaline I have— This is a really long answer. So you're like, “What do you do?” So what I'm doing in class from the first day is getting a little cortisol going but avoiding the adrenaline. But then the most important thing is establishing that *trust* because you have to have serotonin in order to learn, and information rides on serotonin into long-term memory. So serotonin is, you know, the “feel good” chemical, so you need your students relaxed. I mean, you know, obviously not everything you learn is going to be enjoyed, but at least as relaxed as students can be with just a little cortisol ‘cause you want them to pay attention. You don't want them falling asleep, but relaxed and hopefully enjoying themselves in some way. Even if they're not crazy about the material they're learning that day, at least they're enjoying being in the class and being around other people in the room and being with the professor. So. And, as usual, I can't remember what your original question was because I've been talking for so long.

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh no, you're good. You're good. It was, “What do you do to bridge the gap between you and your students?”

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay, so that's— The way to get the serotonin way up and get the cortisol a little up is to learn something about each student from day one. That helps me because I can remember a student’s name more easily if I have a couple of bits of information about them, and so they're not just this two-dimensional name on a piece of paper. They're an actual person. So, I might ask silly questions like, “Do you have a dog or cat?” ‘cause knowing somebody has a cat named Buster will help me remember their name, you know, or some other banal thing. It doesn't have to be super personal, but that helps me remember the person's name, which— That in and of itself establishes trust, but it can also, you know— Students need to feel comfortable with each other as well. So, you know, just a couple of bits of information and then moving forward, you know. One thing that a lot of faculty lament about teaching online is that one essential element gets lost, which is: that minute before or after class is hugely valuable. So, as I'm passing back quizzes I'll stop and, you know, you can't do it with every person, every day — there's not enough time. But just a couple of people where I can, you know, ask them, “Hey, how did that thing go?” or tease them about something, you know, “You have serial killer handwriting,” you know.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

But, you know, you will get the student laughing and have, like, a personal connection where— Because we know that every time a human being makes eye contact with

another human being, that releases serotonin in the brain. So, you know, if you can make that eye contact — and again, you don't have to make, you know, it doesn't have to be long, and you don't necessarily have to do it with every student in every single class meeting, but — you want to make sure that you're regularly exchanging eye contact with each student because then that keeps that trust, and it releases serotonin in the brain and makes both parties feel good about that interaction that just happened. This is one thing that concerns me a little bit about— And I can't even blame this on your generation, even though some older people love to do that. People my age are doing it, too. We're all looking at our phones so much, you know. I'll walk down the hall, like, down to (name's) office with my phone, and I'm reading something on my phone while I'm walking down the hall to go ask her a question, and that's a damn shame, because maybe I passed a few of my students on the way down the hall — or even ones who aren't my students, but they're just other human beings in the hallway — and I missed the chance to make eye contact with them. Or even better, you know, have a two-second exchange. Hey, how are you? You know, I mean, human beings engage in small talk not because we're really asking a question that we need an answer to. Like I say "Hi, how are you?" I don't have time to hear your life story. You don't have time. The question isn't really what matters. The question is that we're checking to make sure that another member of our own species is breathing and that they're not in distress. So, if I say something to you, you know I'm breathing, and then you answer back, fine, then I know you're breathing and that you're not in distress. And so we can both keep moving and know that the other member of our species doesn't need immediate medical help. You know, linguists have words for those types of interaction. They're not about the exchange of information, they're about

establishing and maintaining that trust among members of your own species. So we're doing this thing in the classroom. So that eye contact is really important, and we've all been trained out of eye contact. Like, there's something weird about it now and uncomfortable. And yeah, I fear where we're going that we don't have that. And Zoom doesn't count.

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

INTERVIEWEE:

We don't get that same chemical response in the brain when we're looking into somebody's eyes on Zoom — there've been studies — which makes sense because I don't necessarily know that you're looking right at me right now. "Actually, I'm looking at myself and making sure that my hair isn't sticking up. I'm not looking at you at all," hah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, the Zoom doesn't count, so we lose a lot in those interactions right before and right after class when we're teaching an online class, even if it's synchronous. I still can't, like, make eye contact with my students, and I still can't have an individual moment, or I, you know, I guess they can with the rest of the class sitting there listening, but it's not the same. You know, a student wrote me, you know, "My grandmother died a few days ago, and my mom is having a really hard time having lost her mother. I'm okay, but my mom is really having a hard time, and I'm worried about her," and so, you know over Zoom in front of everybody else, "How did," how do I say, "Hey, John, how's your mom doing?"

You know, it's not that it's super personal, but it's also not something that you say in front of a group of people. Yeah, so some of that is locked, but I think yeah, creating the one-on-one dynamic — even if it's just for a couple of seconds every other week — it can help keep the right chemicals high and the bad, you know, wrong chemicals low and keeps the trust, and keeps everything going in the right direction.

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm. Nice. This room is getting darker and darker. I'm going to open the window real quick. I am also visiting a friend right now in upstate New York, so trying to figure out a room that is not mine is like, “This is fun to figure out!” It's pitch-black right now.

Speaker

Okay.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you for your patience.

INTERVIEWEE:

No problem. I bet through this process, you’ve figured out that professors love to talk about themselves and what they do. And I think a lot of the time it has to do with the fact that education is really, you know, undervalued in our culture. It always has been, but even less so now. So I think a lot of times now, faculty are— They jump at the opportunity to say, “Let me tell you why what I do is important, please. Please agree with me, please. It is important, right? I'm not wasting my time?”

INTERVIEWER:

That's so funny. So how about study abroad? I don't know how many years you've gone. I don't know how or if that's influenced your personal relationships with students.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, I started doing study abroad programs when I was in grad school. There was an organization in that's located in Vermont that I did a summer study abroad with when I was a teenager, and they always need group leaders. And so, when I was in grad school, during the summers, I would be a group leader. And this organization takes high school students. They do have a university program as well, but I was working for their high school branch, so we took groups of high school students to Switzerland and France. And then— Here, I've done, let's see. I don't know if— All told, I've done maybe 10 programs where I've traveled, you know, with the students, and that's a completely different ball of wax. You have to inspire trust in a much more profound way because you're looking after the students' safety. Not just hoping that they learn stuff, but making sure not only that they are safe, but that they feel safe, and sometimes they're feeling safe is the more challenging thing.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

So, you know, especially for someone like me who's taking groups to first-world countries, you know it's not, you know— Chances of something horrible happening to you in Geneva, you know, in terms of, I don't know, getting caught in the middle of an armed conflict, I don't know, are, you know, pretty non-existent, but you have to just— Yeah, and I've gone with a lot of students who had never been out of the country before and maybe really hadn't been ever away from family. So that requires a lot of hand-holding, which I needed, too, when I first started traveling on my own, and I remember

how that felt. So, I don't know. So, how am I— So the question is, “How am I establishing a personal connection during study abroad?” Or, “Why is it important?”

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, both, all. How does it affect your relationship afterwards also?

INTERVIEWEE:

It can be difficult to— I was just talking with my FL 1000 class a couple of weeks ago about the principal sociological domains that we live in. We've got, you know, we've got a dominance domain, where somebody has authority over somebody else, you know—

INTERVIEWER:

Ohh, yes.

INTERVIEWEE:

Versus the communality domain, where you're working with your peers, and how there are gray areas between, you know, these different sociological groups that sometimes you have to navigate. Sometimes the gray area’s that you're going from one type of domain to another domain. Sometimes the relationships live within a gray area kind of all the time. And one of the examples that I use with students is: do you have a job where, you know, it's just a job to earn some extra money? It's not the beginning of your career, and so, you know, obviously it's not as important to you as to your first career job is going to be. You know, you're working in that restaurant or whatever, you know, it's a temporary situation. you know. Just a job, but it's still a job, and you still need to treat your employer with respect and have that, you know, that person has authority over you, and you need to do what they ask you to do. But, so, you're in the dominance domain because that supervisor is, you know, has authority over you, and, you know, tells you what to do, but maybe

they're kind of close to your age, and you have a really good, friendly rapport and maybe even sometimes you go out together when you're not at work. That's a perfect example of a gray area. You're sort of communality in some ways, and you're sort of dominance domain in other ways? And that can get stressful. And it requires constant negotiation almost like you even have to explicitly say, “Okay, I acknowledge you. I acknowledge that our rapport is in the dominance domain when we're at work together, and you're asking me to do things that I need to do them, but when we go out after work, we’re in the commonality domain.” There are rules to those domains.

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm.

INTERVIEWEE:

With study abroad, there are similar complications that happen because you can't stay in the dominance domain when you're traveling with a group of students. I need my students to tell me if something has happened in their host family or in whatever other context that is compromising their physical health, their mental well-being, whatever it is. So. I’m trying to think of an example. You know, I've had students who— She was leaning— She was in the bathroom in her host family, and she was leaning on the sink to get closer to the mirror to put her makeup on, and then she sort of pulled the sink off the wall. Hahaha, it was, it was, yeah. So, what I need to happen in those moments is for her — and I think she must have been the only one in the house at that moment, and luckily it didn't cause a water main to break, so it wasn't like there was an immediate situation where the bathroom was flooding, but it was obviously— The sink was hanging off the wall. And if she just left it there, then maybe a water main would have broken, and later on they'd be

coming home to— I mean, it was something that had to be addressed right now, and she was freaking out, as I would be — and I need a student's first thought in a moment like that — where they have fucked up in some way — to be to call me. And, so, I can't remain in the dominance domain because I need them to know that they can call me and that I'm not going to judge them, make them feel bad about it, yell at them, whatever that is. But I also can't be in the communality domain because otherwise I can't, you know, you don't call a peer in that moment, you call somebody who has more life experience than you do, and maybe more authority, and they can help you fix the problem. So, study abroad has you exist within gray spaces when you're traveling with students, and that can get stressful. But the flip side of that is that once you've mastered that, once you've navigated an uncommon sociological moment with them, the — you know, and doing something together, that was a big deal to them because maybe they've never been abroad before, they've never stayed with a host family, they've never done this, they've never done that — it, you know, it solidifies you for life. I still have students who are, you know, a 40-year-old emailed me recently asking me what she should do about a situation in her work life, and I wrote back and laughed, and I said, "When did I ever give you the impression that I have any wisdom to share at all?" I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to tell you what I would do, but I think it's adorable that you think I know what I'm doing in my life." But once you've studied abroad with the student, those are the types of— All the effort that I put into creating a study abroad program and executing it — and it is a ginormous amount of work and irritation — it's always worth it. Because you get to you get to a place with a group of people that's tremendously — a rapport — that's

tremendously gratifying. That never goes away. So how? But then, your question was, “How do I build the trust?”

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

I think I do a lot of the same things when I'm traveling with students that I do in the classroom, which is I tell them all of the times that I have said and done stupid things so that they know that they're going to say and do stupid things and that it does not matter. And that they will — as they're interacting with other people — they'll know immediately who other high achievers are because other high achievers won't laugh at them when they say and do stupid things because they've said and done stupid things themselves. You have to, in order to achieve any amount of success in your life, either personal or professional. The only people who will laugh at you are the ones who are too afraid to take risks themselves. So I think sharing my stories and making sure that they know that if somebody laughs at them, you almost could, should, kind of feel bad for them because it means they don't have the guts to get out into the world and try new things themselves.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

That's a big part of it. I do let students call me (first name) when we're studying abroad. Sometimes they don't, but you know, some students it really helps because if they have just pulled a bathroom, sink off the wall, if they know me as (first name), they're more likely to call me up and say, “I just pulled the bathroom sink off the wall.” Other students

don't need it, and some students are in between, so they end up calling me (honorific, first name) or something like that, which is great. I have never had an issue with students coming back — say, from a study abroad, and then they're in the classroom again — I've never had a problem with the student going back to (honorific, last name) because they want to call me the same thing that everybody else is calling me, so maybe they called me (first name) during the trip and that helped them, you know, made me feel more accessible, and they felt safer. But then when they come back, they don't need that anymore.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

I've never really cared either way. I find that students kind of set that standard in terms of what they call their professors.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, really? The students set the standard?

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, ‘cause I've been in contexts, I’ve had contexts where I've said to students — especially when I was younger because you don't wanna act too fancy or authoritative when you're younger — you have to sort of assert that you're the one who's responsible for the situation in different ways and beating students over the head with your authority. “Respect my authorit-ah!” doesn't work.

INTERVIEWER:

Haha, “Do it!!”

INTERVIEWER:

Haha, yeah, “Do it!! Because I said so!!” You just, you have to get in there and kind of reason with them. You know, I've said to students, please don't engage in this behavior because it— Did you know (faculty name)?

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm.

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay. I'd say, you know, “Please, please don't do this thing because if you do, I will never be allowed to lead another study program again. When (faculty name) hears about this, then I'll be in trouble.” And I'll emotionally manipulate them in another way; I'll say, “If,” you know, “If you have any— If you care about me even the tiniest bit, please don't do this because the repercussions on me will be significant.” So those are the sorts of things, you know — which sometimes wasn't completely untrue — sometimes it was a little emotionally manipulating, haha, but all other times, it also wasn't completely untrue. I was going to get yelled at by (faculty name).

INTERVIEWER:

I mean, yeah, and the fact of the matter is you have your own boss as well, but.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right. But just little, you know, things like that with study abroad, where it's a different set of rules.

INTERVIEWER:

Mmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

So. But I've never had any trouble, you know, relaxing rules and then needing them to sort of bounce back to where they were after the study abroad trip is over. But, like I said, I don't really need those rules to bounce back. I really find that the students — rather than continuing to live in that gray area between sociological domains — the student wants to go back to the dominance domain. And all that, and dominance domain, can be really helpful. It can make us feel safe that we've got someone else that— You know, like (faculty name). I just, you know, he retired a couple of years ago, but I still chat with him occasionally. And he was passing through town last week, so we met for lunch, and I noticed that in my rapport with him, I'm still— He and I have always been in a gray area. He was my chair, and also, he was just my older, wiser colleague whose advice I deferred to, and now he's not my supervisor anymore. But I still am not completely willing to give up some of those dominance domain characteristics I needed in order to feel— It brings *me* a sense of safety and security to put him, to leave him in that domain. Because then, when I need advice, or I need comfort, or when I need praise, I can go to him, and I can get whatever feeling I need validated. You know, whereas if he— If we were completely in communality at this point and completely left behind dominant domain, there would be something in that rapport that we'd be missing. So it's not about him wanting to retain control over me in some way; it's about me wanting him to still have that authority because there's something about it that I still need. So that's what I notice with students is that they go back into the dominance domain because there's something that they still need from me that they're only going to get in that domain. They're not going to get it through a rapport of communality.

INTERVIEWER:

That is so interesting to think about. I never had the words for it. I never knew what the terms were. You know, you know the concept, but you don't know the language. Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yes, that's right. It's so helpful, isn't it? Rather than, you know, being like, "You know, that situation where you have this kind of rapport with this person?" Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

"You know when the vibe is, like,"

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, social sciences are *so* useful. You know, giving us that vocab into helping us see that, "Wow. Yeah, this is a universal human need that we're expressing in this way. And this is how we go about getting that need fulfilled."

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. I remember — little rabbit trail here — I remember when you would bring up the different hormones, like cortisol and dopamine, in class. So it— I like that you still do that. Where did that come from?

INTERVIEWEE:

That was just something that I learned as an undergrad. It was a course that I was taking — I think it was a psychology course — but it was specifically one on, like, the psychology of teaching and learning. And being aware of, you know, everything that you do is going to affect how a student learns in the classroom, so you can use that to your advantage by being aware of it, or you can inadvertently, you know, make learning harder for people by doing things a certain way. And that goes back to the whole transparency thing. I'm not sure that I could explain to a bunch of high school freshmen,

you know, I'm trying to keep your, you know, your serotonin high, your adrenaline hopefully non-existent, and your cortisol somewhere in the middle. They're not gonna— But by the time someone's a university freshman, they're ready for that kind of explanation and for me to say, “I'm not always going to be successful, but here's what I'm trying to do, and here's how I'm trying to do it, and if there's something that if I can tweak something to make it more beneficial for you, let me know.”

INTERVIEWER:

Mmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

But again, you can't put that kind of responsibility on children because they don't know what they need. But by the time you get to 18, 19, 20, you start to know what you need and being invited to express that, so kind of a “help me help you” kind of a situation.

INTERVIEWER:

Makes total sense. Last couple of questions: you've touched on how you've benefited as a professor from forming these personal connections, but how have you benefited from personal relationships with your students as a person?

INTERVIEWEE:

Ohh, I’ve had— Well, I've got, you know, many former students who are — a couple of them are friends, close friends, and then I've got a lot of acquaintances that I see from time to time. You know, I think a lot of it comes from just good old-fashioned validation. We all need to feel like we're contributing in some way, shape, or form to the world with, like, that we're a, you know, a part of something larger! And I think that, you know— I had one former student I have who's now a close friend — was kind of a skittish

undergraduate. I think that her parents didn't instill a whole lot of self-confidence in her, and there was no way in hell she was going to study abroad. I mean, that was just, you know, in her mind that just not even an option because how on Earth could she survive an experience like that? And I pushed her and pushed her and pushed her on it from, you know, the day I met her and I, you know, I got to, you know, obviously some students you don't push some, some students you feel have a very legit reason for choosing not to do this or that thing, or at least at this point in their lives. So maybe they won't study abroad as a university student, but that doesn't mean that they won't see the world later on their lives. But this one, I knew if she didn't get a little self-confidence really quickly that it was never going to happen.

INTERVIEWEE:

And so I pushed her and pushed her, and then she came on the program with me. I held her hand the whole time. I made sure that her host family was right next door to my host family. My bedroom window was right across from her bedroom window. And that was a lot of work traveling with her. She needed more from me than any other student ever has. And I just remember, on the flight home, her coming up to me in tears and saying, “I can't believe I did this.” And I said, “Well, you did! And it really wasn't that hard.” She's like, “No. It really wasn't that hard.” So, you kind of think that maybe, you know— And now, she's the most outgoing person in the world. I mean, it was a — I don't know — not a total transformation from that one experience, but that one experience combined with other experiences that she had provided by other professors throughout her four years at MTSU created a person — a completely different person. And that's created some conflict with her family because she's a different person now. She's not the same child

that her parents raised, and sometimes they don't know what to do with that. And it's upset them sometimes.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

There's a yin and yang to everything now — that nothing's completely positive. But now, she teaches herself, and her students are benefiting from that same sort of, “I know you're scared, but— And I know how that feels, but you can do this.” She coaches a sports team. And, so I think just knowing — like personally knowing — that all that effort I went to to make that experience happen for her, combined with all of the other people in her life who are making other experiences happening for her, that we pulled something off. Like there was— You know, maybe I've crashed and burned at most of the things that I've tried to do in my life — the way most people have, I mean, most ideas don't come to fruition, and that's completely normal — but just to be reminded that once in a while, with the help of other people, you've pulled something off. So that's probably, personally, I think that's what's kept me going. Like — I don't know if this is bad or good, but — the validation that I need in my personal life, some of that comes from my students because we're constantly getting messages from, you know, from administration, MTSU administration, and it's— I'm about to say something that paints them as terrible people, and that's not how I mean it. I just mean that they serve a different master.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

They're the ones, the people worry about keeping the university running and making sure the budget balances, and I don't have to worry about that. I can be critical that not enough resources go to our students, that “They shouldn't have to pay a penny in tuition, damn it!” but I'm not the person who has to keep the lights on. But the people who have to keep the lights on will sometimes openly criticize us, for, you know, “Why are you spending that much time doing that thing and costing that much money?” And then state legislators, too, are constantly giving the message that higher education is extremely wasteful.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

That it's a huge waste of money because the results are not quantitative, just like we were talking about at the beginning of our discussion. They're not quantitative; they're qualitative. So how do you go— Bringing it back around!

INTERVIEWER:

We've done it!

INTERVIEWEE:

But, yeah, you know, and, like we were saying, qualitative data takes longer to amass, and so how do you put a number on a student who came to MTSU very skittish, had barely been out of their tiny hometown, and then four years later, they're going out into the world and they're create— They're affecting this major change by the volunteering that they're doing and the this and that and the skills they learned and the, you know, the

hard skills they learned and the behavioral skills they learned. Like, how do you put a price on that?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

But state legislators need to tell their constituents, you know, quantitative things, that "11.6% percent more of our population has a college degree and therefore can make life better in some way that can also be established by a percentage."

INTERVIEWER:

"Their paycheck is 12% higher" or whatever. Yeah. Yeah, that makes— Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

One of the issues that we have in liberal arts is that we know that the kind of stuff that we teach fosters critical thinking. So, we've got, you know— So, students go out in the world not quite so billable, you know. As you know — and that's not saying that people who don't have a bachelor's degree are gullible; it just means that that's another tool that we can use to teach ourselves to be less gullible, to not take things at face value, to constantly be thinking, "Alright, someone's, you know, trying to convince me of something with this bit of information. But what about blah blah blah blah blah?" you know — that's a lot of what we do in liberal arts, but, you know, how do you a number on that?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, people are less gullible professionally, politically, even personally, even in their rapport with, you know, relationships in their life, that kind of thing. You know, “Huh, I think you might be gaslighting me?” Yeah, so that can get frustrating if you can’t quantify your results, that (sic) maybe we go looking for validation in a more anecdotal way. And that's some of the gratification that I get from maintaining those relationships.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm. I like that. So last question, not for you personally, but conceptually, what would you say is the value of investing in these human connections with students?

INTERVIEWEE:

Okay, so more, you know, in a less touchy-feely way.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, like as an idea, not from.

INTERVIEWEE:

(Pause.) You know, there's been a lot of talk — I'm afraid I'm going to go into another long answer. Hehehehe.

INTERVIEWER:

That's alright.

INTERVIEWEE:

There's been a lot of talk in recent years of, you know, over time, maybe doing away with the traditional bachelor's degree structure where you go, and you do four years, and you get this degree, and you don't— You haven't earned anything in the meantime. I mean, sometimes people will do an associate’s program, get that associates degree and then go on, but for a lot of people, you're toiling away for four years without getting any sort of

credential. You get the big credential at the end. And there's been talk in academics of having a completely different structure — that would need to evolve over time — but a structure where you do more things in a more of a certification kind of way, where— You know, and you can already do that if— You know, there are a lot of fields where stacking certifications is really the way to go. And someone might do that in addition to a bachelor's degree, or they might do it instead of, and instead of might make a lot of sense for somebody who's in, I don't know, IT, for example, especially in fields where things are changing a lot. So there's something a little bit more, you know, dynamic and fast-paced, and responding to the market about doing staffing certifications and then, you know, and maybe doing it over the course of your whole career, or at least maybe the first 10 years of your career or something like that. I think that they haven't quite figured out how some of those things will fit into that because I think, you know, when it comes to liberal arts, there are a certain number of behavioral skills that actually helps us all as 18-year-olds. You know, ideally, we're 18-year-olds learning those things; we're not waiting until we're 30 or 35 to become more critical thinkers or you know, more interculturally adept or those sorts of things. But I do see the value in, you know, stacking certifications, as well, like maybe kind of a mixture of the two ideas. But I think that— So, establishing these relationships, I think it can help. I think it can help the academy get a better idea of what students' needs are, rather than talking in extremes. I think a lot of times, there's an interim space that we need to get to, so maybe there are a certain number of things that you still learn in kind of a traditional bachelor's degree type of way that's been around for 800 years but that you can augment that with other types of credentialing.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

That's, you know, kind of on a larger scale. Like talking about “the academy” in general. But I think that's true for individual universities, as well, that we need that feedback from students who have gone on when we're talking about effecting, like, big systemic changes. We need that qualitative, anecdotal information to accompany the numbers.

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

So that's, you know— And we're all encouraged to, you know, maintain a rapport with alumni. You know, it's not something that just a few professors latch on to. Some are better at it than others. Women tend to be better at it than men, and it's because of the way we're socialized. You know, it's not that women are inherently more capable of creating and maintaining a human connection, but we're definitely socialized to believe that that's a big part of our role. You know, the only problem with that is that, you know, feminine skills tend to not be respected or monetized in the same way that masculine skills tend to be.

INTERVIEWER:

Mmm.

INTERVIEWER:

I hadn’t—

INTERVIEWEE:

If I'm busy creating these substantial rapports of former students — and we're sharing and trusting and living and! — you know, I probably have a male colleague somewhere who is busy writing this third book and garnering, you know, scholarly props while I'm busy, you know, living and feeling and sharing and loving!

INTERVIEWER:

Crying, smiling.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, academia requires both. We need some people who are more research oriented, who are creating knowledge. I mean, obviously I wouldn't have the knowledge that *I* have that informs my teaching — about, you know, brain chemicals and how to control them — if somebody didn't do some pure research at some point and then teach me that. So we need people doing that, but it can be a little bit frustrating sometimes because the idea is that — and this isn't just at MTSU, this is in the American academy in general —

INTERVIEWER:

Hmm.

INTERVIEWEE:

— that women *maintain* academic programs…

INTERVIEWER:

Can you give me just one second? It was a technical difficulty...Hi, so sorry. Different, like we need both research *and*—

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah. So, yeah, so the stereotype is sort of that women *maintain* academic programs while men produce knowledge through research. And the maintaining of academic programs — the building a human rapport with your students who are currently in the program and then the ones that have left the program is part of that, you know, maintaining a program, running a program and, you know— And that's, again, that's not to say that there aren't plenty of men out there who are great mentors who do this, but there are more women that do it than men.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Writing his third book, that's funny. It's a funny mental image.

INTERVIEWEE:

'Cause former students will say — both men and women — they'll say, "Who was the professor that you had the greatest rapport with, and whose, you know, whose influence was, you know, the most felt by you over time?" and it's usually a woman whether the person answering — whether the former student is a man or a woman — it's, the professor is usually a woman. But then when they're asked, who's the professor that you most *respected*?

INTERVIEWER:

Mhm.

INTERVIEWEE:

You know, and granted, these, you know, there's a subtle art to writing surveys and, you know, these questions are asked in different ways and different wording so that you can get, you know, down to the nitty-gritty. And so it wasn't, you know, it's not a question that's asked exactly that way, but those aggregate questions asked, "Who did you most

respect?" It's usually a man. So some, you know, some woman, you're acknowledging, really transformed your life, both personally and professionally, but that's not the person that you're saying you respected the most. Usually, it's a man who's much more aloof because the idea in our human brains — and this might be culturally affected; my opinion is that it is culturally relative, but I don't think there's been any conclusive research on it — but in our human brains, we kind of respond to people who are more aloof. We admire them because maybe we're thinking, "They're off doing great things," like, "We don't see these great things that they're doing, but they must be because they don't have time for me. They're ignoring me, so they must be off doing something really important."

INTERVIEWER:

It just makes you want it more.

INTERVIEWEE:

If you're more transparent— Yeah. You know, and maybe goes back to the idea of, you know, the stay-at-home mom, who's completely transparent? You know what she does all day because you're there with her as a little kid, but Daddy goes to work in the morning and then he comes home at the end of the day, and he must have been off doing something important. So, you don't have the same emotional connection with Daddy, but you sure have his respect because, gosh, he's probably out doing something really impressive.

INTERVIEWER:

If he's gone *all day*, yeah. And then he comes home.

INTERVIEWEE:

Gone *all day*, you know. And he wears fancy clothes — Mommy doesn't wear fancy clothes.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, my word, I never thought about.

INTERVIEWEE:

Right, yeah. So, you know, I saw that a lot at— My best friend from childhood has four kids. And she stayed home with them, and their dad is a big kind of IT guy. He makes a really good living, provides for the family. He's a wonderful guy, and so he certainly didn't do anything to encourage this rapport, but — until they were in their teenage years, you know, it started to shift because they started to, you know, have a more wholesome understanding of the world — but until they were, you know, I don't know, to the end of high school, they really revered him, and Mom was just their servant. You know, that's changing now, you know. They're late teens and young adults now, and they totally get everything that Mom did for them, and now Mom is reaping the rewards of that because when they call, you know, when they call, they call her. You know, they might come on the phone and chat with Dad for three minutes. But Mom is the person they want to talk to. That's the person that they had a solid, unbreakable, completely, you know, grounded trust in. They love Dad, but it's— They'll never have with Dad what they have with Mom. But those teenage years were hard when they thought everything Dad said was, you know, priceless, and she was just someone who made them lunch. So, but I think some of that carries over into the professional world. You know, you create a bond with the women that you that you work with, but, you know, really well-written surveys revealed

to us that we still have these insidious ideas that that the men are the people who are actually doing the really important work.

INTERVIEWER:

Which is crazy because I would argue that the more difficult, the more challenging thing to do is to take a supportive role. Like, you know, you have to, as a woman, you kind of have to exemplify— I mean, you kind of, not like you have to be inspiring, but, like, there's a reason you're the teacher — you've had to earn something to get you a good position — but then to drop back down and support a student from underneath and lift them up and draw them out of themselves sometimes.

INTERVIEWEE:

That is really— How old are you?

INTERVIEWER:

22.

INTERVIEWEE:

That is — and this is going to come off as me being really complimentary of you, and I'm not trying to flatter ya, I really, it's not — I really mean it honestly when I say that is a very unusual high level of thinking for a 22-year-old to get to. Now, if a 30-year-old said that to me, I wouldn't be impressed at all, but for a 22-year-old who already has gotten to the point where you know that being a helper is actually far more laudatory than being the Grand Poobah. I certainly didn't feel that way until I was in my 30s, and then I finally understood that— Well, and you know, and we get that in our— You know, maybe people should be getting that earlier because anybody who's raised in a Christian church like I was, I mean, even God himself is referred to as a helper, and “helper” is not a dirty,

subordinate word in the Bible. It's a glorifying word. It's a glorious, wonderful thing to be a helper, but somehow that gets lost in our capitalistic culture. We don't quite translate that. We don't take that from Sunday morning and really practice that belief in our lives throughout the week. So it's kind of surprising that — especially in the South — that we don't have a little bit more of that Judeo-Christian influence of the nobility of being a helper. But, again, I think it's capitalism that kills that. But that's a really unusual thing for a 22-year-old to realize. You must have— you know, it speaks to your maturity, and it also might speak to the way you were raised.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Where that, the nobility of the helper, got demonstrated to you.

INTERVIEWER:

Or not demonstrated. That was the— I think that was the reality of it, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

Or not, and then you're realizing that that didn't get demonstrated to you.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Well, we've, we've covered capitalism, sexism. Is there anything you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE:

I think that's all I've got in terms of rants. I can probably think of something else to rant about soon, but those are the big ones

INTERVIEWER:

I took a note— I wrote down something in your class a year ago, and I'm going to see if I still have the note. It was—

INTERVIEWEE:

Was it something I said, and was it brilliant?

INTERVIEWER:

No, it wasn't something you said. Okay, April 4th, 2023. This was when we were having the discussion about how French— Kind of just, like, French socializing, like kind of in the salon versus American socializing and, like, the sensibilities that come with those contexts. Okay, I wrote, “French thought: Americans get exhausted when one social justice issue flows into the next into the next, but Europeans keep that convo going.” So. I wrote that down a year ago and I think I was absent for whatever reason from the class where you were— Like our discussion had to get cut short, and you were like, “Let's continue this next week,” and then I was gone, and then it was like, “I guess I'll keep this in my phone for a year.”

INTERVIEWEE:

And I'm wondering what specifically sparked that, like the specific issue we were talking about.

INTERVIEWER:

We were talking about— It was along the vein of dinner parties and how French people love showing off how smart they are because it's not an intimidation thing. It's an activity, and it's, like, a chance to grow — also a little bit show off.

INTERVIEWEE:

But it's an activity, but it's also a form of compliment because if I argue with you, that means that I think you're smart enough that I could potentially learn something from you. And I don't think Americans have that idea that if somebody picks an argument with you, they're actually complimenting you. They're saying that you have the—

INTERVIEWER:

Right.

INTERVIEWEE:

—the intellect necessary to engage in this, you know,

INTERVIEWER:

Exchange. You're worthy of arguing with, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE:

So maybe that's why they do stick to social causes better than we do — because they're getting that validation in the argumentation, and we're not really getting them. We're not taking it as a compliment, so we get exhausted because we're not getting validated by it.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, the whole, what is it, destination-oriented versus process-oriented?

INTERVIEWEE:

Destination-oriented. So am I going to argue with my next door neighbor over climate change for—

INTERVIEWER:

Three hours, haha.

INTERVIEWEE:

—10 years, on the hope that *maybe* I'll get some gratification at the end of it? If I shift it, and I take joy in the exchange, or I take validation — maybe it's not joyful, but I'll take validation in the exchange — then the argument was its own gift. Rather than my maybe one day convincing him I'm right being the potential prize that I'm working toward, if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Yeah, it's interesting to think about.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, there was another thing I wanted to tell you. You mentioned (faculty name). And then I'll let you go. I got coffee over the summer with my middle and high school French teacher. She started teaching me in 8th grade. And we got coffee, and we were talking about school. She was talking; she mentioned one of her professors. We were kind of, like, comparing curricula because she went to MTSU for French, so we were kind of comparing our course curricula and things. And she was listing a bunch of professors who she'd had, and I was like, “No, I heard of them, but I think they were gone.” “Ohh, did you know this person?” “No.” We kept missing each other, and then she said (faculty name). Haha, I was like, “That's crazy! We had the same—!” Although, I only had her for one semester, but my French professor— When I was *12*— it was crazy. Ohh my.

INTERVIEWEE:

Wow. She’s been here for a while. Yeah, I learned a lot from her. We also argued quite a bit.

INTERVIEWER:

Unsurprising. And those arguments were a gift, don't you agree?

INTERVIEWEE:

They were. They were.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you for talking to me today, (name)

INTERVIEWEE:

Oh, I enjoyed it, yeah. Anybody who wants to ask me about myself and what I do is gonna get long answers.

INTERVIEWER:

I appreciate it. I really do.

INTERVIEWEE:

So yeah, and I'm glad we were able to do it this week. I think it was nice we could take a little bit more time than we would have otherwise.

INTERVIEWER:

Nice, glad it worked out. Enjoy the rest of your break.

INTERVIEWEE:

Yeah, you too.