

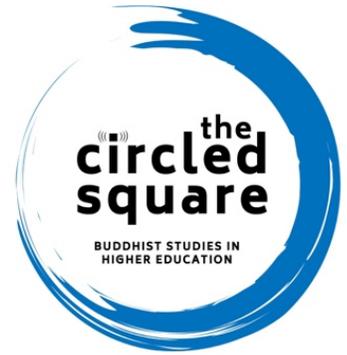
Episode 11: Kerry Brown, Teaching Asian Art as Storytelling

File Length: 00:58:18

Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Kerry Brown



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Kerry Brown: There's all different kinds of Buddhisms, and I think once they get that, they realize that it's easier to understand the different variations. There's not just one Buddhism.

00:00:16:11 - 00:00:24:21

Sarah Richardson: Hello and welcome to The Circled Square, a podcast about teaching Buddhist studies in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson from the University of Toronto.

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Sarah Richardson: In this episode titled "Teaching Asian Art as Storytelling" I interviewed Dr Kerry Brown, a specialist in Nepalese art history. She teaches at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Her approach to teaching Buddhism is through the lens of visual art. Kerry uses active sites where rituals are still being carried out both in her research and in her courses, helping her students gain a stronger understanding of the dynamic qualities of lived Buddhism through Buddhist art and religious rituals. By listening to this episode, you'll hear about how students learn about Buddhist art and religious art more generally while in the context of learning about design.

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Sarah Richardson: These are students who are going on to likely do things like design, video games or advertising, fashion, all sorts of contexts where they will build on what they learn in school to design rich and complex projects. Kerry teaches them art history and Buddhist art to really learn more about their world while also developing tools and skills that will last in whatever they do. We also hear in this episode about many different kinds of activities she uses to engage her students in the classroom and help them grow their study skills, like, for instance, the final week after the exam, she has them do a collaborative review exercise.

00:01:37:21 - 00:01:51:09

Sarah Richardson: Yes, that's right. Another review together after the test to help them really absorb what they learned. So remember, if you hear anything you like here, please subscribe to our show and share it with your friends. Enjoy our conversation with Dr. Kerry Brown.

00:01:53:17 - 00:02:01:19

Sarah Richardson: I wanted to begin by asking you a little bit about your journey, how is it that you came to work on Newar Buddhist art?

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Kerry Brown: It's kind of a long story, but it has it had a lot to do with a study abroad program that I did back almost 20 years ago now in India, which was the Antioch Buddhist studies program. And it was rooted in Buddhist practice, Buddhist meditation, living in a Buddhist monastery in India. And our independent study had us doing a project somewhere. And I ended up going to Nepal and absolutely failing on my project and not understanding Nepal.

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Kerry Brown: No one would talk to me.

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Kerry Brown: It wasn't quite like anything in India, and that was the hook for me to want to do that more when I came back and go to grad school.

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Sarah Richardson: The possibilities of failure?

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Kerry Brown: No, it was it was a hard failure. No one would talk to me, and I didn't understand what I was seeing.

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah. Where and now where do you teach?

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Sarah Richardson: Who are your students and what is their kind of level or background?

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Kerry Brown: So this year I started a new position at Savannah College of Art and Design, we're a professional art and design school, we get students ready for creative careers. Everyone at SCAD has to take Art History survey as an art and design school, which is very different from when I was at different colleges and universities before. Most of our students are interested in some kind of professional aspects of creative careers. So it could be advertising. But in the context of graphic design, or fashion merchandising, lots of animation majors, lots of film majors, storytelling in that way.

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Kerry Brown: So I found that over the course of this last couple of months being there, I'm having to really rethink my classes. It's not just show up and leave. It's sort of "How am I going to use your class, Professor Brown, to better my professional career? How can I use these assets here in my design or in my storytelling?" The topics are different. And so all of that's been a bit of a challenge. But it's very refreshing to have that new perspective after teaching for so long.

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Sarah Richardson: To go back a little bit. How did you begin your study of Buddhism and who were the teachers who made the biggest impact on you?

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Kerry Brown: Certainly when I was at Ohio State doing my undergraduate work, John Huntington was actually the first course I had when I took, I think I was really a naive sophomore and I enrolled in a 400 level like senior level Tibetan art class. And I could get in because I was on the crew team and I could just take whatever classes I wanted as an athlete. And so that was the big hook. And sort of I think he realized my interest and he just fed that. He fed that and fed that. And I had wings and I could fly and I just stayed on that track.

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Kerry Brown: So his perspectives were really important in getting me interested in Buddhist art. Before that, I was a history major. I was interested in religious studies and it was like the mesh of the two that was really fascinating. And I didn't know the material, it wasn't obvious. So it was that challenge of trying to figure that out. I'd always been interested in Buddhism, even in high school. I was interested, but I didn't realize I could focus on that as a degree. So I ended up doing non-Western art at Ohio State for my bachelor's, so I could take advantage of all those courses and do a lot of religious studies.

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Sarah Richardson: So this must really help you to understand your students, right. This kind of beginners perspective that you also remember occupying.

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Kerry Brown: Yes. And I tell them, you know, for me, art history came easy, but that's just me. And I fully appreciate their struggles and I anticipate them failing, and they should be OK with failing. And usually I find students get, once I say that they are allowed to fail and they should fail, it's the easiest way to learn. Then they take a deep breath and are a little easier on themselves.

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Sarah Richardson: With your students, what assumptions do you find that they bring to the study of Buddhism? And do they see Buddhism as a positive, happy, peaceful religion, or how does that feed their interest in your subject?

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Kerry Brown: I think mostly if they do have some knowledge of Buddhism, they have a very rosy perspective, but not usually as a religion. They really appreciate it more in this Protestant, anti-ritual, pure, it's more sort of this meditation philosophy removed of ritual that they think as this sort of more pure form of religious activity juxtaposed with whatever they traditionally grew up in. This is the outlet.

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Kerry Brown: This is the other thing that they can do. And I found when I was worked for the Antioch Buddhist Studies Program and we had students and the program is set up that you're practicing meditation, you're taking classes on philosophy, anthropology or history. You're getting that academic perspective. You're learning the language, and you're living in India at the same time. Usually about two to three weeks in, and they're doing actual practical applications of whatever the meditation teachers are asking them to do is really challenging their presuppositions of Buddhism. And it's a little hard to take. But other students who come in, a little broad-minded, or maybe don't know anything about Buddhism, but just chose to do a study abroad program or just chose to take my class on a whim, it's sort of this open opportunity to sort of present them with this Buddhism that's not monolithic, right?

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Kerry Brown: There's all different kinds of Buddhism's. And I think once they get that, they realize that it's easier to understand the different variations. There's not just one Buddhism. And I think usually that's the challenge. Buddhism is this or Buddhism is the Dalai Lama or Buddhism is meditating or Buddhism is yoga. However, they sort of conflate that and just breaking apart that, you know, it's not this monolithic tradition.

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Sarah Richardson: What kind of tools have you found useful to try to do that? That's a really hard, that's a really hard task, is breaking people out of it an easy assumption of a monolithic entity such as Buddhism?

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Kerry Brown: We actually start with Hinduism. And I like to talk about this idea of the universal divine and how it has no form and sort of how Hinduism deals with it. And then juxtapose that with Buddhism and realizing that Buddhism develops as a reaction to these other traditions. But also show them a lot of art, but art in ritual contexts, so rather than doing in my art history classes, only showing them a canon of works and focusing on images from the past: caves, cave temples; I try as hard as possible to get images of those places today under active worship or active veneration, even the sites that weren't so active.

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Kerry Brown: But now, because of the resurgence of Buddhism in India are. Showing people doing devotional activities at those sites either, you know, shakes them a little loose of that, but also has them thinking about these sites not as far away, but actual, tangible, important places that people worship at and sit, meditate, make offerings to. The second thing is that I spend a lot of time on is recognizing that images have a different role and different function in visual arts in South Asia, images as vessels for a divine presence or persona.

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Kerry Brown: Once they wrap their head around that, then they see the images differently.

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Sarah Richardson: That's a really important lesson then for them to try to receive, but one that also can complicate than the use of like, do you do you ever bring little statues or anything into the classroom?

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Kerry Brown: Sometimes. We have a huge international student population at SCAD, and I had a student last week from India. She brought her images that she brought from India to be with her at SCAD, Lakshmi and Ganesh and Sarasvati. And they're these little, tiny, beautiful silver images. She brought them in a class and she shared them with the class. And I was like, finally, I have these moments with students who do have an understanding of the tradition and can bring that into the classroom as well, since we do have such a diverse student population.

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Sarah Richardson: And did you find that her peers were receptive? Like, how did it go having somebody bring in their statues that were also their personal devotional images and then look at them both as art and not art at the same time?

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Kerry Brown: You know, I think I just modeled my behavior. I asked her if she minded putting them up on my desk, if she minded, if anybody touched them, you know, if there's anything she wanted to say about them and just made it OK for people to be curious and also to make mistakes. And maybe they don't know how to interact with an image or they're not sure if they can touch. So I make sure that they know that they can they can touch them. They can pick them up, should they want to, that they're not you know, not everything is so sacred that you can't interact with them.

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Sarah Richardson: You talked a little bit about your beginnings in teaching in the Antioch program, which is a really famous, of course, international program that trains people in Buddhist studies and does so in a really fascinating way. But how have you seen your teaching changing as you've arrived now into this different milieu this year in an art and design college?

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Kerry Brown: I think the way I was trained was there's this canon. You learn a canon and you learn the style and you learn the context. And it's just this like rote memorization of image, meaning, context. And then maybe, you know, you'd expand that with a paper and that's it. I'm finding that a lot of students would rather dive deep into one image or one site and, you know, step away from the lecture format to sort of more hands on assignments. I try to do that in class. But since I was came up as a student and as a fledgling scholar in that same sort of lecture, just digest and sort of absorb format.

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Kerry Brown: It doesn't work for all students. And that's been my challenge for me is to rethink that structure at SCAD, which is really amazing. We have a 10 week quarter. Every class meets twice a week for two and a half hour blocks. So we we have 20 classes every quarter and I can't lecture for two and a half hours. My students can't listen to lecture for two and a half hours. So it's been really challenging to figure out how to break that time up while still giving them this broad canon of knowledge so that they can go on to the next course.

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Kerry Brown: They can add that material to whatever they're doing. But really just I love lecturing. So it's really hard to just not lecture and answer questions all the time, like, OK, I'm going to answer every single question like, no, I need to flip that back to them. And rather than tell them what style and iconography are,, right, have them break up into groups and have that conversation. And then let's talk about that as a class. That's been the hardest thing for me, is to stop myself from just wanting to provide every answer and make it so easy and to really make them do the work.

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Kerry Brown: And I think in the end, it's going to be nice for me that is giving me little insights into how they're learning and to see where those mistakes are and maybe see where I need to better explain something or provide a different kind of opportunity for them. But it's been, that's been the big challenges is breaking apart that two and a half hour chunk. But the upside is I have two and a half hours and I have project time. And we can have in class projects and in class assignments and then we can dive deep. When I met my classes at another institution, we met three times a week for about 50 minutes, you know.

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Kerry Brown: Right as soon as you're getting into the material, you know, we have to break in. I have to meet them on Wednesday. You know, as soon as you're getting into something interesting, class is over. So, you know, there's always going to be an upside and a downside. But I feel like if I stay focused on that, like, what can I do for that two and a half hours, then, you know, I can keep thinking of things that will be more engaging.

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Sarah Richardson: Give us an example. You've done some interesting things around teaching sacred space. What's an interesting tool that you found to do that with your students?

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Kerry Brown: Well, one challenge of Savannah and one benefit of Savannah. We're a tourist town, but Savannah doesn't have a lot of Asian specific visual culture, nothing nearby, no temple community. So nearby that students could walk there who does temple or a Hindu temple. But what we do have is a cathedral and a very big, beautiful, neo gothic cathedral that's open all the time because it's a pilgrimage spot and it's a pilgrimage site for Catholics doing the cathedral tour in America on the East Coast.

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Kerry Brown: I decided, OK, let's take my Asian art class here and discuss sacred space. And so can we apply what I've taught them about Hindu spaces and Buddhist spaces here? And can we see the same kind of dynamic? What do we see? How do you enter the space? What's happening at the space really treat it as more of an ethnographic study, how you would observe doing fieldwork in India or in Nepal for me, what do I see happening? You know, what are people doing? And my goal then is to at least see that, you know, the topic doesn't have to be Asian to take anything out of my class.

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Kerry Brown: Right. We can apply this basic strategy and approach to spaces in any single context you want it. I don't need a Buddhist temple to talk about Buddhist temples. And so that's, again, another challenge that you can flip and say "OK, you know, like how are we going to use this so that we can take a field trip and get out of the classroom for, you know, at least a Friday and talk about what people are doing at these sacred spots."

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Sarah Richardson: So you treated them like a little band of anthropologists? Kicked them out and made them into anthropologists right there.

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Kerry Brown: I think what made art history in South Asia really interesting for me was I wasn't in an archive and I could go to spaces and I just remember, you know, what was so magical and maybe romantic and naive of being, you know, a twenty, twenty one year old in India traveling to Nepal and just sitting in spaces and watching what happens and really be fascinated by that. There is a point where I wasn't sure if I would be getting a PhD in religious studies and doing material culture or being an art historian that does religious art, because there's two different approaches and there's two different uses of the object.

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Kerry Brown: And so for me, it was just being in those spaces and focusing on the object, focusing on the site. And I was really grounded in that materiality and watching and observing. And so for me, it makes all of those spaces very familiar. And I want students to realize that they can go into this space and they can observe and they can ask questions. And they shouldn't feel intimidated by that. They shouldn't feel intimidated by places that they feel like they don't belong or they don't know about it, so they shouldn't go. And just encouraging them to ask questions and be in unfamiliar places and just be that ethnographic anthropologist in there, watching what's going on.

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Sarah Richardson: So how did you prime them, like all kinds of questions to go into the cathedral, where you asking them to ask of the space? What kinds of things were they looking for?

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Kerry Brown: Well, initially, we had a brief conversation in front of the cathedral just to talk about architecture, to make sure we're doing our art historical bit, but then I asked them to remain silent. I didn't call it a silent meditation, but be present as they entered the space, recognize the types of things they were seeing as they were entering, and then enter the cathedral and walk to the front and then sit in a pew for just about five or ten minutes without interacting with their peers, without checking their phone.

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Kerry Brown: And just to sort of recognize that space and maybe does it change them? Does it not? Do they have an emotional response? Do they not? Sort of. What are their reactions? And many of them hadn't even been in the cathedral before or they had been in a different context and they hadn't been with a class or they had just seen it, but they hadn't gone in. So I just wanted to have that initial response and to sort of use that as a jumping off point for sort of why we may have those responses. What are the types of things you see first? Right.

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Kerry Brown: What could those things that we see? What's the key narrative that this space is trying to tell us and really look at spaces in that sort of larger context, as, you know, pull out the big terms like iconographic program. So it doesn't feel so intimidating and then let them figure out what the iconographic program is and be comfortable seeing like an iconographic program. And what was great is many of them recognize the fact that their iconographic program that they're talking about is the same kind of thing that stores do with merchandising.

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Kerry Brown: And so, again, we're using something that's more academic and then applying it to something more creative professionals, right. Doing fashion merchandising or talking about like marketing and design of a storefront. It's essentially an iconographic program. You want to sell something. But we can also think about, you know, the history of material culture in the same way, selling different things, different goals, different agendas. But they're still maybe selling something.

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Sarah Richardson: So the old stuff's not so different than the new stuff too.

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Kerry Brown: And I love that conversation. Right. Like trying to justify why do I need to learn this old stuff? The old stuff's the same as the new stuff. We just, you know, put it in a different package and we call it a different name, but we're doing the same things. And that's what I really love teaching about the ancient arts, is how it has such an impact on contemporary culture. But if you're in the contemporary culture, you don't always see that. You think everything's so new and shiny and bright. We've done it before. We've always done it before.

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Sarah Richardson: How does this kind of approach to space then come out of your own kind of scholarship and research?

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Kerry Brown: Well, my research in Nepal with the Newar Buddhist community has really been to explore how Newars who have been engaged in art and cultural production in the Kathmandu Valley for nearly 2000 years, how they continually define and redefine their own identity, their religious identity through art and architecture. For my own interests, I've been interested in ritual processions, festival traditions, the performance of the sacred. For me, image processions and sort of image of veneration has been that link between studying the textual context of art and the sort of religious doctrine and then studying the aesthetic qualities of a sculpture or painting.

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Kerry Brown: It's been that for me, a missing link, right? How this object is being used, what can we further understand not just by a formal visual analysis and not just a textual analysis, but a performative analysis. And for me, that's been that so fascinating because the Kathmandu Valley, it's more like a living archaeology of there's these different layers of meaning that change over time. But it doesn't mean it erases the past. It just means that now we have this other layer, and so constantly understanding that this is a built process.

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Kerry Brown: I like to teach my students that as well, that, you know, whether I'm teaching a Western art survey of caves to cathedrals. That's the other course that I teach and I love teaching it sometimes I love teaching it more than my Asian art class because I'm kind of removed from it and I can look at it more objectively. I'm not wanting to give them every single image when I'm really attached to something. You know, I have this attachment to the visuals and Indian. I'm like, but you have to see this, you have to see that. For the survey class, we can really talk about the layering of meanings and messages and how there's just constant repackaging and reinterpretation of using the past in a new way.

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Kerry Brown: And I think they get it. You know, after the course of 10 weeks, they come in and I tell them they're art historians. They look at me like I'm crazy, and I'm like you're already doing it, you put some clothes on this morning, you made some choices. Those choices have meanings. You're doing it already. So now we're going to do it in a more formal way. I think the idea of layering really is helpful. But also, you know that the way objects have meaning, that's a process and it's been a process. And so the way you're going to learn about this is a process, and you're always going to have to return to the same things to have a deeper, richer meaning to that.

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Kerry Brown: And I learned that from Dina Bangdel. And Dina was one of the ones that this is always a process, even when you're done, you're not done and you're constantly going to be

refining what you know so that, you know, you're not too concerned to put words to paper or write an answer to an exam because, again, how you understand it now is going to change from later.

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Kerry Brown: And let's keep working on that process.

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Sarah Richardson: When your students are going on to often be kinds of designers and things. Right. Many of them are hoping to go into future careers and maybe game design or theme park designer computer virtual reality things. What has been their reaction to some of this really new material in your course? How do you teach iconography and such and its value?

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Kerry Brown: You know, it's easier than you think. You know, I say if somebody gives you a task and says, here's your brief, I want this ancient castle and I want these warriors and they need to look like this or they need to look like that, as producers of creative material, you should have a rich visual vocabulary of all these different kinds of options that you can present clients with. And if my course is strong, whether that be the Asian art course or hopefully into thinking about designing future courses, what kind of visual vocabulary am I going to help them build? I'm left off the hook when I know that pretty much none of them might be art history majors.

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Kerry Brown: Maybe I'll get a minor. Maybe I'll get somebody becoming an art history major. But the vast majority of students are going to use my class for content, for visual content. So how can I help them build their visual content? I find that when I present it in that way. Right. You don't want to give them fluffy, airy things when they somebody wants a harsh, dark game with lots of weapons, you have to put it in the right setting and especially the theme park design students. When I show them temple complexes with this rich iconography and I say it's a mirror of Bodhgaya, everything is sort of supposed to be sort of rooted at the center.

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Kerry Brown: This is your surrogate. Well Epcot Center and Disney make a very good surrogate of all of these other places like Morocco and Asia, wherever they choose. And so it's about these constructed realities. And in a lot of ways, Buddhist art is a very nice parallel for constructed realities. If you think of temples and pure lands and temple shrine rooms being this Buddha field, and then you need to put things in the right setting when you're creating this Buddha field. If you think about, you know, the temples in Tibet, all of these constructed realities to help express X, Y or Z, that's what they're tasked with doing.

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Kerry Brown: So I think actually it's been easier to not necessarily sell them on that, but have them really absorb the material once I can use it or express it in some tangible terms for them.

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Sarah Richardson: But we're also living in this interesting time where there's of course, also ongoing discussions about appropriate image use. Right. About like appropriation and then misappropriation of images. Right. Especially sacred and religious images. So how is that kind of impinged on your teaching of this material?

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Kerry Brown: I think the class that I'm teaching on Indian art now, Indian art and architecture, hits on all of those notes because we've been talking about the power of imagery and how even a poster print can be the sacred right, because we're dealing with this idea that the sacred is embodied in a vessel and divine seeing and divine experience. I think a lot of my classes come down to me using my background as a museum educator and someone who's traveled abroad and done research abroad as sort of translating this in language that sort of they can understand and they can digest.

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Kerry Brown: But I also make light of it and I can point out controversies like from Urban Outfitters and different major retailers that put an image of a deity or a Buddha on some apparel or on underwear or on shoes.

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Kerry Brown: And then there's a backlash. Somebody in that line from conception to producing this object should have stopped that. And I was like, so my goal in this class is, if that's your job, you're going to stop that. That's not going to be on your watch. And then you can shoot me an email in ten years and say, Professor Brown, we didn't put Kali's image on some shoes this year.

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Kerry Brown: You know, that would be my hope. Or the Buddha didn't end up on the bottom soles of some flip flops. That's a good, good outcome.

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Sarah Richardson: Still happening, though, sometimes.

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Kerry Brown: Still happening. I mean, and so at least I think I always have to stay present. And for me, staying present for my class means really paying attention to pop culture to my detriment, probably watching too many things and being on Facebook too much, but at least getting a sense of what's happening in contemporary controversies with visual arts so that I can weave that into the material as much as possible as an evidentiary thing that happened. Don't do this. I might be overselling this to you guys, but I really want you to know that this is a problem and people take this very seriously or even talking about film traditions in India and theaters burning because the film was too controversial, students are usually aghast at that, but then you have students in India like shaking their head. Yup, yup, I remember when that happened. And so I think it's a nice way to show that images have power, not just as powerful

things, but images have presence and aliveness that we don't usually consider in Western traditions anymore.

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Sarah Richardson: Tell us a little bit about how you teach with and through storytelling. We understood that you often use the story of the Buddha in some way in your classes as a kind of model to build on. So tell us a bit about this.

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Kerry Brown: I often struggle with how to teach about Buddhism and Buddhist art because I go down this rabbit hole of just telling more stories and showing visual imagery. And so I have to stop myself and remember that I'm teaching a visual culture of some kind in art history class. And so when I start to think about trying to tell the students, I don't think I've taught it the same way every semester or quarter, it changes each time because I haven't quite perfected it, or maybe I want it to be too perfect. But I usually start with the life of the Buddha as a paradigm and work back from that to think about what are the types of stories told about this persona.

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Kerry Brown: In certain classes that Buddhist art section might only be a class, it could be two classes, it could be six classes. It really depends on the nature of that course. So I'm kind of limited. But if I have that key story and I know that there's a foundation that I want to tell in terms of, you know, the development of the Buddha image and then how Buddhism spreads across Asia, I can use this sort of narrative of who is the Buddha? And realize that through Buddhist art, we can see that articulated very differently culture by culture and style by style. How has this persona changed dynasty to dynasty, region to region? Is it the same persona? How can we see through the visuals the story changing.

00:28:57:10 - 00:29:28:11

Kerry Brown: And so really using that as like this deep visual narrative for their own progress to like they're starting from one place and understanding this in a very basic way. And then we're layering in that complexity through layering in iconography or layering in bodhisattvas and then lots of bodhisattvas. And then there's not just a Buddha, but there's lots of Buddhas that took about, I had class yesterday and it took about an hour to sort of solidify the difference between the historical Buddha and lots of Buddhas, which is really interesting.

00:29:28:13 - 00:29:48:26

Kerry Brown: But when they're struggling with it, I'm glad they're not just accepting it. They're asking questions or challenging it. They're really wanting to understand it. I don't mind spending the extra time to do that. They're asking questions, they're interested. I might not be doing a great job explaining or I might need a few new examples, or I might need to think about bringing more material in. But as long as they're asking questions we're on the right track.

00:29:49:19 - 00:30:02:02

Sarah Richardson: And to do that shift then from just the Buddha to a bunch of Buddhas to a bunch of bodhisattvas, are you presenting them with like here's Gandharan Art in India and now here's China ten centuries later.

00:30:02:11 - 00:30:40:29

Kerry Brown: Well, you should do Gandhara. Well, I'll start with the stupa always. We start with the stupa or start with the tree, then the stupa. But then I'll jump to sort of a Pala crowned figure. There are some figures you can use from Ajanta that have crowns like hovering above a head, but you usually can get some crowned images from Pala period or Kashmir that are different. But often the challenge is really just distinguishing key iconography and realizing that an elephant isn't always an elephant, and an elephant isn't always Ganesh, and an elephant can be good and an elephant can be bad.

00:30:41:01 - 00:31:29:06

Kerry Brown: And it's realizing that you need to read it in that larger context. That's usually the bigger challenge. So the stories help ground their understanding. And one of the things I'm contemplating is bringing in children's books because children's books, as I have a child, are a way of really disseminating key information without too much distraction, that is very pointed and very clear. If it's a good story, you can read it very quickly. We could probably do some class exercises, so I'm currently trying to sort of compile a list of good books that are really direct on certain elements of Buddhism and also Hindu things to juxtapose what the Buddha was trying to do versus what new practice is trying to do. And sort of also compare and contrast.

00:31:29:21 - 00:31:31:20

Sarah Richardson: And so these are contemporary comic books?

00:31:33:07 - 00:32:12:00

Kerry Brown: Contemporary kids' book. I started looking for some. I use in my Hindu art and iconography courses in the past I used the little book of Hindu Deities, which is a little picture book of all the Hindu gods. They look like Powerpuff Girls and they're beautiful and they're very short snippets. And I have yet to find some Buddhists parallel, but I hadn't been looking earnestly. And after teaching this quarter, I really think that I could develop a day at least where I could break students into groups, give them each a children's book and have them try to understand the material in a way that was clear and then present that to the class.

00:32:12:02 - 00:32:43:07

Kerry Brown: Think about like what iconography we get just in this children's book. What kind of visuals do we get, what kind of stories that we get? So then again, that's another example of giving them the material as a tangible in class and then coming up with an understanding from that. And then also this idea of group work and sharing as much as students really don't like it really at SCAD they love it because most of the projects they are going to have to do are collaborative anyway, working together in groups. It breaks up that two and a half hours.

00:32:43:09 - 00:33:13:01

Kerry Brown: But it would be another way to sort of think about the material in a different context. How do we get the key story again, again, with that storytelling? Because all children's books are about good storytelling. And I think in reading books to my son, I get a lot of inspiration from just really simplifying and not overcomplicating that message and that narrative. And that's what I want to do in class. And I think when I'm too close to the material, it's really difficult to not want to say everything and explain everything.

00:33:13:17 - 00:33:28:19

Sarah Richardson: How do you feel about this idea of flipping the classroom in terms of I mean, you've talked about wanting them to do the work, but how do you feel about the other moves that we're seeing in some other types of places? We're being encouraged to record lectures and then show up. What do you think of that?

00:33:29:05 - 00:34:02:12

Kerry Brown: I've really resisted the flipped classroom. As I mentioned earlier, I'm really a hard core lecturer. The flipped classroom just seems: no, I want to be with my students in those moments because I think if you're a good lecturer, you feed off that student energy and you are there to see their faces and their responses to things you're trying to say. And in a flipped classroom, you don't quite have that. When thinking about a flipped classroom, I think giving students assignments or a short video or short reading to prepare, not a long reading or not watching a full lecture and then coming to class.

00:34:02:25 - 00:34:42:21

Kerry Brown: I've tried to record lectures when I taught online, and I know probably, you know, less than half of the students actually sat and watched the whole lecture without distraction. I doubt 10 percent did. So I think there's a danger to a flipped classroom. Yes, they have to prepare. But how are they preparing? What are they preparing? And I think that situation, it's better to do a combination, right. Some days I tell my students we need to get cut off. We're going to have a big lecture. But next week, I want you to watch this short video first and come prepared to talk about it and then in class, generate discussion and have an assignment that's guided would be helpful.

00:34:42:23 - 00:35:17:21

Kerry Brown: But I also find that even guiding readings, doing an in-depth reading of a text in class on the spot where they don't know they have to do it. And I give them a 20 page article and we walk through it together, or I break them up into groups and say each group is going to target a certain part of this article and then we're going to work through the whole thing together. I think it's about flipping it the other way. You make these expectations, like read these things and come to class. And I think often for me, flipping it means prepare these short things and I'm going to show you in my class how to read this article.

00:35:17:23 - 00:35:47:29

Kerry Brown: I'm going to diagram it and I'm going to model how to do this so that you can leave my class with another tool set in another skill set. I think a lot of issues in the classrooms

come from the assumption that students know how to take notes, students know how to read for context. Students know how to read for content. And and if you just say read an article, they don't know necessarily what they should be looking for. And I think the assumption is that they should know. And I just I can't assume that anymore. I can't assume they know how to take notes on an article.

00:35:48:01 - 00:36:16:28

Kerry Brown: Do you know how to skim an article and they're like what do you mean? I said, well, we're going to work on picking out out of this nice 8,000 word journal article, where's the thesis? What are the main topics? What's the big takeaway? Who's the author? Where do they work? Those key ideas of simple research? They're not thinking about that. They're not thinking about questioning who the author is. So those are things that I think are important to flip in the classroom. So taking expectations that you think they're going to do outside, bringing that in.

00:36:17:25 - 00:36:54:25

Sarah Richardson: The one you you brought up about taking notes is really interesting to me because, I mean, in some of the giant courses where we will still have to lecture and also with a lot of the kind of material you're talking about teaching, there's some lecturing is going to be necessary because they won't have the basic language to cover the material. But I have found in my classes now that I often look out at a sea of faces, they're looking at me quite pleasantly, but they're not writing anything down. So what have you found to support them, to learn how to appropriately take notes in a university class? Because I totally am finding that I'm having the same resistance from students.

00:36:54:27 - 00:37:52:00

Kerry Brown: From day one I model it. So the first day of class, we go over the syllabus. I start with notetaking on day one. I kind of impress upon them that it's really vital that they take notes in class. And I even had a student raise his hand this quarter and say, well, I've never taken notes in a class before. Am I going to fail your class? I was like, no, but I'm going to teach you how to take notes and we're going to work on that over the course of the quarter. And so a lot of the assignments then that I have in my survey classes are geared towards utilizing their notes in a certain way for a kind of assignment, kind of forcing their hand, creating an outline of the course material, but forcing them to only use their notes and the textbook. So I'm trying to make sure that they're reading and they're taking notes by rewriting their notes, rewriting notes is a basic note-taking and studying tool that I would do in most of my classes, unprompted. But I had a deeper background in notetaking, I guess. So a lot of them.

00:37:52:02 - 00:37:53:10

Sarah Richardson: And we were a different generation.

00:37:53:12 - 00:38:17:16

Kerry Brown: We were a different generation. I didn't have a tablet. I think I had my first email address as a freshman in college and I don't ever remember having a laptop to type up anything. So I always had to take notes. So the assumption was they know how to take notes. I

think that's a false assumption. Most students don't know how to take notes. They don't know what they should be taking notes on. So the outline assignment I have them do is broken up into three sections for each topic and it's the same three sections.

00:38:17:24 - 00:38:49:24

Kerry Brown: So you should be taking notes related to historical and cultural context of this work of art. You should be taking notes on the stylistic features of this work of art. You should be taking notes on the iconography related to this work of art. And if you don't have those three things covered in your notes, you're missing stuff. So for me, flipping the classroom means reverse engineering the class to create a structure. And that's something that I think flipping the classroom to just have them listen to lectures outside so you can have discussion. They're not listening to the lectures if you think they are. I got a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you.

00:38:49:28 - 00:39:12:03

Kerry Brown: I think students don't have a lot of time. I think most of them now you have to assume they're working 30 or 40 hours a week in addition to being a full time student. So the more you can bring it into the classroom to help them understand how to be a better student as you're teaching them your core content, the more successful they'll be on exams, the more successful they'll be in remembering your class.

00:39:13:07 - 00:39:31:19

Sarah Richardson: What kinds of other assignments do you like to use in your classroom and why, like how do you teach your students more about writing? Do you ever use anything like creative writing? What do you find is important that they know about, like scholarly or academic writing? And how do you support that with assignments?

00:39:32:12 - 00:40:12:03

Kerry Brown: So when I was teaching a seminar class, I walked in and I treated it like any seminar that I sat in 10 years ago, it didn't work. My students didn't know how to read the articles. They didn't know how to put together an abstract. They didn't know the basic structure of an introduction. So I realized that for my upper division courses that are really focusing on some kind of scholarly output with like a research paper, I've decided that my courses need to be modeled on applying to a conference and submitting a conference abstract for consideration and then working through those steps of how do we put together a research paper, but also how to create a presentation.

00:40:12:15 - 00:41:02:18

Kerry Brown: So rather than the class being on some topic, it could be any topic. The first day of class, I'm going to present them with a call for papers. And so it'll obviously be similar to whatever that course topic is. So they won't hate me, but really present them with a practical application of, OK, yes, you could do a research paper, but so what? You know, I want them to know that you have to look for conferences in art history, you will be applying for conferences. This is not a poster field. This is a conference presentation field. And we read papers in art history. It shouldn't sound like we're reading papers and we should read papers gracefully and

very dynamically, but we still read papers and we prepare papers. And so in modeling that, I found that it's a little easier for them to accept why they're doing the assignment, not just as busy work.

00:41:02:29 - 00:41:35:25

Kerry Brown: And I usually try to shift things around so that in all of my classes, all of the assignments are avoiding that busy work. Now for scholarly writing, that's a struggle. I don't do that in the survey classes at all, really. It's usually down to fundamentals of basic core sentence structures, taking notes, reading for content and then learning how to articulate yourself. So short writing assignments in class, but really avoiding research papers and research context because I teach basically art history one so the first class they'll ever take.

00:41:36:02 - 00:42:06:16

Kerry Brown: For me, it's building that core vocabulary and that visual vocabulary that's more significant. And once they know that and they understand the difference between style and iconography and culture, then they can work on that next level. I see it as like the foundational steps, the building blocks, and then they can worry about that later. For the graduate seminars or for senior seminars, that's where we spend time on working on assignments, drafting assignments and then drafting writing, but really realizing that they're not writing one draft over the course of a term.

00:42:06:18 - 00:42:24:01

Kerry Brown: They're going to write several and they need to be OK with that. And if they're not, they're not going to do well in the class. And usually there's a push back. And I teach now on a 10 week quarter. It's easy to fall behind. And if you're not on it, then it's very difficult to make sure that assignment is done on time.

00:42:24:19 - 00:42:33:26

Sarah Richardson: Tell me again a little bit about your Indian art class and how you review for that. You you had this interesting kind of course-culminating group review.

00:42:34:03 - 00:43:14:01

Kerry Brown: The course is divided into 10 weeks. And of those 10 weeks, there's two units and I'm saving the last week. So really, it's nine weeks of material. And then the last week I decided, well, I don't really know what they learn, after the test, they just leave. So we're having the test be on the last day of the week before finals. And then that last week of the quarter, they're going to actually get together and sit in groups that I mean, it's not self selected. They're just going to get people that they get. And then have them come up with an exhibition proposal about Indian art that they choose that's going to rewrite the canon in some way.

00:43:14:21 - 00:44:24:12

Kerry Brown: So it has to be engaging and can't just be Gupta Art or Pala Art. It has to be something a little more dynamic. But I find that when you usually give students really creative projects, especially with creative people, there's a lot of anxiety around that. And so I'm

removing the anxiety and I'm changing the anxiety. So they're not getting the assignment until they show up to class that day, because we have the two and a half hour block, they're going to have two and a half hours to complete the assignment and turn the assignment in with their groups. So obviously, there will be typos, there will be a poor sentence constructions, but hopefully when thinking about an exhibition and rewriting the visual canon, we can convince them to come up with a really snazzy title and pick some works of art that are focused on maybe some things they've studied or some not, but let them hash it out together. And then the last class, they'll present that proposal to the class. And so hopefully we'll have like four or five strong, really unique exhibition proposals. We'll see what happens. But that way, the final assignment isn't just a test. Then the final assignment is really like what did you learn in this class?

00:44:24:20 - 00:44:32:04

Sarah Richardson: Much more supportive, too. They've already done a test, but we still I still care. And you're still working together to synthesize this into something.

00:44:32:20 - 00:44:57:19

Kerry Brown: In that last week everyone's so stressed out. And I don't want them thinking about this in advance. I don't want them overthinking it. And I find art students because they're so passionate about what they do, they can really become obsessive about projects in a great way, but also in a negative way. And I, I just want to take that away from them so that I can say, look, this is not going to be perfect. This is not going to be great. But what can you make this is your challenge for today is to see like, can you do this?

00:44:57:21 - 00:45:05:22

Kerry Brown: And I know you can. And then when we reconvene for our second class this week, you guys are going to show us what you came up with and share that.

00:45:06:09 - 00:45:35:24

Sarah Richardson: I like that a lot. And it makes me want to ask you, too, about other ways that you find to support our students. I find we're having a real discussion here at the University of Toronto right now about student mental health, because we've seen such a huge rise in anxiety and depression and even student suicides in these recent years, which is really upsetting and alarming these beautiful young, bright people that we're seeing. What do you find as an educator in your class? Can you do. I mean, that that assignment is one example, right?

00:45:35:26 - 00:46:10:24

Kerry Brown: That's one example that grew out of something I was doing in a survey class where I was doing these long reviews the day before the end of the class, before the exam would be a review day, and I would do it and they would sit there. And it was just there's no engagement, they just wanted to know everything they needed to know for the exam and they were just there sort of blankly worried about the material. And so what I you know, one day I was just really tired and I didn't want to do another two and a half hours of reviewing the

material and just answering questions and being the person to answer the questions. And I said, you know, they're going to do it.

00:46:11:26 - 00:46:46:06

Kerry Brown: So I made them do it and I broke them up into groups and I created an assignment to put together an outline on the course material that was due that day. And so I grade that. But they still have to come with a copy and I break them up into groups and I say, you guys get these things and you guys get those. And I bought, I don't know this like thirty five foot roll of packing paper, you know, for postage paper. And I said, OK, we're going to make one big timeline and you guys are going to draw everything and then we're going to put it up on the board when we're done. And you guys need to teach me and review to the class these things.

00:46:46:23 - 00:47:17:23

Kerry Brown: And I was a little concerned that they wouldn't get into it. But thank God for art school and art students. They wanted to draw. They wanted to diagram, it put the material on them. But in that classroom, it meant that whole day before the exam, they're actually kind of testing out what they know a little bit. My goal was also to alleviate that anxiety so they know that they can go into the exam a little more confident. It's not the first time they're trying to, like, navigate the material, the other class was. So maybe they're still not confident, but they're a little more confident than they were.

00:47:18:01 - 00:47:29:16

Kerry Brown: And at least maybe they remember that thing that they had to tell the class about. There's that you know, there's one object or two objects that might have at least been a focus, that hopefully will show up on the exam for them.

00:47:29:27 - 00:47:47:19

Sarah Richardson: Do you feel that any of this comes out of your experience as an athlete and a coach? Do you? Because it sounds to me like you build your students up in very much like. Oh, yeah, similar to coaching kind of athletic way. Right. Where you're modeling. Practicing. Doing. Reinforcing.

00:47:48:21 - 00:48:49:24

Kerry Brown: I mean, I was a student athlete, and when I was at Ohio State, I was on the rowing team, I didn't finish out my academic career on the rowing team. I stopped early and I went abroad. I went to India. I focused on my studies. But then when I came back and I continue with grad school, my second year with my master's program, I actually started coaching for the club team at Ohio State and that was probably the happiest year I had. It was the busiest and the happiest. And I was teaching freshmen to row. It was like that first foundational stuff, realizing that everything is a process. It comes back to that. And so for me, coaching and teaching are the same because it's both some kind of mentorship. I cannot assume, you can't run a marathon tomorrow. Yeah. I mean, you could you probably would pass out and die. But this idea that I shouldn't expect my students to know everything when they come to the

classroom, I think a lot of educators fall into that trap of just expecting they're going to get all these students that are ready to go and they can't afford the book or there's limitations.

00:48:49:26 - 00:49:22:23

Kerry Brown: And so as a coach, for me, being a coach was about those foundations. And I think, you know, my insistence on writing outlines or rewriting notes, making a flashcard is an assignment, you know, these things that you should do. I'm realizing I have to make an assignment if I want them to actually do it and understand that it's important for their learning process. And so everything I kind of reverse engineer my exams to make sure that my exams are an outgrowth of my assignments and my assignments are preparing my students for the exams. And it's not just busywork, it's not perceived as busy work.

00:49:23:09 - 00:50:04:15

Kerry Brown: And I think the work that I ask my students to do is well received because I make sure they know it's not just a busy assignment to just go to a gallery and write a review. And that's a perfectly great assignment. But if they're struggling with the material and they can't discern some terms from other terms, that sort of like seems impossible to do that when they're not even ready for the basics. So that's why coaching has been super helpful, because I've also had coaches in my life that have just been really, really harsh and not compassionate. And some that are overly compassionate and too easy on me. And I think it's finding that middle ground of being balanced and knowing that each student is going to be as different as an athlete. And so I need to adjust accordingly.

00:50:05:04 - 00:50:21:11

Sarah Richardson: How do you develop your skills as an educator? Do you attend workshops or do you read books about it, or do you listen to podcasts like this one? Do you have any specific recommendations that you'd like to share on ways that you find to support your own development?

00:50:21:21 - 00:51:09:21

Kerry Brown: You know, I started reading the Art History Teaching Resources blog and posts a lot, especially when I realized I was struggling with my own teaching. I was an adjunct for a really long time, I was doing the adjunct hustle. There was no time for developing my pedagogy. There was no time for that at all. This has been the first year I have actually thought about it and had time to think about it. And before it was just like, get to those classes, get things done, get in my car, go to the next class, scrape together some money teaching anywhere from like four to seven classes a semester, as much as you might want to, you can't think about being a better teacher when you're collateral. My primary task at SCAD is to be a great educator and make that two and a half hours I have with those students amazing.

00:51:10:25 - 00:51:41:13

Kerry Brown: And that's scary and awesome all at the same time, and so I do find myself seeking out podcasts now that I have some time, but the idea that I could spend some time thinking about teaching and really that's my primary task, is one of the the main reasons why I

was excited about the position at SCAD and wanted wanted the position at SCAD. It wasn't like this was the place that I felt that my strength as a former coach and a teacher and sort of that teacher mentorship role really suited.

00:51:41:29 - 00:51:52:13

Kerry Brown: And so to develop that and to have the time to make those changes and be creative myself, not just that we're creating creative people, but I can be creative was really, really special.

00:51:52:22 - 00:52:21:09

Sarah Richardson: I'm glad that you've got the support you deserve now to do that. Right. I mean, there's a good chance that many people listening to this are still caught in those cycles that are now a reality for so many of us, like finishing PhDs and ending up in almost abusive adjuncting cycles for a while, right. Where there's just more work and less time and little little funds. Right. This is, I think, what's going on for a lot of people. So it's also uplifting to hear of someone who went through that and got then got the position.

00:52:21:11 - 00:52:50:17

Kerry Brown: I mean, I think adjuncts are special people. Absolutely. Adjuncts can do anything because they've had to they've had to adjust. They've had to change. I think anybody that looks at a CV when they're hiring and it's like, well, they've been adjuncting a long time, trust me, that person is going to be really special and is going to work so hard for you. I think there's a misunderstanding about what adjuncts can do potentially. And I think only looking at somebody's research record in a hiring position and not taking that into consideration, how much they've teaching.

00:52:50:19 - 00:53:30:00

Kerry Brown: It's a hustle like you're driving around. You're creating classes that maybe you're not ready to teach because you need to teach them. That means that that person's willing to be fluid and change and think differently to be successful. Those are qualities in a great teacher. Those are qualities that are going to be amazing in a department. Those are people that, you know, probably aren't going to, like, needle around the little things and complain a lot because they've seen the other side of it and they're just going to work hard because they're being appreciated probably for the first time. So I think anybody that that's not hiring adjuncts is making a mistake, is making a huge mistake.

00:53:30:07 - 00:53:51:16

Kerry Brown: I agree. And I should say not hiring them for like a year position, but like full time. Yeah. So let's be very clear on that. They need a full time position. Absolutely. I mean, that's part of our purpose in this podcast is also like teaching is a form of research in many ways, like we are constantly re translating our topics for a new moment, time, place and group of students.

00:53:51:18 - 00:53:54:14

Kerry Brown: Right. It's real. It's it's also research in action.

00:53:54:16 - 00:54:26:27

Kerry Brown: And for me, teaching survey classes has been the most beneficial to my own research. And I know there's a lot of people that when they get hired, they're really excited if they don't have to teach a survey class and they can really focus on like senior seminars or graduate classes. But the people that ask the best questions are the ones that are just far removed and they really challenge you and they challenge your approach and the challenge, your appreciation. I find like I've become a much better writer and more clear in my presentations and my conference papers and my lectures because I'm teaching survey.

00:54:27:00 - 00:54:44:06

Kerry Brown: Yeah, because I'm teaching freshmen. I wouldn't trade that for anything. Those students ask the best questions because they're seeing things with fresh eyes and they're not maybe so attached to the material and maybe they don't want to even be in your class.

00:54:44:08 - 00:54:46:22

Kerry Brown: Yeah. So they're going to push back.

00:54:47:08 - 00:55:06:12

Sarah Richardson: Absolutely. And we're and we're learning all the time. I love the way you framed that. So as my last question, I think of of this podcast I wanted to ask you and I don't know if it's a thing that you'll have to do anytime soon, but if you were charged with a class like Buddhism 101 or introduction to Buddhism, how would you teach it? What would you want to do or not do?

00:55:07:21 - 00:55:30:09

Kerry Brown: I think I'd probably steal I'd steal a lot from the Antioch program. Yeah, when I was a student on the Antioch Buddhist studies program, I think they were really strategic about how they paced the class where we were learning about early Buddhism at the same time that we had to practice Theravada Vipassana meditation for three weeks.

00:55:30:11 - 00:56:29:03

Kerry Brown: And then we went on to sort of Mahayana traditions and we sort of had an experience with Zen traditions. And then we moved on to sort of Vajrayana traditions. And then we had some experience with Tibetan traditions. I think that structure of sort of starting at the beginning and then layering not just with an understanding about what Buddhism is, but thinking about it as these three different sections, thinking about it as three different practices, and then practices within those practices is a nice way to sort of build an understanding and build those different levels, but also realize that Buddhism and Buddhist practice isn't monolithic. Like I seek out lots of different Buddhist teachers and Buddhist scholars of art history and Buddhist arts that are sort of pan Buddhist. Because what I'm doing in terms of my study of performance, performance in Buddhist art is universal. And so only focusing on one

tradition I think gets you into trouble. And then you go down the rabbit hole of of really only presenting then one perspective when it's really sort of so diverse.

00:56:29:05 - 00:57:01:26

Kerry Brown: And then, you know, you could ask yourself each time, each time you're doing each unit, who is the Buddha? What is Buddhism? That could be your, like, essay question for every single exam. And you'd get a different answer. Even teaching that class, potentially it would be different every time because you have a different set of students. They have a different set of perspectives. And sort of how Buddhist and Buddhist art understand the Buddha again gets reinterpreted with stylistic variations as you move forward. So maybe not Buddhism 101 but Buddhist art 101.

00:57:01:29 - 00:57:05:17

Sarah Richardson: Yeah, I think even if you did Buddhism, it would be with a lot of art.

00:57:05:19 - 00:57:08:16

Kerry Brown: Sure, yeah. It certainly would be with a lot of art.

00:57:08:18 - 00:57:24:29

Sarah Richardson: Yeah. Wonderful. All right. Well, I hope you get to do it soon or one day or and I hope I get to be a fly on the wall because I would love that. I would love that. All right. Well, thank you so much for speaking with us today, Kerry. And it's been a really engaging conversation with a lot of real applications to it as well. So it's been a real pleasure.

00:57:25:05 - 00:57:26:28

Kerry Brown: It's been an honor to be here. Thank you, Sarah.

00:57:31:24 - 00:58:09:21

Sarah Richardson: Very special thanks to Kerry Brown for that wonderful description of your courses, and thanks also, Kerry, for your patience. She was one of our first interviews way back in April of 2019. Thanks also to the wonderful Betsy Moss, my colleague, for recording and editing this episode. So please listeners we'd love it if you could visit our website teaching Buddhism dot net for show notes and links to articles and other resources that Kerry mentions. Also, thanks to the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto for supporting and producing this podcast. Thanks also to Dr. Frances Garrett for her support as a contributing producer.