

# Pedagogy A-Go-Go\_ s02e04\_KarinDonahue\_KateCrassons

Wed, 12/11 11:42PM 1:05:06

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, karin, classroom, autistic, people, neurotypical, book, class, kate, autism, teaching, college, question, understand, feel, pedagogy, speak, read, teacher, learned

## SPEAKERS

Gina Turner, Tom O'Connor, Karin Donahue, Kate Crassons

-  Gina Turner 00:00  
1234
-  Gina Turner 00:03  
Pedagogy A-Go-Go, Pedagogy
-  Gina Turner 00:08  
go go go
-  Gina Turner 00:12  
Hello and welcome to Pedagogy-a-go-go a podcast about college faculty sharing what happens in their classrooms and why. This is season two episode four flexibility in the neuro-diverse classroom and we are your hosts Gina Turner and Tom O'Connor.
-  Gina Turner 00:33  
Hello, Tom.

T Tom O'Connor 00:34  
Gina, how are you?

G Gina Turner 00:35  
I am doing fine. Yeah, it is good to see you again. So soon.

G Gina Turner 00:39  
Yes, yeah,

G Gina Turner 00:40  
we're just recording these things back to back.

T Tom O'Connor 00:43  
We've been knocking them out.

G Gina Turner 00:44  
Yes.

T Tom O'Connor 00:45  
It's starting to feel like a like a real shot. We were talking about these like Netflix seasons and I feel like this is it. This is the season finale.

G Gina Turner 00:52  
Yeah.

T Tom O'Connor 00:53  
And we planned a big one.

G Gina Turner 00:55  
Yes, I guess this is a big one because we have two guests.



Tom O'Connor 00:58

We have two guests. We're changing it up and I really want to do my best Monty Python voice and a now for something completely different. But like, I really think this is both because the format of the show I know you know, we had Kelly Allen on our show runner and and Jeff who does all the amazing work behind the scenes and we kind of had a roundtable but we genuinely have two, you know, two professors on today one from Northampton, one from Lehigh University, Karin Donahue, who is a professor of psychology here here at NCC and for 30 years, was was a behavioral specialist consultant. And she just recently wrote a book with with Kate Crassons, who teaches medieval literature and is just teaching actually a class this semester on neuro diversity and literature. So she's in the English department at Lehigh University. I had the great good fortune to have her as a professor of mine Actually, she just started as Professor there like one year after when I began as a graduate student there,



Gina Turner 01:57

okay,



Tom O'Connor 01:57

and she taught an absolutely Magnificent medieval class and that means a lot for me because I was not a medievalist, and I still you know, have distant memories of throwing Piers Plowman across the room in the Middle English.



Gina Turner 02:10

I don't know what any of that means



Tom O'Connor 02:11

Really, get back to me. Well, if anyone has tried to read Piers Plowman in the Middle English, they know exactly what I mean.



Tom O'Connor 02:18

Okay.



Tom O'Connor 02:19

But she was fabulous and managed to bring amazing material alive but what we're bringing them in today because they are just releasing right around the time this episode airs at this December, a brand new book that they wrote together called Right From the Start: A Practical Guide For Helping Young Children with Autism. Kate's son, well, I'm gonna let them speak to it. But Kate's son is autistic. And he works closely with Karin Donahue. They've had a relationship for many years since 2014. And this book is the amazing product of that relationship. And I think this is going to be a really amazing resource for students of neurotypical or not neurotypical children as well as an amazing resource for educators as well, and it's certainly written to both of them. So I want to get into that discussion as quickly as possible. But first and foremost, you gave me some homework, some extra credit.

**G** Gina Turner 03:13  
I did.

**T** Tom O'Connor 03:14  
I always want to call them extra credit homework. It's still work I do at home, even if it's extra.

**G** Gina Turner 03:18  
Yeah.

**T** Tom O'Connor 03:19  
So do you want to say again, what the extra credit you assigned me was?

**G** Gina Turner 03:24  
Sure. Yes. So I asked you about a formal experience as a student and what you took from it

**T** Tom O'Connor 03:33  
Exactly right. Basically, like the last time I was formerly a student, and I laughed, and I was like, Haha!, you think you've asked me a difficult question, but I was just a formal student. And it's actually why two episodes ago, Kelly Allen was so kind as the sub in for me. And so I said, I would tell that story today. So about two episodes ago, when Kelly Allen filled

in, I was actually in Philadelphia for a two day training seminar ran early in the morning till late in the evening. And it was a really wonderful experience to be a student in a room again, there were three instructors for the course. And I was surrounded by people from colleges all around the country. Many of them not from academic backgrounds, many of them who were lawyers, and I felt at times wildly out of my depth. It was a topic I knew I had some passing familiarity with the topic being discussed that day. But I learned a lot about myself and I learned a lot about what it is for our students to feel a little uncomfortable in the classroom. This has always happened to me when I'm observing a math class, right? You know, I'm like, I'm drowning. I'm trying to follow this and I just don't have what it takes. And by the end of the two day training, I did feel like I learned enough that I could come and embrace a new role here at the college based on that training. And so like I kind of went through this whole little students journey It was like a you know, Eugene O'Neill play, you know, Long Day's Journey Into Darkness or journey Oh, I'm getting the play wrong. It doesn't matter. Just look bad student again.

G

Gina Turner 04:59

But I think it's a Great point to remind ourselves, those of us who are in the front of the classroom, what it feels like to be out of our depth for sure. So I think it reminds me of an experience I had a couple summers ago, where I went on a tour with someone who was conducting the tour in French. And I barely remember my high school and college French. So I was really trying really hard to follow what he was saying. And he was so sweet because when he turned to the English speakers, he would speak really slowly. In French still so you know, that's

T

Tom O'Connor 05:37

like any good French teacher.

G

Gina Turner 05:39

Yeah, exactly. Or just any person who's trying to speak in their own language to someone who doesn't speak the language as though going slower is helpful.

T

Tom O'Connor 05:42

And they say it louder too

- G** Gina Turner 05:48  
Right he did it with a lot of facial expressions and gesticulation. But it was really valuable for me to remember what it is like to be understanding 30% of what's going on, right? And because you do you check out and you feel, you know, you feel like Oh, man, I can't do this. And you You're so
- T** Tom O'Connor 06:15  
right. I mean, you feel it your depth, but if you double down on it, suddenly you find yourself understanding a little bit more French. I want that experience today? I want this to be out of our depth because I anticipate that we're going to learn a lot today.
- G** Gina Turner 06:28  
Yeah, I think that's true. But I think it also speaks to what they're talking about, which is this idea that our students are coming from very different perspectives and have very different understandings of the world when they come into our classrooms, and they might very well feel out of their depth for myriad reasons. So, without further ado,
- T** Tom O'Connor 06:47  
let's get these two in here so we can talk to them.
- G** Gina Turner 06:51  
If you had just one word to describe yourself
- G** Gina Turner 06:55  
as a teacher, what would it be?
- T** Tom O'Connor 07:00  
So we're in the studio today with Karin Donahue, NCC Professor of Psychology and Kate Crassons, a Lehigh professor of medieval literature and teaching, I just found out, what was the title of the course again Kate.
- K** Kate Crassons 07:16

It's called Neuro Diversity and the Literary Imagination.



Tom O'Connor 07:19

I love. Yeah. So and we couldn't be more excited to have the two of you in the studio today. You have a book coming out in just a few weeks that we were privileged to get at least the sneak peek look at earlier and but I guess, now that we have you in the studio today, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to work on this project together?



Karin Donahue 07:45

It's all her fault.



Kate Crassons 07:49

Let's see. I met Karin in 2013. At the time, I had a four year old who was in pre-K and was having some just challenges and difficulties getting through the day these it's sort of been ongoing, but he was at a new school and the teacher suggested that we get him enrolled in this program called wraparound care, provider 50, that would provide a behavioral specialist consultant and therapeutic support staff to come in during the school day and help, you know, set up some structures for him to be more more successful. And Karin by happenstance was assigned as his behavioral specialist consultant and as she worked with him and us as a family, he made a lot of progress. But the program lasted with him anyway for you know, multiple school years so as we shifted to different schools Karin came along with us, and I wouldn't let her go anyway. And we just saw that there was a real need for the immense amount of knowledge and expertise and resources she was providing every new place. She would walk in and the teachers would be like, "Wow, this is so helpful." And then she'd find herself doing presentations and lecturing on autism. And we just came to realize that there was a real need for resources. Because there's lots of kids like my son out there and programs and, you know, teachers can use support.



Karin Donahue 09:30

Kate asked me "Karin, would you like to write a book, you should really write a book." I just like laughed. I'm like, "Yeah, that's a great idea." She's like, "No, you should write a book."



Karin Donahue 09:39

And so we decided to write the book together, because we really wanted this book to

have both the clinicians perspective and the parents perspective, which we really think is essential.

**G** Gina Turner 09:50

It's really enjoyable to read because of that, too. As Tom mentioned, we got to have a sneak preview of it and it's readable. Because it is the story of a family and the story of a particular child and obviously other examples as well. But I love the way you guys have structured it to include the research and and to give the definitions and things like self regulation at the beginning to,

**K** Karin Donahue 10:16

you know, that was really our goal is we really wanted to set a foundation for understanding, like let's really understand how come children on the autism spectrum are behaving the way that they do because they frequently get mislabeled that they're oppositional, they're stubborn. And so we really wanted to increase the knowledge out there like this is what's going on to these kids brains. This is what's going on, that they're struggling behaviorally, and then really focusing on strategies like this is really a how to guide.

**G** Gina Turner 10:48

It's so great that it's practical. And the other thing that I really, I thought that was really valuable to me was the fact that your son is is high functioning right that is defined as high functioning that you wouldn't necessarily label him with autism. And I think that's the case with so many of the students that we get obviously much older, you know, college age and above students, or traditional college age above students who, we wouldn't know that they have autism. But just to recognize, these behaviors are outcomes of the explanations that you've given, I think are really helpful. So do you find that, I'm really interested in the way you guys have talked about this idea of flexibility and self control your smiling Karin, and why are you smiling?

**K** Karin Donahue 11:39

I just came out of class where I was teaching about flexibility. Okay. Yeah.

**T** Tom O'Connor 11:44

Can I just say quickly, for those listening in the title of the books, you all can look out for

him. It is *Right From the Start: A Practical Guide for Helping Young Children With Autism*. And the two things that I just want to pull from that in the passages from the book I had had to read before today was both its personal nature in terms of specifically Kate you talking about your son Henry, as well as it was really practical, I think you do not need a doctorate to read through this book. This is a book designed for parents of children with autism, educators of children who are non neurotypical. And as I was reading it, I constantly felt there's stuff in here that I can use every day in the classroom. And one of those things was the segue back to Gina's question, is this idea of a flexible approach to teaching as opposed to a more rigid style? So would you mind speaking to that?

K

Karin Donahue 12:39  
Sure.

K

Karin Donahue 12:40  
So one of the things that has really come from my my collaboration with Kate is the focus on neuro diversity, that we really need to understand that everybody's brain works differently. And we don't want to look down on people or degrade people. That might think differently than the way we do or behave in a in a way that we might consider to be bizarre or different. The concept of neuro diversity is we want to accept everybody for who they are and accept that everybody's brain works differently. And that people on the autism spectrum or with learning disorders, or intellectual disabilities, these people are not less than they're just different. And we need to understand them and understand differences. We're all different.

K

Kate Crassons 13:26  
And I also think, in a classroom at any level, preschoolers to college age, you know, we all learn things, even if we're not, if those aren't the things we've been explicitly taught. And so just modeling that flexibility, I think, as a teacher, again, at whatever age group is so important, because if you have a student who's a little kid or a college student who's who's struggling or feels stuck, and you meet that with a response that's equally rigid or just leaves another demand when a student is already sort of stuck in a moment, it just doesn't work very well. It just tends to backfire. And I think the more you can model that flexibility and build a bond of trust with that student and try to meet them where they are, I think you're likely to get much more, you know, a much more successful outcome or to resolve a problem or a moment of, you know, rigidity. You'll get out of it more quickly.



Tom O'Connor 14:25

Yeah, you give a great example of this at the start of the first chapter. I imagine it was an example that you came up with on your own I forget the name of the student Mark or someone who goes in an autistic student, a high functioning autistic student is in like a preschool or nursery school classroom playing with trains. And it's frustrating that that's not quite working and slowly becomes depleted as they're trying to kind of marched as they're, their routines are broken because it's raining outside. It's just this very realistic example and it's very easy that imagining happening every day and in classrooms. Then you model I think in the book or describe some of these flexible teaching practices like what might that look like in class? What would those flexible I mean, in this case, it was, I think offering their students some quiet time to maybe replenish it was about inviting them some assistance with, I think was a pumpkin carving exercise or something because there were motor controls and things like that. I'm probably butchering this story, I'm sorry. But you talk about where things can go wrong. Because of really miss identifying behaviors. You're saying that these are not bad kids. These aren't kids who are acting out. These are kids who don't have the ability to communicate in a way that we understand but they're communicating in other ways. And flexible teaching styles can help us help them in those situations. What are some of those flexible teaching styles look like some things that we can do in the classroom in a situation like that.



Karin Donahue 15:55

We always want to give people an opportunity to feel calm and safe. So if people aren't self regulated, which we talk about all the time in the book, then they're not capable of learning.



Tom O'Connor 16:07

And can you describe for audience what self regulation is? Because they might not be familiar with that term?



Karin Donahue 16:10

Yeah. So self regulation is the ability to control your emotions and your behavior. So we all self regulate, we all engage in behaviors to kind of keep ourselves properly aroused or stimulated or alert. So like a good example that that I use in, in the book and that I talked about in class as well, is that if you're driving late at night, and you're starting to feel really tired and your eyelids are starting to droop, you're going to engage in self regulatory behaviors to make sure that you stay alert and stay awake and don't fall asleep driving

the car. And so I try to help people understand that we all engage in these self regulatory behaviors to kind of maintain that appropriate stasis for the condition. But we need to recognize that sometimes our students are walking into class and they might not be self regulated. Did you know they might be coming and really upset or the other morning I was teaching class and it was pouring rain. And so the students are coming in and they are just dripping wet, you know, and so like, they're probably really uncomfortable. So just recognizing like, Hey, guys, thanks for stopping through the pouring rain as you get to a class. I recognize that, you know, you might not be in the best place right now. So just kind of recognizing where students are, how they might be feeling just validating students.

G

Gina Turner 17:31

One of the things you say in the introduction is about creating a positive experience of school is going to set the tone for them to be able to proceed throughout their education. And I thought that that was so powerful, obviously for little kids, but definitely at the community college. Certainly, we have students who are underprepared for college work or don't have any background in You know, they don't have family members who went to college, so they just don't have any understanding of that. And so I was really, really struck by that idea of creating the positive environment, even to the point where you're not necessarily as worried about teaching them every single thing that is on the curriculum, right, necessarily, as someone who teaches gateway courses every semester, I felt like that really resonated for me. Do you feel like that is something that you take into consideration when you're teaching your college classes, right? I mean, certainly with Lehigh students, they're probably more prepared. But do you still feel like you take that into consideration?

K

Kate Crassons 18:43

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I can think about a class I taught, maybe last year, it was an upper level seminar and critical theory. So it's kind of dense topics where we're looking at different approaches to studying literature. And I had a student who's a successful student. She was a senior invested in going to law school and applying for a Fulbright. But also a student who was struggling to understand the material. She could regurgitate a lot of what I said and made a lot of strides to get close, but in conversations and rewrites of papers, you know, it was clear that just the, the conceptualization wasn't quite there. And so at some point with her, I mean, this might be a little unorthodox, but it's definitely influenced by, you know, learning from Karin and the book we wrote, I just pulled back and I said, Look, you're not going to write a second paper. I might get in trouble with my Dean. (Laughter) I want you to understand this. So so let's stop. This isn't working. Let's stop doing this. I want you to draw, like to do a visual approach to this assignment and draw out you know, how the signifier relates to the signified or whatever and We went through

one version of that. And then I think something about that different mode of representation and engagement. We finally got that click right. And it took her, you know, much longer, more effort, but I feel like she got to a point that we've been looking for. And that's what mattered. You know, she didn't write two papers, but she wrote lots of versions of one paper, she did this whole new visual assignment and way of thinking. And I think that was, you know, what she needed, right? More than just going jumping through the hoops of a syllabus or curriculum. It's like you were saying

T

Tom O'Connor 20:37

Sounds actually a lot like UDL or Universal Design for Learners was one thing that I kept thinking about, like again and again, in terms of coming up with different assignments for different types of learners within our classroom. And even in the early childhood level, I mean, Gina, I think you started talk a little bit about this, you know, it sounded like there were struggles as you were trying to help the teachers understand that need to prioritize? Is it here actually from the book because it was such a, it was the inherently logical connection between educational and emotional goals. And you were I think trying to encourage educators to focus more on your son Henry's social and emotional skills over and above at times academic skills. that resonated with me because, especially and again, not not that this is solely a community college and I definitely had non neurotypical students when I was teaching at Lehigh years ago too. But there are students who come without I sometimes the emotional maturity, something we see frequently, even in neuro typical students, but there are these all of these other skills that are connected to how we teach ourselves how we can go out and research and how we acquire knowledge, not just in that specific classroom setting, but these are real world skills that you can take beyond them into other settings. Yeah,

K

Kate Crassons 21:57

yeah. I mean, they're really important and look, it's It was painful for my husband and me to have to say to teachers, because like, we're big school nerds, you know, I'm a professor, it hurts my heart to have to say, let's not worry about the academics. But you know, you're right. They're foundational, the academics won't come. It's like Karin said, You can't learn if you're not regulated. And I think even on a larger scale, the social and emotional skills really needs to come first. And I think teachers know that, but they're under a lot of pressure to produce, you know, to get to students, for students to take test scores, and to move ahead as quickly as possible. But I think, you know, you pay a price for that. in other ways, when there's so much focus on academics, I think it actually ends up undercutting the academics because, you know, you've missed the boat on, you know, some of these skills that are hard to hard to make up, you know,



Gina Turner 22:50

In the example that you used of the woman in your seminar. She was, I mean, you we don't know or I don't know if you know, but I The assumption is that she was not non neuro typical. In other words, she was neurotypical, but still needed a new way of conceptualizing the material, and then got it and that the exercises of writing one or two or five papers, or three or four tests, those are all supposed to be in the service of providing a way into the material, right? So yes, your dean shouldn't get mad at you, right?



Kate Crassons 22:52

You have to think about where you're trying to where you're trying to go.



Gina Turner 23:30

Yeah, definitely. So thinking of yourselves now in the classroom, and maybe even since you've written this book, and also collaborated together, do you feel like that has changed you in the classroom? And then I'm also going to ask you, is there a word that you feel like you can use to describe yourself in the classroom? If there were one word, what would you use to describe yourself?



Tom O'Connor 23:53

Gina is the queen of segways. And that was a beautiful segue. We'd love to ask this question. You know, describe yourself as a teacher and one word. So we're springing it on you now.



Karin Donahue 24:03

I would say the one word that describes me in the classroom is passionate, because I'm incredibly enthusiastic about what I teach. And I warn my students on the first day that I'm very interactive, and we're going to do a lot of interactive engaging activities. So if you're hoping to for a class where you could just, you know, look on your cell phone at the back of the class, like this is not the class for you. So I yeah, I would have to say, passion because I really bring my enthusiasm and my passion for my field to class



Gina Turner 24:39

And your laugh.

K Karin Donahue 24:40  
Yeah.

G Gina Turner 24:44  
How about you, Kate? Um,

K Kate Crassons 24:47  
I mean, I guess I'll answer your first question. I'm gonna

G Gina Turner 24:52  
work your way.

K Kate Crassons 24:54  
Because I just, you know, when someone says passionate, I'm not dispassionate, but The word I choose so I'm gonna just skirt back to the the first question but I think working with Karin and and writing this book has has completely altered the way I teach. I think I'm much more flexible and willing I mean there's a temptation I think after you've had a certain kind of training especially and you've been a certain kind of student, yourself to expect that everyone else is just going to fall into line and their course goals and there is a there's a course outline and there's a schedule and we're going to get through it and you're going to write your papers. And, you know, I think might you know, just being a mom of non non neurotypical kid and working on this book, I just think I've really sort of walked back that rigidity, and just try to be thoughtful. I guess the word I'd use is thoughtful. I try to be thoughtful about you know, aiming to be comprehensive and rigorous but also in a way that's manageable. Because if you can't get that There, you know, what's the point and, you know, students have lives students have have difficulties, they have different learning styles, whether they're non neurotypical or not. And the benefit of being able to teach small classes, like I often do is to be flexible and make adjustments and be responsive as we go along. And I think it helps their learning Most of all, yeah.

T Tom O'Connor 26:25  
So another question we often ask our guests, I'm going to tweak and I probably get in trouble for doing so. And so the question we often ask is, Was there an experience that

you had when you yourself were a student that came to affect who you are today in the classroom, either in a positive or a negative way? You're welcome to answer the question as we often ask it, but Kate, for you, personally, maybe it might have been an experience you had with one of Henry's educators that made you reflect on who you are in the classroom, or or Karin and perhaps it was something that you encountered as Behavioral specialist consultant, so not necessarily so I'm trying to actually you can still answer the question the old way, but I want it to be open to kind of you guys have some specific experiences that I think can speak to pedagogical practice.

K

Karin Donahue 27:13

Well, certainly being a behavioral specialist and really a clinician at heart and I was a clinician for decades before I started teaching at the college level, I taught younger kids psycho educational stuff. But before I started teaching at the college level, I was working with young children and being a clinician for a long time. So that really laid the foundation for me as as a professor, it really did. I really teach from a mental health perspective. So I, I just tend to be really empathetic and caring and understanding and flexible with my students and sometimes students might say, Oh, well she's she's easy because if they tell me that they've had a crisis over the weekend and weren't able to finish their paper, then chances are I'm going to say, Well, you know, could you get it into me by Wednesday then? Right whereas other professors are like, how could you possibly give an extension like extensions are never offered. Right? But that mental health perspective absolutely informs my teaching.

G

Gina Turner 28:27

Yeah, I mean, speaking to that, just briefly, and then I definitely want to turn back to Kate but that idea of flexibility around around deadlines, but you also speak to this in your book about giving them the skills to emotionally regulate and to have self awareness allows them to meet deadlines, and if you can meet like so for myself, I'm I am a stickler about deadlines, but I say you can talk to me as early as 24 hours before and I will reschedule anything, basically. So I I want to make sure that they understand that I'm happy to work with them as long as they want to work with me and try and create that space of flexibility and openness. So but still with the idea that there are milestones you want to meet and outcomes that you have in the classroom. So I didn't want to ramble on and turn back to Kate.

K

Kate Crassons 29:26

I mean, I think on the parent side of things, having talked with a lot of preschool teachers

and administrators. I mean, first of all, those are people who have really hard jobs without a lot of support for not making a lot of money. My mom was a preschool teacher. So with so many people in that field, you know, you just see their love and enthusiasm for the students. When you're called in to meetings about your son not behaving well. You can see a different side to even, you know, the most fun loving preschool teacher. But I think what I found most helpful were the people who could still see the strengths and the potential in my son because because he has tons of both of those things and who could approach the challenges from a problem solving solution, as opposed to a sort of reactive, you know, disciplinary, these are our policies, we can't, you know, we can't have this happening at our school because that reaction would just then trickle down to Henry eventually, via my husband and me who would get, you know, feel very worked up and upset about the whole situation. So, you know, I think I've just learned to try to work collaboratively with students whenever possible, and to just have a mentality that that's focused on problem solving, whether that's an area of content in the classroom, whether it's some issue outside the classroom But it's not about I think not reacting. knee jerk reactions are good to avoid. Yeah,

**T** Tom O'Connor 31:08  
you know, you use the word discipline and I was actually thinking about discipline when you were talking about extensions and things with students and leave it to a medievalist to give us the Latin root of the word discipline. I am ashamed to say I didn't know and discipline in the Latin, where's my notes? It literally means teacher. It's teaching learning and knowledge is the Latin is the Latin for discipline about like the disciples of Jesus? Well, I mean, like, there was some really heartbreaking stories in terms of as he as you just explained, the types of things that are likely to happen to students who are autistic in the classroom, raised voices, right. I mean, like it's

**G** Gina Turner 31:53  
I just want to jump in—have autism. We do kind of try to want to refer to people with Any kind of diagnosis rather than using it as the adjective?

**T** Tom O'Connor 32:04  
Oh, as opposed to saying autistic, having autism.

**K** Kate Crassons 32:07  
Is that actually there's a bit No, it's switched for, for autism and the neurodiverse

G Gina Turner 32:12  
really good for me to know

K Kate Crassons 32:15  
no, I mean, my students did a whole unit on that. So actually, this is actually something I know about um, so the person first language, you know, is what you thought that's where the good intentions are. I think with autism, it's different because it affects a person's wiring. So it's sort of intrinsic to their way of being. And so like, you wouldn't say person with maleness or a person with Jewishness, right. So, so most neurodiversity advocates and autistic self advocates prefer autistic as opposed to person first language, because they worry about separating the autism from the person can lead to some really damaging cultural and ideological views of autistic people.

G Gina Turner 32:58  
Wow. I want to do a whole podcast with you guys just talking about the culture around the context.

T Tom O'Connor 33:05  
I have a question I heard a text because I had heard previously neuro atypical and then before we started the podcast I thought I overheard you saying it's actually non nuerotypical

K Kate Crassons 33:16  
You can say either I think, I just see non neurotypical used more often, okay.

G Gina Turner 33:22  
Karin, as the clinician in the room is person first still kind of the standard for psychological diagnoses and disorders that speaking.

K Karin Donahue 33:33  
Yeah. For psychological disorders. We don't want people to feel labeled that they are that disorder.



Gina Turner 33:39

Right. Okay. Okay, cool. I'm so glad that we made that distinction, because it was it was in my head. So and I'm sorry, Tom, I totally interrupted your question.



Tom O'Connor 33:48

It wasn't you know, it was really there was a couple. It was a couple specific things that you excited, you know, that I think happen in secondary and elementary and preschool and secondary and even in college. classes I think about discipline a lot. Maybe it's the dean hat I were sometimes where, you know, not so much maybe in my own classrooms but in a lot of instances that are brought to me and you make this specific case for how this affects potentially non neurotypical students talking about how frustrated teachers might raise their voice to a child who's acting out reprimanding them for poor choices or what they view as poor choices or you know, or what are poor choices, but not ones that they are controlling moment and possibly crowding personal space. I'm, this is not an exact citation, I am pulling some of this from your book, just for clarity. So um, I am changing some of this. So you mentioned that in Henry's case that his challenging behavior decline when you began to view that behavior as a misguided form of communication, a desperate means of conveying some kind of need, during a moment when he couldn't access emotional language. And that's something that reoccured a lot in the book. I was thinking about that in the specifics of Working in regards to autism, but then I would read lines about creating spaces where we give children or students the tools to recognize, assess and moderate their feelings and that that sets them on a path to success enabling them to thrive from the first moment they sat in a classroom. That applies to every student. And I mean, oftentimes I imagine changes we would make for one or two autistic students might benefit an entire classroom of students.



Karin Donahue 35:26

Yeah, that's really the foundation is how do we set people up for success? Whether you're dealing with somebody in preschool or somebody in college or somebody out in the work environment? How do we set them up for success? How do we create an environment where they are capable of doing the best that they can? And I tell my students on the very first day of class, I'm like, here's what you need to do to be successful in this class. And I use that word success. Like here's what, here's what you need to do. And I tell them like, here's the simple points. It's not a whole long thing, but here's the simple point. of what you what you need to do to be successful in this class, which is kind of getting back to, you know, some fundamental strategies that we use with people on the spectrum that you need to make things predictable. And you want expectations to be really clear, you don't like things to change radically unexpectedly. And so I tried to lay down that foundation on

the first day of class.

G

Gina Turner 36:29

Do you also give them tips on how they can self regulate? And you know, another thing that struck me as I was reading the excerpts from your book is that you that students who have experienced any kind of trauma are going to have those same moments of not being able to label that you know, those are common symptoms of having lived through some sort of traumatic experience and symptoms of other again, other diagnoses. So within your class, you feel like you have This space to give self regulation tips to your students. I mean, even if it's something like you said, Karin, just acknowledging that, hey, this is a really stressful morning because we're all soaking wet from the rain.

K

Kate Crassons 37:15

Yeah, I mean, I think you have to and the class I'm teaching now on neuro diversity, I have to say it's been really challenging. It's brand new. My little Henry is now in middle school, that's a year of transition. That's been a little bit bumpy. And it has not been super easy just to, you know, go from a tense IEP meeting right to class to talk about autism, you know, to try to figure out, you know, how much personal experience to bring in because it's irrelevant, you know, do I want to protect his privacy? Do I not want to make this class my personal therapy session? I mean, trying to negotiate that has been really challenging for me, and I just put my cards on the table and have said, Look, this is what's hard for me there's students in the class who have autistic siblings, their students in the class with ADHD, no one who's autistic themselves, but it's been a really emotional class. And we all definitely have needed to take time where we just, you know, switch topics, you know, take a take a break, I mean, these very basic strategies and accommodations for autistic students, they're really just things that we all need as human beings. And and there's not one thing in that book, not one accommodation you could do for an autistic student that wouldn't help every other student in the classroom.

G

Gina Turner 38:37

So like, What might that look like in a class where you're just like, I'm spent, how might you sort of create that break or create that space?

K

Kate Crassons 38:46

I mean, I would probably just say like, you know, I mean, the language I use with with my son is the zones of regulation. Like I'm getting in the red zone. You know, like, I just this is

getting really emotional, it's a little fraught, let's go take a break, get a sip of water or you know, it might be not quite so explicit, but just, you know, let's switch to a video or Let's break up into some group work, right? Anything that just kind of puts a pause on, you know, the rhythm and allows people to regroup, I think would work

**T** Tom O'Connor 39:20  
something like a red zone is that

**T** Tom O'Connor 39:24  
that makes a lot of sense to me in terms of, if something Henry might be struggling with is recognizing another person's like emotions and their own way of approaching is I'm saying that poorly aren't I? But like, kind of helping them understand where you're at. So they know, I kind of correct and appropriate ways of behaving towards you. Does that make any sense?

**K** Kate Crassons 39:49  
Yeah, I mean, I think programs like that are mostly for kids themselves, to develop the language to describe to recognize and describe their own feelings. And then to have strategies to use when they're in the red zone as well.

**T** Tom O'Connor 40:04  
Yeah. Okay.

**K** Kate Crassons 40:05  
And I, you know, and I just try to use that language because, you know, it helps, it helps me too. And I don't want that to be like, well, that's the program, you use, (laughter)

**K** Kate Crassons 40:16  
you know, while the rest of us have no emotional struggles at all.

**K** Kate Crassons 40:21  
So yeah, it just kind of becomes the, you know, the language we use in our house, and

that's helpful. Yeah.

G

Gina Turner 40:29

Can I ask about that class? Are you looking at characters from literature that would be defined as non neuro typical or?

K

Kate Crassons 40:42

Yeah, so we started looking at kind of the history of autism and its relationship to narrative, because, you know, there's no biological test or brain scan to diagnose autism. So a lot of it has this kind of literary quality. It's its reports its observations. And we look at sort of the history of the diagnosis and the reasons why the neurodiversity movement emerged. And then we just moved in, we read some memoirs and books by artistic writers. And now we're moving into some literary representations of autistic characters. And then finally, we're going to end by looking at just some regular literature to see if there are some literary techniques that could be described as a kind of autistic poetics. So all these elements of autistic language that get pathologize like monologuing or echolalia, can we can't we see those from a different context as being really valuable literary techniques? So it offers you I think, a different way to look at literature without just finding characters and diagnosing them.

G

Gina Turner 41:51

So interesting. Do you feel like there's a good portrayal of someone who's autistic that you guys have are exploring

K

Kate Crassons 42:00

We just read this book called *The ride together*, which is a family memoir by Judy and Paul Karasik. And it's done with alternating prose essays and comic strips because Paul was a, I guess, a comic writer. And so that's nonfiction. But I think that book does a really good job of thinking about even raising being self reflective about what it means to even represent an autistic person. In this case, it's their brother, but, you know, they'll be comic strips that like the final chapter is chapter 14, something kind of cheesy, like the power of memory and then it scratched out and it's like, nope, here's the real chapter 14, and it's about my autistic brother David, who still performs the Superman routine, you know, at age 60. So it's acknowledging, I think, some of the challenges it's facing and, and trying to, you know, you don't want to package up any person too neatly Yeah, with a label,



Gina Turner 42:58

it does remind me just to avoid Another quick question I had, which is I was looking at the table of contents and you have a chapter called the eight senses and a have to know what that means.



Kate Crassons 43:09

I'd like you to take that one



Karin Donahue 43:12

People on the autism spectrum frequently have challenges with interpreting and understanding information from through our senses. Okay? And I frequently talk about this in class, which is also validating sensory challenges for our students that, you know, just within the classroom, you've got all the shadows that fluorescent lights give off, you've got usually a humming of the projector, obviously, the sound of my voice, which I hope students are somewhat tuned into. But we talked about all these different sensations and how some people, neurotypical non neurotypical struggle with interpreting and understanding all of these sensory challenges. So there's the usual five senses that we're all taught about in kindergarten. And then there's proprioception, which is understanding kind of like where your body is in space and understanding the muscles and movements that your body makes. There's the vestibular perception, which is basically your balance. And then there's interoception, which is understanding these functions inside your body like hunger, which is a very common problem with people on the autism spectrum is they don't recognize when they're hungry. Yeah, and they get very hangry. And the but they're unable to really recognize Hey, this feeling in my gut like this is hunger. Right? So interoception is really this perception of the feelings inside your body or pain. Many times people will be in pain and not be able to express it and and, and cope with it.



Tom O'Connor 44:57

I'm thinking a lot about these eight senses. And how they would affect someone with who's autistic. At the same time, I'm also thinking that Kate you mentioned that there is no one test for autism. And I know that in your own case, it was like four different doctors, right? And there was you mentioned in ADOS test the autistic autism diagnostic observation schedule, and I, I had no idea like what that was. If that's too much to go into Now, my question would be is I know you have an interest in social justice. And some of the classes you taught at Lehigh had it. And it had me thinking about people who may not have health insurance or who have poor health insurance or who may not know how

to advocate for themselves. So what advice because you mentioned that especially high functioning autism is a highly illusory disease, I think is the language that you use to describe it is that it's hard to diagnose. Is there any practical advice that you would give people who are concerned that that might be the case questions they should ask?

**K** Kate Crassons 46:00  
I feel like that's the question you should answer.

**K** Karin Donahue 46:03  
Well, we're doing a much better job assessing for autism.

**K** Karin Donahue 46:08  
Pediatricians are supposed to assess all young children for autism. So that we just, it's just like a really short five or six question assessment. And if certain red flags are raised through this assessment, then the pediatrician can refer that child for a much more thorough evaluation like from a developmental pediatrician, or from a psychologist.

**K** Karin Donahue 46:35  
I don't think I answered your question though.

**T** Tom O'Connor 46:37  
No, I mean, that's, that's helpful. These are all the names of doctor you know what I mean? I guess.

**G** Gina Turner 46:42  
So in other words, like, you're saying that anyone who is involved in the medical profession is more likely at least to have a doctor assess the child, whether it's someone who is in, you know, on public assistance and seeing someone who is you know, Early Childhood health professional, I'm forgetting the word for pediatrician. That at least that is starting to be built in structurally Yeah, into the healthcare field, which is great. It kind of leads me to the question of what would you like to see built in structurally in terms of the educational field, like you've talked about having access to a behavioral specialist like Karin. And even at the at the college level, what things would you like to see built in structurally what changes do you think could be valuable for all levels of neuro diversity?



Kate Crassons 47:41

I mean, I think for all students if there are way, you know, I don't want to call Bernie Sanders. I don't know if college should be free. If there's a way to take pressure off of students, faculty, even, you know, administrators, universities and colleges are, you know, not for profit organizations but they need to stay solvent but it feels to me like there's just so much pressure on everyone to, to stay afloat and so many students who, you know, worry about taking on incredible debt they're trying to get out and for years, you know, I wish education could be a space and, you know, I mean this for neurotypical students, for non neurotypical students to go slowly to take time to pursue what you're really interested in without, you know, that feeling breathing down your neck of how am I going to turn this into a lucrative job or at least a job to pay off my loans? I just yeah, I wish all students could just have more time and space to explore their interests.



Gina Turner 48:48

Yeah, gosh.



Kate Crassons 48:51

I am high.



Tom O'Connor 48:53

And Karin specifically. I mean, like, we work together here at Northampton Community College and there are supports for us. students with autism at the secondary level that we don't have at the college level. You mentioned IEPs. Earlier Kate and this has been a recurring issue in terms of student has no need to self diagnose right teacher may not have any idea what best practices are. And and I have multiple times had cross my desk issues similar to this potentially due to neuro diversity but for any number of different reasons but within the classroom that could be creating an atmosphere where there is a better way that we don't know the path to yet. Is there things that you'd like to see change specifically here at the college level or here even at Northampton Community College specifically? That's a big question that I've been asking myself for a while but I don't have any good answers to so



Karin Donahue 49:41

when I think about the supports that are offered for young people before they graduate from high school, they have opportunities to be part of social skills groups, anger

management groups, they have friendship groups, luncheons, all these things that are built specifically to help provide supports to help people form friendships to help people connect with other people, to help people learn new coping skills, we have all of these things built in K through 12. But then magically, it all just disappears. So some colleges have particular structures built really geared towards people on the autism spectrum. It would be it would be wonderful if we had more supports here really geared towards folks with autism,

**G** Gina Turner 50:32  
especially given the numbers that you quote in the introduction of your book, right.

**T** Tom O'Connor 50:37  
1 in 37 men I think and 1 in 59 women.

**G** Gina Turner 50:41  
Yeah, and then you you know, and you also mentioned, it's basically one in 10. Children are being diagnosed with ADHD as well. So and then finally, you guys are also making that point that these are programs and skills building. techniques that can help anyone with all of these things, right.

**K** Kate Crassons 51:04  
And I think like given, you know, the diagnostic rates to a huge underlooked resource for all these issues in education, our autistic people themselves and non neurotypical people themselves, and, you know, I think for far too long, they've been excluded as sources of expertise on their own ways of being in the world. And, you know, I would no one in my son's education so far that I know of is autistic. And that makes me sad for him, you know, I want him to have role models and people he, you know, can relate to or the people who might be able to understand him. It's tricky with autism, because everyone is so different. But I would like for him to feel like he's part of a community of people, not just somebody who has to go to social skills class or anger management class, or whatever. I think those are great supports, but I mean, I'm holding out hope that, you know, autistic people themselves can be involved in shaping some of these structures and programs

**G** Gina Turner 52:02  
and being open about it too and open about the the, the fact that it's just it is a spectrum

of humanity. Yeah, that all of these symptoms are things that individual people who don't have a specific diagnosis might still grapple with or have these similar sensitivity.



Kate Crassons 52:20

Yeah. And for all the challenges, their strengths and a lot of times, the difference between a strength and a challenge is just a matter of context more than anything else, you know,



Gina Turner 52:30

I loved I want to take your classes. When you said the poetics of autism, I just am. I'm so struck by that and the beauty of seeing it as an artful way of communicating, right that monologue. I mean, monologuing is an art form. It's a shondra genre. Yeah, and and to contextualize it as a way of, of being creative and a creative expression is such a beautiful way to think about it.



Tom O'Connor 52:58

When we I love that when we value there is the expression of non neurotypical people, we allowed them to be the models, right? We saw that a little bit. And I don't think you should need to be Temple Grandin to be that person. But when she visited, you know, us recently, she spoke very similar, but I know that we have professors, you know, with autism spectrum disorder at this college, certainly at Lehigh University as well. There are models, you know, out there, and I think maybe if we can culturally appreciate them, show them that appreciate and the value in them that might lead for them to speak. Yeah, to decide that more than simply be a model for in my own classroom in my own life. To do Karin is, you know, as Kate was saying, that you've done as you're going to speak before groups, you know what I mean? But from them speaking from their own, from their, from their own perspective.



Karin Donahue 52:59

Yeah. And when I've gone to conferences and workshops that are led by someone on the spectrum, it's just so powerful. I have learned so much from those folks, and I've quoted them in the book. I mean, just learned so much.



Gina Turner 54:01

I can't wait to read the rest of the book

- T** Tom O'Connor 54:02  
them. So and the book is just to say it again because I'm gonna it's \_Right From the Start: A Practical Guide For Helping Young Children With Autism\_. If there's any one takeaway that I come and read your book, Joe, singer, songwriter, something I don't know, I'm bad at names Jane Doe, John Doe, when they encounter your book, what do you hope they take from it?
- K** Karin Donahue 54:22  
You will learn ways to interact with folks with autism and you will be able to help them have a successful experience in life and feel good about themselves.
- K** Kate Crassons 54:33  
Great.
- G** Gina Turner 54:34  
Well, as you talked about, we've been talking about something that is very obviously close to your heart. It's it's very much part of your your your work life Karin as well. So let's take give ourselves a little fun break. And ask our final question, sadly, of the podcast which is Is there any guilty pleasure I'm doing air quotes that you would like to share with us maybe something that you enjoy doing that people don't necessarily know about you that when they listen to this podcast, they'll go—what? Who wants to go first?
- K** Karin Donahue 55:10  
My guilty pleasure is girls night out. Girls night out. It's just great to be able to be with
- K** Karin Donahue 55:17  
a group of women where we can just all connect and have a great time. I love girls night out.
- G** Gina Turner 55:24  
Okay, what are you guys doing after? (laughter)

- T** Tom O'Connor 55:26  
I suddenly feel a little excluded. (laughter)
- K** Kate Crassons 55:39  
I have I think a mischievous sense of humor. My autistic related traits are being inappropriate. I think so. I love
- K** Kate Crassons 55:49  
bad movies. I love Tiffany Haddish Oh, gosh. She's like my hero. Yeah, I'll watch anything with her.
- G** Gina Turner 55:58  
She's in a TV. show called. Oh, I can't remember the name of it
- K** Kate Crassons 56:04  
Klds say the darndest things.
- G** Gina Turner 56:07  
I haven't watched that one yet. But it's a no it's a it's a an animated show birdie and somebody. (off mic—Tuca and Birdie)
- G** Gina Turner 56:15  
Kelly got really excited about it. Have you watched \_Tuca and Birdie\_?
- K** Kate Crassons 56:19  
No,
- G** Gina Turner 56:19  
I haven't watched it either. But Kelly is like, his face is just exploding.



Gina Turner 56:25  
Tucan like the bird is it?



Gina Turner 56:27  
No it's Tuca? But they are bird like individuals. Yeah. And I apparently it's really funny.  
Great. Oh,



Kate Crassons 56:36  
thank you.



Gina Turner 56:38  
Well, thank you both very much for being here. And I really do want to take your class  
Kate, and then I want to go to a girls night out with both of you. And Tom you can come  
too.



Tom O'Connor 56:50  
Thank you guys. You know, I've been racking my head looking around for ways to help  
train our educators right? And this book is pitched Not just the parents, but its pitch to  
educators and this is a useful thing. We need this now. And I was so happy to have the  
opportunity to start reading it and hopefully to use it in the future. So thanks to you both.



Gina Turner 57:14  
I can't wait to get it signed by both.



Gina Turner 57:26  
Go, go.



Gina Turner 57:30  
Go, go, go. Anyway. Oh, it was yesterday. All right. Well, that was a fantastic conversation  
with Kate and Karin and I learned a lot and I think there's so much in terms of their work  
with autistic people and autistic children that so relatable and applicable to our work with  
all of our students in the classroom.

T

Tom O'Connor 57:58

Couldn't agree more. Every time you know, every time they spoke when I when I was reading the book itself, I kept mapping what they were saying from something very specific to all of our students and it brought me down to a non neurotypical student in my class who needed me consistently to change the syllabus with any tiny insignificant change even if it was like Hey guys, I'm shortening the reading or I'm cutting this he needed it there and he needed it updated on Blackboard, he was fortunate to express that to me and and every single one was the only time I think I've had a student say really appreciate it all the blackboard updates on like, you know, on the on the student assessment at the end, I'm not known for you know, using Blackboard to it to its fullest potential. And I that at least that's my little mini experience. Were knowing that when doing for one, I actually helped all

G

Gina Turner 58:45

it's true because it makes me think too, because I'm going to be out of the classroom for a training next week. And that's so that's really impacting my schedule, and I myself hate changes to the schedule because I I'm really rigid about my own syllabus, and I really like to stick to my syllabus as much as possible, it drives me crazy to have to vary, and now I'm having to vary significantly from the syllabus. And so I'm doing the same thing because I'm just thinking of myself, which is I want a new version of the syllabus on Blackboard, I want it to I want email reminders. And so I'm doing all of these things for the students because, again, it's for me, because I have that expectation that I don't like change that I have not initiated. So the other thing that I thought was so lovely about something that Kate said was about this idea of how narrative is different for people who are autistic. That was another huge learning for me to that idea of how you refer to people who have autism and then people with other diagnoses but that idea that The narrative forms that people with autism use are also things that we see as art forms and other ways. And that I'm this term that's going to keep sticking with me is that that poetics of autism. It's really lovely. And it just makes me think of the ways in which we can be open to all sorts of different ways of expressing ourselves, you know, students who don't express themselves in standard English, right? students who don't express themselves formally in writing and recognizing the value judgments that we place on the different ways in which people communicate, because those are the ways, they're used to communicating or the ways that they have have learned to communicate. So I, that has, I think that's really going to stick with me

T

Tom O'Connor 60:53

and thinking about, you know, you mentioned the word poetics, and that's stuck with me

too, and maybe a meaningful way to kind of wrap up The conversation we just had with Kate and Karin is what I find to be an incredibly poetic quote that they included in their book as an epigraph. And it's from Alison Gopnik. And it's a quote from the gardener and the carpenter. And I'm going to read the quote, and then I'm going to read it again with a slight change of words. The original quote is, our job is not to make a particular kind of child, but to provide a protected space of love, safety and stability, in which children of many unpredictable kinds can flourish. And if we just thought about the word child for student, our job is not to make a particular kind of student but to provide a protected space of love, safety and stability in which students of many unpredictable kinds can flourish speaks to, I think, the potential of the neuro diverse classroom and the flexible teaching style that they both spoke of that it's our job to create the safe space of love and exploration. Where all learners and I mentioned UDL universal design, but all learners have a space to be their best selves as students and that still be true to themselves. Trying to make some kind of perfect type of A student that we might have pre constructed in our head. So,

 Gina Turner 62:06  
yeah, it's really true.

 Tom O'Connor 62:08  
But a little bit of extra credit for you before we part ways and I'm also going to kind of gesture towards the conversation that we just had with them. In the book, Kate spoke about learning how, like how she had to shift her expectations of herself, as well as her expectations of Henry, her son, that she had to let go of unproductive techniques that she assumed to be failsafe and that she had to experiment with new strategies that she often felt unsure about. So there's three things there and I'll put them to you in an email See, remember them but like can you think of a time in the classroom when you've had to shift your own expectation expectations of yourself as a teacher and of a student or some several students or classroom a time that you let go of unproductive techniques You assumed were failsafe, right that's sure fire assignment that worked every time and then didn't and maybe a time that you've experimented with new strategies that you often felt unsure of at the time that you were experimenting with.

 Gina Turner 63:11  
Yeah,

**G** Gina Turner 63:12  
definitely. I mean, I think that I run across that all the time, basically. So yeah, I will think of some good examples.

**T** Tom O'Connor 63:20  
So that's a big extra credit I feel like I'm wrapping in three extra credit assignments for you but

**G** Gina Turner 63:24  
I happily accept

**T** Tom O'Connor 63:26  
I know you're up for the challenge. And we're about to go on our holiday break but I can't wait to see you after the new year for our next podcast.

**G** Gina Turner 63:35  
Yes. Excellent. That threw me (laughter)

**G** Gina Turner 63:41  
What thre you?

**G** Gina Turner 63:41  
The holiday break. I was like oh, what holiday wait Thanksgiving and then I got confused.

**T** Tom O'Connor 63:47  
Were several holidays away.

**T** Tom O'Connor 63:49  
This is a perfect end and it should end in chaos. Teaching is messy. I love it. And I will see you today.



Gina Turner 63:56

Happy Holidays



Tom O'Connor 63:57

Happy holidays. And to all you listeners out there. I hope There's a little jingle and whatever song Jeff puts behind this to get you on your happy holiday way.



Tom O'Connor 64:17

Hey, thanks for listening to Pedagogy-a-go-go recorded in the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology at North Hampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Our podcast daydreamer slash show runners Kelly Allen and Pedagogy-a-go-go is produced by Jeff Armstrong. If you've got any questions, please send them to Pedagogy-a-go-go at gmail. com. Our social media handle is at Pedagogy-a-go-go and you can stop by our website at [www Pedagogy-a-go-go. com](http://www.Pedagogy-a-go-go.com) for copies of podcast transcripts, guest assignments and other useful tidbits. Keep in mind there are no hyphens or dots in any of the above web addresses. Until next time, this is Gina and Tom saying Take care and teach well