

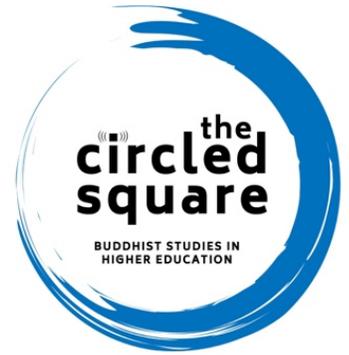
## Episode 8: Frances Garrett Teaching Empathy and Collaboration

File Length: 01:03:58

### Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Frances Garrett



00:00:00:06 - 00:00:04:26

**Frances:** And I think then as a teacher you have to kind of model appreciative criticism.

00:00:11:03 - 00:00:44:25

**Sarah:** Hello and welcome to The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist Studies in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson. In this episode I sat down with Dr. Frances Garrett, Associate Professor in the department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto, and the director of the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. This episode is called Teaching Empathy and Collaboration, because Frances is really interested in creating courses where students cultivate skills like working together, and not just in competition.

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**Sarah:** Now at some points in this episode you do hear some background noise so please don't get distracted by the truck backing up. We recorded this interview back in June 2019. Really almost a whole year before this present COVID-19 pandemic caused all of us to step back and really rethink how we teach, and why we teach what we do. But even though this conversation comes from the before times, it still has a lot for all of us to ponder. Enjoy.

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**Sarah:** Hello Frances and welcome to The Circled Square.

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**Frances:** Thank you so much Sarah.

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**Sarah:** So, I also have to say at the outset of this interview that this is fun and funny because in ways, we talk often, because we work so closely together and have for a long time, so we already know each other both professionally and personally. But we don't always get to dive deep into teaching.

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**Frances:** Yeah that's right.

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**Sarah:** So, I'm pretty excited actually to have this time set aside to get to talk to you about your teaching.

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**Frances:** Yeah. Thank you. Me too.

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**Sarah:** And also, because personally you were an important teacher for me. I came here and did my PhD at U of T, and took my intro Tibetan course with you, although 15 years ago or 14 years ago... So, thank you for permitting it. I wanted to ask first, where do you teach and who are your students? What is their level and background?

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**Frances:** I teach at the University of Toronto, and I teach undergraduate and graduate courses. So, undergraduates are... Toronto is a very culturally diverse city, and so we have a really culturally diverse student body. Students from all around the world often are in our classes, and so that's a bit different than where some people teach, and certainly that is different from sort of my graduate training experience. So yeah, I teach undergraduates at all levels, first year to fourth year, and then graduate students.

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**Sarah:** OK great. And also, can you give us some background on you? So, when did you first encounter Buddhism and how did you come to this point? When did you decide to make Buddhist studies into a profession and how did that story of evolve for you?

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**Frances:** Well I was an undergraduate at Columbia University and I was a philosophy major, and then I did a study abroad program through Antioch in Bodh Gaya in India. And so we spent a semester living in a Buddhist monastery studying Buddhism, doing a little bit of meditation study and language study. That's when I first started taking Tibetan language. Then I came back to Columbia, back to New York and took some more courses in Buddhism.

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**Frances:** And when I graduated from college, I really thought I had enough of school and didn't want to ever go back. But I did. I had gotten a Fulbright to go back to India to study after college. So I went back, ended up going to West Bengal, spent a few years there studying Tibetan and then at some point during that period in the hot season I would go up to Darjeeling or Kalimpong and spend some time in Buddhist monasteries up there, and it was at that time that I decided to go back to graduate school.

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**Sarah:** Wow interesting. It's also neat that programs like the Antioch program have had such a big influence on so many people

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**Frances:** On many of us, Yeah.

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**Sarah:** Yeah, formative. I think actually one of our guests was Carrie Brown, and she taught an Antioch program for a few years too. And I think we actually forgot to really even talk about it.

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**Sarah:** So, you had some pretty extensive time spent also in Buddhist communities in Asia before going back for grad school. And then what was grad school like for you in a nutshell?

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**Frances:** It was long... I went to school for about ten years, I guess I did take out two years in the middle there to have a baby. UVA was a really fantastic place to do Tibetan Studies and Buddhist Studies. Jeffrey Hopkins was still there, David Germano had just arrived when I was there, and so I was able to take classes with both of them and many other people in that department which was fantastic. Part of the reason it took 10 years to get through that program is I spent a lot of time in Asia during that period too. Mostly, I stopped going to India for a little while and started going to Tibet, to western China. And so that made the program longer, but really amazing opportunities.

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**Sarah:** And when you were in Asia, were you focused especially on translating texts while you were there? What did your work look like? Just curious.

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**Frances:** A couple different things. I did a year of dissertation research. In India actually I went back to Darjeeling and also spent some time in Sarnath. And so, in that case I was reading Tibetan texts with doctors mostly in those places, Tibetan doctors. In Tibet I spent a number of years going with David Germano and his collaborators and working on the early years of the Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library. So that was before that project had gotten started. So, we were there every summer to do ethnography work and other kinds of recording work with all kinds of people throughout the Tibetan plateau.

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**Sarah:** Great. And now it's become such an important resource for so many of us. And can you take me back actually to the Columbia experience a little bit too? So, at Columbia, what was that first course that grabbed you related to Buddhism?

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**Frances:** That's a good question. My first Buddhism class was taught by someone named Paul Watt who I have not been in touch with since then and I don't know... He was an East Asian Buddhism scholar. Then I did take a few classes from Robert Thurman when I came back from

India. He had just arrived at Columbia then, but before that I had taken some philosophy classes with someone named Akeel Bilgrami, who is a philosopher who had a background

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**Frances:** I think in Indian philosophy, although he was charged at that time to teach this Western civilization core texts course at Columbia that's a requirement for all students. And that wasn't a very influential course on me because he kind of didn't follow the rules and ended up spending like most of the semester on Plato, and a little bit of the rest of the semester on something else, and spent a lot of time talking about self, and perception, and experience, things that then later became really interesting to me in the context of Buddhism. So actually I think it might be that philosophy class that kind of got me started, even though at that time I didn't yet know much about Buddhism.

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**Sarah:** Some academics are sometimes kind of reluctant to discuss ideas about teaching because they don't feel ready right? We're always we're always sort of developing our teaching privately right? But that's the sort of the idea of this podcast, is trying to trying to open ourselves up. So is there a specific idea a word or story that describes your approach to teaching?

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**Frances:** That's a little bit of a hard question to answer because it's changed so much over time. And so at first I was thinking maybe the answer is something to do with how one develops as a teacher, or how you experiment in your courses and sort of try out new things, and maybe that's one of the sort of core principles of my teaching approach. But if you ask what am I thinking about most now, it's maybe more to do with different forms of learning and knowing that I can help students think about, such as knowing with their bodies or knowing through different senses beyond the five senses, or sort of thinking about perception and subjective experience as a way of knowing about the world that's legitimate in a course.

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**Sarah:** Interesting. Teaching... When did you know you wanted to do teaching, or did you ever know that teaching was something you wanted to do? Was there a moment?

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**Frances:** I would say I never wanted to do teaching.

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**Sarah:** It's fair. That's a fair answer.

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**Frances:** Yeah, I'm not an extroverted person. It's quite difficult for me to be in a public space like that or to speak in front of people so it was never something I wanted to do.

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**Sarah:** Right. But has it become easier over time?

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**Frances:** Definitely.

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**Sarah:** Yeah. And what has changed in you or what has made it easier over time for you?

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**Frances:** Well, just practice. So doing it again and again, realizing the students are not actually going to throw things at you or laugh riotously.

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**Sarah:** Usually, hopefully...

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**Frances:** Yeah and maybe my confidence has improved a little bit, and also though my sense of what it means to be a teacher and the role of the teacher in that classroom space has changed a lot as I've as I've done it.

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**Sarah:** Yeah yeah. Say more about that if you can?

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**Frances:** I suppose, but most of my college experience and even graduate school experience was pretty traditional pedagogically, and so the teacher was the one who had a lot of knowledge and a lot of information, and the students were the ones who needed to receive that from the teacher, and the purpose, the activity of being in class was listening to the teacher and writing things down and then going home and trying to remember them. So I didn't experience a lot of other examples of teaching beyond that in my career as a student. So when I came to be a teacher,

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**Frances:** First I was so painfully aware of not actually having all the knowledge in my head about everything, and so feeling very kind of scared of being in front of the classroom and now being the person who supposedly had all that information but realizing that I didn't have it there... Yeah so teaching is scary if that's how you think of it, I think. Whereas now, fifteen years later after I've had a lot of experiences in the classroom and done a lot of reading on teaching and thinking about pedagogy and learning and teaching, and have a completely different attitude about what my role is in the classroom. You know, the information that students need to have is often to be found on their phones in their pockets, so I don't need to provide that information. So what I'm doing in the classroom is providing an atmosphere or an environment for their own learning, and then thinking about what that means is my task.

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**Sarah:** Right. So its sort of building a community that they can find their own questions in, or something, in the classroom?

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**Frances:** Yeah that's part of it. It's thinking a little bit about how do people learn well? In what kind of environment do people learn well? And also, thinking about what are the things that I want them to learn.

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**Frances:** Is it really a list of facts about the history of Buddhism? Or is it some other kinds of attitudes about learning, or about themselves, or about their role in society or their relationship with the environment or something. Is that it, or is it a set of experiences that I want them to have which will then allow them to form those attitudes or something? So then how do you achieve that in a classroom has to do with, as you're saying, trying to put in place a kind of a community, or a kind of atmosphere that can bring those things to life in those students.

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**Sarah:** Let's get into the nitty gritty of some of the really interesting different kinds of courses you've been developing in these recent years, because you're doing really innovative cool things. There's one that I want to ask about, this roleplaying course that I heard a little bit about and I was jealous I didn't get to participate in. So my understanding is that it was based a bit on this "reacting to the past" model of immersive game-style courses. And you set your students, you gave them roles or something like that, and over the course of the semester things happened. So can you tell us more about what that looked like? What was its structure? How did you get by in all of that?

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**Frances:** So that was a year long course on intro to Buddhism. So second year, core undergraduate course introducing people to the study of Buddhism, so these are people who knew nothing about Buddhism possibly. The design of the course was that for the entire year, so I announced, I described this at the beginning of the first semester, for the entire year we were to imagine ourselves as living together in a village somewhere in the Himalayan Mountains, and I assigned each person a role in the village, so some there were some farmers, some doctors, some scholars, monks, nuns, ritualists, Traders... I think maybe that was the set of skills. And then one of the main assignments for the course was for them to write a year long journal or diary in the voice of that character. And so then I would come to class every week and announce something that had happened in the class. So for example one week there was a hailstorm and the bridge washed out that connected our village to a neighboring village.

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**Frances:** And so I would come into class and announce this event, and then the students would have to figure out how they should respond as a group. So there were relatively few required

readings compared to another intro to Buddhism class, because they had to each do individual research on how their character would respond as these things happened throughout the year in the village. So a doctor, for example, would have to do a lot of his or her own reading to find out how would a doctor respond to this situation? Or a monk, or nun would have to find out what what would I do in this situation?

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**Frances:** So they were each reading individually, separate things, and then they wrote these journals and they had to then sort of coordinate in class. Also they had to have meetings with each other to coordinate activities together because part of the way the journals were graded is that they actually were effectively networked with each other. So your journal had to show an awareness of the fact that there had been in fact a hailstorm, and and what the other people in the village were doing. If you wrote and sort of showed no awareness of what was happening, then that would not be as effective as a community member.

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**Sarah:** A technical question, was it a village now? Or was it a village set in some historical moment? Was it like 18th century? or was it present day?

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**Frances:** I didn't specify in that class. I kind of imagined it to be a few hundred years ago, but I didn't say, and then at some point somebody wrote in their journal that they had been watching TV the previous night, so then that kind of set the time for us. Then we all had to sort of realize, OK well I guess we are...

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**Sarah:** We've agreed that we have television.

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**Frances:** Yeah.

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**Sarah:** And then did they pick their own characters? Or did you assign them? Like there had to be so many monks, so many nuns, so many doctors...

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**Frances:** I assigned what I called "the primary character's skill" or something. So you were a farmer, I would tell you that you are a farmer but then I allowed each student to pick a secondary skill, so over the course of the year if you weren't so interested in farming and you actually really wanted to become a nun then you could develop your secondary identity as a nun and start writing in the in the character of a nun. So they started out with something but then they could develop over the course of time.

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**Sarah:** How many were in that class?

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**Frances:** I think sixty five.

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**Sarah:** Sixty Five that's big for an immersive role play game. Cool. This was a Buddhist Studies course, right, it was an intro to Buddhism course, so how did you teach them about the Buddhist Studies aspects that you were trying to get them to see?

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**Frances:** Yeah, that was a little difficult to know. It took a lot of talk class time to give the students time to discuss with each other what their approaches were in the village to deal with these events that were happening, and especially over time they required even more time because more things would be happening, and so for example there were a lot of nuns in the class, the nuns all decided to develop a library, they needed to consult with each other to build their library, they needed to consult with the traders who were going down to the plains in India to buy the books that the nuns wanted, they needed to consult with other scholars to know what kinds of books a nuns library ought to have. So this required a lot of discussion amongst themselves and they needed class time to do that, which meant that there was less time for me to do traditional lecture style teaching on Buddhist Studies, intro to Buddhism, but I did do some of that. So I would say I started out with at least half the class time devoted to me actually just basically doing some lecturing on the fundamentals of Buddhism, because they had to know something.

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**Frances:** And then over time maybe I would be doing less of that, or some weeks I would do less of that if there was a big event that they had to deal with in the village. And so that was a little difficult for me to give up a lot of the content that I would otherwise have felt important. But I think they gained a lot from this experience that they wouldn't have gotten if I had simply lectured at all year, so it's a bit of a tradeoff and it's definitely, you know, you can't do both.

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**Sarah:** There was 65 students journaling every week. Were you reading all of these journals?

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**Frances:** Yes.

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**Sarah:** That must have been a ton of work.

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**Frances:** It was yeah.

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**Sarah:** As well as devising the events that needed to happen in the village?

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**Frances:** Yes because I realized that my events had to react to what they were saying was happening. So I had to understand, because they were also making things up that had happened in their own neighborhoods. We had a map of the village and so they all knew where they lived and who their neighbors were. And so they would say that something had happened and then I had to come up with an event that would react to that. And so I really had to stay on top of everything that was happening in the village.

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**Sarah:** How did it work? What was the student feedback on that course? Like how did it work for them? This had to be so different than anything else they were expecting from a university class, so how did they receive it?

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**Frances:** Its always a little bit hard to know. I guess the good thing about a year long class is that you can, in the middle of the year, do an assessment conversation in the class. So I did have a survey form that asked them about all the different features of this experience that in December I handed out. They gave me this anonymous feedback and then we had a class discussion about the feedback, and then we did make some changes to the structure of the project after based on what their feedback was. So I came in and said it looks like nobody really likes doing X, Y, Z, and so we would change, we'll just cut that part of the project.

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**Frances:** I think by the end though, I would say... It's a little bit hard to say if they liked it, but I think they did. I've known some of the students after that who have talked about it as a positive experience. But the other thing that kind of makes me think that it was successful is that the writing that I got in this class was like nothing I've ever seen before. People did research to support their character's development like I've never seen research in an undergraduate class. And the writing was often so beautiful, they added so much depth to their characters. Like their characters had families and relationships, you know that was not a required part of the writing assignment, and so they invested so much of their own kind of personal emotional energy into this writing that it's hard to believe that they weren't liking doing it.

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**Sarah:** They were guided then through like learning through empathy, right? Like they had to be empathic to their characters, deeply, to really engage the course. Was that the plan? Were you conscious of teaching through empathy in that course?

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**Frances:** Yes, if I remember, that might have been one of the course objectives that I explained, that I would have written on the syllabus, and definitely that was my intention, is that they can

learn to think about the lives of real Buddhists as real people. So sometimes when we teach Intro to Buddhism or other Buddhist Studies courses and we're mainly reading old texts that come from hundreds of years ago, and that are kind of foreign to us in style, it's hard to think about the real people who wrote those texts and who practice those practices. I was influenced by an article by Todd Lewis, who has written about revising our approach to teaching intro to Buddhism by thinking of Buddhism as something that exists in Buddhist communities and in the lives of real Buddhist people.

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**Frances:** And so it's not only about the practices of monks, say, or even monks and nuns. It's not only about books and texts. It's also about how trade occurs, or how social relationships occur, or how people interact with each other and with neighboring villages and with the environment. And so I wanted students to think from the get go of that as being where Buddhism exists or where religion exists more generally. And so that was kind of what was behind the design of the course. And part of that, part of being able to think about something like that is to be able to empathize with people in other places. I think that worked based on the way that they wrote about these characters. They really imagined deeply how these characters lives would be in this place.

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**Frances:** And then in April of that year was the big earthquake in Nepal, and there was a Facebook group for the village for the students in the class... The class was over by the time the earthquake occurred, but one of the students wrote on the Facebook group, posted and noticed information about the earthquake, and she said something like "look this is right near where our village was!". So something in the news occurred, a great disaster in this place and the students immediately thought like "oh my gosh this is where we were".

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**Sarah:** They were touched personally. How did the assessment work in that class? Like what was the structure, was it all writing assignments or?... I guess you couldn't really do like multiple choice exams or anything?

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**Frances:** I would have to look at the syllabus to remember exactly but I know that this, and like a number of my other courses that are sort of similar, participation is a very large part of the final grade. Like normally in classes we put a little 10 percent or something on for participation. So in this case it's a much larger percentage. In that I'm saying that you have to come to class and you have to participate. You have to be an active member of this community. And that's even, you know some of the students were living in the village but they were living in a cave because they were interested in meditation, but still, those people had to be active members of the community in whatever way would make sense.

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**Frances:** And so participation was a big part of the grade. This writing assignment, the journal that lasted all year was probably the other major part of the grade. And then I may have had some quizzes that were about terminology. So there's a lot of foreign words, Sanskrit words or Tibetan words when they're doing their research that they had to know, and so we did have just vocabulary quizzes on Buddhist terminology and a map quiz on key locations in Asia, so they had a sense of the Asian geography that they were dealing with.

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**Sarah:** And then in terms of also helping them doing research in these really specific roles and places, how did you help them? Well I mean with a group that size, did you have some texts of, I don't know, historical biographies or something that you could default to for them, or that you had recommended to them, or were they really on their own with their research?

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**Frances:** No, I posted over hundred articles on topics relevant to the kinds of things they would need to know. So that was some work for me, and I also had to keep posting things. We had one iron worker in the class and at some point he wanted to do some kind of iron work project. I think maybe for the nunnery and I realized "oh he doesn't know anything about traditional iron work in those kind of communities"... So I had to go look for articles on that. So I would be constantly reacting to the things that were happening the village and then trying to look for what would be obscure articles for them to find on those topics, and then I would make them available to the students.

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**Sarah:** Yeah, amazing. That would have been a ton of work.

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**Frances:** Well it was but it would not have been realistic to expect them to do that kind of primary research.

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**Sarah:** No, exactly. I'm imagining my first year students at U of T Mississauga, and their default would be Google, and then if it didn't exist there they'd be pretty much done right.

00:27:43:19 - 00:28:04:12

**Sarah:** So I wanted to switch gears now a bit and ask you about some of the kind of innovative things you've also done with your grad student classes. There's a grad student seminar that you taught here at U of T where you had your students work together over the progress of the course to produce something by the end. Can you tell us a bit about that course and how it worked?

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**Frances:** I've done a lot of experimentation in my undergrad classes, and I've done some experimentation, a little bit less kind of radical examples of that in grad classes as well. So each

grad class I teach is really very different from the last one. Different in content, but more challenging is how they're different in approach, or in what I'm trying to convey to them or teach to them. So in this case, our goal in the class was to create an article together that we would try to get published in a peer reviewed journal. And so I was trying to get away from the typical graduate class where the objective by the end of the semester is that you as a student write your own paper that's privately the result of your own research, and that then I am the only one who reads as the teacher.

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**Frances:** The students might talk about their research and compare each other's research, or you might even compete a little bit about who's got the smarter paper, or the better paper, or who's done better research... And I wanted to completely get away from that model of a graduate class and instead try to have the challenge before us - can we come up with some sense of agreement about a topic to the extent that we could read an article together about it? Each meeting of the class we would think and sort of revise our notes toward this aim, and gradually come up with an argument and a structure of a paper, and do the writing that would create the paper.

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**Frances:** I was interested in that, like I said, to get away from the sense that academic work is about competing with each other, and instead to test out the possibility of collaborating with each other and coming to an agreement, which isn't to say that we don't also think many other things about this topic or we don't have our own independent thoughts about the topic, but what would it mean in the context of that class to put aside what I personally think and instead appreciate what you think, and think like how can we build on what you have thought, or how can we build on what the group thinks and create an article out of that together.

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**Frances:** So that's something that obviously in the sciences they do all the time, I guess. Collaborative articles are very common but in the humanities we do that so rarely, and we don't know how to do it. I wanted to sort of practice that in that article and see how it would work. And in that class it did work and we published the article in a peer reviewed journal.

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**Sarah:** Great. Great. Where did the article end up?

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**Frances:** Journal of the American Academy of Religion.

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**Sarah:** Great. And how many students did that work with? That grad class was how many?

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**Frances:** Maybe there were ten to start out with, I think. We did not finish writing the article during the course of the semester. So it was maybe another year after the course that the article was written and finished, and by that time the contributors had dropped to four or five.

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**Sarah:** Right. And then what was the *how*? The *how* to doing that methodologically? You spoke a bit about it but... So the classroom time was time for discussion about the topic, with the goal being agreement?

00:31:39:20 - 00:32:46:11

**Frances:** Yeah, I mean not that we needed to agree on the issue but we needed to agree on the article. So we could have many opinions about the different issues that were being discussed. It was a food studies class and so we were talking about tormo, the role of ritual offerings, and the role of food more generally or consumption practices in Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices. And so we had to decide what view about ritual would work best in the case of talking about tormo offerings. So we did have some collaborative documents that we would work on online together, and then we spent time in the class talking about those approaches. I would like to do that again. I think it's very difficult to create an environment where that is possible, and I think I could use more practice with that. In this case it turned out to work in the sense that the article was published, but it's hard.

00:32:46:13 - 00:33:02:17

**Sarah:** Yeah, it must be hard to... I mean everybody's writing looks really different, it's a pretty personal practice, so then to be able to collaborate on writing would require hearing criticism about your writing from a peer. That must have been hard for students?

00:33:06:04 - 00:34:18:16

**Frances:** Yes I think you're right. I think, I do that often in my grad classes, I will almost always have public writing so your papers or your reports that you do throughout the semester will almost always be available to everyone in the class. I really want students to get away from this fear of sharing their writing because that is so crippling. And I think then as a teacher you have to kind of model appreciative criticism right. That's another thing that I've talked in different grad classes about doing and even explicitly we practice, like how can we say four positive things about this piece of writing that are critically constructive but also positive and affirming of the scholar in question. I certainly did not learn how to do that in my grad classes, and I've had to do a bit of reading on that and sort of try to practice it in my classes with my students. But I think it's very important for students to develop confidence.

00:34:19:20 - 00:34:29:04

**Sarah:** Appreciative criticism must not only be affirming, but also finding ways to help someone here if you think there is a glaring problem that needs addressing, right?

00:34:29:12 - 00:34:54:15

**Frances:** You can model that to students by saying "I really love the way you've written this few paragraphs. They're so clear and there's so much evocative imagery here, but I would understand your argument so much better if you did it this way". You know I could say something like that. Like you can really skillfully be appreciative while still suggesting room for improvement.

00:34:56:03 - 00:35:07:08

**Sarah:** What kinds of things did you read or do you remember, to learn more about this appreciative criticism? I need these resources. What kinds of things did you read to learn about appreciative criticism?

00:35:07:16 - 00:35:08:01

**Frances:** I don't know. That was a long time ago...

00:35:08:03 - 00:35:33:21

**Sarah:** OK we'll find that later. Well we'll find ways to link to it later in show notes and stuff because I know that probably some of our listeners, like me, would like to know more about how to learn more about appreciative criticism and how to actually put it in. I mean I can understand the need for it, I can understand the theory of it, but I know that I'm probably still failing in the execution of a lot of things.

00:35:34:14 - 00:35:56:05

**Frances:** Yeah, I read so many things about teaching, I'm sorry that I can't remember. The reason I can't remember specifically is that I've read so many things like this in the area of experiential education and teaching. I read a lot about teaching reading, teaching writing, all these things. It's not that hard actually to find that kind of suggestion...

00:35:58:12 - 00:36:02:18

**Sarah:** What are your favorite places to search? Is it like podcasts on teaching that you listen to?

00:36:03:14 - 00:36:24:14

**Frances:** Some of that, but more education journals. The education section in any library. Books, journals... A lot of teaching centers have resources on their university websites, specific suggestions on how to be encouraging in giving student feedback.

00:36:24:16 - 00:36:46:04

**Sarah:** One thing you mentioned in the process of saying something else, was that sometimes it was about the "non-Buddhist Studies thing I also wanted to teach them", right? That was part of your thinking about the course? So is that a way you think about your courses, that you're teaching kind of Buddhist Studies and something else, and you're trying to marry those or join those?

00:36:47:09 - 00:36:47:24

**Frances:** Yeah.

00:36:48:16 - 00:36:57:23

**Sarah:** So you're kind of teaching with Buddhist studies, rather than about, right? What are the other kinds of things that you want to teach with Buddhist Studies?

00:37:00:04 - 00:37:38:08

**Frances:** Usually when I think of a course design, the year before I'm going to teach a course I start thinking about what I'm going to do, and the first thing I usually think about is not so much the topic in Buddhism that I want to address, but more the skill that I want to teach. For graduate students and undergrads it's a little different. For graduate students I know the cohort that we have and so I think to myself, well I think this cohort really would benefit from improving presentation skills, and so I'm going to teach a class, which is the class I did last year, where all the work is devoted to building up their presentation skills.

00:37:38:15 - 00:38:18:09

**Frances:** And in that case, we might read articles on presentation skills or watch some videos or something, and then all the assignments will be based on gradually teaching presentation skills, and practicing presentation skills. In the role playing course maybe my primary objective was to teach empathy for people in other times and other places. In my course we were talking about where we create an article, my primary objective was to have students think about how you can do collaborative work as a scholar as opposed to independent work that is critical of others mainly.

00:38:18:18 - 00:39:09:00

**Frances:** So usually that skill that has nothing to do with Buddhist studies is the thing that comes first to my mind, and then any topic in Buddhist studies can sort of match, can fit into that. Then all the assignments of the course are based on practicing or developing that skill. So in a lot of courses, and probably earlier on in my teaching, you just kind of have a rote selection of a research paper, a presentation, participation, and discussion practice or something. You do a little bit of each of those. There's no deep attention to any one of them. Now I've moved away from that sort of scattered approach and instead think, well let's just focus the entire class only on discussion, more on presentation or whatever.

00:39:09:07 - 00:39:22:11

**Sarah:** Interesting. That's unusual, I think, in grad student teaching and undergrad teaching still right? But it's a great idea, Right? Because exactly, if we're doing everything not well, what's the point?

00:39:24:03 - 00:39:39:26

**Sarah:** I wanted to ask also... You've done some interesting things with digital humanities courses and teaching your students also about skills related to the digital sphere and that space of communication. Can you tell us a little bit about one of those courses, and what it looked like?

00:39:43:02 - 00:40:17:11

**Frances:** Yes, I did a few undergrad courses and maybe one grad class where I was focusing on digital humanities skill development, and that was in the earlier years of my teaching because I was interested in that work myself, that kind of work. So I did an undergrad class, that was again the intro to Buddhism class, a year-long class, and the class project for that year was to build a website of Buddhist centers in Toronto.

00:40:18:25 - 00:41:00:14

**Frances:** The project was called Mapping Buddhist Sites. They learned some mapping technologies and they had to go out and do little mini ethnographies of these Buddhist sites and work with the Buddhist centers themselves, who would have of course had to agree to participate in the project. So the team assigned to that site would gather some basic information about the site and then they would create a little web page for the Buddhist center and put it on a map. So they learned some online mapping skills, some ethnographic skills, and some project management skills because that class had like one hundred and fifty people in it. So it was a really big project.

00:41:00:16 - 00:41:46:10

**Frances:** So that was one. Then I did another undergraduate class that was on oral histories of contemporary Buddhists in Toronto. Again, this was a smaller class, a third year class. We did some reading on how to do oral histories and the purpose of public history and oral history. Students were assigned to a community member who had agreed to participate., and they recorded an oral history, so they learned some audio recording skills and editing skills. They put that interview on a Web site so then they had to learn some HTML and JavaScript skills to put together this audio file, some images, and some text that would contextualize the oral history.

00:41:46:12 - 00:42:05:23

**Sarah:** Amazing. Tell us a bit about where you're taking your teaching next? What are the goals as you look ahead to returning to teaching next year. I know you were on sabbatical this year, still, so you're enjoying a little bit of time away from the teaching at the moment, but I know that you've got some interesting plans for next year. Can you tell us a bit about what you're thinking for next year?

00:42:06:29 - 00:43:18:26

**Frances:** I spent several years doing this digital humanities stuff and really thinking that it was important for students to learn computer skills, and I still think that's important. But now I've moved away from that more to thinking about I guess slightly more sort of philosophical or phenomenological investigation of their understanding of Buddhism and learning and so forth. So we don't do any computer stuff in my classes anymore and we do instead movement practices, sort of personal, I'm not sure if I'd say contemplative practices, but embodied practices that allow students to think about how their learning exists in their bodies. So I got started with that in a course on walking that you mentioned in your introduction, cultural history of walking, where one of our primary assignments was to do a lot of walking and then to

write about that walking, to think about what it meant to be a walker from different points of view.

00:43:19:17 - 00:44:08:09

**Frances:** And then that's also related to some international programs I've done taking students to the mountains to do trekking and to sort of immerse themselves in this physically challenging experience in another place. And then next year I'm teaching a course on interdependence, on the Buddhist concept of interdependent origination. But again, I'm still developing that course and thinking about how it will be, but I'm thinking more of getting students to really think about how their perception and their subjective experience can be a way of learning about the concept of interdependence, as opposed to simply reading texts on interdependence.

00:44:08:11 - 00:44:15:17

**Frances:** But also, I'm wanting students to really sort of experiment with their bodies and their minds from around that topic.

00:44:16:01 - 00:44:41:18

**Sarah:** So the focus back on your body was something that we actually missed saying earlier but it is true of you, for people who know you, from years ago that you were originally trained in ballet and you did teach a little bit of ballet long before you taught Buddhist Studies. You taught a different thing that started with "B" right? So has that felt like a full circle to you, coming back to teaching through the body now in this very different forum?

00:44:43:16 - 00:44:51:15

**Frances:** Yeah that's a good question. I guess it is in a way, you know I wish I could teach my students ballet but I don't think people really want to learn that.

00:44:52:09 - 00:44:55:13

**Sarah:** Some people do. Maybe not at university....

00:44:56:27 - 00:45:41:18

**Frances:** But yeah I mean that as a dancer, or as a former dancer, or still a dancer, I guess I'm always interested in that experience and what it means, how it is that you communicate nonverbally, you know that's what dancers do. There's like so much communication, emotional communication, and just interpersonal communication. There's so much sensory information that goes on when you're dancing. Like all of the senses are so alive and you're so aware. It's a very kind of focused and present state to be dancing, so knowing that experience myself, and I know you're a dancer too so you know that experience yourself as well.

00:45:41:20 - 00:45:58:17

**Sarah:** I'm a tap dancer. But yes, yes. Actually the only thing I ever really wanted to be was a ballet dancer, and I was told that the age of 9 that I wouldn't have the body for it. Actually in retrospect it still fundamentally shaped everything. Anyway. Sorry go ahead.

00:45:59:22 - 00:46:37:14

**Frances:** Yeah so I guess that's such a formative experience in my life... Probably that has something to do with my interest in Buddhism and in philosophical aspects of Buddhism like no-self or interdependent origination, and what it means to be a self, or what it means to be an identity. Also ideas of consciousness and embodied perception and so forth. Those all I see really coming to life as a dancer in this kind of nonverbal way of communication. And so bringing that to the classroom is something I've wanted to do.

00:46:39:24 - 00:47:03:05

**Sarah:** I understand what you mean too, but I don't know that all our listeners would. So what do you feel resonates between teaching about these incredible Buddhist philosophical ideas like no-self and interconnection. How does this relate to bodies and dance for you?

00:47:04:06 - 00:47:54:23

**Frances:** Maybe it has to do with my own experience of studying Buddhism and thinking about concepts like no-self and interdependent origination going way back to when I was in college and those being just really transformative concepts for me. So it was not the case that I was reading Buddhist texts and just saying, "oh that's interesting I get that and I know how to repeat it on the exam", but I was changed profoundly by reading, by taking those courses and studying those ideas. And when I try to think about how it changed me or what it means to me, it has to do not with learning information, but with ways of existing in my body and existing in the world in relation to other people and environments.

00:47:56:03 - 00:49:10:25

**Frances:** And I guess I think, especially for undergraduates, you know that time of late adolescence or your early 20s is such an emotionally deep time of life, and that's the time when I think people really are moved and changed by thinking about their identities, who they are, what it means to be a self, what it means to exist in the world, what it means to relate to other people or to the environment, and that stuff is heavy for someone in that sort of typical age of an undergraduate. What I thought about those topics had to do partly with my readings in philosophy maybe, but also just with my own experience, to go back to being a dancer, is of yourself being an embodied self, not just an intellectual self or cognitively active self. And so I think that's a way of understanding some of those Buddhist concepts. I think that's what some of those Buddhist texts are talking about, and there's a lot of stuff written in philosophy and psychology and so forth that has nothing to do with Buddhism that also talks about these ideas, and I just think that that is a topic that is often really moving and interesting to students.

00:49:11:17 - 00:49:21:04

**Frances:** So I enjoy I guess teaching that kind of topic because students responds with such kind of excitement.

00:49:21:09 - 00:49:52:24

**Sarah:** What I was going to say though is, it's a topic too, or it's an idea about the self and about the mind that's often kind of excluded from the Western academic setting, right? I don't know.

We're often still reliant on a kind of disambiguation of mind and body, and a hierarchy set up between those two that privileges one sense over the other. So it's a kind of radical shift then that you're proposing, to be able to bring that into a university classroom, right?

00:49:53:11 - 00:50:39:00

**Frances:** Yeah. I mean there are so many people in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science who are talking about these things, and in Buddhist studies we're talking about these kind of things as well in philosophical ways. But I think what you're pointing to is that that doesn't always reach the level of classroom practice. Yeah. And so my interest is how can we not only just talk about and read about these ideas, but how can we embody these ideas? And then how can we in the classroom with undergraduates who have no experience in these topics get them to think about their own subjective experience and their own perceptual experiences as being interesting and worthy objects of investigation and ways of knowing?

00:50:39:20 - 00:51:35:04

**Frances:** So then that I think ties in also to my desire to have what we call a "student centered classroom", where student knowing is an absolutely legitimate form of knowing, because if you're looking at embodied ways of being and you're asking students to think about their own selves and their bodies and their movement practices, then that can only be based on their own subjective experience, right? That really brings the students into the center of knowledge production in the classroom. That's one thing. And then the other thing is, in order to do that you have to move away from the classroom setting where you're in a box, sitting in a chair, reading a book or listening. You have to you have to go outside or you have to move around in the classroom. You have to lie down in the classroom or jump or something.

00:51:37:02 - 00:51:51:16

**Sarah:** There's a beautiful power there too right? In teaching students that they already have a bunch of knowledge, they already have a bunch of tools, right? They already have a bunch of resources, the message doesn't have to be, "you don't have it yet", but rather "you already have a lot", and to recognize that?

00:51:52:28 - 00:52:26:17

**Frances:** Yeah. You already have a lot, and also I'm interested in what you have. That's another thing I want, I want to create an environment where every student believes that I'm interested in their experience. To do that, you have to create a certain environment sort of even before you enter the classroom. You have to create a kind of intention to do that and then set in place all of these factors in the syllabus or in the course design that will allow that to happen.

00:52:27:14 - 00:52:40:20

**Sarah:** And you say you're not an extrovert... That that's a kind of extroversion, right? To be able to conceive of planning to connect with 65 people at once in a genuine way.

00:52:40:23 - 00:53:09:12

**Frances:** I don't know. I mean I would say that I think I'm not an extrovert because to do that... I do that because I find it important and I think that's my role. That's the way I value being in the classroom, but you know after I'm done teaching I have to come to my office and close the door and lie down and do nothing for the rest of the day because it's incredibly draining. To pay that kind of attention to, as you say, to a whole classroom of individuals.

00:53:09:20 - 00:53:18:19

**Sarah:** Yeah. Well openness and vulnerability take a huge amount of energy. They really do right? To be that open... It's a lot easier to not be.

00:53:18:26 - 00:53:19:14

**Frances:** Yeah.

00:53:20:26 - 00:53:58:24

**Sarah:** And then, what kind of things do your students come to the classroom thinking or knowing or assuming about Buddhism, and where do you think these classes get them that's different in the end? What I mean by that is, many of our, many of my students anyway, what I see in my first and second year students at U of T Mississauga, which is not far from your students at U of T downtown, is that they're they're coming with kind of the cultural baggage and the assumption that Buddhism is this alternative and good religion, that bad things don't happen within it because you know, enlightenment and altruism, and compassion...

00:53:59:04 - 00:54:50:26

**Sarah:** I have felt complicated in recent years because I don't exactly want to tell them it's wrong. Compassion is a beautiful idea, enlightenment is a fantastically beautiful idea, the concept that every person has that potential, every sentient being has that potential is a really powerful idea. And yet I also feel a bit of a moral obligation to not reinforce something that really does of course extend from the colonial encounter with Buddhism where it's set up as a "different thing", that is another part of putting down other forms of religious practice and putting down other forms of peoples in their histories, right? And certainly it's something that in our current world, we're seeing Buddhists do bad things too all the time. Yeah. My students have have this baggage, I don't exactly want to tell them it's wrong, but I also need to complicate it. So how do you feel about that challenge?

00:54:52:20 - 00:55:51:17

**Frances:** Yeah I think you're totally right. You have to deal with that, and it's important to teach students about the history of Buddhism and all of the terrible injustices that have been done by Buddhists or in the name of Buddhism around the world and are still... These things are still taking place all over and we have to know about that and highlight that for students for sure. You know, we study the history of Buddhism and make sure to bring those things forward, and then also studying a bit of works on Buddhist modernism, or will address some of the other issues you've mentioned about the colonial history and how that shapes our perception of Buddhism, you know the popular sort of lay perception of Buddhism. I think that's important.

Sure. Depending on the topic of the course you may get more or less into different aspects of those.

00:55:51:20 - 00:55:58:07

**Sarah:** How do you respond, because I get this question still all the time... How do you respond when your students ask you, "Are you Buddhist?" How do you do it?

00:55:59:09 - 00:56:00:11

**Frances:** I say I'm not.

00:56:00:13 - 00:56:03:21

**Sarah:** Yeah? And then is there a follow up conversation, or that's it?

00:56:06:03 - 00:56:24:25

**Frances:** You know they always look really disappointed when you say that, and so, then I will sometimes follow up by saying "well you know I've studied Buddhism for many years several decades and I certainly appreciate many aspects of Buddhist thinking and practice"... And I'll just leave it at that.

00:56:31:04 - 00:56:32:13

**Sarah:** I've been trying something similar recently.

00:56:35:00 - 00:56:58:04

**Frances:** I think that kind of then opens the door for a conversation about religious studies as a discipline and what it means to study religion in our department. And so that's a conversation that students need to have. It's actually a good question in that sense, because it allows you to talk about the importance or the possibility of studying religion from different kinds of standpoints.

00:56:58:09 - 00:57:08:10

**Sarah:** Yeah absolutely. Which is of course one of the things we're trying to teach when we teach about the academic study of religion, right, that religious practice is not the same as the study of religion.

00:57:08:25 - 00:57:09:10

**Frances:** Exactly.

00:57:10:00 - 00:57:19:02

**Sarah:** And the study of religion does not have to be disrespectful or negative in its outlook on religion, and it's not here to claim religion as good or bad but instead, study...

00:57:19:04 - 00:57:51:28

**Sarah:** You've talked already to us a bit about your growth and change as a teacher, and the many kind of different stages you've gone through of interests in what you're trying to get from

your class experiences, where we usually only have at U of T students for 12 weeks at a time, really these short periods. Where do you feel that you want to grow more as a teacher? What's the feeling of somewhere where you think, "well I've still got a ways to go"? What's that, what's the thing for you right now.

00:57:52:04 - 00:57:53:29

**Frances:** Oh gosh. Everything.

00:57:56:22 - 00:57:57:07

**Sarah:** No, be nice...

00:58:01:17 - 00:58:18:20

**Frances:** Oh, I mean I can't imagine ever not feeling like I still have everything to learn. The more I read about teaching, I mean that's a whole field, like I could go get a PhD at the school of education and then still feel like I wasn't done.

00:58:18:22 - 00:58:19:12

**Sarah:** You don't need to do that its ok.

00:58:23:04 - 00:59:38:20

**Frances:** And I guess one of the downsides about my approach of reinventing my courses every single time I teach them is I'm always having to learn new things, and then never feeling like I've really finished learning them, and so every time I pick a new topic I want to teach, like presentation skills, I realize painfully how I've never learned how to do that. And there's a lot to know, and there's a lot of expertise out there that I could benefit from being around. So it's hard to even pinpoint one area of growth. But I think currently I'm interested in experiential education. I've been to the Association for Experiential Education annual conference and was really amazed at all the things I learned there, and the people I could learn from in that discipline. I guess I'm interested in sort of reaching into other areas of expertise, and being around people who really are enthusiastic about teaching and have expertise on different aspects of teaching.

00:59:38:22 - 00:59:57:27

**Sarah:** What does experiential education mean to you? Because there are various definitions and I had to go into this this year, figuring out what it meant to me for a course that got designated as an experiential course. So what does it mean to you? What's the value in it and why is it important?

00:59:59:14 - 01:00:59:13

**Frances:** Yeah, that's not an easy question to answer. You know it is a discipline, there are journals on the topic, there are many books written on the topic, there's a whole section in the library. So it's not straightforward and it depends on also if you are asking how does your institution define experiential education... Our institution here has a certain emphasis on job skills and experience in the workplace. In other environments experiential education can be

about the things that we've talked about like embodied learning, or there's something called "Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning". Maybe you've heard of this, where there are these three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning, and so in experiential education circles they talk about different ways of learning and different ways of creating your classroom or your learning environment so that all of these domains can be activated for a student

01:01:01:14 - 01:01:16:15

**Frances:** Thinking about these kinds of things where students are experiencing what they're learning, as opposed to simply reading it. And of course, reading is an experience we all have, so it's not a simple question and that's why there's a whole field.

01:01:19:19 - 01:01:38:25

**Sarah:** What's the value to you? Because, job skills was something that I decided wasn't part of my active definition for what I wanted to do in my class this year. So what's the value, what's the experiential learning "piece" that you want to engage more as as you go forward?

01:01:39:18 - 01:02:26:27

**Frances:** I guess it is helping students think about all the different ways that they can learn things and know things. So much of undergraduate education at least, and all also graduate education emphasizes cognitive forms of learning, and some classes will do a bit of other kinds of psychomotor or affective learning, or there will be aspects of that in a class, but there's not much talk about that in most classes I think, and so what I've been trying to do in my classes is talk to students about how they're learning, ask them how they feel learning to be occurring, and where they feel knowing to exist in their experience.

01:02:31:06 - 01:03:00:13

**Frances:** I think that's experiential learning in the way of experiencing learning, and highlighting that for students and helping them think about that, because it's something that they will be able to use in their lives as they move forward and use in all their other courses, is to sort of have an awareness of what they're learning and how they're doing that, but then also to think, to appreciate the different ways of learning and knowing that occur in their lives outside the classroom, outside my classroom.

01:03:06:13 - 01:03:49:18

**Sarah:** Thank you for listening to my conversation with Frances. You can find more information about Frances's research and publications on her profile page at the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies where she is the current director, and at the Department for the Study of Religion. We'll post a link in the show notes. Show notes and transcripts are available on our website, at [teachingbuddhism.net](http://teachingbuddhism.net). And if you have enjoyed this, we would love to hear from you. Please let us know via social media or email, and we invite you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple, or Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. A very special thanks to Dr. Betsy Moss for recording, editing, and producing this podcast. This podcast was produced by the Robert H.N.

Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.