Christopher Richmann: Welcome to Professors Talk Pedagogy, a podcast from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richmann. Professors Talk Pedagogy, presents discussions with great professors about pedagogy, curriculum and learning in order to propel the virtuous cycle of teaching. As we frankly and critically investigate our teaching, we open new lines of inquiry, we engage in conversation with colleagues, and we attune to students' experiences. all of which not only improves our teaching, but enriches and motivates ongoing investigation. And so the cycle continues.

Today our guest is Sarah Mosher, Assistant Professor of costume design and technology in theatre Arts at Baylor University. She has an interest in universal design and design systems. Cultivating design thinking in students, and engaging with questions about design life cycles across disciplines. Recently, Professor Mosher participated in Baylor's Paulo Freire Centennial, celebrating the founder of critical pedagogy, co-designing the celebration installation in the university library, and serving as a panelist discussing assessment in the fine arts and what she calls the pedagogy of autonomy. We are delighted to welcome Professor Moser to the show to discuss the slippery work of assessing learning in the arts, Students' fear and anxiety related to education ,and the journey toward critical pedagogy.

Sarah Mosher, welcome to the show.

Sarah Mosher: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

CR: Well, the main thing that we wanted to invite you want to talk about here today, which we have not really had a chance to in our previous podcast episodes to talk about critical pedagogy. And this is something that I recently became aware of that you are interested in and have, have worked with your students and developed yourself as an instructor along these lines. So I wonder if you can just kind of define for us what this term critical pedagogy means and describe how you came to kind of adopt this approach or this philosophy.

SM: Sure, I'll answer your question sort of in reverse because I became frustrated with working with students and finding that they really wanted a checklist of things that they needed to accomplish in order to feel successful in the class. And the work that I teach tends to be much more fluid and creative. So I needed them to engage in a different way with the content and was struggling to figure out a way to make that happen. And I realized that what I wanted to do was really focus on making the goal of each course that I taught be to have the students be more fully themselves in order to engage with the material. And I tried a number of things to do this. I tried a few different ways to give them some grace. I try a few different ways to give them more structure. I was struggling a little bit with how to accomplish that, but I just felt like it was the right path forward. And then very late in my career, I encountered the work of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as bell hooks and other writers who engage in these methodologies out of which the idea of critical pedagogy came. And this sort of solidified for me that the struggles and frustrations I was having were valid, first of all, which was great. And that also there were some people who are already working on this and we're doing great work and had been for since before I was born. So I just sort of became very engaged and interested in this idea. And critical pedagogy really looks at the ways in which we not only engage the content, but also engage the form of learning. And question, how is the form? How's the form working? Is it working? Is it not working? And how do the students become more active and engaged and empowered learners. Being part of the conversation of critiquing the form of the learning as well as engaging with the content. So that's how I came to critical pedagogy. And the part of it that really was most exciting to me was again, this reaffirmation of the importance of each person recognizing themselves in the work and advocating for themselves in their learning process.

CR: Well, I'd love to pick up that thread there. You mentioned students becoming more themselves and at Baylor, but not just at Baylor, in higher education, more generally, we often talk about, and here are our institutions talk about transformational education. I'm wondering is do you think there's a tension there between, on one hand, seeking to transform students, on the other hand, seeking to make them more fully themselves? Or is it just different ways of saying the same thing?

SM: For me it really is the same thing because I think the journey of becoming more fully ourselves is a lifelong journey that will never be complete on earth. I think of Romans 12 or the talk about renewing of your mind and the fact that each person is so uniquely and individually made with certain talents and abilities. And of course, we all have different life experiences as well. And so those really shape who we are and will continue to shape who we are as we grow and our relationship with Christ and we grow in our relationship with each other. And so I think that the act of becoming more fully ourselves is a transformational act. And so if we are asking students to just take the information and regurgitate it, That's not the same as being transformed by it. I argue that in order to be transformed by their education, they need to engage their full selves, which means I have to become more fully themselves. And all of us are learning who we are every day with constant sort of critical focus and prayerful attentiveness. So I see it as a lifelong journey and an opportunity for them to explore that in an environment where we can support them in that endeavor.

CR: I'm no expert in for areas work, but I, but I do know some of the context out of which it arose. Particularly class struggle in Brazil and, and really the notion of bringing people to an understanding of themselves as agents and not simply as oppressed. So I'm wondering what kind of translation work needs to be done when you bring that philosophy born out of intense class struggle into place like Baylor, where that's not as much the concern that students are bringing with them.

SM: Yeah, that's a great point. And I think the term *oppression* and *oppressed* is a very loaded word, especially in our culture. And so I think there's always some caution there about how we talk about it. But I think what I like about Freire the core principle is this idea. Agency in this core principle is the idea of the fact that through education, through learning, you can become, have more agency. You can become more active and your work and the world and with each other. And I think that that to me is universal. And especially if we are thinking about in the Baylor community, creating people who will go out into the world and live out a Christian mission. It's really critical that they can be thoughtful and prayerful and self-reflective at all times in order to do that. And I, and I think that one of the other things that Freire talks about is in addition to this idea of the oppressor and the oppressed is also a more robust idea of identity, right? So various aspects of my identity would be sort of in the majority in the United States in and sort of be in, in a place where I would be considered the oppressor. And various aspects of my identity would also fit and the oppressed category. And so it's complicated and you can't sort of water it down and make it narrow. And I think that that's what I really love about it, is that it really challenges us to think about who we are. And again, a fuller understanding of ourselves and our role in society, and our role within the church, and our role as people who are leaving this place to go out into the world. If we seek to transform, we must also be transformed. And I think that the message that Freire has does a lot of that. I think there are definitely some places where I would take issue with some of the work as bell hooks has pointed out, there are some issues. It's sort of, it's very patriarchal. But I think that, I think that the core idea is really, really valuable, especially as a Christian like this idea of we are created in the image of God. So we must get to know our full ourselves in order to really do the work that God has called us to do in this world.

CR: So what kinds of concrete practices has this translated into for you is and has there been a development of of how that has has worked for you?

SM: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I've tried a lot of things and some of them have just not gone well. But I think the biggest thing that I've done is tried to be really transparent with my students about what I'm doing. And I find that the more transparent I am, the better it goes. I'm transparent about my goals and what I'd like to achieve, but also transparent and inviting them in. And also very transparent when something doesn't work. Before we started, I was mentioning that I had to retool the last half of my class this semester because I was responding to the fact that the students had a very different needs than I was expecting them to have. And so I was very honest and I said, I sense that you need more time, a sense that we need to reshape this. And they affirmed that. And I said, How about if we do this? And they were very excited about this new opportunity. So I think holding holding it a little bit more fluidly has also served me really well in I'm going in with structural ideas but also not holding that structure rigid, being really responsive to each individual student and the culture of the classroom. So we have sort of that sociological culture that's happening. Some of the things I have done are one of my dear friends introduce me to the idea of standards-based grading. And I was able to adapt it in some ways and do skills-based grading, which allowed students to really just work towards individual skills in the class. And that has had sort of mixed effect. I realize that it's still serves as a bit of a top-down or banking model of education that Freire talks about as being a challenge and being not what we want. And so I've, I've tried to play with that in some ways and see if I can make it more cohesive structure that really leans into the students agency. And I think that there are some room for that in skills-based classes. But in my lecture classes, I've changed it entirely. I've been inspired by the un-grading work that's being done. And have the students create their own goals at the beginning of the semester. So they create very concrete goals that they want to achieve in the course. And then have them reflect every few weeks on how they're doing in relationship to their goals. So instead of asking them to turn in specific assignments and giving them a grade on them. I have them reflect. I have them talk about the course content to show that they can critically assess the content and also that they can make personal connections with the content. And then I respond back with my own questions and thoughts and ideas and it becomes more of a dialogue between myself and the students. And then ultimately this student's assign themselves a grade for each assignment that we do based on our conversation. And they're usually very honest and very, very accurate. And that has been really successful. And it really does put the onus back on the student to decide how they want to engage with the content and to decide how they, what they want to take away from the course. And so far, I feel like that's been the most successful work that I've done in this area. But of course, it is an ongoing process and I'll continue to develop new methods.

CR: I love the self-assessment piece of that and I'm thinking more and more about ways to integrate that in formal and in informal ways to, I'm teaching a graduate seminar course this semester in the School of Education, teaching and learning and higher education. So it's very meta every time we do something and I can say, why did I do that? Why do you think I did that and did that help? And, and every, every class session, it's a small class. Every class session I asked students to arrange themselves in some new order. So just to start the class with getting them to talk to each other and figure out how they're going to arrange themselves. And just yesterday I asked them to arrange themselves in the, in the order of the, of their quantity of contribution to the class. A very kind of facetious way of like getting them to think about how much do I talk and contribute in this class? And I was surprised at how accurate they were and how, how, how easily they took to that self-assessment piece. So I think you'd be surprised me, just sort of ask students to do that, that they can be pretty accurate and we might be worried like, Oh, they're just going to give themselves an a, but no, they can be pretty self-critical.

SM: Yes, absolutely. I find that it often is the reverse that I have to be like, actually you did better. Give yourself a little bit more credit here. Yeah, I do. I do think that they are very, very astute in understanding how much they're contributing and what they're learning is like. And I think that's part of the heart of what I particularly enjoy about critical pedagogy is this idea that like we as individuals all know like in our hearts what we, what we are doing and not doing. And should we not bring that to the table? Should we not unleash that? Because the other thing that's a concern of mine is that in the creative fields such as theater, which I teach in, and I used to teach in fashion as well. And my other institution. Once they enter the job market and the professional world, they're expected to be expected to have a really strong sense of self. And their expected to have a lot of ambition. And they're expected to be self-motivated. And the current academic structures don't really allow for that in the same way. And so I tend to find that students who are exceptionally fantastic and ambitious academically really struggle in the professional world because they don't have the checklists and they don't have somebody to please. Um, and so it's difficult, and I say this as somebody who's been successful academically, I've had to unlearn some of those thoughts in order to, to become a self-starter and to try and engage my own, my own artistic sensibility in the work I do.

CR: You mentioned the banking model. So I think maybe for the sake of our, our listeners, we should explain what exactly that is coming out of Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

SM: Yeah, So Paulo Freire talks about the banking model of education as sort of the method that we're all familiar with. Where the teacher stands up front and says out loud a bunch of information, sort of a lecture model. The students, I'll take notes and then they're expected to regurgitate it. So basically we are banking information into our students by placing it into them. And then there we are expected to be able to take a withdrawal of the same information. The problem with us that I think a lot of educators will, will say, and a lot of studies have shown is that that doesn't lead to lasting engagement with the material. So as a student, maybe I could do really well on an exam and really good at memorization are really good at regurgitation. But then five years down the road, if you asked me about it, it would be really fuzzy. So I'm not sure I would really have connected that information and kept it. So the banking model is critiquing both the final outcome, like I just mentioned, but also this idea that I standing at the front of the classroom and an expert in all things. And you should listen to me and write down what I have to say and not question it. And I think that was the really big critique in that the work was, you know, let's, let's shift this balance. We are all human beings, which means we all have perspectives and we all have information and we all have places where we do not know things and we're learning things. And we know that information changes constantly has so get up in front and say, this is the way it is. I want my students to say I just read a new article that actually contradicts that. And I can say, Oh, that's really great. Let's tell me about it. Why don't you talk for a little bit? And I really want them to bring the sort of aliveness of information and the way that it's fluid and constantly growing and blooming. I really want them to bring that to the classroom. And not just listen to what I have to say, write it down and regurgitate it.

CR: One of the things that, that all of this philosophy sort of challenges is the traditional kind of approach to what the nature of the instructors authority in the classroom. Because as you're describing it there, your authority, such as it may be in a classroom, is not directly tied or directly dependent on you being the one who always knows the right answers to things. But also, there's, you were mentioning like being transparent and flexible with students. And I think some instructors kind of sense of authority is tied to that. Like, I'm the I'm the enforcer of the deadlines and the protocols, and this is the contract syllabus kind of thing. So I wonder if you, if you can just reflect on how that has changed the way you think about authority in the classroom. Do you even think in terms of authority? Or is that kind of not, not, not an applicable concept for, you?

SM: Oh I think about authority a lot. Because I, again, I, I'm somebody who thrived in the academic model precisely because I was like This person knows everything and I'm just going to quietly sit here and take it all down. And so I did very well. But it really made me think, Oh, there's so much that I am sort of regurgitating. They may or may not be correct because I haven't looked at all the source material myself.

CR: Yeah.

SM: So I think that really challenged me to think about it. And then There's been times in theater we work so closely with the students because not only are we working in the classroom, but we're also working in a practical setting, producing shows. So we have a much, many more contact hours with students. And so as a result of that, there are times when I feel like I don't have a level of authority. I feel like we're on the same page. We're working side-by-side with the same roles in this production that we would have in the professional world. And then something comes up and the Stewart, and it's revealed to me that the students didn't say something to me because they were afraid of my authority. And so it's really made me have to acknowledge the fact I will have the authority solely based on the fact that I'm in the position that I'm in. And I find this to be true with students who come to Baylor that they're very interested in like, how can I fit within this structure? And so it's difficult for me to figure out how do I undo that structure in a way that doesn't completely undo them. But how do I undo the structure in a way that I can invite them in and create a brave space in the classroom where they can say, you know, actually read this. And I don't think that what you said was right because I want them to do that and I want them to challenge me and I want them to learn. And I think the only way to do that is to first acknowledge that there is naturally going to be an authority sort of layering and structure in the classroom that's just going to happen. And then being constantly aware of it makes me able to try to break it down and encourage them to be brave.

CR: I won't ask you to speak for all women, but do in your experience, are there additional challenges related to that as an as a female instructor? Because we know that women are more likely to be challenged by their students in their area of expertise. And in their policies. So do you feel that that tension is that something that you've noticed when comparing your efforts to maybe male colleagues or something like that?

SM: Yeah, definitely I definitely have some sense of that. I think I've also been been sort of fortunate, I guess, in, in a sense, because my area is costume design and construction. And people tend to think of anything clothing related as related to women. So there's already sort of an assumption there that actually gives me a little bit more leeway. But there are definitely are times when the structure of the class or how I choose to implement grace, or how I choose to make decisions, can be challenged, especially by male students. But I also find that the more transparent I am with what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and how it benefits them, the less problems I have with that. I don't think that's going to be true across the board, of course. As you said, I don't speak for all women. But in my particular experience, it's really helped to be as transparent as possible and vulnerable as possible in those moments. And it's really seemed to help to level the playing field a little bit.

CR: You mentioned bell hooks and I'm thinking of *Teaching to Transgress*. And I think one of the ways that she really extended that conversation of critical pedagogy was focusing on the instructors sense of self. And especially like embodiment she's bringing her feminist theory into it. So thinking about, I'm coming in here as a woman. This is the body that I have. I can't escape these things. I wonder if you can reflect on how you align your sense of self with your teaching.

SM: Absolutely. Yeah, I think bell hooks does a really great job of, of criticizing fray, but also taking what is really, really good work and really good theory. So I really appreciate the nuance and her reading of that a, and I am very interested in and have been interested in this idea of embodiment. Not just the fact that I, that I present as female, but also that I live inside this body. And I, I think the sort of separation of body, soul, and mind that's been a part of our Western Christian tradition, is proving to be a challenge for people right now is we've gone through this pandemic time. People really are seeking to return to the body into the land. And again, our relationship within creation because we are part of the ecosystem of the world and of the earth. And so if we aren't fully aware of sort of the layering that's possible, It makes it difficult for us to be fully present, both with ourselves and with our students. So it's something I think about quite a bit and I've worked on in various ways. I've done like movement practice, I've done movement performance work and egos, thinking about our relationship to the land, our relationship to our identities in all aspects of our identities and our relationship to each other in the, in the social settings such as the classroom.

CR: So you mentioned un-grading and I think about, you know, coming from someone who's who's not trained in in, in, in the art, at least not at the graduate level. I think probably the arts have a lot to teach the rest of us about, about assessment. Because we already kind of see that as something maybe more like a conversation and kind of an ongoing dialogue rather than in many stem and humanities field. It's like here's your grade, you just here's how you did on the exam, you know, and this there's much less emphasis on the process of it. So in what other ways has, has critical pedagogy maybe even extended that, that part of assessment and fine arts that's already maybe there.

SM: Yeah. I think one of the things that I like about working in the arts, as you said, it's already so much of a dialogue with the students. But again, about bringing my own self to the table. I have so much anxiety about performance and about my own personal performance and whether I get an A or a B. And it really distracts me from doing the work that I have set out to do. And so I think that that's actually a place where the arts could do better is that we still use a lot of standard grading practices. Even though we're having those dialogues, even though we're having those conversations, we're having critique sessions. We still end up giving somebody a grade and it was top-down. It comes from the instructor down to the student. And I think that there's a lot of pitfalls that can happen there, including the fact that we all have really different aesthetic voices. And so sometimes a student will present something that I personally do not like. But I see where they've made the choices and it's really well thought out and it matches their own personal personality.

CR: Yeah.

SM: So I saved that is excellent work. And I think that there's a trap there that if we aren't thinking about that, that we could say, oh, that's not good. And we make judgment values about art. And I think that that's really, really problematic. And I find that students who do really great and really compelling artistic work are the students that are putting more of themselves into the work. Which is again part of why my goal is to have them become more fully themselves and to express that and to explore that and to embody that by doing the work and by creating art that it speaks to who they are as a person.

CR: Has this translated into, particularly for students, different kinds of learning objectives from, um, like your pre critical pedagogy values to that like, oh, like on the syllabus or some other documents that the students would actually see.

SM: Yeah, I think there's this tension that happens, right? Between preparing students for the professional world and asking them to really develop the artistic sensibility. There's this tension that's happening, that's very real because there's this economic concern that students have when they

leave, they may be able to find work and do well. And so there's a lot of skills that are specifically aligned with the things that they need to know in order to be a good professional in the arts and to be a good professional in the theater world. So I tend to make more of my outcomes related to that and say like in order to do really well at this job, you will have to do x, y, and z. You will have to be a really good editor of your work. You'll have to be critical of your own work and not be so married to it that you can't have that conversation with your work. You have to be able to do the paperwork to manage your work. If you can't do the paperwork, you're not going to be successful. Like that's just the reality of it. And I know that's on artistic and I know it's not fun, but it is critical. And if you embrace it as a part of your process, you'll do much better. So I think, I think that tension sort of lives in that place where the outcomes are measured is what I can measure is, are they preparing themselves for the professional world? What I count measure, but I can have dialogue with them about, is how much of themselves are they putting in their work? What are they learning about themselves in this process? How are they growing as a person? How are they growing in their relationship to God? How is all of that and forming their work? And I think that assessing that gets tricky and that's always the constant tension.

CR: Yeah. Yeah. How do students react to the things that you've tried? Have you had any kind of massive house burning incidents? It's varying success. Yeah. So I tried something new every, almost every class because I'm constantly yearning and hungry for new approaches and new ways to engage the students. And I've definitely had times where I have not been successful. And I find that in implementing critical pedagogy and new systems of assessment, if I spend the time upfront to really explain it and then really work with them back and forth and maintain that dialogue and hold That's base and keep that sort of sacred. Making sure that I'm giving them myself when I'm giving them dialogue, it tends to work much better. The places where I've been uncertain and I've been questioning my own methods. I will hold myself back a little bit and then it proves to be unsuccessful. So I think that for me, the places where I've had success in the places where I've had failures are directly tied to how much of myself I'm putting into the work. Which to me confirms my desire to help draw them out and you help them engage and become more fully themselves.

CR: You're, and you're modeling what you're asking them to do in their own their own academic work.

SM: Absolutely. I think that's essential. I cannot ask them to put themselves out there like that and not do it myself. And so I had a class that that didn't go well with my assessment model. And I realized that I had held a lot of myself back again. So I actually wrote an email to the class and said, You're right. Thank you for your feedback and thank you for this. You're correct in all of this, I really appreciate your feedback and I'm very sorry that I created a space in which you felt more anxiety when the intention was to reduce it. I take full responsibility for that. So I think using my responsibility and authority in a thoughtful manner where I can say like as the authoritative figure, I understand that you didn't feel like you could say some of these things at the time. Yeah, I'm glad that you gave me this feedback and I appreciate it and I apologize. And showing them that I'm trying to be good stewards of the learning environment that I have authority over, right?

CR: So what do you what new things or you're trying or wanting to try in the semesters ahead.

SM: Well, right now and my history of costume class, I feel like it's going very well and the students have said that it is. So that's helpful. Is, is creating, having them create their goals. Like I mentioned before. So they write out very specific goals, three specific goals that are measurable. And then they reflect on it constantly. In order to have them engage with the content, I'll give them a couple of prompts that they can respond to as sort of their quiz. But they can, there's, the questions are very open ended. So for instance, I would say, we've talked about how important land in place

is in the development of attire. So think about two of the cultures we've studied and compare and contrast how, where they are has affected what they wear. And so it really is open ended and allows them to engage with the material in a personal way and also in a critical way. And then they give that to me and I respond with questions that I have for them, but also just sort of questions in general, it becomes very conversational. Like, Oh yeah, when I was reading that, I thought about this and so it just becomes a dialogue. And then they read that and respond with what grade they think they should be awarded and why, and how it relates to the goals that they have set for themselves. And that's been going very well because I have students with very different goals in that class. And if I had done that class the way I normally do, which is really assessing, do you remember all these terms? I think I would have really lost a few people along the way.

CR: If I remember correctly, bell hooks makes up pretty pretty strong plea for small class sizes. So is that something that you've, you've had to navigate your Baylor or in previous teaching?

SM: I'm extremely fortunate because I happen to have very small class sizes. Part of it is being in the department I'm in. The work that we're doing require so much hands-on work that there's a limit to how many people we can interact with and have a meaningful dialogue with. But also, I think Baylor is really supportive of that, of having smaller class sizes. Even when I taught my largest class, which was only 34. So I know that's still pretty small. I was able to have individual one-on-one Zoom conversations with all of the students. Really get to know them and then offer them content based on our conversations and say, Hey, have you check this out? Try looking at this. So I think that I'm really, really fortunate in that, in that way. And I absolutely think that bell hooks is right. I think that if you're going to engage in critical pedagogy, really need this space and the ability to get to know your students. And I think that's really hard to do and you're doing really large lecture style. So I'm really grateful for the opportunities I've had to work in smaller classrooms.

CR: Well, Sarah Thank you for your reflections and taking time to talk with us today.

SM: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

CR: Our thanks again to Sarah Mosher for joining the show today. In our show notes on the podcast website, you'll find links to the two main sources we discussed in our episode. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and bell hooks *Teaching to Transgress*. That's our show. Thank you for listening and join us next time for Professors Talk Pedagogy.