

Susan Fiksdal
Interviewed by Nancy Taylor
The Evergreen State College oral history project
May 28, 2019
Final, part 1b

Taylor: Now we're on ZOOM 1, folder 4. We're an hour into a conversation on May 28, 2019 with Susan Fiksdal. We were just talking about programs that you taught, people that you learned from, and things that you learned about teaching, and about content, and about students. That's where we are.'

Fiksdal: I think one of the things that Carrie Margolin was really surprised at when we were planning the program is that Doranne Crable—after we got a big, long list of books and various kinds of texts and various kinds of things that wanted to do—said, "Okay, now let's look at this list and make sure that we have women, people of color, a good range of texts that will bring more to the program." Carrie had never thought about doing that before, and I think that was an eye-opener for her.

I enjoy doing that kind of thing, too, because often, you find sources that you didn't know existed. I don't remember a lot more about that program, but I remember I taught a lot about gender and conversation.

Taylor: What was it called?

Fiksdal: Mirrors of Language. We added an "s" so that we would have at least three mirrors for the three of us that were teaching. The students really loved it, and that was a great program.

Taylor: Were they first-year students?

Fiksdal: Yes. That was the year that I taught Carrie Brownstein the first time. She worked with me again about four years later. The program was interesting because I remember one good thing we did. It was a three-quarter-long program. We decided not to move the students from their seminar groups or their faculty sponsor. The students were with us all year, so that we really knew them, and we knew the other students because each of us taught a module and we had lots of workshops.

I think that was the only program I was able to argue successfully for that structure, and it was the only time that I felt that students were learning in a very deep way. Students didn't drop out. Even though they were having other kinds of experiences in the program, we had this wonderful continuity. I

remember at the end they had to all sorts of things, and one was to produce magazines. Another was performance. I think linguistics and psych were connected in the magazine and in the performances. It sounds silly—“Oh, they made magazine”—but it was wonderful. They were like zines, which was very popular at the time so the students really loved it, and they poured their hearts and souls into it. Lots of creativity—in photography, and in drawing, and in writing.

The reason I mention Carrie is that she became a very famous singer and guitar-player artist in her band, Sleater-Kinney. It’s going to come back now after all these years. She also has collaborated in a TV program called *Portlandia*, which was really amusing. She has written an autobiography, and I am actually mentioned in it! She loved sociolinguistics, and I think it helped her a lot in thinking about conversation. I think it helped her in *Portlandia*. She was a great student.

Taylor: Are there other students that stand out that you know you made a difference for?

Fiksdal: Amy Hitchcock worked a lot with me because she loved linguistics, and she was so smart, and she would do everything better than I ever would imagine. I wanted to help her get to graduate school, I remember. So I took her up to the UW when I was invited there by a former professor of mine, a mentor. She was a bigwig then. She had become a star in linguistics. So I said, “Well, let’s go see Penny Eckert and listen to her talk.” Her talk was just fabulous.

I introduced Amy to her. We didn’t talk a lot, but I just wanted Amy to see that you have your teacher, and your teacher can be your mentor. That’s how it works. But I think it just helped to freak her out. She is a very anxious student. She started teaching ESL in Shelton. That’s a place a lot of students have gone because there’s a large population of Guatemalan and Central American people. She was teaching adults. She got interested in that, and she got her master’s in adult development. She’s really done well for someone with all that anxiety and brilliance.

I had only one quarter I taught Intro to Linguistics at some point early on, like in the ‘80s, and Rick McKinnon took the course. I didn’t really remember everything about him then, but several years later, he was back in town because he had grown up here, and he had gotten his PhD in psycholinguistics. He told me he owed it all to me because of that one course. He didn’t owe me anything! A psycholinguist looks at how children learn language and develop. He ended up going into another field. I hired him for a while to teach at Evergreen, because he was excellent.

Then Siri Mehus was one of my wonderful students as well, and she got a PhD in communication, after only two quarters with me. I had her working on an early project I was doing of studying seminar talk. She helped with that. She was amazing.

In my class she took part, with two other students, in a study that ultimately failed. What they were trying to do was record people as they were leaving a venue, and they decided to go to a small church. They were recording people as they were leaving to try and figure out, how do people leave? It's really hard sometimes to stop talking. You stand out on the porch and pretty soon you're walking down the driveway, you're standing at the car. What is it that's keeping people there, and how do people stop the conversation? But unfortunately, as they were doing the study, the participants began to realize what they were doing and asked them, "Are you trying to figure out what we say as we leave?" The experiment got ruined that way. The participants in a study can't know what you're doing because then they adjust. They may help you out or they do something that's not natural. We wanted naturally occurring conversation at all times. We also videotaped for that reason, because there's always non-verbal interaction going on.

Taylor: Is this out of the program Art of Conversation? Is that where that came from?

Fiksdal: Yeah, it is. That's where it came from. Anyway, she was brilliant. She went to the University of Texas at Austin. Then she was free one year. She called me up and said she was back in Seattle, doing not much. I think she had a job but it just wasn't too interesting. That fall quarter, I was going to teach Art of Conversation again, and I had something like 34 students crammed in the room.

I told them how hard it was going to be; that I was really tough; that they'd have so much work; that it had to be 40 hours a week commitment or else. I just went on and on to get rid of them, because I needed 25 not 34. They all said, "We're not leaving." I said, "Okay, let's have a break. This is your chance to escape and then we'll talk some more, and we'll do a little exercise." None of them left.

Tom Wolmeldorf was the Dean of Curriculum at the time. I talked to him and I said, "You know, I have a former student who has a PhD, and she'd be fabulous. If we could hire her, even half-time, then she could help me out in this program. She already knows the material, and probably knows more than I do." So he hired her.

Taylor: Wow! What was her name?

Fiksdal: Siri Mehus. She was fabulous. She was younger than me, and she, it turned out, was tougher than me in grading assignments and things. I thought I was still tough, but I had loosened up apparently. [laughing] That was so much fun because we knew each other's expertise. She had gone more into non-verbal communication. I had developed this program since she had left, so it was different than what she had done. But she loved it, and she suggested a couple things that we, of course, did. It was only one quarter, but I wish it could have been longer.

Taylor: The students did well?

Fiksdal: They did very well. They were happy. You never heard them say, “Oh, I wanted you, not Siri, for my seminar leader.” You didn’t hear anything like that. We were really in tune.

Taylor: Where did the [*A Guide to Teaching*] *Effective Seminars* book come from?

Fiksdal: This came much later, so I’ll wait till we get to that topic.

Taylor: Okay.

Fiksdal: But for all of the ‘90s, I was working on videotaping seminars. The money came from an assessment grant that we got somehow. Steve . . . hmm . . . right-hand arm for Barbara [Smith] . . . Steve . . .

Taylor: Hunter?

Fiksdal: Hunter. Steven Hunter had assessment money. Faculty could apply for it and work in the summer. I had been videotaping seminars during the year, so I started to analyze the data that summer. And I wrote two monographs for the college—one called *Seminar Talk* and the other called *Getting a Word In*. Both of those were circulated to the faculty. I don’t know if anyone read them. They were linguistic, because I had chunks of what people actually said in seminar, and I had quotes from what they said out of seminar when they were looking at the videotape, what they meant and what they thought was going on. It was very eye-opening to me.

I kept working on this idea of seminars. I wanted to write a book, but boy, there wasn’t much time. I did go to conferences regularly, and I did sometimes present. I didn’t always present, and that kind of saved me, because I think if I had tried to always do it, I probably would have gone nuts.

Yeah, those were some amazing students. I’ll think of others as we’re talking.

Taylor: Thinking about seminars, seminars are such a central part of the classic Evergreen programs. Obviously, you came to be a believer. But talk about how your teaching changed, in terms of philosophy and in terms of what you felt was important, or how you changed as a teacher over the course of many, many years.

Fiksdal: We also had a grant in the early years called the Libby Grant—you might remember—where some faculty, I think they got a little training or something, and then they got to go into people’s classes and observe, and then report back what they observed. Nancy Allen came into my seminar, and I thought I was just doing this great job. I thought we had this great seminar. I was pretty excited to talk to her afterwards. Her first, and pretty much only, comment was “Well, you teach seminar as though it

were a language class.” And I said, “What?” [laughter] She said, “Well, you keep looking around the room expecting someone to answer the question that you have, that you asked. So you put people on the spot. They feel like they have to respond.” I said, “But they did, and we had a really good seminar.” [laughing] She said, “Yeah, but that’s not usually the way.” That was long before I even knew what discourse analysis was.

The one thing that really annoyed me about the way we did our program planning, always—this was always true, as far as I know—anyone I talk to, every way I always did it—our seminars were always at the same time, so how could you visit someone else’s seminar? You could if you left your students alone, but basically, you always feel you have to be with them, so you never know how everyone else is doing things, so you have to figure it out on your own.

I interviewed a whole lot of faculty about these very questions, like, “How do you know what to do?” Most of them said, “You know, I really don’t know how to do it.” [laughing] Even when I brought Peter Elbow back years and years after he had left the college—he was there in the early years for quite a while, 10 years or so?

Taylor: Might be.

Fiksdal: Then he came back much later when we needed a good writing workshop for the faculty. I chatted with him at lunch and at dinner, and I asked him about seminars. I asked him about all kinds of things, practices in the early years that we thought were so important to continue. He said, “I never did understand seminars. I never did a good job, I’m sure.” [laughing] I just thought, how many of us were like that?

I think by studying seminars in my way, the way I was trained to do—to analyze discourse and to look at various ways people use to signal what’s going on in the conversation—I became a better listener. I was not asking all the questions, and I was encouraging students, even if they could blurt out only a few words, I would either help them develop that, or if they really couldn’t, I would sort of ask everyone to help with that thought. I got much more collaborative and better at facilitating. And the students always liked my seminars.

Taylor: Seminars were always the center of your programs?

Fiksdal: They were. They did go down to one time a week sometimes in various programs, because of the other things that we needed to do, who I was teaching with, how much they were on campus, all those kinds of things. There’re so many programs, so it’s hard to remember exactly which ones were like that, but that did occur, I remember.

Going back to great programs and collaborations, I wanted to mention Hype and Hucksters that I taught with Ginny Hill. This was a program she had taught before, I think at least twice. It was her program. That's another way you can do program planning—you walk into someone else's program, and then you create space in it for more questions. She was just really open to anything because she loved linguistics, and she wanted a partner in this program.

The program was all about marketing and hyping things. We started with the autobiography of George Barnum, for example. It was so fun to teach with her. She was really tough, and I liked her manner in class. I couldn't really quite adopt it because I wasn't her, but she was the stronger force, one would say.

Taylor: What did you learn from her?

Fiksdal: I learned to stay in control, like when the students start talking and going off on tangents—you know, just bring them back and don't mince words. Also she had this thing about getting work done. She would just say, "As it says in our covenant, if you can't get it done"— No incompletes." That was a real breakthrough to be more definite about how students have to get the work done, and on time. Work can be late, but not much of it can be late. Things like that. She helped me with my work life [laughing] so it wasn't so horrible.

Taylor: In terms of content, I always thought that team teaching was the best faculty development imaginable.

Fiksdal: Oh, yes.

Taylor: Because you're teaching with people that know things that you don't know, and that you need to know to teach the programs. So, you learn.

Fiksdal: Oh! I learned.

Taylor: Do you have examples of where that happened?

Fiksdal: Ginny had these case studies from Harvard. They focus on particular businesses, and what happened to them. These Harvard students would go out and research and talk to actors in various businesses. One of her favorites, I remember, was California Dried Plums. They used to be called prunes, but they rebranded to become plums. The marketers thought maybe they would sell better. This whole case study is very interdisciplinary. It looks at how it's marketed on TV and in jingles and on radio. It looks at brochures. It looks at everything. The students had to learn how to do all those things.

So what was I supposed to do? I didn't know anything about branding. It was kind of a dirty word even at the college because people kept saying that we needed to rebrand Evergreen, and all of us were like "Ooh! What's that? We don't want that!" I learned about it and decided that it wasn't bad, it was very interesting. It's clever, and it's what people do anyway. Criminals often rebrand themselves. People just become someone else, and that's what they do. I learned a lot from her in that.

Fitting in some exercises on discourse was perfect, so I taught them a lot about how to make messages prominent, and how to write ads so the most important things are there, and how people talk, and how it all matters. It was fun.

Then I taught Designing Languages with Judy Cushing twice. That was just a one-quarter program, but it was so much fun. I would teach Introduction to Linguistics. It's not really what I liked to do. It's the structure of language, so students get an overview of language—it has sound, it has little meaningful parts, like "ly" makes it an adverb. It's a morpheme. Then how syntax is created, and semantics, how things mean. Pragmatics goes beyond the sentence in terms of meaning, and that's my area.

I'm teaching all this, and then she's teaching computer science. Students are actually learning a little computer language that she's having them do that creates things. Then they're supposed to design a language at the end in groups. It can be a so-called natural language, or it can be a computer language. That was really fun. I was meant to learn a lot more from her than I actually did. I found it very frustrating that my math skills were not quite up to par, but teaching with her twice helped.

The second time, Brian Walter came into the program, unfortunately just part-time. We wanted to have him full-time. But I could ask him questions about what she said, and somehow it was very clear. He's very clear.

Taylor: Yes, because he's a mathematician and a systems analyst or something like that.

Fiksdal: He knows a lot about computer programming. He knows several languages. Whereas for me, I was dipping my toe in. But it was great because it was cross-disciplinary and fun.

Judy learned a lot of linguistics, so the second time we taught together, she was able to help students when they were working on problems. I didn't feel comfortable helping students on their problems with her side, I have to say, but I did learn a lot about computer languages—that was good—and how they're designed.

Taylor: I so often think about teaching at Evergreen versus teaching other places, and the opportunities that we had just kept us there, because it was constant.

Fiksdal: It was constant.

Taylor: We were always learning new things and always having to go out beyond our comfort. It was never boring.

Fiksdal: No, it was never boring. And you never know what's going to happen. Like one time, I was just having lunch, and Jose Gomez sat across from me, and we were talking. It turned out neither of us had an idea of what we were doing in a couple of years. Then we kind of looked at each other and I said, "Well, I guess we could teach together—language and law." I didn't know what else to say about it. That became our program, Language and Law, because we didn't quite know.

It wasn't until I really started teaching with Jose that he started to understand what linguistics was all about. No one knows what linguistics is, in the first place. You just have this sense of, I don't know, something about diagramming sentences. But there's a lot, and he already had a lot to say also about the language of law itself.

He had taught his own program alone so many times before, and he loved to have the students have a Supreme Court where they're the judges, and they're the attorneys, and they have real cases that are in the appellate court but not decided yet. He would love to do that. Other people had said to me, "Watch out. He's going to do that, and the end is just all about the Supreme Court, and it's not about your work or what students learn overall."

I said, "Let's think about the end of the program." And I made sure that while they were planning this Supreme Court, a dry run, we did something called Presentation of Self. The students videotaped each other presenting arguments, and then analyzed it. The next week, they actually did the Supreme Court. He had a lot of accoutrements and a lot were from Harvard, so we were joking around about that a lot. He had graduated from Harvard. That's a very big deal for a migrant farmer's son, someone who had worked with Caesar Chavez. He had gone to Harvard, but he did mention it a few too many times. [laughter] I, having only gone to the University of Michigan, made a few comments once in a while, and the students kind of picked up on this.

We had the third week before evals and I thought, oh, let's have them do these creative projects, and meanwhile, we can be writing. I was always trying to figure out a way to make evaluations easier. They never were, but this was one more idea.

One group did a little play that was absolutely hysterical. They made fun of Jose by playing a little song “You’re So Vain.” [laughter] Then showing some Harvard symbols. They interviewed him and me at the end of it. It was all really crazy, but it was about the program. At the end, they talked to him, supposedly years later. They said, “So, do you remember teaching Language and Law with Susan Fiksdal?” He says, “No, I don’t remember her. Who is that? No idea.”

But I didn’t know what he said. They interviewed me, and I decided to just walk into this classroom, and I started speaking French. The whole thing is in French, and every once in a while, they said, “Now she says she wants chocolate.” [laughing] They didn’t know what I was saying!.

This was just a real hit in the program, because everyone showed their creative pieces. That one was so nice, so I gave it to Greg Mullins to put in Archives because, as you know, Jose died too soon, and now we have this joyous piece of a program where students are being creative.

That was a wonderful program, and I learned so much about constitutional law. We’ve had so many attorneys on the TV talking about our presidents and things they’re doing or shouldn’t be doing or whatever. In the Bush years, I really understood when attorneys got interviewed why they talked the way they did, how they diverged a little bit from the question in order to go over here and talk about this. I thought, I have learned so much about attorneys, and ways of talking about things, somehow through this program, that I hadn’t realized.

Taylor: That’s super.

Fiksdal: Besides things you could point to, like I knew a bunch of cases by then, and I could cite the date. Jose was really fun to work with.

Taylor: But very principled.

Fiksdal: He knew his stuff. He also was one of these people who—he’s a person of color. His background is Mexican American. He had been born in the United States. But he told the students in his seminar they could say anything they wanted, and I told him I just couldn’t do that in my seminar. I said, “If they hurt someone by saying something racist, I’m going to have to stop them.” And he said, “Well, let’s just say that we do what we do.” That was really helpful because I was really nervous.

Taylor: He was very interested in the First Amendment.

Fiksdal: Yes, for him, the First Amendment—and we read a counter-argument to the First Amendment. I’ve forgotten the name that he had at that point for those attorneys, but they talked about how words do hurt, and how you shouldn’t be allowed to just say anything you want. That debate, of course, has

gone on forever, and it's in the academy and it's outside the academy. But he was strongly for the First Amendment and I was not.

We decided to group all Hispanics and people of color that we knew about into my seminar. I don't know why we didn't put them in José's, but that's just what we did. We wanted to have a critical mass so that students of color wouldn't be divided in the program. Usually you have one or two, and their personalities and backgrounds are different, so it doesn't really help them feel safe, and we wanted them to feel safe. However, there was a problem, because one of the students didn't have a Hispanic name but she was Hispanic and she confronted us. I didn't really know what to say except "I'm sorry."

Taylor: Just a sideline. My small story about Jose, he was on the committee to select the President when Jane Jervis was selected. I was chairing that committee. He was the most important person on the committee. He was just amazing in terms of questions, in terms of the clarity of what he stood for. He worked really hard on that committee. He was very, very helpful. That's the only time I really got to know him because I never taught with him, I just worked with him when he was working in the deans' office.

Fiksdal: But you did a terrific job. You really did.

Taylor: But that was a terrific search. I think one of the reasons it was good is that there was no insider. We were genuinely looking for the best person we could in the country. The committee, in the end, was 100 percent behind Jane, and she turned out to be wonderful. But Jose was very, very important.

Fiksdal: I think he was the leading person also—he would never say it—when we created the union. He, with his legal training, understood the current contractual language that was needed. And he knew how to negotiate, and he knew how to clarify. He was very good with that.

I remember when we wrote our first evaluations for each other—because it was a two-quarter program. You'd send the seminar evaluations—and I can't quite remember how we divided up that program, but I think I had two evaluations per student, depending on whether they were in my seminar—to give to him. He critiqued my evals and said I couldn't be just saying "excellent." I was trying at the time to write really short evaluations, because there was a group that was trying to get us to do that and I believed in that. But anyway, he really cared about words. He was an attorney. Every word matters. Yeah, he was an amazing person.

Taylor: He was a wonderful member of the faculty, and he came in through difficult times. The college was full of people that were, in a way, unlikely members of the faculty that really were important to the [college].

Fiksdal: Early on, we had an attorney, Hap Freund—do you remember him?

Taylor: Yeah.

Fiksdal: I got to be friendly with him because we both were going to go to Mexico at the same time. I think he went to the language school, too. I was just more advanced, so I wasn't in the same class, and I didn't see him either. But anyway, we talked about it a lot the year before we left.

He was teaching in that program Lawmakers/Lawbreakers, and the lawbreaker was an ex-con, Jim Martinez, who was such a nice guy. I'd run across him in the hall, and he really had pearls of wisdom.

Taylor: But in the end, I guess, I don't know if he got fired.

Fiksdal: Yeah, he got fired. It didn't quite work out, but he was a good person. Yeah, that was an unusual combination of people. They weren't hired long-term, as I recall. But that idea, Lawmaker/Lawbreaker was a good one.

I think Cruz Esquivel, even though he had to be fired, too, because he wasn't quite truthful on his resume, he was quite an amazing person. He wasn't someone who really was rigorous or could adhere to a college or university, but he was smart.

Taylor: I don't think the college now, in hiring, dares take that kind of risk.

Fiksdal: No, they don't.

Taylor: There were all kinds of cases where people were hired, and I think there was a known gamble at the time.

Fiksdal: Yeah, exactly. This is a liberal arts college. You don't want people in professions. You don't want an engineer, you don't want certain kinds of professionals necessarily. And yet, José was able to adapt so well, and excite the students about law. A lot of them, after working with him, didn't want to go into law anymore. His programs helped clarify what the law really was.

I was really happy, in the last years I taught, I took to heart—and I cannot remember who said this to me, but someone—it was probably Barbara—said, “You need to mentor the new faculty. That's what older faculty should be doing in their last years at the college, instead of just teaching alone.” Because, you know, as deans, we saw older faculty teaching alone quite often.

And so in the last years of my teaching, I really reached out to new faculty. I taught with Heather Heying. I taught with Rachel Hastings, which was absolutely fabulous. She's a linguist and a mathematician, and has PhDs in both, which made me very nervous to even approach her, but she's a wonderful person. We taught together so happily. She's quite a versatile faculty member. She's going to be one of the best hires we ever made. Brian Walter, too, is one of those people that can really spread his wings, as he's shown by teaching with Steven Hendricks and doing a lot with narrative and that kind of work.

Taylor: And improv.

Fiksdal: He's great at that. I took his improv class because I was teaching with him. Actually, I'll talk about that later, about why I took improv with him. Maybe we should move on?

Taylor: Okay.