Susan Fiksdal

Interviewed by Nancy Taylor

The Evergreen State College oral history project

May 28, 2019

Final, Part 1a

Taylor: We're going to start recording, and let's see if we get anything. It's Tuesday, May 28, 2019. This is the third interview. We may have lost some things from the second, so this first part is going to be an attempt at reconstruction. Just briefly, in case we lost it, tell the story—I mean briefly—about your deciding to go back to school to get your PhD.

Fiksdal: I think there were two big influences on that decision. One was that it seemed to me to have any power to speak, you really had to have a PhD. The second was that I really wanted to learn more about linguistics. I had had so many questions from students that I couldn't answer. I had bought a number of books, and I had read them, and recommended them to students, but I didn't have a method. I just would go to the UW Bookstore.

My husband agreed, and so we moved for three years to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. It's a small town with a huge university, very liberal, lots of good food, and a good place for children. I had a two-month-old baby, Alex, and Mara, who was four. We moved into married student housing, which was very supportive and good.

Taylor: I'm just amazed that you did this.

Fiksdal: The first year, I found out that before the doctoral work, I would need a master's in linguistics. I thought I could just jump right in. I just didn't know how things worked. They did allow 12 credits from my master's in French to be applied.

So, I got my masters done in a year and a half. Allen had a job, so he was making money. That was very, very helpful because I could afford a preschool for Mara nearby, and I could afford daycare for Alex. Most of the students in married student housing were men from other countries—all the families were from elsewhere in the world, so it was fun. A lot of women took in children, so I chose a Puerto Rican woman to take care of Alex, and she was wonderful.

Briefly, my experience in Ann Arbor was wonderful because I didn't think it was so hard. I was older. Most people who do a PhD, it's when they're young and still indecisive, and are falling in and out

of love, and they have all these other issues. I had a lot of stability because my husband was working. I wasn't falling in and out of love. [laughing]

The second and third years that I was there, they gave me a TA assignment teaching ESL, and that was very nice because it reduced my tuition and gave me a stipend, and an office. And then you just learn so much culturally by doing that kind of work.

There are so many things that you had to know to teach ESL. Ramadan was all-important. You had to know about it, and you had to know about soccer. You had to know what was happening in the soccer world. Those things were universal among the students that we taught, who were, as I say, not English speakers.

I got my pre-reqs done for the PhD, I got all the coursework done, and I even gathered all my data. When I got back to Evergreen, I thought I could finish my dissertation, but, in fact, it's impossible with our full-time jobs. I finally had to take a leave of absence for one spring quarter, and with summer, I finished it. In '85, I taught with Charlie Teske, Ainara Wilder and Meg Hunt. Barbara Leigh Smith, the curriculum dean had asked Charlie to teach in the arts, because she was afraid there was not enough content, that people were just learning to dance or do theater, but they weren't really learning how to think critically and learn other important things for a liberal arts education.

Charlie was placed there, and then I was asked to teach in a program he had conceived of as well—The Making of Meaning. It was just perfect for me, because I was thinking about so many of the things that they, in fact, teach. So after my first lecture, for example, Ainara and Meg came to me and said, "Okay, everything has to change. You have to think about where you are on the stage." Because we were always in the Recital Hall, and they are stage artists, and I was apparently just standing there like a, I don't know, just a stick. I needed to have more animation. They talked to me basically about presentation of self on the stage, and that was what I was working on (in my dissertation), *The Presentation of Self* by Erving Goffman. I was encouraged to start thinking about how to change my teaching style a little bit. So that was great.

Charlie was wonderful because he had so much to say that he could easily fill up time if we needed it. [laughter] You're always scrambling at the last minute. Who's going to do this workshop? What's going to happen? Oh, we forgot this. So he was great. He always had something he could do or that we could all do.

We were teaching first-year students, and Charlie reminded me of one good teaching technique. I was interviewing him for this oral history project and he told me that, early on in the fall, I jumped up

after one of his lectures and I said, "Okay, now, what we're going to do is go back over Charlie's lecture and look at its structure, because it's unusual, and I want you to be able to follow this kind of lecture as well as any other kind of lecture. Let's just be thinking that that's going to happen in your life here at the college."

So, with my notes, I went back over his lecture much more briefly, just talking about the topics, and then how cleverly he related this to that, and how it looked like he was going in a circle off over here, but in fact, all that meant was that we understood this point better. I got to the end and the class just started clapping, and Charlie was just "Ooh! Ooh!" He was so excited. I think we had such better ideas back then for those first-year students.

Taylor: This was called The Art of Meaning?

Fiksdal: This was Making of Meaning. It was a wonderful program where basically, the questions were how do we make meaning, in what ways, and how are we influenced? It was perfect coming back from graduate studies, trying to introduce some topics from linguistics. I wasn't too proud of how I was able to do that. I thought there could have been more, but I did my best at the time.

That spring quarter was when I took my leave. It was a three-quarter-long program, so Betty Ruth Estes stepped in, which was great. I attended the final performances, and the students created a play that was just stunning. I felt that they had delved into the material so much farther than any of us had even thought about when we created that program. It was one of those magical moments at Evergreen, where you see the incredible learning that went on. I guess we guided them, but we certainly didn't have those ideas when we were teaching. That was wonderful.

In that six months, as I said, I finished the dissertation. In the meeting after the dissertation defense, we all went to lunch, and one of my mentors, Frederick Erickson, asked if I would like to publish my dissertation as a book in a series where he was supposed to produce a book, but he didn't have time. I said, "Well, sure!" Not knowing one thing about that. But it seemed like that would be a good opportunity. That work jump started the research I tried to do while I was still teaching, and having a family to manage and all of that. That book was called *The Right Time and Pace: A Microanalysis of Cross-Cultural Gatekeeping Interviews.* It was the first book about really analyzing interviews at a micro level. I looked at pauses, and I counted them.

Taylor: This was your dissertation?

Fiksdal: This was my dissertation, but the editor just said, "Take all references to people you had to refer to, because maybe they were on your committee or whatever. Take out anything too detailed.

Make sure it's pretty clear. Rewrite the intro." Basically that's all I did. I didn't really change it all that much. That was published in 1990.

Taylor: *The Right Time and Pace* came out in 1990?

Fiksdal: Yes. I loved the title because it encapsulated what I was working on, this idea that there's a right time to introduce a new topic, for example, or to try and diffuse a topic in a conversation. You can feel it when you do it wrong. [laughing]

Taylor: Like we've done. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Yeah. And then there's a pace that's going on, which has to do almost with a metronome; that we actually have a very particular tempo that's guiding how we talk all the time. That's really quite interesting, too, so I introduced those topics.

Taylor: Then you came back and you taught full-time?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Taylor: Maybe this is a good time to talk about other coordinated studies programs that stand out, and people that you talked with, and what you learned in the course of that teaching.

Fiksdal: That was what kept me at Evergreen, and kept me teaching, and kept, I think, everyone engaged. When you collaborate, you learn so much from your colleagues and from the students. It's quite exciting. When you're planning a program, you can get a glimpse, but you don't really have a sense until people start unfurling all their ideas, and then you try to connect those ideas for yourself and for the students.

Taylor: Could you talk about how you formed teams, and how you came up with ideas that were useful and good teaching programs?

Fiksdal: I'll tell you one way, which is, I think, a way that a lot of people do it now, unfortunately. One way was in 1990, I wanted to teach with Doranne Crable because she was a friend, and I had helped her get hired at the college. So, I chose to teach with her because she was a friend. I told her about this book that I had read called *Mirror of Language*. She liked mirrors and then she could imagine all kinds of ways they connected to her teaching. Talking is actually a performance, when you think about it, because words are not rehearsed. Sometimes you pretend to rehearse them in your head, but they don't always come out exactly right. So, you are performing, and she was, at that time, in the performing arts teaching Butoh and various other types of theater, so she could see her role.

Then we decided we should have a psychologist, so we asked Carrie Margolin, who we didn't know very well, and that was great. What was unusual about that program was that we were three women teaching it. We were a little afraid when we proposed it. We thought that the deans would insist that at least one man should be in it. Whereas before it was mostly men, one woman maybe, this team was going to be all women.

The program was accepted. Each of us had of a module that we taught. I taught beginning French, Doranne taught beginning performance studies, and Carrie taught some basic psychology. The rest of it was all very connected. But I remember in the '90s, that was the time—in linguistics and in a lot of other areas—people were looking at gender a lot. That was a great topic.

Taylor: That was in the '90s?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Taylor: I can remember the time when it used to be there had to be one woman on each team. Then, for me, too, I started teaching with only women, and that became quite common.

Fiksdal: Yeah, then it became common. Well, let's check to make sure everything is going well.

Taylor: Okay, that's good.