Christopher Richmann: Welcome to Professors Talk Pedagogy, a podcast from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richman. 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. And so the cycle continues.

Today our guest is Dr. Stephen Sloan. Dr. Sloan completed his Ph. D. at Arizona State University, specializing in post 1945 public history and the American West. He began his academic career as the co-director of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi. In 2007 he joined Baylor University as a professor in the Department of History and the Director of the Institute for Oral History. Dr. Sloan is a prominent figure in local history organizations, having served as the president of both the Historic Waco Foundation and the Heart of Texas Regional History Fair. He is the visionary behind Waco History, a website and free mobile app dedicated to local history and the host of the Waco History Podcast.

In the broader community of oral historians, Dr. Sloan serves as the executive director of the National Oral History Association. and publishes research and guides for oral history. With his Baylor colleague, Julie deGraffenreid, Stephen edited the monumental primary source reader, The United States in Global Perspective. In 2022, Stephen was an active Learning Lab Fellow here at Baylor, and this year Stephen was selected as the Cornelia [00:02:00] Marshall Smith Professor of the Year, which is awarded to a faculty member who makes a superlative contribution to the learning environment at Baylor, including teaching and research. That is judged to be of the highest order of intellectual acumen and pedagogical effectiveness. We are delighted to have Dr. Sloan on the show to discuss role play and simulations in teaching, incorporating oral history into teaching, and what it means to instill in students the habit of living the questions. Alright, Stephens, thank you so much for joining the show today.

Stephen Sloan: Thanks, Christopher. Thanks for being thanks for inviting me.

Christopher Richmann: I want to start by asking you how you're feeling about the, being named Cornelia Marschall Smith Professor of the Year, which is a big deal here at Baylor. And it's a, it's an award not solely for teaching. But teaching is a big part of that. So what do you think this award recognizes in your work and especially in your teaching?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, so I, that's a great question. Particularly in my case, I thank the committee because I'm a little bit of an oddball with regard to most tenure track faculty or tenured faculty because I'm a 12-month appointment. I run a research center, which that's half my job. I do a lot of community-based stuff. And so I really thank the committee for looking at all the areas I do a lot with student organizations so I really appreciated the fact that they looked at every aspect of my work. And even [00:01:00] teaching in ways that is not traditional classroom teaching. I do a lot of workshops. I do a lot of consulting and things like that. So I was very grateful for the committee that they looked at the full body of work in making that decision. But yeah, very humbled and honored by that designation.

Christopher Richmann: What do you think they are seeing in your teaching portfolio or profile as a whole there?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah I've done a lot of teaching even though it's not a huge part of my job assignment. I've taught a wide variety of different courses really at every level of instruction. I think they have seen, I'm hoping they saw once I get in the classroom, the work that I do in the classroom, that students are responding to it. Also because I'm not in the classroom as much as a lot of my colleagues. I think it became more important kind of the independent mentor mentorship that I've done with graduate students and things like that.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah. How would you compare your classroom teaching style or approach to the community education stuff that you do and maybe we can then go backwards into what oral history means and community history and that kind of thing too.

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, I think in a lot of ways what I'm doing in the community is trying to is similar to what I'm doing in the classroom, which is to try to complicate maybe an oversimplification or a generalized notion of what history is and what in the classroom I'm generally I'm not teaching local history. I'm teaching more broader themes of history. But I'm often, oftentimes trying to complicate their understanding of whatever it might be, particularly with upper division courses where I've got a lot of history majors.

Christopher Richmann: Do you find that people appreciate having their history complicated?

Stephen Sloan: That's a great question. Probably not. Also I a lot of humor into my classroom work, anytime I'm in front of a group, I use a lot of humor. And I think maybe that's the little sugar in the medicine that maybe maybe helps it go

down a little bit. But, often times, yeah, I can say it's not appreciated, but, I think more often than not, folks grow to appreciate it.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah. I'm glad that you brought up humor. Humor is a touchy area when it comes to teaching because sometimes it lands well and sometimes it doesn't land well. What have you learned about that area of your own teaching persona?

Stephen Sloan: You've got to update your cultural references.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah, that's right.

Stephen Sloan: That's a problem with some of our colleagues.

Christopher Richmann: Boy, that's hard to do, yeah.

Stephen Sloan: They're still making mash references. It doesn't resonate with their clientele.

Christopher Richmann: You've never heard of all in the family? What's wrong with you people?

Stephen Sloan: I've got this great laugh in story. It just doesn't land anymore. Yeah, it's really interesting the dynamics of my classes because it takes students a couple of weeks before they learn it's okay to laugh. And I think one of the things it does for me in the classroom is it holds their attention in a way. Even if they're not as engaged in the material, they may pay attention for a turn of phrase or something that, that keeps them engaged.

Christopher Richmann: That's right. Yeah. And I know that you are You're fairly adventurous when it comes to your own teaching too. You've been an active learning lab fellow. And I know as part of your work in that room, I didn't get the chance to see it in person. So maybe this is a good chance for you to describe for me the kind of role playing or simulation work that you've done I think around Cold War history, maybe just explain what that class session or is it a series of class sessions that you do there?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, so because of my role I've always been I've always looked for ways to get in the classroom a little bit more and so it's led to team teaching opportunities the class you're talking about I created a few years ago with Dr. Julie deGraffenried in the history department, who's a Russianist. And I really wanted to team teach a Cold War class, where I would take the U. S.

perspective and she would take the Russian perspective with her depth in Soviet history. And we can go back and forth. And I think that variety of students have appreciated the class. It's been subscribed.

But that semester as being an active learning fellow and having kind of the playroom that is Moody 104 opened up the opportunity to do a Cuban Missile Crisis. So we assigned roles, everything from the press to the Cubans, which were pretty much ignored in the corner, to the Soviets, to the United States, and particular roles within each of those factions. And then gave them kind of a timed exercise where they, different scenarios were presented to them. And they had to solve it and there would be a conclusion, luckily it wasn't nuclear annihilation. In that case the U. S. did give away a lot to reach peace in that iteration of the Cuban Missile Crisis reenactment. But that's something we're going to do again next semester Julie and I are going to do it again. I think it went really well. I think it challenged students to think a little bit differently about content. Because they had to become familiar with the actors that they were representing and how to act truly to the time.

One thing that I highlight in my classes is teaching historical empathy to try to understand the situation that historical actors are dealing with in the period in which they're dealing with it. Culturally, there's a the general belief is everyone in the past was more racist and more stupid than we are now. And that's a problematic, incorrect assumption if we can understand, And I think if we can extend empathy to historical actors a little bit more as I said when I talked about this in September, I think it extends our ability to extend empathy to different people than us in the present and there's a national shortage on understanding and extending empathy to other people. And so I, that was a fun exercise to do. I really I really enjoyed that. That's the first time I had done it. And it took a space like that we could kind of mess with the space to make it happen.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah, so how did the actual space and the furniture and, I don't know, maybe if you use the extra monitors that are in that space, how did that all help with that?

Stephen Sloan: They could use the monitors to there's a simulation platform that they're working with and they could, we could use the monitors to share individual things that were going to each different group, but even how we position them across the room where the Soviets were far away from the US team and there was limited interaction or there were only certain channels through which communication could happen. One to the other. And then we had the media in the mix, trying to make a decision on what they were going to report. As the crisis was ongoing. And then you had the Cubans off to the side

which are trying to get attention mainly from the Soviets. And, again, it's a Cuban Missile Crisis, but the Cubans aren't powerful actors and at least the resolution of it.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah. And if you actually have that space to separate the groups, then you can actually do the thing where it's you have to communicate through these channels and you can't overhear each other.

Stephen Sloan: And they're wanting to listen to each other. Get some sort of back channel intelligence.

Christopher Richmann: So with a slightly different kind of approach to a learning activity like that, how do you prepare the students for that?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah. We had briefs that they did. We spent time, Julie and I both spent time contextualizing the event from either side. Cause you've been, it's obviously this is early 1960s. So we spent time laying a really good foundation on both the United States and the Soviet Union, what their priorities are, what their concerns are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and so that they have a real good grasp on that before we head into the 1960s we had a, students had a good sense of how each side is viewing the Third World by that period and their interaction to what they would call at the time, we call it the developing world now. What they would call the Third World. And I think they had a good context, going into it both generally and on their particular actor that they would be portraying.

Christopher Richmann: And the question that's always coming up along behind any group work or teamwork is assessment. Are you assessing the students and how?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, we are. It's challenging. It is challenging. So it would be there was a level of group assessment where they're all in some sort of cohort. And it would be the kind of a cohort assessment of their role and how they operated within the group. And then a self- assessment that they would do. And so that's something that they submitted to us after the fact. And we use that to do evaluations of their participation in it.

Christopher Richmann: What do you learn about students when you ask them to do self assessment? It's not always a nice window into, I don't know, their psyche or something.

Stephen Sloan: It is, and also I would say you've got to really read it like you would a historical source. You have to think of the creator in the ways

Christopher Richmann: An intended audience and purpose and all that, yeah.

Stephen Sloan: And how do we triangulate that with what their peers are saying? There's a bit of an art to that.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah. One of the things that I really appreciated because I listened to your your lecture that you gave for receiving the Cornelia Marschall Smith Award. You had this beautiful phrase that, that comes out of your own, I think research and scholarly activity as an oral historian live the questions. I'm wondering if maybe you could just set the stage for what that means first in your research, the craft of that, and then how maybe you translate that into working with students.

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, so the root word, the root Greek word of history is *historia*, which is inquiry, asking questions of the past, and there's. If that's what history is, there's a dynamic nature to it, and there's an eve- changing nature to it, because it's not only about asking better questions, it's about who's doing the asking of the questions, and what source material are they using to ask those questions. And so I think outside the discipline you could think of history as a very static sort of thing. Civil War happened If we need an answer about it we can go dust it off and crack the spine and open it up and find the answer. When history is really much more of an ongoing conversation in asking these questions and receiving these answers. I mentioned that I know history is getting better because I know that we have a wider variety of folks that are asking those questions. And they're interested in a lot of things that people are interested in. historians weren't interested in a hundred years ago. And so I love that part about my craft. And, you might criticize it and say that seems really subjective. Part of the, I would say the flowering of history comes with the fact of embracing a level of subjectivity in the work to understand that this is, not purely a science in history, but there's an artistic element to it and history kind of walks that fine line between art and science that I think I find really interesting and really exciting.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah, and there's, a mental shift that has to happen for your students that you hope happens for your students where they start to see history less as a matter of answers and more as a matter of questions. So how do you help the students progress along that line. Is it different for, say, a freshman level, like you teach a freshman level general required course versus you getting to work with majors when they're seniors?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, there's a spectrum there. And there's a variety, and it's easier, of course, with the majors when they're seniors, because they've developed and been thinking on it. When I tell people I'm a historian, I have one of two reactions. This is just out. One, they're, they say, oh, I love history. History is the best experience I've ever had. I love taking history. Or, their eyes roll in the back of their head. Oh my gosh, how could you teach history? I was so bored in history classes. And oftentimes, I'm working with, students that didn't have a great, a secondary experience in the classroom. Sometimes in Texas, and I don't want to pick on coach, but we got to give coach something to do during the day. And in a lot of public schools, coach is teaching history and we can learn a lot by watching the Patriot and Pearl Harbor movie. To a point, being sarcastic there. But I think just the idea of teaching history is something that has a relevance to them. Something that is intimate and not foreign to them. Something that is about asking great questions. It's about analyzing sources. It's about understanding the roots of who we are. That, that part of history is what, that's what we want students to take away from the class. They can ask great questions. They can analyze positions. They can look at source material and assess it. I, I tell students some, even if you don't go on to be a historian if you can do better in arguments with your spouse, it was worth taking a history class. And so that, that goes back to particular dates, particular times, you know I tell students if you want to know when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, you can go look it up if you need the date. But the order in which things happen and the way in which things evolve is extremely important. So chronology is extremely important. Particular dates, particular, particularly in the age of Wikipedia that we're in where, we're, we don't lack for that information anymore. It's at our fingertips if we need it. What we lack for is the ability to really ask a great question and really, the ability to really assess. Sources for their value and draw conclusions and opinions from that, I think is the challenge we have these days.

Christopher Richmann: Yeah, when you're in graduate school and you're doing historical work, it gets knocked out of you pretty quickly that history is about dates and people and events. But I do still, I teach church history. One of the things, like you said, the order of events really matters. I know this is one of the things I'm working on in ongoing iterations of my classes, having some kind of exercise or assignment where they just have to put things in the right order. And I do that in class just as exercises sometimes, but maybe ratcheting that up to the next level of, continually reinforcing. It's the cause and effect, right? That we're trying to get them to think about.

Stephen Sloan: If it's a list of dates, you don't have a connection between those things, but if it's, if it is the cause and effect, there's a thread that's running to see how, and this is a challenge with students, right? Writing the history of X, everything changes, everything evolves, everything has shifts and oftentimes

students see things in just static terms and I'm always pressing students to talk about that may have been true then, but was it true six months later? I don't know, this other thing is happening then it forms and changes and shifts of me.

Christopher Richmann: When I give them, when I give my students, a dozen names in church history, and I ask, folks that we've worked on together, and ask them to put them in order in chronological order and what they get wrong is such a key to me about where I've not done a good job. Cause it's so clear to me, who's contemporary with whom and all that. But when they miss that, I'm like, okay, so I gotta slow down, go back, reinforce these things. It's a really good formative kind of exercise.

Stephen Sloan: It is, yeah, I That's a, that's well said.

Christopher Richmann: You are, as I said, you are your craft is oral history for those who are not versed in that. What is that? How is that different than history? I don't know. Is that...

Stephen Sloan: It has an unfortunate name. So There's a whole, in my methodological field, there's a whole discussion at the, with its professionalization on what we call it. What we call it. And it's really interesting to go back and read those discussions in the 60s and they're like It's probably not the best name, but oral history has gone generic. So we're going to... because it sounds very discipline specific to history. But we I work with people in all sorts of disciplines that are really interested in long form qualitative interviews. They're trying to understand phenomena in their field and they're using kind of grouned theory to do a long-form interview trying to understand the stuff,. So it doesn't have to be a historian. But for me, it, what it, how it impacts how I view history is it's about how I hold my expertise. Because it's saying there's an expertise. When I'm an oral historian, there's an expertise sitting in front of me. There is a truth that I don't know and a truth that I can't tap into. And the closest I can get to that is working with this person to describe their experience and explain their experience in a way that I can begin to grasp and understand it. Now it's framed and enriched by what I know about history. But some of my most satisfying things that happened in an oral history interview, in this long form interview, is when their answer about X completely contradicts anything I think I know about X.

But it is true, because it's their experience with it. And, we all stereotype and generalize is a matter of convenience, but those are often frustrated for me when I'm with someone that talks about here's what my experience was. And so that's what I'm trying to do with an oral history interview. I'm trying to understand

how someone had a first person experience of X, Y, and Z. And because of my work and the way we work at the Institute, I have to remain a bit of a generalist in living history because I might be interviewing you today talking about the history of the ATL, the Academy of Teaching and Learning, but I might be interviewing a survivor of the Cambodian Genocide tomorrow, and I may be interviewing a World War II veteran the next day. And so I that about my, some, I think academics would find that really frustrating because, you want to get in your corners. And stake out your territory in your discipline and then fend it off from all barbarians.

Christopher Richmann: After the mics are off, we'll talk about all the martial imagery you're using for your profession.

Stephen Sloan: But I like the fact that I'm always. It challenges me a bit. I obviously my I've done a lot of local history here in Waco. That was not my area in my PhD training, but I did learn of the importance of local history and some principles of local history. And so I like the general nature with it. But with the world history, we're doing interviews, we're training faculty to do interviews, we're working with undergraduate students to do interviews and graduate students as well. So it, it's always a new project, there's always a new sometimes I'll talk to students about what silence do you want to address with your project, where's the silence in the sources and how do you address that.

Christopher Richmann: That's really good.

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, and so oral history offers an opportunity to do that.

Christopher Richmann: How does the posture, because in some ways when you're doing an oral history interview, the interviewee is analogous to the historical document for more traditional historians. So how is the posture the same or different for an oral historian doing an interview versus a more traditional historian in an archive bending over some historical document?

Stephen Sloan: That's great. Yeah. Yeah. So it very much is you're the what's produced here, and of course it's collaborative. That's one thing, that makes it really different. It is influenced by what you're asking and who you are and what's gonna be created in this interview. So that collaborative nature of it makes it very different. But it is, you're, you are creating a primary source document in this interview that you're doing. I can ask questions, and the questions that I ask are going to shape what this primary source looks like in the end. This primary source is going to have all, the things that all primary sources have. They're going to have miscues, they're going to have distortions, they're

going to have some bias, and there, there is the creating the thing, you and I are creating this oral history, and then there's the using of the thing, how do we use it as a historical source as opposed to other.

But we're doing what we can right now to create something that's very representative of your experience with whatever topic we're dealing with. And so I, I, sometimes I want to enter into that conversation with the other sources I use, and it's a little frustrating. Because I can't. That's the benefit of doing this work. We're a special collection within the libraries here at Baylor, but we're not just curating materials, we're actually creating special collections and doing this, and so I'm very well aware of what we're able to create and what I'm missing in creating, that's another hazard of my job, is the things that I don't get to and don't get to do.

Christopher Richmann: How does the process or even just the mindset of being an oral historian work into your teaching? How do you think you might teach differently than your colleagues?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, it's good. I think that perspective part about really thinking about, as we're in particular periods, I probably teach a little bit more with memoir. I probably teach a little bit more thinking through biography as a tool to teach. What oral history does is it really, grounds the experience of whatever this so you take a topic like World War II seems you know, it's a huge event economically, politically, militarily, globally, it's this huge event. How do you begin to understand it? You begin to understand by grounding it in something. And in oral history, I'm grounding it in a particular story. I think I can do that effectively in the classroom also. I can take this huge, if we're talking about globalization, how do I begin to get a student to try to understand it? Let's just, let's do this thing. Let's try to understand how it plays out in this particular case or for this particular person. And so I, I think in my instruction I lean a little bit more into that as a tool to try to get students to grasp a larger phenomenon and larger processes.

Christopher Richmann: Would you say that shows up also in the primary source reader that you worked on with Julie deGraffenried, too?

Stephen Sloan: It did, yeah. Even the thing we do there at the beginning, and if you've got your copy, I'll sign it.

Christopher Richmann: I don't have it with me, sorry.

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, alright, okay. The students go, yeah, I know you. You wrote that book I had to read. One of the things that I'm proud about that book is we, there's a beginning of each chapter. There's a thing called a 360. And it's just taking a theme and doing a quick kind of spin of so like Indigenous rights. Let's look very quickly around the globe cases of how indigenous are being treated by colonizers.

Christopher Richmann: So it becomes comparative?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, it becomes comparative quickly and also broadens the notion of, okay, here's a thread that is global. You're not just telling me it's global. You're showing me how it's global by giving some evidence of how it's working out in these different cases. And yeah, that was a fun, that was a fun project to do. And, the challenge there was just making choices, right? What do you include and what do you not include?

Christopher Richmann: And what can you get the rights to and what can't you get the rights to. Is there anything else on the horizon for you in your teaching? Any new courses or new approaches that you're wanting to do or planning on?

Stephen Sloan: I'm excited anytime, as a, as an instructor who's now, I'll say I'm in my prime that could be debated, but, I've gotten the position where I teach what I want to teach now and often don't get to teach new courses in that respect. Because I have administrative assignments that limit the number of courses I teach. But, next summer I'm teaching in Baylor in New Zealand.

Christopher Richmann: Oh, nice.

Stephen Sloan: Yeah, so I'm going to teach a course on war and memory in New Zealand. And the students that go with us will look at memorialization of war in New Zealand. But they'll also do some oral history interviews with some Kiwis while we're there. And so that's something that I'm really excited about. That'll be challenging for me to figure out how to, because this actually takes away my writing leave next summer. But it gives me an opportunity to learn something very new, very different from me. But I'll also be folding it into my understanding of World War II, my understanding of Korea, Vietnam, and those sorts of things. But I'm excited about being able to do that class.

And then the other thing that, that I'm working on is a textbook, which would be oral history for public historians. So how do historians that work with the public use and apply oral history. And so that's a, that's a project that I've had online for a while now, but that's my writing project that I'm working on along the

way. And it allows me to coalesce a lot of oral history training stuff that I've done for 20 years now.

Christopher Richmann: And speaking of training, so when you're working with students, what are some of the challenges of getting them proficient in oral history methods?

Stephen Sloan: Yeah it, we, I have a graduate seminar that I teach on this. And, we talk a lot about before we even get to interviewing, why would you want to do a project like this? What's reasonable to try to determine? We need to assess what weaknesses might exist in using this methodology for this approach. And how can we in project planning and execution address those weaknesses? What are the strengths that could come out of this? And how do we think about leveraging those strengths as well? And so it, it takes time. It, it's challenging for a lot of people to take on the mindset of what it means to be a good interviewer. But I, the success is, and the experience that I've seen students have really inspired me to the point that, I do this a lot where I'm meeting with students that want to bring an oral history component to whatever research they're doing. My only demand in that is I want it to be central to your evidence. This is not a... and so as long as they're doing that I'll do what I can to bring them along.

Christopher Richmann: I'm suddenly very aware that I'm interviewing at a professional interviewer. Before I make a fool of myself, I think we'll wrap it up right there. Stephen Sloan, thank you so much for joining the show today.

Stephen Sloan: This is great. I appreciate you having me with you.

Christopher Richmann: Our thanks again to Dr. Sloan for joining the show today. Baylor's Institute for Oral History, the primary source textbook Dr. Sloan edited with Julie deGraffenreid, and Stephen's Cornelia Marschall Smith lecture. If you've enjoyed this or any of our episodes, be sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts, leave us a five-star review, and spread the word about this show. Well, that's our show. Join us next week. It's time for Professor's Talk Pedagogy.