

Episode 1: Tomatoes in the classroom

(Shuffle beat)

Namrata Mitra: I think it is important for professors to think about their tomato, to think about what it is that they are doing, what it is they are committing to and to name it, even if the students don't echo that back.

Kaitlin Rothberger: Umm, the tomato that I really love is really self-aware that it's a tomato. And makes you all self-aware, like calls the students into that kind of self-reflexivity also.

(organ, pages rustling, deep breath)

Ada Jaarsma: you're listening to The Learning Gene podcast. This episode is called "tomatoes in the classroom."

(chalk sounds)

Kaitlin: Today's key word is "tomatoes."

Ada: When you're a professor, say a professor who happens to teaches philosophy, your work could be described as work that focuses especially on *concepts*. This is what I told my students in a feminist philosophy lesson last fall:

(Ada in classroom): What's so nice about a philosophy class, I feel like, you can see whether you agree, is that we get to learn different theoretical frameworks for different kinds of problems.

Ada: It's an entirely ordinary thing, interacting with concepts as a professor. As part of the gig, you read about the concepts that others find really helpful. You teach concepts to your students. You explore concepts through your own writing. But it's an uncommon, perhaps extraordinary thing, to come across a concept that completely shifts your understanding of something. It opens up a new theoretical framework, which in turn compels new ways of understanding a problem. This episode is about that kind of concept. The concept's name is *tomato*. And it refers to the artistry and the design-choices of teaching.

Erin Manning: So teaching can also be a lonely practice in the sense that you can be very lucky, and I am lucky in that way to have amazing students, but it would be wrong to not notice that there's a different pact whether you're a prof or a student. I mean, different responsibility for sure, and a different set of conditions. And what I find is that there aren't enough opportunities to share and to learn from each other, those of us who are teachers. Partly because it's not easy for us to be in each other's classes.

Ada: I am so grateful to Erin Manning for agreeing to participate in my very first Skype interview for this podcast.

Erin: My name is Erin Manning and I teach at Concordia University in the departments of Studio Art and film Studies.

Ada: It seems exactly right to me that Erin teaches art because what I've discovered about teaching and learning *from* Erin's writings is that there is an art as well as a science to teaching practices. In an upcoming episode, we're going to explore the science of teaching. In this episode, we're tuning into the art—the artistry—of teaching practices.

Erin: And what I find is that there aren't enough opportunities to share and to learn from each other, those of us who are teachers. Partly because we can't, it's not easy for us to be in each other's classes.

Ada: This podcast is an experimental response to this predicament. It's true that, *as teachers*, it's physically next to impossible to be in each other's classes. We might, every now and then, attend someone else's class but it's likely that we're there to observe, which means that we're there to adjudicate the teaching, and not to share or learn. This is not exactly *being in each other's classes*. So here is the experimental question that animates this podcast. What would be a way for us to share and learn, especially to learn about our very own teaching practices? I have an hypothesis about an almost entirely untapped resource for engaging conceptually in new ways with teaching practices. And that resource is sound! There is so much sound in academic enterprise.

(Sound of book pages flipping)

Ada: Classroom scenarios are sonic scenarios. Here's what my classroom sounded like one morning, last fall

(Sounds of a noisy classroom)

Ada: The classroom doesn't always sound like that, though, it can also sound like this (quiet, coughing, rustling). And when the space is so quiet like that, this is what I sound like in my role as professor:

Ada in classroom: I would love to emphasize the fact that this is a seminar, we're in a circle. Please feel free—you don't even have to put your hand up, just like blurt things out. I would love to trust that you will do that.

Ada: That was me, last semester, on a morning when the classroom was feeling particularly quiet.

Ada: And at this point, I should really introduce myself. I'm Ada Jaarsma, I teach philosophy at Mount Royal University where I'm recording this in my office. We're located on Treaty 7 Territory in southern Alberta. If you live outside of Canada, we're in the foothills of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, a few hours north of Montana. What you heard a few seconds ago was a bit of what we could call my *own* professorial stylings. In that moment, I was reminding the class of what we're doing—"it's a seminar we're in a circle"—and I was doing my part to conjure up a particular kind of resonance in the space ; basically: please start speaking. ("you can blurt something out. I would love to trust that you're going to do that"). I've become fascinated by the way in which we role-play "professor" in the classroom. I think that a few years ago, I would have probably discounted a moment like that. I maybe would have described it as a kind of spontaneous motivational speaking, if I were to even reflect on it: you know, important in terms of negotiating the challenges of the classroom (feel free to participate, students!),

but not nearly as important as more salient design choices that I would be making as the instructor of the class.

Did you catch my reference to a more obvious design-element, in that brief exchange? That semester, every morning, we'd drag the desks into a circle so that our classroom space had a more seminar-friendly design. I think that I would have recognized *that* as an intentional choice, even before I started relating to teaching as a design practice.

But it's been a revelation to realize how many other kinds of design elements *are* really at play in teaching. There's definitely a curatorial function to putting a course together, designing the content and the focus of a course. That's part of the design-challenge of teaching: discerning what to include on a syllabus.

But it's even more instructive, I think, to consider design in terms of *how we deploy* those design choices, once the semester begins. And that's what this episode on tomatoes is really about: definitely the "what" of teaching, in terms of curricular content, but also the "how." And the how of teaching is relational. It is the dynamic between ourselves, our students, the space, and the content of the course.

Erin Manning: My way of engaging is intense, and urgent, and all encompassing. And it's my way, right?

Ada: Feedback loops emerge from how we craft and carry out our design choices. Feedback loops like soliciting participation from students *and like* assessing that participation in ways that feed right back into classroom dynamics. Erin Manning has this beautiful way of describing how singular these feedback loops are, so specific to *how* we happen to be enacting our roles as professors:

Erin Manning: And it's my way, right? And if other people around me don't engage in that way I think they're bored or passive. And somebody said to me today: but I'm that way, but I'm not bored or passive. So we were talking about how maybe part of the question of how we get feedback is listening for things we don't know how to listen for. Do you know what I mean? So in a classroom, that's really hard because we're used to particular kinds of feedback, including enthusiasm, so as profs, those of us who are good performers, we're used to getting a feedback, like a figural feedback or a visible sort of face feedback. But if you're trying to do something that includes discomfort, for example, where we're all learning and there's an uneasiness in it, you might not get that feedback, you might not even know if it's making a difference or if it's just aggravating that you're looking for another way. And I think that we don't have very many ways of talking about that, without it falling quickly into evaluative strategies: I like this, I don't like this, it's good, it's not good. So in a sense we need to have patience with non-evaluation, do you see what I mean? We need to *be* in the process without worrying too much if it's working or not. And I say that as if I know how to do that, and I don't.

Ada: This is what we could call the quandary of tomatoes in action.

Erin: We need to be in the process without worrying too much whether it's working or not

Ada: And that's exactly it: The tomato is always in the process, without worrying whether it's working or not, perhaps without knowing what kind of tomato it even happens to be. And we come to our keyword

for today's lesson: the tomato is a metaphor, and it's a metaphor for the specific suite of design choices that a teacher makes. Each teacher deploys their own particular tomato, as they go about the artistry of creating and teaching courses. And there are so many tomatoes. Imagine the student that Erin was describing, who was responding to the feedback loops that *her* tomato cultivates. Later that day, it's likely that student went on to somebody else's tomato, in a different classroom taught by a different person, and then, maybe the next day, on to yet another tomato.

Being an undergrad means being incredibly flexible. Because tomatoes can be so different from each other. This episode is really an ode to the value of a wide array of tomatoes.

Let me replay that moment from my own tomato-classroom last fall:

Ada in classroom: What's so nice about a philosophy class, you can see if you agree, is that we get to learn different theoretical frameworks for different kinds of problems.

Ada: We could say that each tomato presents students with its own framework, not explicitly—it's not like the recipe for each tomato is spelled out; teaching does not work that way—but through the practice of teaching and design-work.

Ada: It might become apparent to students, in one class, that there's a fairly sentimental tomato at play: students might find themselves saying things like—yes, oh, I like that—about a text or an assignment, or—no, I just somehow don't quite relate to that—and those would be entirely appropriate ways to interact in that tomato's classroom. The students are responding to the cues of that tomato when they share those kinds of statements.

But in another class, say an art history class, students might encounter a tomato that's allergic, completely, to sentimentality. In *that* classroom, the very last thing a student should do is say: "Oh, I like that painting." And instead, they'll be rewarded and affirmed for making critical comments about the context or history of a painting.

This is actually the first tomato I ever learned about. I did not invent the concept of the tomato. I discovered it in the novel *On Beauty*, written by the amazing Zadie Smith. Vee, or Victoria, is an undergrad, and at one point in the novel, she turns to her art history professor Howard, and she says, "Your tomato is: you cannot like the tomato." What she meant is that, in Howard's classroom, the tomato shapes what students are learning—say studying Rembrandt, for instance—but it also shapes *how* students are learning. In Howard's class, you cannot say; I like that painting by Rembrandt. Vee and her friends started describing their courses as different kinds of tomatoes because they felt the very palpable effects of design work on the very meaning of knowledge-acquisition. The very epistemic conditions of the classroom are shaped by tomatoes. I was talking about tomatoes recently with my good friend and podcast-collaborator Namrata.

Ada: All right, I'm here with my dear friend, I'll ask you to introduce yourself in a second, in Toronto, we've been talking talking talking, but now we're introducing a mic into the situation. Which feels hilarious and a little awkward. And we're gonna take some time out to talk about tomatoes.

Namrata Mitra: Hi, my name is Namrata Mitra, I teach English at Iona College in New York.

Ada: And as it happens, Namrata and I did the same PhD program a long time ago, so we share a deep and varied interest in philosophy and English literature. You're the one who introduced me to Zadie Smith, a long time ago. And I take your recommendations very seriously, so I plunged into *White Teeth* and then I read *On Beauty*, and I loved it. I think we share a love of the campus novel. I was trying to make sense of teaching, like I was trying to get clarity on the weirdness of classrooms and how very different different classes feel, and I remembered this passage in *On Beauty*.

Namrata: At that point, Vee is summing up different classes that in ways the professor may not have overtly structured it, but what she is summing up is the method of it. Many professors are very strict about certain things that they want students to get out of it and certain things that should be said or they shouldn't get out of it. Which often students don't respect and thankfully so.

Ada: So do you think that the concept of a tomato, if it emerges from students, like students move from class to class, and those classes feel sooooo different. The *space* feels different, the teaching is entirely different, even the underlying presupposition of what are we doing, what is learning, what is teaching, is entirely different. Does it strike you that, by saying, oh, well this is *this* tomato and then I'm moving to this class, and this is *this* tomato, do you think that by having that clarity as a student, that allows for more possibility of resistance?

Namrata: Yes, indeed, because the tomato is the student articulating what they think is the professor's attempted design of the course. So then they sum it up in the tomato language, and then they can resist it, in ways that the professor's tomato or what the professor is intending or how the professor may have *thought* they'd designed it would be quite different. So even the same class I suspect if you ask the professor or the student what the tomato is would emerge as very different tomatoes.

Ada: So are you saying that students have a capacity to experience a class and say, o, I know what species of tomato is going on here, it's *this* tomato, and are you saying that it's likely either that a professor would be like, what? I don't know, that's not my tomato. Would the professor say, o no, my tomato is something else entirely?

Namrata: Yes, I suspect sometimes the professor might want to disagree and say, no, my tomato is something else entirely. Students do have a very strong sense and idea of what the tomato is, and I think that should be given precedence. Where the professor might want to correct and edit, like they were doing with their class, but that is very much a symptom of their tomato. And the tomato is something the professor can't control, which is what I like as well.

Ada: I think that is so beautiful and a little terrifying in a certain kind of way. Because the tomato affects what is happening and what isn't happening in the classroom. And if we as teachers can't even name our tomatoes and in some ways can't control it, it raises up really complicated questions about responsibility, how to relate to our own teaching.

Namrata: I think it does. It does. I think every professor is sort of under obligation at some point to *think* about their tomato. To use the tomato but to throw the tomato out into the room. And the students will do what they will with it, and it might come back in a recognizable form, it may come back as a to-mah-to, they may not even be aware of what happened to their tomato, the student may want to put it in a blender and sort of hit, you know, blend, I guess, but I think it is important for professors to think about their tomato, to think about what it is that they are doing, what it is they are committing to, and to name it, even if the students don't echo that back. So I think that's an obligation professors have.

Ada: So Namrata and I both took a graduate seminar, years ago—different semesters but we took the same class—and you have a stunning description of that tomato. Do you remember what it is?

Namrata: I do. I do. And this would be another place where I don't know if the professor would necessarily agree with us. My sense of that class was that the tomato is in outer space.

Ada: And what does that mean? The tomato is in outer space.

Namrata: It means that we are going to talk about situations that are unclouded. Undiluted. Undirtied by the messy parts of life: lived experience, social political systems. We are going to talk about ethical dilemmas in very controlled atmospheres—like in a lab, which is situated outer space. Because no such lab exists. Aliens are invoked in such tomatoes. Right? What should happen if this alien interacted with that? What would happen in this imaginary scenario if you've been hit by a million trolleys and bridges. Not for one minute reflecting on the problems with this. What would happen if we taken even one of these situations and then actually look for historical precedents, where people have been killed very deliberately by others. But in no point did the tomato want to actually grow anywhere on the soil of this earth—it was very much outer space. I remember that class. It was profoundly alienating. And I don't think the professor was alienated by it. And one thing I think we both observed, even though we took that class four years apart, was other people who got into it. There were many people in that class who found great comfort in dealing with the tomato in outer space. Which wasn't interfered by the messy world of race, and racial violence and class and sexuality. And they would get into it in a way in this very antiseptic greenhouse. Situated outer space.

Ada: Ya, I remember that you said that: that we might find this tomato, the tomato is in outer space, very alienating but our classmates got so excited about that tomato.

Namrata: They did, they'd rock their chair back and forth, their voice took on volumes. That fell in the Marxism classes, that fell, in other classes, where I think in some ways we glimpsed something. So I think that tomatoes that *they* could identify with or they found themselves more at home—which I thought was situated outer space, which was alienating for me—seemed to be a very difference experience for them when they moved to a different classroom, where they read through texts, they examined questions they hadn't thought of and didn't wish to engage with, and they wished to remain in outer space. So they felt very alienated or wished to remain feeling alienated in some other classes, particularly the social political classes.

Ada: So I am gleaning a few really important points from this discussion. Number 1, it's very important that there are many tomatoes. That students can move, especially undergraduates, can move from classrooms to classrooms because tomatoes propel different situations in the classroom. One tomato might say *this* kind of curriculum is important; another tomato might completely not even have a sense of that curriculum but would mobilize a different set of texts. One tomato might say we're going to assess in this way, participation means this, and another tomato will have a completely different model of participation, so if students are moving from classroom to classroom, they're being interpellated, they're being hailed by different tomatoes. And the other really important lesson that I think we can take from your reflections on "the Tomato is in outer space" is that there can be disproportionate effects from tomatoes—so I'm gonna put this kind of bluntly. Not every tomato actually syncs with certain mandates like "universal design in learning." Like there are more ... some tomatoes I think can be more easily infused with principles of flexibility and true accessibility where everyone is welcome at the table.

Namrata: Yes, I do think so. Ya. And so—many tomatoes don't open up, their designs are quite limited. It's sort of built into the tomato. I mean, it's not nourishing for everyone. And students know it right away. I think that professors may suffer from the illusion that they have an all-purpose nourishing tomato that they're offering up, to which everyone is equally excited about participating in, one in which everyone *can* participate, and their participation will be recognized and valued equally, and that is often not the case.

Ada: Okay, I think that is such an essential point for this conversation. You've said that students know immediately the degree to which they're welcome, the degree to which a tomato is inviting them to open up, inviting them to relax, *or* doing the opposite.

Ada: This is another part of the quandary of tomatoes; it's not the teachers but it's the *students* who have the ability to detect, to diagnose tomatoes. Even when Namrata and I began tossing around the concept of the tomato with each other, we are teachers now, immediately we tapped right back into how we felt in different classrooms *when we were students*. This might be a clue to where our tomatoes come from, in the first place. I mean, if you, dear listener, are beginning to be convinced by the key contention of this episode—which is that there's a singularity to the artistry of tomatoes—that each tomato wields its own artisanal flavours—then you might be wondering: well, where do tomatoes come from? If you're a teacher, you might be thinking, well, where did my own teaching tomato develop?

Anna Mudde: My name is Anna Mudde and I'm at Campion College at the University of Regina.

Ada: Anna is another collaborator on this project, and I asked her about where she thinks her own teaching practices came from.

Anna: But one of the things I remember and that stays with me is using many of my profs as negative examples. So I've used them as teachers, and I've used them as instructive. But I remember feeling so alienated in lots of my classes, and I remember thinking like, there's a lot of really cool stuff here that this person is talking about but I didn't feel empowered or comfortable even, and I felt very kind of lacking in confidence and all those sorts of things, and so one of the strategies that I have employed

over and over again when I'm thinking about teaching is: how might my students *feel*. Not what might they learn, but how might they feel. And that's not to develop their sense of confidence or anything like that, although I suppose that's important to me too, I wouldn't want to say that it's not, but mostly because I knew that I didn't learn as well when I was feeling so stressed and so not at home in that environment. And so for me, like, if students are going to learn well, I always think: okay, what do I want this to feel like? And that's a hard thing to grapple with when you leave the classroom, because did it feel right? Well, I don't know. But I'm just thinking that that is definitely something that I learned by negative example and that's an interesting way of teaching as well. Though I try not to be that teacher (laughs).

Ada: So Anna's tomato, we could say, is a creative response to the less nutritious tomatoes she encountered as a grad student. But if I'm right that it's *students* have keen radar for discerning the differences between tomatoes, then how should we be judging and evaluating tomatoes if we are teachers? This is actually the question that we'll be exploring in the next few episodes. It will lead us to an exploration of the *science* of teaching. It will lead me to confess to you what I think my own tomato is (that confession will be shared with you in the next episode). And it'll lead us to some difficult conversations about the constraints on tomato-creation in our contemporary, abelist, neoliberal universities.

Kaitin: And I think too that one of the dangers of the university as a neoliberal space is that it homogenizes the tomato. We are taught that there's only one way to do the tomato, one way for the classroom to look, and it's hard to imagine a path to learning that's other than that.

Ada: Kaitlin is an undergrad field-reporter for this podcast.

Kaitlin: My name is Kaitlin Rothberger, and I study philosophy and gender studies at York University. There's a certain element of performativity to being in the classroom as a student and to move between the space of all these tomatoes—like, I will be in one classroom and I will know for that professor how to perform learning in this space. And the way that looks in one classroom will be radically different from the way that it looks in another classroom. And I think it's important for students to tune into these moments and what the professor thinks learning looks like and what kind of learning is actually happening in the space. And it's so rare, I've found, for professors to communicate with students about what's happening in the classroom. It seems that there's not a lot of dialogue that happens. The professor just assumes *this* is how teaching looks because *this* is the way that I am doing the teaching. So learning has to be taking place as a result of what I am doing. And sometimes that's not often the case. The tomato that I really love is really self-aware that it's a tomato. And makes you all self-aware, like calls the student into that kind of self-reflexivity also. Like I've had classrooms with female professors especially who are always asking who the "we" is, and I think that brings into question what the tomato is also, I think that's implicit in that space. That's *my* favourite tomato: the tomato that knows it's a tomato.

Ada: That's a beautifully generalized portrait of a tomato by Kaitlin. A tomato that knows that it's a tomato. I suppose that this podcast episode is trying to draw attention to tomatoes and maybe solicit

more self-aware tomatoes. The thing is though that the workings of design always exceed the intentions of the architect, in this case, the professor. This might be why it's students, not teachers, who have the best radar for diagnosing what's going on in the classroom and actually identifying what tomato is at play.

This episode comes out of writing that I've been doing about teaching. I have a book coming out later this fall, and one of the chapters is titled "Tomatoes in the classroom." I had an amazing undergrad RA while I was researching that book project, he's now a graduate student, and he started to produce these stunning tomato portraits, first as an undergrad and now as a grad student. These portraits, more than anything I could say in this episode, really capture the singularity and the artisanal specificity of tomatoes. They also express how affectively intense classroom spaces can be. Students can feel dread, they can feel joy, they can tap into comedy all in part because of the work enacted by tomatoes.

Here is one of my favourite of Kyle's tomato-portraits:

Kyle Kinaschuk: "The Lifeguard Tomato". This tomato - upon first taste - is remarkably robust, luminous, and sapid, yet it will not be long until one discovers that this tomato who appears so divine and delicious by the side of the pool is not planning on ever swimming with you; rather, this tomato will only dive in momentarily to save you from imminent death. In fact, some swear that this tomato hasn't been in the water in years. Others, however, contend that this tomato has forgotten how to swim, or, at the very best, is terrified of swimming.

Ada: My thanks to Kyle Kinaschuk for sharing this tomato with the podcast. I'm not sure if I've ever encountered the Lifeguard Tomato myself, I do think that I have, actually, but the portrait conjures up such a specific dynamic that it certainly feels familiar.

I'd also like to thank everyone who participated in this episode, and commented on drafts and shared their own amazing audio know-how. You'll find all the references and resources for further thinking about tomatoes on the episode's shownotes, which is on our podcast website. On our site, you can also listen to a pre-episode that I made, along with some blog posts about learning how to navigate audio and sound design, starting from scratch. You can also read some of the feedback that I received on that pre-episode, as well—it's so interesting, the very different reactions that an audio essay can elicit.

All right, and before I wind down this episode, I have some homework for you. Should you choose to accept it, your homework assignment is really simple. It's to choose one sonic situation that is a part of your everyday travels, and simply to mic it up. If you're a student, record yourself making a comment in class. It's super easy to do this on the down-low. Just hit record on the voice memo on your phone. If you're a teacher, pin a little lav mic onto yourself and record part of a lesson that you're giving. Let's see if new feedback loops emerge from the fact that you will have created some tape out of your ordinary activities. This way you can join the experiment that we're staging here at The Learning Gene.

I'd like to thank my institution, Mount Royal University, especially the Faculty of Arts, the Academic Development Centre, and the Institute for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, for start-up support for this project. We are super appreciative. I thank the students in Feminist Philosophy and Philosophy

of Science who participated in this project last year. You can listen to *their* audio projects on our website; you'll find them under "Voices." And I thank my RAs, especially Patrick Gibson and Logan Peters. And I thank *you* for listening. Join us next time as we turn the dial up on our inquiry into the designs of classrooms.

Music credits

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