**Interview with Janice Moskalik**

**“The Questions We Keep Coming Back To: Pedagogy and Philosophy for Children”**

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

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

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

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

Today’s episode, “The Questions We Keep Coming Back To,” is an interview with Janice Moskalik. Janice is now a Senior Instructor in Philosophy at Seattle University. But in the summer of 2016 Janice was still a graduate student in Philosophy at the University of Washington, and received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Public Projects in the Humanities to pursue a project on philosophy for children. Our conversation explores, among other things, the challenges and rewards of working in the K-12 context, the importance of adaptability in both philosophy and publicly-engaged work, and the relationship between building trust and taking risks.

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ANNIE DWYER: Thanks so much, Janice, for joining me today.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Thanks for having me, Annie.

ANNIE DWYER: I thought we could start by having you tell me a little more about your work doing philosophy for children. If you could say what the general concept is, what a typical session looks like…tell us a little more about what philosophy for children is.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Sure. Philosophy for children, generally speaking, sounds like an odd idea unless you happen to be in a place like Seattle where, in fact, there are robust and wonderful programs running. As a graduate student at the University of Washington a number of years ago–maybe nine years ago now–I got involved with the University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children. This organization is a research unit of the University now and it was founded and is still directed by Jana Mohr Lone. By the time I arrived at the program, the Center had been around for a number of years. I was able to learn from the folks who are already doing this work–including Jana–and got to be in classrooms in Seattle public schools doing philosophy with kids.

There are lots of different ways that one might engage in doing philosophy with children. But, in general, we engage with students to create a community of inquiry. It's very collaborative. We aim to have it be a student-driven kind of investigation. We often start with a prompt of some sort. Maybe it's a picture book or maybe it’s a game. But often, then, from there we see what student questions arise and explore accordingly.

I myself often find that whatever I leave a session thinking about from that session, I then come up with a prompt and I explain to the students, I don't know if this is what you all think about, but what you guys said last week inspired me to think about this, so now I'm curious to hear what you want to discuss.

Oftentimes, I'll teach a couple of sessions in different classrooms. I, generally speaking, will start out with the same prompt for each class but quickly the different classes will go in different directions and they'll be doing completely different sessions each week because the students and the community will just find different things that they want to talk about.

It's been fun for me and because after graduating from the University of Washington was fortunate enough to take a job at Seattle University, I get to continue that work and continue working with students in Seattle public schools doing this work with the UW Center.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that's fantastic. Can you give us an example, just to give a little more texture to your description, an example of a prompt?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Sure. Sometimes with a new class–I've never visited the class before–I might start at the beginning of the year by asking them to write down a few words on a blank sheet of paper that they think of when they think of themselves. And then I ask them to flip over the page and to draw their name in a way that incorporates, or represents at least some of those words. So, they have this drawing project and it's always quite creative. And then at the end present their pictures of their names that they have drawn and explain why they drew them the way they did. I think of this as in thinking about our personal identity. Then I usually surprise them by making those pictures be the covers of their philosophy journals.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, neat. So then all sorts of questions around identity, memory, things like that emerge from that activity.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah. What's really cool [is that] we'll decide later in the year that they want to make a new cover because they don't feel like that picture represents them anymore. Another example might be to read a story. For instance, if you know any of the *Frog and Toad* stories by…

ANNIE DWYER: I love Frog and Toad.

JANICE MOSKALIK: By [Arnold] Lobel. I'm trying to think…I think it's called “The Garden,” where one of them admires the other's beautiful garden and says, "Oh, I wish I had a garden like that," and his friend says, "well, you know, a garden is a lot of work, but here's some seeds." The character goes home and he's waiting for the seeds to grow and he's yelling at them. And his friend says, "Well, you can't yell at them. They'll be too afraid to grow." So he proceeds over the next, however long it is, to weed the seeds, to put a candle out when it's dark so that they're not afraid of the dark. And eventually, of course, they do sprout. He tells his friend, "You were right. It is really hard work." So, I might ask students after that: What questions do you have about the story? Then we'll decide which question we're going to pick up for discussion.

ANNIE DWYER: One of the things that strikes me about that description is how flexible and adaptable you have to be in doing…

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yes.

ANNIE DWYER: …work with children. Your whole plan hinges on what comes up. That's making me think, when people are doing public scholarship in K-12 educational contexts or working with children, more broadly, are there some general challenges, aspects of that work that you think folks might encounter?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Sure. One of them is in terms of developing more capacities. This is one of those skills that I think many teachers were constantly trying to develop. I don't presume for a moment to have developed the skill. But hearing the philosophical question or hearing the philosophical content that's being offered, particularly if a person is still in the process of forming the thought–I think that's something that I came to learn quickly from working with kids. But it's a skill that I think is super important for all of us, regardless of what sort of philosophical conversation we're having. There is often philosophical insight and if we don't hear it in a certain way or if it doesn't match with a perspective we already hold, we might not notice it as quickly. That said, that's what's so beautiful about collaborative thinking like this. Whether it's with kids or with anyone, is the opportunity to hear many, many perspectives and to enrich our own and to engage with the ideas and perspectives of others in ways that, even if we don't end up being persuaded, give us a deeper understanding even of our own view.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. That deep listening is so difficult to develop…

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: …and such a gift when it’s present.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah. The other question that I heard in terms of challenges in the K-12 setting in particular, when you were initially asking the question, goes to the fact that…I think it's a gift that I get from teachers if they can make the space in the classroom for me to come in and have this freedom with students…because teachers, of course, are so busy and they have so many things that they need to do in their classes with their students that this open freedom that I'm given in these times is a gift. The teachers have to carve out that space in order to allow me and/or me and my students from college or whomever. That's probably one of the biggest challenges.

ANNIE DWYER: How do you build those relationships with teachers?

JANICE MOSKALIK: This is important. Any kind of partnership needs to build that trust and gain that trust. Again, I want to highlight that I am super fortunate because I get to participate as part of a very robust program that has been long running. Once a teacher is interested and knows a bit about having philosophy, they're often diligent about making that space. But, of course, it does take them getting to know the individual who's going to be in their classroom, them getting to know a little bit about philosophy. That can vary quite a bit.

I will say that the teachers with whom I've been fortunate enough to work in their classroom in consecutive years–they will start sending me emails saying, “We're working on this right now. Can you think about a philosophy lesson that might go along with this?” Or, a teacher fairly recently was basing the writing prompts on the philosophy sessions…would continue with writing after I had left, where the students would have space and time to develop whatever ideas were coming out of, or emerging from the discussion. She would issue prompts that were based on the discussion that we'd been having. So there's a lot of partnering that can happen as well. And, of course, there are lots of teachers who are having philosophical moments in their classroom all the time…got nothing to do with me. So I think your point about building trust is super important. And I think that's true with any good community partnership.

Annie Dwyer: I love how you describe that too because your responsiveness is not just to the students but also to the teachers and what's happening in their classrooms.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm also imagining that part of building that trust is articulating the value of this work to teachers. So I'm wondering: How do you do that? What do you say? Why is philosophy for children something that is compelling? I don't want to say useful…I don't want to instrumentalize it in that way. But how do you articulate the value of this work to teachers that you're approaching, to the students themselves, to other people, other colleagues?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah. I think it's easier with some people than with others because they might already be thinking of philosophy in a certain way. I have this conversation a lot with college students who will say things like, “Philosophy has gotten a bad rap as being this obscure and difficult subject, but actually it's super interesting. I've had lots of philosophical questions and never realized it.”

It is interesting because I think that teachers have so much more experience with young people than I do. Many of them may already know that their young students have all kinds of insightful philosophical thoughts all the time. So maybe they don't need that much convincing but continue to learn how to be a better teacher. Being in different settings with different communities and different norms in those different communities is super helpful to reminding me–college students will be polite. I imagine I could stand up at the front of a classroom in a college setting and lecture for an hour and a half and they might not complain. But I'm not sure that that's a great class.

ANNIE DWYER: Right, right.

JANICE MOSKALIK: And it certainly doesn't give them an opportunity to do philosophy…

ANNIE DWYER: Right, right.

JANICE MOSKALIK: …with one another.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm thinking too about how this might shape your self-understanding as a philosopher or of the work of philosophy beyond the kind of pedagogical questions. Has it? Do you…

JANICE MOSKALIK: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

ANNIE DWYER: How so?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Because it gets me thinking about meta-philosophical questions. What is philosophy? You know…

ANNIE DWYER: I was going to ask you that. What do you say philosophy is to the students?

JANICE MOSKALIK: I tell students–and I'm pretty open in stating that I think it would be awfully dogmatic and unphilosophical of me if I thought that I was absolutely right about this; I have to be at least open to there being another possibility–but I do think that one of the valuable bits about philosophy in my own view is that philosophical questions are these kinds of questions that we think are not just interesting but important. They're not questions that we are sure we have an answer to, but they are questions we keep pursuing because we think there is an answer. Reasonable people might disagree about what that answer is, and there's room for that disagreement. But that's not to say that any answer is good enough or every answer counts either. I think they’re these complicated questions. And they're the questions we keep coming back to oftentimes. That's why you can look back in history and see the same questions being asked hundreds of years ago, if not thousands.

ANNIE DWYER: I love that. I'm wondering if we might pivot a little because I know you started with philosophy for children and then you did two Mellon fellowships–one was a fellowship working with faculty at one of the community colleges in the Seattle district and then you did a summer fellowship.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yes.

ANNIE DWYER: That was a project that sought to widen the reach of philosophy for children. Will you tell us a little more about that?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah, sure. The first fellowship, the one for reaching new publics, was…the Simpson Center connected me with Dr. Bill Harms who's faculty at Seattle Central College in the Philosophy Department. This fellowship was such a gift and something that seems like it's different than the typical graduate student in philosophy working on a PhD would have an opportunity to do in that in many ways it was unstructured. I was able to connect with Dr. Harms and find different ways to connect with Seattle Central and to learn about the college. But I wasn't particularly tasked with doing specific kinds of things. Instead, I got to explore…sort of the way the communities of inquiry go with the young people. I got to follow my interests.

Dr. Harms and I quickly discovered that he was intrigued with this notion of philosophy for children because he didn't think it seemed much like something children would do. We just had such fun philosophical discussions that we started talking to his students. I was attending some of his classes, and we started talking to other folks in the counseling office to see…would there be any interest in students at Central getting involved and getting an opportunity to take a philosophy course that also allowed them to go visit public school classrooms for philosophy sessions. And it turned out there was a fair bit of interest.

The Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at the time, Dr. Bradley Lane, was also supportive of the idea of me trying to set up a directed study for students to take a course that would allow them to do philosophy for children. There was a complication with getting it officially on the schedule. The class didn’t end up running because, in fact, there was no time for people to enroll. It also turned out, when we talked to students who were interested, that some of them had concerns not because they didn't want to take the class but because if you do a directed study it doesn't count as credits towards certain kinds of degree requirements. This is what inspired the notion that perhaps developing a course–an actual course that would count for specific degree requirements–might be attractive to students. That was what led to the summer fellowship.

ANNIE DWYER: That's fantastic…and echoes so much about what you said about adaptability and flexibility and openness and curiosity, which are virtues in philosophy, right?

JANICE MOSKALIK: Yeah. To return to what we were discussing near the beginning of our conversation, the freedom and the encouragement to be creative that was afforded me from the Simpson Center is not always something that naturally we think is a good…. Taking risks and trying new things–it can be one of the big challenges. The thing is that that's where that could be a huge improvement. Of course, sustained authentic relationships with partners and colleagues are super important [when] building trust. But trusting someone to try something…and others being willing to support something that might be unexpected. It might not work out…but it might. It might be kind of interesting and kind of brilliant and might lead to unexpected and wonderful learning communities.

ANNIE DWYER: Well, I think that's a wonderful note to end on. Thank you so much for your time today.

JANICE MOSKALIK: Thanks, Annie. It's good talking to you.

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