**Interview with Steve Groening**

**“Now That I’ve Had Three Sips of a Beer: Graduate Education and the Formation of 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, “Now That I’ve Had Three Sips of a Beer,” is an interview with Stephen Groening. Steve is an Associate Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Washington, and, in the summer of 2017, Steve received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities. Over the course of that summer, he developed the course “Public Spheres, Public Media,” which he taught in the spring of 2018. Our conversation explores, among other things, the utility of theoretically grounding publicly-engaged work, the necessary transformation of doctoral training environments, and the importance of informal spaces of exchange both in the cultivation of new publics and the training of publicly engaged scholars.

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ANNIE DWYER: Thank you so much, Steve, for joining me.

STEVE GROENING: Thank you, Annie. It's a pleasure to be here.

ANNIE DWYER: To begin, I wonder if you can tell me a little more about the concept of the course. What were some of the major learning objectives or central questions?

STEVE GROENING: There were two main objectives. One is that I wanted to give an intellectual history of the idea of the public. And that turned out to be for me, after teaching a seminar, the thing that was of primary importance, and something that has informed my scholarship and work later on. The second objective for the course was to think about how different media forms produce different publics. I had—it was a section on letters, a section on television, a section on cinema. And I think I had…oh, and I had a couple of weeks on the internet as well. So…thinking about what the cinema public is and how that's different than the internet public versus a letter-writing public. That was really the two main branches of the course.

ANNIE DWYER: In terms of the assignments and the scaffolding of the course, what did the arc of the syllabus look like?

STEVE GROENING: I started it out more with an intellectual history. And–because of my own training in European critical theory–I started out with Enlightenment thinking and assigned Kant’s essay, “What Is Enlightenment?” and the idea of the private individual and private thought being crucial to the formation of bourgeois consciousness and the Enlightenment. So…right away juxtaposing public and private from an early time period and then leading into Jurgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* and then various responses to Habermas. The first part of the course was that intellectual history and the second half were these case studies. So…using that intellectual history to look at different media forms. That was really how I built it up. Reading the original text–not in German, translated into English–was important to me to have students not just get the *Reader’s Digest* version of Habermas, but also to approach it with an open mind and critical thinking.

ANNIE DWYER: That was one of the things I noticed about the materials that you added to our archive…is the way in which you allowed students to do deep meditation on particular quotes and do their own reading of Habermas and other thinkers.

STEVE GROENING: That was an assignment I borrowed from a seminar I took as a graduate student, where I would take a particular sentence or a couple of sentences from this rich text and isolate them. I would say, “OK, think more about this in this low pressure way.” What would notes in the margin be when you read this sentence? Because we all do that. We're reading the book and we're like, “Oh, my God, the sentence…it's all here.” And you might highlight it or put a Post-It next to it or a star or whatever and then move on. I hardly ever take the time to fully write out my response to that star moment in the text. That's what I was trying to give the students the opportunity to do.

ANNIE DWYER: I love that because it's so exploratory and it's a wonderful way of working through theoretical difficulty, too.

STEVE GROENING: Yeah, thank you.

ANNIE DWYER: And then also I think I love the interpretation that you had of the general assignment of the Mellon initiative for faculty who received this fellowship, which is to develop a public-facing, publicly-engaged graduate seminar. And you think that in the direction of “I'm going to give graduate students this robust opportunity to construct a genealogy of the concept of the public sphere, and interrogate the concept of the public sphere.” I'm wondering, how do you think that kind of theoretical basis or grounding might help students who later go on to pursue publicly engaged scholarship or teaching down the line?

STEVE GROENING: I would hope that the students from that seminar, when they're entering into those projects, are better able to articulate why the public is important and why public-facing scholarship is important. Maybe for values about democracy and knowledge and human dignity…and that's why the public is important–because it's humanistic. Public humanities is almost redundant in that way, when you confront it from that aspect. And to give the students the vocabulary to talk through those issues not just with other academics, but of course also with the various communities and publics that they're engaged with.

ANNIE DWYER: So, so useful. The other thing that I loved about your construction of the course is the way in which you built in this open-ended proseminar time. Can you say a little more about that?

STEVE GROENING: This is also based on experience I had as a graduate student. I took this seminar, where–it was a Friday seminar–and after every seminar we would walk a couple of blocks to this hotel bar and sit around and have one drink and talk about academia, talk about the world of academia and get a lot of professionalization advice. I wanted to build that in. So what I did is I said, “I'm going to have the last half hour of class reserved for students to present their own work–that might not have anything to do with the class–that will help them prepare conference presentations, prepare for their general exams. Maybe they can give us a bit of another seminar paper that they're working on or talk about problems that they're having. Afterwards we'd walk into the U-District, find ourselves a bar, sit down, be casual, and talk about all sorts of stuff…because to me that's also about publicness, that's building community, that's building solidarity. For me, learning is always social; education is always about relationships. I wanted the students to know and feel like they are also scholars, they are also academics. Institutionally, they may be like junior academics or future academics or these sorts of things, but at the same time they have a seat at the table.

ANNIE DWYER: What I love about that is the informal space and building or creating an opportunity to have those kinds of conversations that only happen in those kinds of spaces. It's so rare and so difficult to find. What do students do with that time? What sorts of things do they bring to the proseminar space?

STEVE GROENING: The proseminar space–there were two people who presented mock conference talks. Some other people brought in papers that they were working on and workshopped that. Those were the two primary ones. I thought people would ask questions to me or would want a session about how to write a dissertation or how to plan a dissertation or what to do about general exams or the job market. The proseminar time, during the official class schedule–those issues never came up. But when we retired to the bar–that's when we would start having shop talk chats. I think it's partly because, as you said, that informal setting also made it feel like it's less student-teacher relationship and more like, “Oh, this person has experience in and can show me the ropes. And now that I've had three sips of a beer, I can ask Steve these questions that I was going to ask before.”

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah.

STEVE GROENING: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: That was one of the things that I loved about our summer sessions, too. It seemed like a rare space where graduate students could talk to faculty who were not on their committee, necessarily, about things like “How do I pursue public scholarship in the context of a university that doesn't always value it?” And just watching those conversations unfold and that camaraderie emerge was so gratifying.

STEVE GROENING: Yeah, absolutely. I'm glad you brought that up because I'm going to give a shout out to Dr. Regina Lee who was in that summer session with me. She is just amazing. I have vivid memories that summer of graduate students walking up to her, seeking her advice, and she was so generous. I could tell that she was a role model for them. It was so valuable for the Simpson Center to present that opportunity for those graduate students, and, of course, for Dr. Lee to be able to have that opportunity to be a mentor to them. This summer seminar that the Simpson Center sponsored–and that I was so fortunate to be a part of–informed the way…and probably inspired me to become the graduate program coordinator here. I'm the graduate program coordinator for the Cinema and Media Studies graduate programs, which are new. I helped the rest of the faculty. We basically built them up. We changed a lot of aspects of the Ph.D. study, in particular, but also the M.A. study. I would say that for me there were two driving issues. Well, they're related, so maybe it's just one. Less hazing is what I want. There's so much mystification around graduate education–people not telling you what the expectations are, people being vague about what it takes to succeed, and people hiding things. There's a lot of mystification…I want to break this down, I want less opacity, [I want it] less opaque. I don't want our program to be one of those where it's like, “Well, I did this: I read 100 books in the original French from my exam list, so everyone…”

ANNIE DWYER: “And you must suffer as much as I did.”

STEVE GROENING: Exactly. Exactly. “I suffered; you must suffer.” I'm like, “No, I suffered; that means nobody else should. If nothing else, I should make it so that people enjoy graduate school and are able to benefit from it at the same time.” I was thinking of…the concrete example is we changed the way we're doing general exams. It used to be: you come up with a list of works, then you get that one question, you're locked in the conference room basically in front of a computer for eight hours, you're timed, and you have to write all these pages. When we were trying to figure out what to do, how to change the program, I said, “What is the purpose of this? Why do we basically chain people to the desk and make them type? We get, often, not very good essays out of that.” And there is…I can't think of another time in my career as an academic when I had to do that.

ANNIE DWYER: Right.

STEVE GROENING: Right?

ANNIE DWYER: Right.

STEVE GROENING: It's true that sometimes there's quick turnaround for journal articles, but it's not like that.

ANNIE DWYER: Not the same thing.You can't leave the room, you must produce this amount of pages in this many hours…

STEVE GROENING: Exactly. And so we thought, “How can we make the exams so that they benefit our students later on in their career?” And we decided to make them more teaching-oriented.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, interesting.

STEVE GROENING: Yeah, your three fields are more like “What three survey courses would you teach?”

ANNIE DWYER: Nice.

STEVE GROENING: “How would you teach an intro to poetry class? How would you teach an intro to the novel class?” The emphasis was on the oral part of the exam. So, you come into the room and somebody hands you *Jane Eyre* and says, “How would you teach this?”

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, I love that.

STEVE GROENING: A 100-student class…“What would you do?”–and talk about that.

ANNIE DWYER: That’s so valuable because so many students don't aspire to research jobs. They're interested in teaching at community colleges or other teaching-intensive institutions.

STEVE GROENING: Exactly. That’s a great point. And even those of us who are in research jobs like I am–teaching is easily half if not three quarters of my time.

ANNIE DWYER: Exactly.

STEVE GROENING: Everybody does it, and so why not make that a part of the whole process.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. Apropos teaching how do you think you're teaching shifted or changed

while you were teaching your Mellon seminar? Anything stick out to you as, “Oh, this is something I want to carry forward?”

STEVE GROENING: I think, for me, that seminar was the first time at UW that I was relaxed as a teacher, that I was in the room and I felt like the students respected me and I didn't have to prove myself. That might have been completely false, but that's how I felt.

ANNIE DWYER: That's interesting.

STEVE GROENING: Yeah, and I thought, “This is the attitude I need to keep in all my classes.” I think it's changed the way that I teach…that I'm much more relaxed, I'm much less defensive. When students ask me questions and I don't know the answer–I don't know.

ANNIE DWYER: I wonder if it had something to do with just the openness of, for instance, that proseminar space or even the final projects that you assigned students…and not always necessarily positioning yourself as someone in that position of mastery.

STEVE GROENING: I think you're right–that that detail about the final project is something that I've carried forward [into] the last graduate seminar I taught. The prompt was basically the same: “Do what is useful for you. What do you want to do? And what do you need to do? Does it need to be a video essay? Does it need to be a book review? Does it need to be a syllabus? Does it need to be a seminar paper that you revise into a journal article? I'm not going to hold you all to have to do the same thing because you're all at different points in your career and you're thinking. I don't want to cookie-cutter it.” That’s a way of treating the students with respect and saying, “I'm here to help you succeed and I trust you to know what you need.” That's an ethic that did come out of the public humanities seminar.

ANNIE DWYER: To back up, you had an open-ended final project assignment where you said, “You can think of this as a final project for a different audience using a different genre. It doesn't necessarily have to be an academic genre.”

STEVE GROENING: I did a couple of academic papers. One was about Reddit as a public sphere, as an example of the internet public sphere. I had one that was about 1930s cinema. But then I had others. I had a student from design who wanted to design a new publication process–a new open publishing process. That project was hard for me to evaluate because it's coming from design thinking, which I'm not familiar with. There's lots of diagrams. It was different, but I think it really helped him. Having that space where I was doing all this abstract thinking and conceptual thinking and this heavy emphasis on European theory, shaped his design stuff, which then he had to help me with. I had a couple of students write syllabi for public-facing undergraduate courses, which, looking back, is maybe something I should have emphasized more.

ANNIE DWYER: I think that’s such a great idea. Because even as the Mellon initiative has been focused on graduate education, there’s no reason that public scholarship can’t be integrated on an undergraduate level. If we’re taking the long view and thinking about institutional and disciplinary transformation, it has to include reimaginings of undergraduate work.

STEVE GROENING: Right. Right. Right.

ANNIE DWYER: I was thinking about your disciplinary location, and the way in which your immersion in media studies might help you think about and teach public scholarship in ways that other people might not have available to them. I'm interested in the question of the relationship between public scholarship, teaching public scholarship, and disciplinary knowledge, location, formation.

STEVE GROENING: I love this question because it makes me go all the way back in my mind to before I went to graduate school, before I even applied to graduate school. I was working as a box office employee at a movie theater and also selling popcorn at an independent movie theater. One night we were showing a New Zealand film called *Once Were Warriors.* After the film, the audience came out. Usually people after the film…they come out and walk out the door or whatever. But after this film, people started gathering in groups. They didn't know each other–I could tell they didn't know each other. They were strangers to each other. They introduced each other, and they wanted to talk about the film.

ANNIE DWYER: Fascinating.

STEVE GROENING: I had worked there for years, and I had never seen that before. That’s what sparked my interest. What happened? What is it about these people in this film in this moment that made them form a public and say, “We are going to be engaged”?

ANNIE DWYER: Powerful anecdote.

STEVE GROENING: That's when I'm like, “I need to go back to graduate school.” I started thinking about audiences and publics and theoretical training and realizing that there's not one thing that is public. That public means many things, and we just assume it means one thing when we talk about it, it's a shorthand for a lot of other things. But these different media forms produce different kinds of publics as well. There’s something about the movie theater, the architecture of the movie theater, and the curtain going up and the lights coming up that creates a certain relationship between film spectators that's different than television. I didn't realize until you asked that question, but this interest goes back a long time.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah.I love this story, Steve, because it’s so Habermasian. As you’re reminiscing, the 18th century coffee house gives way to the 21st century movie theater, but you have a similar outcome: the formation of a public through critical exchange about a work of art. That story is such a strong argument for grounding the work of public scholarship as you do in these intellectual genealogies of the public sphere. Thank you so much for talking to me today, Steve. I’ve learned so much from our conversation.

STEVE GROENING: Thank you, Annie. It was a real pleasure.

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ANNIE DWYER: This episode of *Going Public* was made possible with help from the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities staff, particularly, C. R. Grimmer, who is also the Communications Manager at the Simpson Center; our sound editor, Oliver Gordon; and of course, support from The Mellon Foundation. The Mellon initiative at the Simpson Center, *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration* was led by Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Mellon initiative, Director of the Simpson Center, and UW Professor of English; Rachel Arteaga, Assistant Director of the Simpson Center and Associate Program Director of the Mellon initiative, and myself, Annie Dwyer, Assistant Program Director of the Mellon initiative. We hope you check out additional episodes of *Going Public* on our website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic) and wherever you get your podcasts.