

**Joe Tougas**  
**Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
**November 18, 2022**  
**FINAL**

**Fiksdal:** This is Susan Fiksdal. I'm here with Joe Tougas for our second interview on November 18, 2022. We're going to go back in time a little bit to Joe's first teaching experiences. I'll just ask you to start there, Joe.

**Tougas:** The first college-level teaching experience that I had was when I was in graduate school in the PhD program at Irvine. They had a group of advanced graduate students teaching these little standalone seminar groups with the students who were in the liberal arts track there. This was the second year of graduate school. Usually, they would only allow people who were third-year, fourth-year, more advanced, actually working on dissertations, but I was able to talk my way into one of those halftime teaching position.

When I finished the coursework, [I] came back to Olympia with the idea that I would get whatever teaching was available, but try to live in Olympia with my family. I was talking to people at Evergreen, obviously, but also at Olympic College, and they had a branch campus in Shelton.

So, the first teaching I was doing during that time period was a conventional introduction to philosophy for community college students. The first year I was doing that, I also was hired to teach a four-credit class at Evergreen.

What's interesting about that is I was teaching these four-credit classes—in a sense, the same subject matter because it was called introduction to philosophy—but it was very, very different because I was teaching at the community college and using a textbook that they had chosen. Then, with the Evergreen class, I knew what I wanted to do, and because of the generosity of the deans, I was able to say, "I want to do an introductory philosophy class, but I want to have it structured around dialog and hands-on stuff, the practical application of philosophical principles."

The community college class was about the history of philosophy. The Evergreen one was doing philosophical work that connected with the students' actual lives.

**Fiksdal:** That was exactly what your approach [was] to them all along, so that was really cool.

**Tougas:** Right.

**Fiksdal:** Was I the one that hired you for that class? Because that was a four-credit class. I remember

coming in halftime.

**Tougas:** Yeah. The next year, I taught halftime. I think that was the point at which I was doing the administrative work, the grievance officer stuff, which was also an interesting pairing because—I think that when you hired me, it was to teach a business class.

**Fiksdal:** Oh, that was the very first—I threw you quite a challenge there.

**Tougas:** That was the first eight-credit half-time thing.

**Fiksdal:** And that was in Grays Harbor, so you had to drive there.

**Tougas:** Right. For a while, we were doing it on weekends—it was always a complicated scheme.

**Fiksdal:** It was always complicated. Some people argued that it was good to do one night, like a Wednesday night, and then a Saturday. You may have done that.

**Tougas:** I think I did that at least once.

**Fiksdal:** But I didn't remember it was the first course that I asked you to teach or halftime program, but I remember looking at your resume and seeing, of course, you had the PhD in philosophy, which is terrific, but we desperately needed business, and you had owned The Sign Painting Shop for so long. But what was great was that you were very flexible about that. You could have said, "No, I would prefer X." But you did it, and that was wonderful.

**Tougas:** And it was clear to me that whatever was offered, I would take.

**Fiksdal:** That's probably true. [laughing]

**Tougas:** Which is that whole class of the Road Scholar—you pack up your stuff in a car and you go itinerant.

**Fiksdal:** Until you have a permanent position, you were forced—okay, so tell me a little bit about those early years in Part-time Studies. I think it was called Part-time Studies at the time.

**Tougas:** Yeah.

**Fiksdal:** Later, it changed to Evening/Weekend Studies. But what interests me is that it took us a while—I think a year or two after you got hired—for the faculty to agree to five permanent faculty members in that position. There were lots of others that were contingent, like you, who were fabulous, so there were plenty of people to teach with, but it was not like fulltime. It was a limited group. I was wondering if you remember at all how you formed programs, and how you talked to people, how you chose your teaching partners.

**Tougas:** For most of that time, up until I started teaching fulltime, I was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to teach with anybody who would have me. Basically, teaching whatever I felt I could make a strong case that my background was relevant. I remember having a conversation with Rita Pougiales

and it was about money. It was about what the pay would be, so that brought in the question of experience years.

**Fiksdal:** Yes, right.

**Tougas:** I was thinking, well, I did this teaching at Irvine, and I did this at Shelton and I did this at Evergreen. That was what I had for experience years. Rita was, “No, no, no. We see here that you’re teaching business, and I know you’ve had a business for 10 years.”

**Fiksdal:** And that was relevant.

**Tougas:** There were some other things. Working in classrooms, volunteering at Lincoln [Elementary School], that kind of stuff. Rita went to work and said, “We can do a little here, six months here.”

That’s where I became clear that there was unpredictable curriculum needs and there were people who were trying to fill those needs in a very creative way. That’s what made those activities worthy of being experience years, and I got paid for it.

**Fiksdal:** Yeah. That was our practice I remember, but I think the business, we would only half of that in not 10 years but five. I’m not sure why. Because it wasn’t teaching, but it was relevant. Who did you teach with in Part-time Studies? Do you remember your teaching partners?

**Tougas:** The guy who taught Web design. Arlen?

**Fiksdal:** Oh, yes.

**Tougas:** Space, or something like that.

**Fiksdal:** [Transcriber found Arlen Speights.]

**Tougas:** That was an interesting program because it was community building through the Internet. Arlen was a Web designer. My part of it was to have the students go out into the community and identify non-profit organizations that were doing good work, but it was in Grays Harbor, and how are they ever going to make use of the Internet when there’s nothing offered there that really fits their needs, which is basically to build community around these different organizations.

The YWCA and the YMCA. What were some of the community . . . Oh, there were people who were providing elder services in the community. There were people who were working in tribal communities. All of those different people with their different need—they did have in common that they wanted to be able to use the Internet to build awareness and to provide services.

My job was to get the students out into the community interviewing. A lot of them already belonged to organizations in the community that they could immediately hook up with. Others, it took a little work, but that was the point of it, to get people out there.

They were working in teams, so they were usually two or three together and learning how to

divide up the work of that community building, and to support each other in learning to do Web pages. I think it was a two-quarter program, and by the end of those two quarters, they had all created Web sites with whatever capability they needed for their particular thing. It was a perfect blend of the hands-on, technological, up-to-the-minute with this is what's happening out there in the world.

**Fiksdal:** That was early on, too, so it was a real service to that community. Such an isolated place.

**Tougas:** Yeah.

**Fiksdal:** High unemployment. So, you did your service doubly continuing on at Grays Harbor.

**Tougas:** Yeah, so that was that. Dang, I wish I had . . .

**Fiksdal:** You can fill us in later if you think of other things. That's a good memorable experience, though. I'm glad you brought that up.

Another question I have is, over your years of teaching at Evergreen—which were quite long—did you learn pedagogical approaches or strategies that you ended up using that you found useful that other people had introduced you to.

**Tougas:** Yes. One part of that is the way of using writing as a pedagogical structure. There were a couple of people that really influenced that. [chuckles] Now, I've got a dozen different programs popping up and fitting together.

But the use of writing in connection with community dialog and community building, I think I got ideas about that by looking over the shoulder of Sam Schragger and Matt Smith, in particular. And then there is the work that I did with Nancy Koppelman—with Nancy, we taught together just the two of us. But then, we taught, in addition to that, in three-person faculty teams.

What was going on there in terms of the pedagogical development was discovering ways to use different content materials in the learning of the writing skills. The writing fulfilled a dual purpose. It challenged students to develop just the craft of writing. Sometimes it was fiction. Sometimes it was creative non-fiction. Those kinds of writing activities.

But they were always aimed at getting the students to think about the things in their daily lives that they could articulate in these different kinds of writing assignments, usually developing over the length of the quarter, and going through a series of stages of outlining, researching, drafting the standard, the step-by-step structure for the writing process. And always making use of the content expertise of whoever it was I was teaching with.

That was where teaching with Nancy was so rich because of her understanding of history, the writing of history and the critique of history. That was very rich for the students. What really nurtured the collaboration with my teaching partner was that we brought different skills and different teaching

goals, and then we challenged ourselves to demonstrate to the students how that worked.

Don Finkel, of course, was another influence. The ideas from his work that I could apply to the activities that happened in the classroom with the seminars and with the individual projects, encouraging students to really identify topics that they were genuinely interested in.

I remember talking a lot with Nancy when we were developing a syllabus. We would start with a stack of books. Then, as we were working through the thematic trajectory of the program, narrowing down, focusing in, Nancy was always bringing in these wonderful short pieces of writing that we could have the students really tear them apart . . .

**Fiksdal:** . . . and to do close reading.

**Tougas:** Yeah.

**Fiksdal:** How did summer institutes help? Did you go to those?

**Tougas:** Oh, yeah. Partly as a self-recruitment tool [chuckles] to get to know other faculty. Partly, I remember some of the Summer Institutes were very contentious. I think that was partly because we were trying so hard to nurture all the different teaching ambitions of our colleagues.

I remember one discussion about how we used writing, and this idea of Writing Across the Curriculum. One of my teaching partners said, "We're supposed to be doing Writing Across the Curriculum but what we're really doing is typing across the curriculum." [laughter]

**Fiksdal:** That's a very interesting statement.

**Tougas:** Yeah. One of the first full-time programs I taught in was a health and human development program that I taught with Bret Weinstein. One of the things about Bret is he didn't read books. He didn't like to plan. He was very attuned to his own idiosyncratic interests, which drove me crazy.