



# *a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap*

## **Episode 10: College Writing with Dr. Dr. Stacy Smith**

[Theme Music]

**Adam:** Hi. I'm Adam Sanford, and I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

**Dinur:** And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles. And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where discuss how we learn, and how we teach, and how they overlap.

**Adam:** Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is episode 10 and today, folks, this is really exciting - we have our first guest episode. And so with us today is Dr. Stacy Smith, she's currently teaching at... where are you teaching now, Stacy?

**Dr. Smith:** University of Alabama at Birmingham.

**Adam:** And she's just recently finished her Ph.D., and she's done college teaching for something like 15 years. And Stacy writes a blog on how to write better for college students, because we all know - Dinur, I'm sure you recognize this well - our college students often have real trouble understanding what good writing actually looks like.

So today's episode is for all of you students out there who struggle with writing, and all of you the instructors out there who struggle with "how do I make my students understand what we need?" This one's for you.

Tell us about your background in teaching students how to write. What brought you to this?

**Dr. Smith:** A little unusual. I'm now a sociology teacher, but I started off life as an English teacher. I went from there to teaching college writing. I've taught at community colleges, four-year private colleges, four-year state colleges, in a bunch of different formats. So, probably about ten or so years of teaching experience in writing.

**Dinur:** So we know you have this website, [undergraduateswrite.com](http://undergraduateswrite.com), and we're wondering, what made you decide to start a website - or start a blog - about student writing?

**Dr. Smith:** Well, now that I'm on the other side as a sociology teacher, I'm in a classroom where we expect students to come in being able to write. But that's not what's happening. They're hitting college without the skill set that we used to see them with 10 years ago. And I want to make it clear I'm not faulting K-12 educators. I have a lot of good friends that are K-12 educators that are doing a great job, but there's something happening with our students. I suspect the answer there is complex. I am a sociologist. That's how we look at the world, right, as complex.

But the reality is that, we still, for whatever reason, we have these students in our classroom, and they

don't have the skills that we need. And so I can ignore that - and a lot of teachers are; people are stressed. We have more adjuncts that are teaching 5 classes, and they don't have the time to address the lack of skill set. I wouldn't say I have the time, but I have that writing experience. I know how to teach writing, and so I do have that skill set. So I should be using it, right? I should be helping my students in any way that I can. But then the reality is still that I'm teaching sociology.

So instead of trying to turn my classroom into a writing classroom, I want to try to address that skill set without losing content. So this started out as me thinking, you know, "I'll just build a website that I can refer my students to." And then I thought, "if I build this website for myself, why in the world wouldn't I share that?"

**Adam:** You mention that students come in with lower skill sets, or nonexistent skill sets, compared to students of 10 years ago. And Dinur and I have both seen that in our own classrooms as well. But do you see a pattern of which students seem to have much trouble with college writing, and in your experience, if you do see a pattern, like "that group has more trouble than this other group," do you have any speculation on why that is?

**Dr. Smith:** Well, a lot of the time I don't know a lot of personal details about my students, so what I'm about to say is coming from anecdotal evidence. Right? From the students that I have gotten to know well enough to have an idea of their backgrounds.

I suspect a lot of it has to do with class and with region. So students who are coming from school systems that are just overburdened, you know - if the teacher has 30 to 40 students in the classroom, there's just no way you can be effective in that classroom. And when you have a student who may be struggling for whatever reason, then how do you spend extra time with the student? You really can't.

And they may be coming from geographical regions where education is not a priority, you know. They may be climbing their way into education, but not have that background that other students have. I am a first generation college student myself, and to go back to your previous question, that is part of my motivation as well. As a first generation student, I want to reach back and offer a hand to those who haven't that hand offered to them, and I think that's an important thing. So, definitely, some class and region issues.

I've had some students that, when I sat down to talk to them about their writing, found that they had an undiagnosed learning disability. So I've refer those students to disability services, and hopefully they get some help that way. But again, I think that's a class and a regional difference, that those things aren't being caught.

I kind of, in preparation for this, I divided students into kind of three different categories: there's the "underprepared and they don't know it." They may have been assured that they're prepared, or they don't, for whatever reason, don't know that the standards are different between high school and college.

There's the "underprepared that do know it," and often it's the rare student who's underprepared and will actually come ask for help. Most of the time students that are underprepared and know it assume that everyone else around them does know, and so those students feel ashamed and humiliated, and they don't want to ask for help. And so in some ways my website is very much for them, because they can "go behind the curtain," so to speak, and they can get some help. And hopefully it occurs to them also that if I'm saying these things publicly - I feel like a whole website needs to be built around it, then they're not the only one. Right?

**Dinur:** Absolutely. And it's a way for them to save face.

**Dr. Smith:** Right, exactly.

**Adam:** Dinur is really big on saving face: how can we help the student learn without feeling like they're the dumbest person in the world?

**Dr. Smith:** Absolutely.

**Adam:** And I started telling my students, you know, you have worth. Just because you don't know this doesn't mean you're not worthy. Just because you don't know this doesn't mean you're stupid. It just needs you don't know it.

**Dr. Smith:** Absolutely.

**Adam:** And - they come up to me and say "I always thought I was stupid, because I thought the goal was for me to get it right on the first try," and I said "only a very rare genius can get it right on the first try, and even Einstein made mistakes."

**Dinur:** And confidence goes such a long way in how they perform. It's not the only thing but it's a major thing.

**Dr. Smith:** Right, as sociologists, we know that there are gender and class differences and race differences involved in that expression of confidence. We're not just seeing a student who lacks confidence. We're seeing social-structural differences and that's a bridge we need to reach across.

My last category - I think they're rare, but they tend to be a sticky problem - and those are students who were the big fish in a little pond. Everything they did was given an A, you know. They didn't have to work all that hard, and they get to college, and all of a sudden the criteria are different and they don't get the grades they expect, and some students will respond to that with "oh my God I need to fix this, I need to find out what's going on, I need to get better," and other students just get mad.

**Adam:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Smith:** Those students, I think, are the most difficult to get through to. Typically they have a lot of potential, but you know, as your students are - the ones that are saying "I didn't feel worthy," and now they do, they know that there's a skill set to be gained. And those students may fare better, because they know there's a skill set to be gained (and they're motivated by it) than the student who thinks they've already got it and doesn't have to work.

**Adam:** Yeah. In my work I call these students the ones who hit the "pinch points." They hit a point in school and suddenly it hits back.

**Dr. Smith:** Mmm, mm-hmm.

**Adam:** They were a gifted kid, or it was easy for them to get through school. They didn't have to work very hard, so they never developed the study skills and then they hit... I've talked about my four main pinch points, but for us the one that's important here is college. You know, high school and college are not the same.

I tell parents sometimes, "your child who's preparing to go to college right now? They're getting ready to go to Spain. And all the knowledge they have about Spain is four years of Spanish. And I have to tell you that's not going to be enough, because when they get to Spain there's a whole bunch of cultural differences that their Spanish class never taught them about, probably didn't know to give them a heads-up about.

You know, I've done a lot of research on how high school, or K12 - specifically high school teachers - what they think college preparation looks like - you know, what does it look like when the student's prepared for college - And compared that to what professors in the college system think it looks like, and there's a gigantic gap. While the high school teachers are not aware that what they're teaching their students isn't preparing them for college, that what college demands is a totally different skill set and a totally different realm of knowledge that is not communicated in high school. And there are teachers who, in high school, just can't believe that they're not teaching college level stuff, that they don't realize that what they're teaching is not helping the students be prepared for college.

And so when you get a kid who's told in school - like you said, "you're prepared," and then they get to college and they're so not prepared, and they walk away with C's instead of A's their first semester, and they're like, "Somebody cheated me." I've had that student, and I'm sure you have too.

**Dinur:** Me being the sports nut, I always tell my students: "hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard," and then I tell them, "everyone in this room has talent. You wouldn't be here if you didn't have that. But talent won't take you as far as you need to be if you don't work and develop and grow."

**Dr. Smith:** That's a great way of putting it.

**Dinur:** If you had to name three skills that students need to be successful in college writing, what would they be, and how do you teach them in your classroom?

**Dr. Smith:** OK, there are a lot of skills. Some of them are - let's see if I have a better way of putting this - Like character building skills, things like time management. You know, we were just talking about with the needing to - that pinch point idea is making me think of a post I made online just yesterday, where: I write well, you know, English teacher! There's a reason I went to English first: I write really well. When I was in high school, I dashed off papers - it was before computers, right? I'm ancient - and so I could sit in the hallway, and write my paper out by hand in the 10 or 15 minutes before class, and turn it in, and get A's.

And now I'm an academic and now I'm dealing with papers that are 20 to 50 pages long; my dissertation was 300 pages long - complex ideas, there's no way I can do that. And so here, as a college graduate, I am having to learn completely new ways of working, and thinking about my work, and thinking about myself. So don't think that ends once you figure out how to write a college paper, if you keep going, it keeps challenging you.

So what our college students do is they, some of them are taking a full class load, and then they're also working part or full time, so they don't have time. But even those that do have the time are still procrastinating. So they're waiting until the last minute to write their papers, and the vast majority of papers that I have failed, or have insisted the students revise, et cetera, had been papers that it's clear that they sat down, started writing, quit when they hit the word count or the page count, where they thought they had answered the question, and turn it in - and that's it.

If a student wants to get passing grades in a college class, consistently, they've got to change that strategy, especially if you don't naturally write well. I mean, that's a skill. It's a talent, just like anything else. I can't catch a ball to save my life, but I can write. So students shouldn't feel bad if they're not great at writing, because not everybody is. It just happens to be a thing that I'm good at. But leaving yourself that time to set your paper aside and go back and edit it, even if that just means "I can go back in half an hour and I can spell check" - that matters! Or finding a peer, a roommate, or a friend, or someone who can read it for you and say, "this sentence doesn't make sense."

**Dinur:** And one thing you said that's making me kind of think back to an earlier part of the conversation, is there are psychologists that think that procrastination is really a defense mechanism, because it's a way

to avoid dealing with failure or avoid dealing with prostration. You give yourself a built-in excuse: "I didn't do well, yeah, I kind of wrote it at the last minute, it was sloppy." And if it happens once, and the student learns from it, that's one thing - but typically, it becomes a repeated pattern.

**Dr. Smith:** Oh, absolutely.

**Adam:** Yeah, I had a student at UC Riverside, back when I was in grad school, who came to me and said, "I didn't do any of the things that you said we had to do, and you still gave me a B on my paper, so I don't think I have to work on the things you said to work on."

And I said, "well, if you'd worked on them you might have gotten an A."

And they looked at me like I'd just clubbed them across the head with a clue-by-four: "You just made me think about this in a totally different way."

I said, "Why did you put it off to the last minute?"

They're all, "Well, because that way I don't have to deal with failure."

And the thing about the students who are not good at writing, you know. What I do, like, I do try to encourage a growth mindset, where it's not even - you may have a talent at writing, but talent doesn't take you anywhere. You've got to develop it.

And Dinur uses sports analogies a lot; I use music analogies. You know, I came from a family of musicians, and I'll ask students, in the first time that I talk about writing, "how many of you are athletes and how many of you are you musicians?" And then I say, "OK, so athletes: What do you think about the idea of going to the game, not having gone to any of the practices? How are you going to do?"

And they're all, "Oh, we're going to suck," you know and then I ask, "OK, musicians: what do you think about going to the concert when you haven't practiced yet, and you're just going there and you're just going to sight-read?" And they're all, "It's going to be awful!"

And I've said, "Well, then why do you think writing is any different?"

And I have athlete after athlete saying, "Oh, so when I write, when I do that writing thing that you're telling us to do every day, that's practice?" Yes, that's exactly what it is!

And some of them change their minds, and some of them get really, really resistant. So then we've got to talk about procrastination. Maybe that's another skill that they need to work on, is not procrastinating?

**Dr. Smith:** Right. Well, and another thing that's happening, and this is something that maybe we don't understand is happening - because we didn't grow up with cell phones attached to us - is a lot of these students are trying to stream Netflix or YouTube or something, and write at the same time. And that's what they're used to. And there's a lot of evidence of the shows that that messes with your brain.

**Adam:** We have a guest coming up for Episode 30, Dr. Larry Rosen, who specifically is going to talk about that distraction issue.

**Dr. Smith:** Fantastic!

**Adam:** He's done research on it for years and years and years.

I tell my students, "you are not allowed to try to multitask anymore."

They say, "but I can multitask! I can do 3 things at once!"

And 2 of them are eating while you're reading a book and breathing, that's not multitasking, OK? Because you're doing the other things on autopilot. And I give them the research on how you can't actually multitask. I had one student very upset with me, or at least with the information, you know, blaming the messenger, saying, "well, all the ads for jobs, they all say that they need you to be able to multitask!"

And I said, "Yeah, what that means is that they want you to do the work of two people for the price of one."

**Dr. Smith:** Yeah, it doesn't mean that they want you to do your job while being on your phone texting with your friends! Definitely not what that means.

**Adam:** Right.

**Dr. Smith:** The second thing that I think is one of the big things that they don't know how to do, is how to make an argument or back up their points. So I see it over and over again, where they have the challenge of showing me what they've learned in class. So, for example in my theory class, they had to show me that they understand these theories, and they understand the concepts associated with these theories. So your job, when you write that paper, isn't to write a brilliant paper. Your job is to be showing me what you've learned, because this is how I'm assessing your grade, I'm required by the college to assess what you've learned.

And I think this is something a lot of students don't understand, and it's something I've written about in my blog, is how assessments work, and what we're actually doing. We are trying to teach you, right, as a student. But also, we can't make you learn. And I've said that in my classes and got shocked looks on my students' faces: "I can't make you learn," and they're horrified. But that's true. I can't force someone to learn; I can only offer you what I think is going to help you learn. And then your job is to pick that up. Your example of training for something is spot on.

So when I assign that paper, I'm trying to assess your part of it. I'm trying to assess your learning. And so, students think they can just throw a term out there and rely on my understanding of the term to get a good grade in the paper, because they haven't shown me that they know what the term means. They have to show me they know how to apply the concept, etcetera.

Or they've made an argument that they haven't made very clear, so they're not drawing those explicit connections, and that's really detail oriented work. And it may have something to do with the time that they're putting into it, but you really... Think about writing that paper as "I need to show my teacher what I know."

If you do that, even if you're not a strong writer, even if you don't have the best word choice, your sentences, maybe they're clunky or awkward - but if you're showing me that you learned the material, you're still going to get a passing grade, and maybe even a solid one, because you've shown me the content. So for me, I think for many instructors it's content over form.

**Dinur:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Smith:** Form is probably going to get you that A, but that content is going to get you a C or maybe even to a B.

**Dinur:** I usually tell my students their content and their analysis is the letter grade, and the plus, flat or minus is how clean the writing is. So I tell them almost all of my emphasis is showing me that you've

worked with these concepts, that you can explain, that you can apply them - work with what I call the meatier part of the assignment.

**Adam:** Right. And a lot of instructors are using rubrics, and that may be something that a student might not even know what a rubric is. But you can look at the rubric and say, "OK, here's where the weight is. Here's 40 of my 100 points are coming from analyzing this material. I better work on that first. And 10 of those points are for how pretty it looks, right? So let's work on the meat of it first."

So there's a real lack there, and I think some of that also comes from a lack of practice. So the less teachers are asking students to write, the less practice they're getting.

The final thing, and this is something that bedevils people who assign writing all over the place, is technical skills - like knowing how to paraphrase, knowing how not to plagiarize. One of the biggest things that I see consistently is students are being taught that substituting words means that you've paraphrased, and I've talked to enough students directly to know that somebody is quite literally teaching students to do this as a means of paraphrasing. So you would take the original sentence and you'd substitute a word or two out and suddenly it's your sentence.

**Adam:** I call that "Mad Libs" - you know, the old game? - where you put in a noun, put in an adjective - so I call it "Mad Libs," but still, that sentence structure still belongs to the person who wrote it, you're still stealing. And one of the things, I don't know...

I would like to suggest a tool here: On Pedagogy Unbound, on that website, there is an exercise on "teach the student how to plagiarize, so that they know what it looks like, so they can stop doing it," and there is a paraphrasing part in there where it says, you know, "paraphrase it but keep the sentence structure. OK, now paraphrase it by changing the sentence structure, so that it's your own words. You know, make sure you give credit," and it takes them step by step, and I've had - I make it part of one of my writers workshops, "go do this." And I've had students say, "I never knew that substituting words in wasn't paraphrasing."

And I do think that, you know, I used to be very, very strict about this. You know, I would say "the first time you plagiarize it's a zero on the assignment, and the second time you fail the class." But realizing they may actually have been told, by some other teacher, that it's OK to do that - has forced me to take a little bit more of a broad view of that and say, "OK, this is maybe ignorance, this is maybe not intentional. This is probably, actually, with this current group of students not intentional. It's just they don't know that that's not OK."

So have you written a piece on plagiarism on your blog yet, or is that something that you've got in the hopper?

**Dr. Smith:** That's upcoming, and I'm definitely glad to know about the Pedagogy Unbound piece, because I do want to link to existing resources. There's a lot out there, and so the more I can link to and give students tools, that's wonderful. So I will be linking to your blog also, so thank you for that.

**Dinur:** And one of the things that I've noticed with a lot of students, is when you present the idea of "plagiarism as theft," that really hits home for them, because you tell them, "think of how tough it is to write a paper. Do you want someone else to get credit for the words you wrote? No, you'd want credit? Give the author credit."

**Dr. Smith:** Absolutely.

**Adam:** That's something that I've had students say, "Wait, I never knew it was stealing!"

Then think about this: someone else wrote those words, and you're telling me you wrote them. At least two things are happening now. You're lying to me, and you're stealing someone else's work.

And I use the word "steal." I use the word "theft." Because, you know, if you just say, "Don't use other people's work," it doesn't come across. It doesn't get hard. But when you say "thief," I say, "this is an academic crime. This is not OK. This is, like, so not OK. This can get you expelled from college," and that gets their attention.

**Dr. Smith:** And one of the things that I am trying to do with the blog which comes off of this is, I see it as pulling back the curtain. So I'm not just trying to tell you... the one I'm working on right now is a collection of things not to say in your paper, so for the love of God, please don't start your paper with "since the dawn of time."

**Dinur:** Yes.

**Dr. Smith:** What you're signaling to your college teacher is that this is not going to be a college level paper, and that's most likely not your intention. I'm assuming it's definitely not the student's intention, but that's what's happening.

But it's one thing to say "don't use this" and another thing to explain to the student why, so I've written a piece about how to read an assignment sheet. And unless I'm doing that, I'm trying to explain to students things like what assessment is for, right? Why is your teacher doing what they're doing? What's the "behind the scenes," because our students that are first-gen or coming from grossly underrepresented groups, groups that have not had the resources that others have, they don't know these things. And if you don't know the "why," it's a lot more difficult to make those changes.

**Adam:** Yeah, Dinur and I in several different episodes already, have talked about how the students tend to perceive us as "the adversary," someone they have to fight for their grade, or someone who will, you know, withhold the grade and only dole out grades to people they like. And there's an enormous amount of work to be done, especially, as you mentioned with the underserved communities. You know, Dinur and I out here in Los Angeles; we have a huge underserved community out here. I don't think it's the same underserved community that you're serving in Birmingham, but we have similar problems in that both of these groups of students are coming out of high school, and in high school it often is "the teacher's being the adversary." I had a teacher once who told me in high school, "I'm only going to give 3 A's in this class of 35 students."

**Dr. Smith:** You and I, I think have talked about this before, that students feel like their teachers are trying to trick them.

**Adam:** Mm-hmm.

**Dinur:** Yeah.

**Dr. Smith:** So I give my students a study guide that consists of the questions they're going to get on the exam, and that seems pretty straightforward: "these are your questions; this is what I'm going to use for the exam; and study those," and students get very anxious. We know that students now are experiencing much higher levels of anxiety than in the past, and you see that come out when you're doing something helpful to them, and suddenly they're frozen, and anxious, and asking a lot of questions.

And it's because I've flat-out said, "You've had teachers in the past trick you." And they nod, "yeah, we've had teachers that tried to trick us." And you have to work harder as the college teacher, and again, no disrespect to K-12, but you know, in any group, you're going to have people that just aren't nice.



**Adam:** We mentioned this in, I think, episode 6 or 7, Dinur? Where we talked about how “teachers, if you're doing this, cut it out, because you're not doing your students any favors; you're not teaching.”

I had a student bring me my two-page assignment sheet and say, “what aren't you telling us?”

And I said, “I'm doing my best to tell you everything. If there's something that it seems I have not told you, tell me so that I can put it in there.”

“Oh, what?”

And I said “this is not a class on mind-reading. I'm not asking you to figure out what I want. I'm telling you what I want. I promise you, if it's not in there, I'm not going to grade you on it.”

And they're all, “Really?”

It's really hard to convince the students that, you know, we are not actually trying to trick you. And the majority of us aren't. I still have met a few professors who indulge in that. Shame on them. I'm not even going to say I'm not trying to put them down! Shame on them! I am trying to put them down.

**Dinur:** So I've actually asked my students, “Why would I trick you? What would I possibly gain from this?” And they look at me - they're stunned, and they go, “I didn't think of it that way.”

And I told them, like, “look, when I ask you a question that says ‘all of the above’ or ‘A and C only,’ your tests are open note and open book. I want to see how well you can look at information that we've discussed, retain it, and use it. I'm trying to see how careful you read and how well you think something through, but I'm really, really not trying to trick you when it could hurt your grade.”

**Dr. Smith:** Right. So you ask me how I'm teaching this stuff in class. That's my sore point, because that's where I run out of time and that's part of the reason for the website is so that I can say... you know, what I want to get to at some point is to be able to say, “OK, here's your assignment, go read this blog post and then write what you learned about it,” or “write what you're still confused about,” or so on, so that I can see what they're getting out of it. And then I can go back to the blog post and fix it, and hopefully we get some of that learning done that way and I still have time for the content.

I do want to get to a point where I want to do more community work with my students. I want my students to go out in the community and do some real applicable work, and come back in and write and spend some time in the classroom drafting, and editing, and dealing with paraphrasing, and making stuff your own and so on.

That's a down-the-road goal. That is part of where the website is coming from, is an attempt to try to address some of these issues.

**Dinur:** How have students responded so far?

**Dr. Smith:** To the Web site?

**Dinur:** Yeah.

**Dr. Smith:** My students don't know about it yet. But I have shared it in some online teaching communities, and another instructor actually apparently has assigned my blog post on how to read assignment sheets and rubrics, because I had like 75 to 100 hits on that within a couple of days. So, you know, my hope is that it does become useful to that point to where other teachers might incorporate it in their course materials, so that students are driven to it and hopefully leave me feedback. If I don't have

feedback, I don't know what was missing what to make better. Like, literally, Adam was saying, you know, "tell me what's missing from my assignment sheet and I will fix it."

So, yeah, my students haven't found it yet.

**Dinur:** Oh, I gotcha.

**Dr. Smith:** But at some point, it will make it onto my syllabus.

**Adam:** OK, so what kind of mistakes do you see the most often? And is there, like, a pattern to the mistakes? Is there, like, "yep, this is one that all the students make; here's one that most of the students make." Is there anything like that?

**Dr. Smith:** One thing I see.... several of my classes I do assignments that I link to with field research. So you go out, and you make some observations, and you come back, and you're required to use resources with it. And I've given them some questions I want them to answer. And a lot of what I see is their paragraphs go down that list, and they answer each one of those questions in order, and the last thing on my list is to incorporate a reference into your work and so what happens is there'll be a paragraph at the end, where there's a reference, and then they're done.

**Adam:** Box checking; answering questions.

**Dr. Smith:** Exactly, exactly that. And I've seen this not just with students that I think are probably underprepared, but I've seen it with honor students as well, students that have been given a lot more training. So stop it, you know, when your teachers they want you to use a reference, that means they want you to read and understand that reference, and incorporate it into your writing. Or they'll incorporate references, but it's kind of a survival strategy approach to using a reference, I think, where you pull a reference and then you look for a quote that you can drop in. And then you shove that quote into your paper, whether it fits or not, and then boom you've got your reference. Again, not what we're looking for, and not in the spirit of what the writing assignment is supposed to be, and what academic thought is supposed to be.

But again that's probably a lot due to lack of time, and a lot due to lack of training and understanding of what a teachers really looking for.

**Dinur:** Do you also run into the opposite problem, what I call the "throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks problem," where - reference after reference after reference, none of it is really thought out, but they've got multiple references in the paper?

**Dr. Smith:** You know you're reminding, me one of my posts is going to be about how to read an essay question prompt. So for example let's say the question is to compare and contrast Marx and Durkheim. This is such a common question that you can Google it and find essay after essay after essay written on this. So what I had some students do for their essay exams or take home exam was, they found peer-reviewed references that answered the question, and they told me what the peer-reviewed references said about Marx and Durkheim. So they showed me that they were a good researcher. And several students did this, but they did not show me what they had learned in my class. So I had to revise my essay exam to forbid them from using external resources, and to explain what an essay exam is supposed to do.

I think there's a real pervasive idea among our students that their voice is not important; that what they're supposed to be doing is reporting on what all the "smart people" have said about this topic, and that their analysis is not welcomed. And if anything, we need to be producing students who are more analytical, who have a greater analytical capacity than we have in the past. I think it goes along with "my

teachers trick me” idea, that there's this body of learned people out there that are somehow better than you, and they hold the keys to the kingdom, and your job is to figure out what they want that they're not telling you, but also to parrot what they've said because that's what's going to make them happy. There are professors out there like that, but that's not what we need.

**Dinur:** No. And one of the things that I like to tell my students early on is, the only reason I know more about this subject right now than you is because I've spent more time than you on the subject.

**Dr. Smith:** Right.

**Dinur:** But that means that I didn't come into this world knowing this. It means I thought it was interesting, so I spent a lot of time trying to study and trying to research it and trying to learn more about it.

**Dr. Smith:** So you mean you weren't born knowing everything about Marx?

**Dinur:** Who knew?

**Adam:** And I tell my students, I actually try to debunk a couple of things you said. You know, I say “if you write, and I feel like you're trying to kiss up to me or make me happy, I may look over your paper with a microscope,” and I say “I can tell when you're trying to kiss up, it's not hard.”

And I also tell them that, you know, “when you are writing a paper, I'm not your audience.”

And they say, “the professor is always the audience!”

I said “Nope, you are not allowed to write a paper where I'm your audience or where your classmates are the audience. Those are not allowed. You have to find an audience that can fix the problem you're talking about.”

So you have to talk to me about, or you have to show me, who are you talking to? Are you talking to doctors? Then don't say “this paper is aimed at doctors.” Say, “doctors occasionally run into this problem.” If you're aimed at teachers, then you say, “teachers may have to deal with this issue.” Now I know who you're talking to.

But my job is not to be the audience. My job is to evaluate how well you did your job. And again, that's the pulling back the curtain that you're talking about, right? And making it clear.

**Dr. Smith:** Right.

And many students don't see that. They don't realize that. They think that their job, like you said, is to make us happy.

**Dr. Smith:** Right.

And then the thing about voice... I constantly have to deal with this, I have so many... I mean, the majority of the students in my sociology classes are young Latina women, and so many of them feel like they do not have a right to a voice - that they're voiceless.. So I talk a lot about worthiness, and I say, “you're worthy just because you're human! And you don't have to do anything to be worthy and your voice... how do I know what you know if you don't tell me?”

And then the last thing I wanted to go back to what Dinur was saying, you know, the spaghetti method. I call that a “quote sandwich,” which is one sentence at the beginning of the paragraph that they wrote,

three lines or four lines of quotes, and then one sentence at the end - I say, "that's a quote sandwich. You're letting the quotes do all the heavy lifting. I don't want that. I want to see what you think about this topic." And for some of them it sounds like, or it seems like, that's the first time a teacher's ever told them that. It shocks them.

**Dr. Smith:** Well, and on our end, you've got quote after quote after quote - I don't have any idea. Maybe you printed out the article and threw a dart at it, and gave me this sentence that the dart hit. And unless you're telling me what you got out of that quote, and what you think I should get out of the quote, I have no idea what you mean.

I end up telling my students - and I like the way you're talking about it better - "Don't rely on my intellect. Don't rely on what I know to pass your paper. Show me what you know."

So if those connections are missing, I find myself grading and thinking, "oh, this is what they meant," but now if I had to say, "oh, this is what they meant," it's not there, and it needs to be there.

And so I can't give you that grade. I'm not grading myself, I'm grading , you know -

**Adam:** - my guess.

**Dr. Smith:** My guess, yeah.

**Adam:** And I tell the student that they have to make it clear to me what it is that they're saying. And I said "if you want me to grade you - and you need me to grade you, because you can't get through this class without grades - then you need to give me something to grade." And if it is quote after quote, fine, good, you can look at resources and you can pull quotes on that. That doesn't tell me anything else.

**Dr. Smith:** Right, and this is my next one, is cheating is an issue. And not a lot of students cheat, but too many do, and often I think that's driven by desperation and a lack of confidence. These are students who... I've actually had a student say "I don't write well, you know. This other person said it great, so I didn't want to give you what I wrote. I want to give you what this other person wrote." Well, no, I want to see what you wrote. I'm grading you, not this other person.

**Dinur:** I remember grading an assignment years ago, as a teaching assistant, and a student had lifted a paragraph out of a different student's paper. And it was a useless paragraph. It made up the word count. That was about the only purpose it served. And I remember crossing it out, and I graded the rest of the paper as though that paragraph wasn't in it.

The student comes to me and they go, "Well why was my grade this low?" and I go, "do you see this paragraph?"

They go, "Yeah."

I show them we're using Turnitin. So then I said "do you see this exact match with someone else?"

They go, "yeah."

I go, "OK. That's problem one. Problem two is, why did you put this in? This answers no part of your question. And [38:43 unintelligible] it was completely irrelevant, so it's cheating, and it didn't really help you that much." I said I could either grade the rest of this paper as though this paragraph was never in there, or it could be a more serious issue. At that point they were OK with the grade.

**Dr. Smith:** Right, right. I just wrote a post last week - I guess it was this week but it was last week's post

that's how I'm doing - on page length, because - students that are listening, don't ask the teacher "how long does my paper have to be?" Because what you're conveying is, "I don't want to write this stupid paper; how many pages do I have to crank out to make you happy?"

And I'm sure that in many cases that's not what the student means to convey, but that's what's going through your teacher's head while they figure out how to answer you. So when I sat down, I thought, you know I don't think I have that much to say about page length. It turns out I did, and so I put some steps in there about ways to figure out, from your assignment sheet and so on, what's required of you - how long your paper, the beginnings of how long your paper needs to be, before you publish it and make it better.

One thing, I think - it was going back to cheating - one thing I think the students don't realize is how blatant cheating looks in your papers. All of us, we've had a lot of reading and writing to get to the point that we're at. When you spend that much time with text, you become very familiar with text and how students' writing sounds and so on. And all of a sudden you get this brilliant paragraph in the middle of writing that's otherwise that's somewhat labored - and you may as well have attached a neon sign: "Cheating! Cheating!"

Or students, who, instead of relying on their course material, they google it and they find someone's - what's that? Quiz...

**Adam:** Quizlet. I've got students who copy them and then I tell them, "you've copied this from a website," but they're like, "it's open source!"

"No. You aren't allowed to do that, you know. If you took it from a source, then it's not your words."

And they say, "my words are no good." Like you said, you know, "I would rather have the 'smart person's' words."

So I give them a very specific limitation on any quote beyond about 10 words. I say "the only time you're allowed to use a quote longer than 10 words is if there is absolutely no way that you could say it shorter, better, or clearer than they did - and 95 percent of the time you can't."

And then the few times that you do have a long quote, it's because you're going to take it apart or interact with it in some way, and you're saying "OK here's a quote from Durkheim, blah blah..." You know. We take this apart, we see that the first sentence says that" that's fine, that's analyzing - but it's very rare that we're going to do that in anything other than the humanities, because the humanities will always have you take, like, a quote from the work, and then you take it apart. It doesn't happen so much in social science, doesn't happen at all in science. And so, students, be aware that also, which discipline you're writing in matters.

**Dinur:** Absolutely. So what I'm kind of curious is, do you have any lasting pieces of advice? And we've given a lot of advice to students in this episode, but do you have any advice both for them but also for their teachers?

**Dr. Smith:** Both of you are human.

**Dinur:** Yeah, right.

**Dr. Smith:** Right?

**Dinur:** Last time I checked.

**Dr. Smith:** Yeah, exactly, and actually I'm not sure, I don't think this has happened to me but I've had

other teachers say that their students have been stunned that they get sick, for example. You know, that they, too, have car wrecks or break their legs.

Not all teachers - we've already said there's some teachers out there that we wish would stop doing what they're doing, and so, not all of your teachers are approachable, but when you find one that is, my goodness, you know, approach them!

And I think that for teachers, teachers need to be... we need to step out of our own experience, and try to collect more information about what's actually going on with our students. Because we do have an experience gap here.

I went from teaching at an R1, a highly research-intensive university, to a small regional state college, where - the R1 because it's a big college, pretty high tuition rates, right. There is a population of first-generation students, but not as high as the college that I went to.

And my first semester teaching there did not go well, and I got really terrible teaching evaluations. Now I could have just said, "these students are terrible!" and not have gotten anywhere, but instead, I stepped back and I looked at what had happened. I talked to my students.

And you may not get something from them face-to-face, but you can use - for example, Google Forms allows you to do surveys where you can collect - you can give a link, and then you can collect information from people without them having to identify themselves. So for all intents and purposes, it's anonymous. So I can drop a Google link into the learning management system and say, "respond to this, it's anonymous," and get feedback on how the class is going, what's working for students, what's not working, where they feel like gaps are, and they're much more likely to tell me in that situation than they are in the classroom.

I've instituted some assignments where I've asked them to tell me how they plan to study for the midterm, and they tell me. And then after the midterm I say, "OK, what was your grade and how did that go?" And it gives me an idea of how they're using course resources, how they're using their time, what kind of other pressures there might be on their study habits.

So, you know, collect information. Every student body is different, so collect information on who your student body is, and what challenges they're facing. Ask how many - ask them how many of them are working part time to full time. Ask them if they're required to do internships, and how many hours are spending on their internships. That's a lot, and that's maybe on top of being a first-generation student, or even a second-generation student. There are differences in experience, and willingness to speak out and ask for help, and being able to access resources, and so on.

We get caught up, in our culture, in blame. How many times have you seen "millennials this, millennials that," you know? And it's ridiculous! And so, if you show your students a little understanding and a willingness to listen, they really respond.

**Dinur:** Yeah. A little compassion goes a long, long way.

**Dr. Smith:** What I have found is that my students know that they don't know what they need to know, and they're upset about it, they want to know it. But they don't know - they don't know what they don't know, and they don't know how to get there. But they're motivated. Understanding that, and trying to develop ways to reach them, goes a long way.

**Adam:** Do you model for your students? You know, "This is what my writing looks like?" Like, when I get a writing workshop, I will say, "we will not discuss my master's thesis." And when I talk about fingerprint words, fingerprint phrases that students love to use, like, "obviously," or "thus, therefore, however," you

know, or they love this one phrase and they just keep using it. And I tell them that if you took my 220-page dissertation - so obviously, you win the dissertation - you know, because you've got the 300-page dissertation - but if you took my 220-page dissertation, and boiled it down to just the "obviously" and "however," you'd probably have 5 pages of text, which is way too much. And I tell them, "so, now when I write I tell myself I can have one obviously, or one however, every 5 pages and that's it." So if you have a thumbprint word or a thumbprint phrase, you can only have it -

But have you ever modeled it? Like, I've read about some teachers, when they teach writing, they will bring it like a 3-page draft of an article they're starting, and they give it to the students and they say "critique it, tear this apart for me." And the students are like, "wow, you're letting us tear apart your stuff?" and that really, apparently, breaks down that idea that you are the God of the classroom and they just don't know anything.

**Dr. Smith:** The modeling for students, I think, that we are fallible - I think it is very important. I did at one point. I was working on a paper, and we just happened to be in the module, and we were talking about research methods, and so I brought in my idea for the paper and we brainstormed my paper in class on the overhead. And it was an intro class, and they actually gave me great ideas for where to go with my paper. We shouldn't think that just because our students are freshmen or sophomores means that they don't know. You know they actually can have great ideas, and I think, when they see you take their ideas seriously, that makes a big difference to the students.

**Dinur:** And admittedly, I try and model some behavior for my students, even when it's not in the classroom. I've gone to a few workshops that are incredibly boring. Useful, but incredibly boring. And I've had students go, like, "are you teaching today?" and I go, "No it's one of my days off, but I came in, you know, for this workshop."

And I remember, one of them was on, literally, "how to write a good rubric."

And then they go like, "well, why?"

And I'm like, "well, if I'm asking you to bust your ass and to work hard for me, don't I owe you that very same, and try and improve and build and build?"

And I had a few where they look surprised, and go, "we didn't think of it that way."

I'm like, "these are skills! Just as I'm trying to develop your skills, I want to develop my own."

**Dr. Smith:** Absolutely.

**Adam:** And I try to model mistake-making for my students, and that's very hard for me, because I was a gifted student. I was one of those kids that got angry when suddenly the circumstances were different, because how dare they be different? Because this used to be easy.

For me, making mistakes is a big, fraught, thing, so when I make a mistake, I bring it to the attention of my students very, very clearly. I say, "OK, I screwed up. Here's how I screwed up. Here's how I'm handling it right now. Am I embarrassed? Of course I am. That's why I'm telling you. Because I'm forcing myself to not hide, because hiding is what creates the problem when you make a mistake. If you hide from the mistake, if you hide from the shame, if you hide from the embarrassment, it makes so much worse."

And I've said, "Because I know I'm not alone here," and I've had students go, "oh, wait, you can make mistakes?" I'm all, "I'm not God. I'm not perfect. And there's no way that I'm going to get through any semester without making mistakes. If I made a mistake on grading, tell me, so that I can fix it. I can't do anything if I don't know about it."

So in any case, is there anything that you'd like to finish this interview with, Stacy? I think this has been a great interview; it's going to be a model for all the future episodes we have: "go listen to episode 10 and, you know, if we're interviewing you: go listen to episode 10, that's what we're going to do," but is there anything else you'd like say to the students and the instructors that are listening? Any final words?

**Dr. Smith:** Don't stop learning. Honestly, we learn about each other, we learn about teaching, we learn about our subjects, we learn about how to do things better. And I think, implicit in "don't stop learning," is this idea that we all have something to learn; every one of us. Don't think that everyone else has it all figured out, right? Be inquisitive, get out there, and if you don't know it, figure it out. Find somebody who does know it and get better. I always tell my students, "when we learn better, we do better." So go with that.

**Adam:** And before we go, I want to recommend that all of you check out Stacy's website, **[undergraduateswrite.com](http://undergraduateswrite.com)**, where you'll find a ton of good information on how to fix the problems in college writing.

That's it for Episode 10! Thank you so much to Dr. Stacy Smith, who has brought us an enormous amount of information and guidance about how to teach students how to write, and how to be students. And for Episode 11, we're going to be talking about why that early confusion, when you're confronted with an unfamiliar topic, actually means you're learning.

**Dinur:** We'll see you next week.

[Theme Music]

You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach and how they overlap.

**Adam:** We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

**Dinur:** If you want to support us, please go to [www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier](http://www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier).

**Adam:** And we look forward to seeing you next week.