**Interview with Colin Marshall and Ian Schnee**

**“Philosophers Are Very Trained at Tuning Out Things: Philosophy and Its Publics”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today’s episode, “Philosophers are Very Trained at Tuning Out Things,” is an interview with Colin Marshall and Ian Schnee. Colin is an Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the University of Washington’s Department of Philosophy, and Ian is an Associate Teaching Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in University of Washington’s Department of Philosophy as well. Ian and Collin jointly received a Mellon Summer Collaborative Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities in 2020. Over the course of that summer, they collaboratively developed resonating courses that they taught in the winter of 2021. Colin’s course was “Respect, Rhetoric, and the Psychology of Persuasion,” and Ian’s course was “Conspiracy Theories, Propaganda, and Epistemic Vice.” In the wake of both of these courses our conversation explores, among other things, the work of collaboration, both between students and between faculty, responsiveness to the contemporary moment in the classroom and beyond, and philosophy as a public practice.

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ANNIE DWYER: Welcome, Colin and Ian. Thanks so much for joining me.

COLIN MARSHALL: Thanks for having us.

IAN SCHNEE: Thanks very super excited to be here.

ANNIE DWYER: I wonder if we can begin by asking you to tell us a little bit more about your seminars. What were the major learning objectives? How did you scaffold the course? Give us a kind of orientation to the work that you did in these two courses, and whoever would like could jump in first.

COLIN MARSHALL: OK, I can start–this is Colin. The seminar grew out of an undergraduate course that Ian and I developed together, an intro level course on the ethics of persuasion. And the course went well. It was something that a lot of our graduate students were interested in. So the aims in terms of content were to get into some of the ethical issues around persuasion, both issues focused on the value of respect and treating others respectfully, respectful engagement, listening, exchanging reasons, and other moral frameworks such as that of producing good consequences, thinking about systems of injustice. So, in addition to content then the last 40% of the class was all student presentations. They were in small teams for the first and the second one they could do individually or in teams. The first project was analyzing some real-world attempt at persuasion, using some of the resources that we'd covered. It was left totally open to them what to look at and which of the resources to bring to bear.

The second public project was to propose an intervention of some sort in an ongoing persuasion attempt. One example I gave them was, say, writing an Op-Ed directed at some organization that was trying to get people to do something. So, an Op-Ed for example directed at some local group of officials who are attempting to get people to wear masks or something like that and helping them improve their messaging. So, the last big chunk of the course was all student presentations and engagement with each other, and I left open whether they went through with their proposed intervention, but they had the option of doing so and I asked them to set things up so that if they wanted to, they could.

ANNIE DWYER: Nice, Ian, before we move on, do you want to jump in and say a little bit more about your class?

IAN SCHNEE: Yeah, you bet, this is Ian here. So, like Collin’s class, my class focused on questions of persuasion and manipulation, but the focus was on the darker side–the ways in which politicians, individuals, and technology can easily manipulate us. And we focused in particular on the specific topic of conspiracy theories. Partly because they were very historically relevant. Our first class happened to be on Wednesday, January 6th, when there was an uprising in the Capitol in Washington D.C. So, students were seeing concretely how conspiracy theories can affect their individual lives or the political trajectory of our country. And we also incorporated a practical focus into the class. So, we didn't just want to understand conspiracy theories from a theoretical point of view, but we wanted to devise strategies for concrete interventions that could help us combat conspiracy theories or understand when a certain conjecture counts as a conspiracy theory versus something that is grounded on solid evidence. So, that whole combination of misinformation and manipulation with an application to conspiracy theories was the focus of my class.

ANNIE DWYER: That sounds fascinating. I love how you can see the overlaps and also the distinct foci of your different courses. It seems like they must have worked wonderfully in tandem with one another. I wonder if you can speak a little bit more to developing these courses collaboratively, which you did during the summer of 2020 and also you taught them together, or at the same time. They were different courses, but you taught them during the same quarter. To what extent was there overlap between the courses or just conversation between the two of you as you both developed and taught the courses and how did that shape how you taught?

COLIN MARSHALL: I guess the one thing to say is that there would have been a lot more overlap if there hadn't been a pandemic, and we could have just been in the department together and chatted. We had some exchanges. I sat in on one of Ian's classes which was fascinating. We exchanged some emails as things went along. In terms of development, I think I can say there's a long history here. Ian and I have been teaching, talking about teaching–and I've been learning from Ian about teaching and about interdisciplinary philosophy classes–for a long time, so there's been a buildup. The summer before in the Mellon Institute was extremely valuable. Ian and I had a lot of back and forth there, a lot of back and forth with the other fellows.

IAN SCHNEE: And in terms of the development process, we were really lucky that our interests overlapped completely but our backgrounds and specialties didn't. Colin knew much more about ethics and value theory than I did. My specialization was more in the theory of knowledge. But we both are interested in empirical literature and work in cognitive science and psychology. Mine focused more on the heuristics and biases tradition, epistemic biases, and Colin was really knowledgeable about the psychological work on persuasion. And so that allowed us to have a lot of fruitful conversations when we talked about what we want to cover in these classes.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that's wonderful. And that doesn't happen enough where people are in deep conversation with other faculty in their course development. What about--and this is something that I notice so much in reading your syllabi and your assignments--the ways in which students collaborated with one another in your classes. It seems like that was very deliberate, developing these collaborative assignments. And I'm just wondering, what were the yields of that and were there any challenges or difficulties that came up?

IAN SCHNEE: Sure, I can speak because my class was–this is Ian–my class was slightly different than Colin’s in the sense that the audience for my class was both advanced undergraduates as well as graduate students. So, we had a larger number of students. I had about 30 students in my class. And what that meant was we had a lot of folks who could get together and do small group work, and then they could report out and engage with the other small groups. Since this was the pandemic when we ran this class, we had to rely on Zoom breakout rooms, which do have a slightly mixed reaction among students. But I think I found some techniques in conversation with other folks trying to develop effective Zoom pedagogy that made the small group work successful. And I used the small group work and breakout rooms in every single session. We had Google Docs that we used as a collaborative working tool, and they have a structured set of directions and objectives that the students were trying to accomplish in the 15 minutes that they might be in their breakout room.

For example, on one day students had to do research on a conspiracy theory that interested them, and when they came back together they met in a small group with everybody else who chose the same conspiracy theory. So, there were about six different popular conspiracy theories that folks were interested in investigating. That meant that everybody in their same small group had a similar level of preparation, but they might not have read the exact same material. They put together a small report on that conspiracy theory, which then they reported out to the rest of the class. Rather than just listening to me lecture on all these different conspiracy theories, that allowed them to investigate them from the inside and take a lot of the responsibility for that expertise. Every single one of our classes had that type of small group work and I'm really happy that we incorporated that into the class.

COLIN MARSHALL: The seminar that I taught had only nine students. As Ian was saying, the structural differences were pretty dramatic. They were also all graduate students. One was a graduate doctoral student from education, the others were all philosophers. I learned the hard way that doctoral students in our department don't like being micromanaged. I left things relatively flexible in terms of what they did for their engaged assignments. I had a traditional paper writing assignment as there were some things I did want to get across, but their public engagement work they had a lot of latitude on what to do. And overall, things, especially for the first, what I called “field project” where they analyze some real-world persuasion attempt–I thought the results were quite good. People found some really interesting topics.

One group did an analysis of a debate about people living in tents in the Green Lake neighborhood, a debate that unfolded on the Nextdoor app. I thought there was insightful analysis of the back-and-forth there and understanding of people's motivations, the way they frame things, and the underlying moral issues. That was excellent. Another group, for example, did a really compelling comparison between the ineffectiveness of the January 6 video of the rioters that was used during the second impeachment proceedings of former President Trump–how that was ineffective at winning people over–and they contrasted that with Michael Moore's film Fahrenheit 911, which arguably did have more of a persuasive impact. So there, one was looking at a relatively small neighborhood conversation on social media. The other was contrasting two widely viewed public films with grand political aims.

ANNIE DWYER: It's interesting as you all were talking though I was wondering, do you think there's something easier to sell or do you think students buy into collaborative work more easily when it has to do with public-facing work? Is there something that is qualitatively different?

COLIN MARSHALL: It's a nice question. I think it's less scary for students to dive into something new when they are with some of their peers and they're hammering it out together. They don't feel isolated and given a difficult task. I do think it helps on that front. They still need help from scaffolding and examples and the group may not up to that, but certainly in making the project or the prospect of doing something new seem less daunting group work does seem very important.

ANNIE DWYER: I think that's a really important point to note. Oh, I wish I would have done more scaffolding with this assignment. I wonder if there are other things that you all observed over the course of your teaching or in doing the postmortem after the course. What things would you have done differently? What things would you change in the next iteration of the course? I think this could even lead into advice for other people planning publicly-engaged philosophy courses.

COLIN MARSHALL: Lots that I do differently but I'll let Ian go first on this one for the self-criticism.

IAN SCHNEE So, I think one of the mistakes I made in planning out my course was I was overly ambitious with how much material we were going to cover. This is something that instructors run into all of the time because there are so many great things we want to talk about with students. I simply have not learned from years of experience enough to counteract this sort of planning bias that we have. My hope was to cover a large number of conspiracy theories and literature on conspiracy theories from psychology, political science, and sociology in addition to philosophy. And then to also cover a lot of technologies and literature on the philosophy of technology and big data–it was simply too ambitious to try to fit all of that in.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, I think that “less is more” advice is really useful for people. It's just so hard to gauge the amount of work it will take to set up some of this publicly-engaged work. I think that's really, really sound advice.

COLIN MARSHALL: I think the “less is more” applies especially when I'm considering both giving students content they're not familiar with and assignments they're not familiar with, especially during a pandemic but even not during a pandemic. My advice to others and to my future self who probably won't listen is to pick one or the other. Either we're going to be engaging with material that they're not familiar with but are still in the traditions they're familiar with, mostly philosophy and maybe philosophically structured discussions of rhetoric or psychology, and then some bold new public, engaged assignments…or I keep the assignments–most of the assignments–more traditional (maybe throw in one bit of public engagement that's lower stakes, takes up less class time) and then give them some new material.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, it's a really hard balance. At the same time, what strikes me about both of your classes is the way in which it offers up such wonderful opportunities to students to think through what philosophy in particular might lend to public engagement or public debate. I want to prompt you to speak to that a little bit more. What's particular about public philosophy as opposed to public literary criticism or other humanities-based work that's public facing? What do you think are some of the specific contributions that philosophy offers and how did you try to make that apparent in the seminars that you taught?

IAN SCHNEE: One thing that philosophy is concerned with is normativity in many different guises. So–thinking about where standards come from, whether they're ethical standards. Are they relative to communities or are they somehow out there in nature in a more objective sense? This idea that we can think about normativity in many different domains, whether it's analyzing arguments, whether they fit certain evidential standards, or analyzing people's personal values and whether their actions live up to those values. This concern with normativity and questions of “ought” is something that I think is very valuable to the history of philosophy and that philosophy can add to the contemporary world.

For example, just thinking about questions about persuasion and manipulation with technologies. There's been a recent focus on STEM education in America, and people tend to think of that as just hard science. Students are learning math, science, and engineering, and all they need is the training in those core disciplines and they're going to be able to go out there and make the world a better place with their wonderful algorithms and technological inventions. What we've discovered, in fact, is that normativity is deeply embedded in science and technology. These instruments, these algorithms that folks are creating are not ethically neutral or psychologically neutral. Philosophy has a really valuable contribution to that. Thinking about the values that underlie perhaps even unintentionally the algorithms that surround us,

COLIN MARSHALL: Yeah, I agree with that. On a different focus, one thing that I think is distinctive about philosophy, among humanities, and that is both something that it can potentially contribute but also an obstacle is that at least one tradition in academic philosophy is very focused on thinking carefully through the logical relations between the explicit content of claims that are not situated in a formal science or framework, and this can be at a fault. So, philosophers are often surprisingly tone deaf to the communicative force of a claim outside its explicit content. It's not everyone, it’s true, but there's a cliche where a philosopher will say, “well, look, wasn't what I'm saying true?”, even though philosophers have theories about why merely saying something true can communicate other things as well.

Because of this focus, philosophers often are very trained at tuning out things other than the explicit content of the sentences that they're looking at, which is good and it can give them a certain sort of rigor. But it poses a challenge when you're trying to communicate what you're doing to people who are not used to doing that. One, because they may not see the point. But, two, because you might just overlook the fact that the particular phrasing that you used is reminiscent of a pattern of phrasing that's connected to a tradition of oppression, for example. Maybe that's not there in the explicit content of what you're saying, but that'll of course throw off certain readers who aren't just focused on the explicit content.

And that's something I found in, that was one of the many things in my seminar where I thought I ideally would have done more to help the grad students see how, if they want to write an Op-Ed, for example, unlike writing a traditional philosophy paper, they need to unplug their ears and start getting back to the normal sensitivities they have in their everyday life to the other semantic dimensions of what they say and the claims they're engaging with.

ANNIE DWYER: That's fascinating. I'm wondering, too, if this is one of the reasons why you brought in that your class was very interdisciplinary… Both of your classes were very interdisciplinary insofar as they were engaging with social psychology, cognitive science, rhetoric. Did you see that interdisciplinary approach help with some of that work? And/or another follow up question to this is: do you think that public engagement necessitates interdisciplinary engagement?

IAN SCHNEE: Yeah, I personally found it incredibly valuable in part because of the subject matter of my class, because the philosophy on conspiracy theories and misinformation is relatively new. The classic philosophy papers on this topic were published about 20 years ago rather than 200 or 2000 years ago, which is the way it goes with some topics in philosophy. A lot of the really interesting work done about conspiracy theories is not just done by philosophers. It's done by folks coming from other scientific or humanistic trainings, and it hasn't even been absorbed into the philosophical tradition yet, and then been looked at through a philosophical lens. So in that way, we had to go straight to the source and we had to look at some of the major empirical findings from political science, for example, on longitudinal studies of people's beliefs and conspiracy theories. That kind of interdisciplinary lens really helps students feel like they're being well-informed.

ANNIE DWYER: And I guess the other thing that strikes you about–strikes me about–what you just said, Ian, is the way in which your course is really responsive to the moment in which we are living. Both of your courses could make use of things like January 6, and stage conversations around those events. I'm wondering if you could speak to that a little bit more and tell other folks what you did to be responsive to the contemporary moment in the kind of teaching that you were doing.

COLIN MARSHALL: One thing I found that worked out–and I don't know how deliberate this was–was that giving students a lot of latitude in finding something outside the academy to apply this stuff to let them connect it to things that they were already worried about and already concerned with. I'd like to think that could happen in lots of different courses. But I think it took framing it in terms of “this is a non-traditional assignment, really I want you to get outside the academy,” and a real emphasis on that for students to feel that they could talk about the things that they were worried about, that they were thinking about.

IAN SCHNEE: Yeah, one thing that I found challenging about this point that you're raising is there was so much information just in the news about conspiracy theories that I had a hard time keeping up with all of it, thinking about the popular media and at the same time making sure I also think about the academic literature. The sheer overwhelming amount of information–because the conspiracy theory class was so topical–was a challenge for me. But like you're saying, it made it quite evident to students how they can think about what's surrounding them in their offline lives or in their online lives. Here's one example, we wanted to evaluate the effects of different attempts at combating conspiracy theories in the class. So, one phenomenon was we found Exiter articles–articles from previous QAnon believers who would then post their story on Reddit or sometimes on a major news organization or just their own personal blog…look at the effects and the rhetorical situations of those Exiter testimonies compared to other attempts at debunking Q-Anon or other conspiracy theories. The fact that there is so much information out there like that, that was getting published. Every 24 hours we would just go online and try to find more relevant information. It made it both exciting and exhausting at the same time.

ANNIE DWYER: That makes sense. I imagine it just really highlighted the stakes of the intellectual work for your students. But I can imagine the sense of inundation just trying to keep up with it all. I'm wondering if coming out of teaching the seminars, thinking ahead, if you have any thoughts more globally or any kind of broad strokes comments on how teaching this seminar has shaped your own practice of public scholarship or pedagogy.

COLIN MARSHALL: Yeah, for me having stepped in a year ago directing the graduate program, the experience and the Mellon summer seminar got me thinking–in a much more general way–about how to think about the role of public scholarship and training graduate students for public scholarship in our department. The seminar helped me appreciate that it's not something you can easily throw into a class and just expect students to benefit from it. There has to be a process. It would help, for example, for students to have multiple classes where they read Op-Eds by philosophers on the topics to just get used to some of the rhythms and things that happen there. And then for my own work, I have this ambition to write a book that's not just for this tiny handful of people. I’m trying to write something for a popular audience. I definitely benefited from watching my students’ attempts to do things like that and see in them the mistakes that I almost certainly would and still likely will make when I attempt to do it.

IAN SCHNEE: Engaging in this seminar experience has completely transformed my way of thinking about assignments and course design. I think this is consonant with what Colin was saying. Engaging in broader publics, whether it's Op-Eds and popular news material as substantive readings or designing essay writing and other forms of assignments that students don't think of as having an academic audience but a broader audience. Those are major skills, so we shouldn't think that only one or two classes in the department should engage with those skills. This made me really excited to think about the kinds of philosophical writing that we teach students, broadening it beyond the five-page argumentative thesis-driven essay…and think about audience much more broadly in terms of our philosophical writing, because I saw how excited students get when they don't have to stretch to relate the material they're learning in class to their daily lives.

COLIN MARSHALL: One thing I'll add is that I saw in this that having different types of writing, going into class can help students appreciate–students who are learning how to write in the academic philosophy vein–understand that style better by contrast. Seeing why is it, for example, that you just focus on the explicit logical content, the explicit content of logical relations between things, and saying “Oh, well, that's a really distinctive form of writing. That's what we do when we're writing in this particular tradition and notice how different that is than trying to write an Op-Ed.” Done right I think it can add not just a new skill set that traditional graduate programs can't have but help students develop the traditional skill set, too, by situating it.

ANNIE DWYER: I love that comment because so often people think about this as an either/or phenomenon and you can either prepare students for multiple kinds of careers and expose them to different intellectual traditions and questions, or you can do very solid disciplinary training. And I think that comment gives the lie to that. It's really useful to see how these things can be complementary.

COLIN MARSHALL: Yeah, absolutely, and in terms of one relatively easy broader departmental change that I think could help is incorporating more public-focused work by philosophers into graduate level work.

ANNIE DWYER: That's great advice.

COLIN MARSHALL: That's not hard to do; it models the skill. It's often for students, especially students who are new to a topic. Seeing a public presentation of a topic before getting the traditional scholarly things I think would help a lot. So that's low hanging fruit. The harder question of how to incorporate public, engaged activities and public, engaged assignments–I think it's trickier. But, for one thing, not trying to reinvent the wheel. There are resources out there, there’s the public philosophy network, there's an engaged philosophy group that's put together lots of great things. Cluing people into that. I would like to see there be a consistent theme throughout of “here's what public philosophy looks like, here's what traditional academic philosophy looks like, here's how they can complement each other, here's how they differ.” And then that just being something that students have their eye on. In some form even if it's a relatively small way from the beginning as they're thinking about their broader trajectory.

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