

Popular Podagogy: Episode 1

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00:08 Nathan: Hi there and welcome to Popular Podagogy. I am your host, Nathan Chaney. This podcast is brought to you by Queen's University, Faculty of Education. In this podcast we will cover big teaching ideas in a way that will allow all teachers and maybe even some parents an opportunity to relate on a variety of emotional levels, from hopefully hilariously funny to heartbreaking sadness. Our guests will include top researchers and instructors from our faculty, as well as practicing teachers to combine big educational ideas with the everyday life of being a teacher. We hope that as you listen to this podcast, you will have an opportunity to relate to the lives of other teachers, enjoy some of our stories, and maybe even pick up something along the way.

00:50 Nathan: Before we get to our first guess. I'm just gonna give you a little bit about myself so that you have an idea of my background and how I came to be hosting this podcast. I was always one of those people who wanted to be a teacher, which has become a bit of a cliché, but it was the truth for me. After university I got a job teaching our West in a grade four, five, classroom, and I was so excited to head out and start a new adventure. I loved teaching. It was everything I expected it to be and report cards were definitely more than I expected them to be. I loved Alberta too, but we decided to move back to Ontario because that was our home.

01:24 Nathan: I took a job at Queens and someone had the bright idea to let me talk them into doing a podcast. Now that you know who I am, it's time to bring on our first guest and I'm joined here by Lee Airton. Lee is a faculty member at Queens, a Twitter rock star, a all around famous person and pretty much a jack-of-all-trades. Hey, not bad, I got a laugh right at the start of the podcast. So Lee, how are you doing today?

01:50 Lee Airton: I'm very well, Nathan, how are you?

01:52 Nathan: Good, thank you, good, thank you. We're going to actually start off with the most hard-hitting questions, and then from there we'll kinda transition into some softer stuff. So the first question that I have for you is, "Is it true that you belong to an elite cocktail society? [laughter] And my second question is, "How did you get into this and how cool are you?"

[laughter]

02:17 LA: That's very hard hitting. I am a member of the Toronto Temperance Society. I wouldn't call it elite, I would call it specialized.

02:26 Nathan: Okay.

02:27 LA: For a very reasonable monthly fee, you can belong to a bar or where there are rules around how loud you can be and how many people you can bring, and you can have access to some of the best cocktails and bars in Toronto. I found this out... Not bars, cocktails and beverages in Toronto, and I found this place 'cause I was at a restaurant called Side Car on College Street with my friend Alicia, and we really liked the drinks and we asked a lot of questions and they said, "Hey do you wanna test out our cocktail bar upstairs?" And we saw people going through a secret door and I love secret doors, so we went up stairs and I joined and I go there every time I go to Toronto. So yeah, I do. I don't know if it makes me cool but it makes me interested in perhaps too interested in cocktail.

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03:09 Nathan: Well, to me it makes you the most interesting person in the world.

[laughter]

03:15 LA: You can join too, Nathan, and then you can be as interesting as that.

03:18 Nathan: Well, I don't think they'll let me into an establishment like that.

03:21 LA: No they will. You just have to read the rules.

03:23 Nathan: Well, there's your problem.

[laughter]

03:26 Nathan: So, just off of that, what would be your favorite cocktail that you've done there or made in general?

03:33 LA: Well, I really love the Manhattan. I love variations with the Manhattan. And actually my favorite cocktail there is one of their classic standards called the Cary Grant, which is a twist on a very, very well-made four ounce Manhattan.

03:48 Nathan: Wow, sounds delicious.

03:49 LA: Must be stirred.

03:51 Nathan: Must be stirred, shaken not stirred, or stirred not shaken?

03:53 LA: With a peel with no white stuff no piff.

03:55 Nathan: Alright, so now that we've gotten those hard-hitting questions out of the way we're gonna transition into an article that you wrote for the Toronto Star. So can you just tell us a little bit about what that article was about?

04:07 LA: Yeah, so I wrote an article for the Toronto Star, from the perspective of someone who works in the field of education, about an incident that happened at Wilfrid Laurier University, I believe last fall, where a teaching assistant was brought in front of a couple of professors and institutional administrators because she played a clip from a video, put out by Dr. Jordan Peterson of U of T, where he states his opposition to using transgender people's correct pronouns. And what happened at Laurier was that the TA was told that the way that she'd introduced the video and led discussion around it was problematic.

04:42 LA: And what I was interested in, is how the discussion around the incident completely sort of abdicated any conversations about pedagogy or about teaching. So people were kind of appearing online and making arguments like, "We should be able to have a debate about anything in the classroom or else it's not teaching." And so I wanted to point out with my article that actually, "Let's have a debate, kids," isn't the way that we teach all topics, and that the teacher's job is actually to provide a space where all students can participate as safely as possible, and especially when we're

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talking about things that count for credit, things like participation marks.

05:17 LA: So I gave an example of whether you would debate the Quebec Niqab Ban and and make students participate in a debate for or against people wearing the niqab in public life, if you have a student in that classroom who also veils. So how would you compel that person's participation, make them take out the opposite side? We just don't teach so many deeply cultural and personal things through debate, and I just wanted to point out how nonsensical that was as an argument.

05:44 Nathan: So how do you think that we should be bringing in particular political topics into the school? Because debates can be great teaching moments in the right context, and it's an opportunity for people to disagree respectfully, especially in a time where social media and the internet and other outlets lead people to lacking empathy, and especially in political situation. So how can we frame the debate to make it or use another tool so that we can make it, so that they're still getting that quality discussion, while being respectful of each other and having that understanding of mutual respect.

06:22 LA: Well, I think there's a lot of ways that you can bring up what happened culturally and societally in Canada, around, for example, the passage of Bill C-16 in the Senate, 'cause that was the bill that added Gender Expression and Gender Identity protections to the Canadian Human Rights Act. And so you can actually teach that social conflict. I teach the many different viewpoints that are erupted around the inclusion of gender expression in the Human Rights Act. And you can teach that as a pivotal moment in the Canadian conversation about human rights and about gender diversity issues, and in doing so, you can talk about and you can teach these videos of Dr. Peterson and other materials that have been produced, like my articles and all kinds of different ways that people have intervened in public discourse about this on, I guess, we could say the other side. You can teach this as a conversation, and in doing so, you can also be mindful of who your students are and how they're liable to take up that conversation. But requiring people to sit in the classroom where their existence is debated is not a way to teach about this at all.

07:26 Nathan: So do you think that there's a place in today's classroom for debating at all] Or do you think that...

07:31 LA: Oh sure.

07:31 Nathan: So could you give an example of where you think that would be a good area to use a debate?

07:36 LA: Oh my gosh, you could debate about all kinds of things, but I think is multi-culturalism a good policy platform? Is it still relevant? Go to any high school or university debate club and find things that are being debated and where debate is a useful pedagogical exercise. But that's not necessarily the way to engage all topics, and not having a debate doesn't mean that teaching and learning aren't happening. There are hundreds of different kinds of instructional strategies that teachers use for engaging topics that are boring, I mean not boring [chuckle] from engaging topics that are sort of like vanilla non-confrontational...

08:10 Nathan: We're gonna leave that in. I just want that to be clear.

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08:10 LA: In every possible way, or for teaching topics that are really sort of gripping and polarizing. And let's have a debate, is far from the only thing that teachers do.

08:21 Nathan: So from the Toronto Star article, we're gonna transition here. So you are the maestro of the "no big deal" campaign. Can you tell us a little bit about what that is about?

08:30 LA: Yeah, the "no big deal" campaign is something that I initiated and then created with some collaborators, particularly at the University of Toronto in the sexual and gender diversity office around the kind of conflict that arose in fall of 2016 when Dr. Peterson released his first video saying, "I will not use a person's pronouns that they use for themselves if they do not match what I personally would use for them automatically." That's kind of the gist of his argument. At the time, I was working at U of T in OISE. I was a sessional lecturer in the Master of Teaching program. And I'd been there for almost three years at that point. And I am a non-binary person and my pronouns are they/them." And I go to work, and have colleagues and teach students and have neighbours and what I had experienced about being a person who uses gender neutral pronouns is that a lot of people are willing to do their best and not make a great huge big deal about it. And I wanted other people who were in my context, where I worked every day, to know that that support is visible. I wanted to honor the goodwill of the many people I knew who just do their best and used my pronouns, and it's no big deal.

09:41 LA: And I wanted to offer a way for people to speak back to that really kind of crappy climate in which it was suddenly like, a weird polarizing political issue. And actually many of us have been out with our pronouns and our identities for many years, and actually have not experienced any kind of polarization. So I just wanted to frame the debate differently and I wanted to offer people some tools to speak back if they chose. So, we made a series of infographics that are all available and free to download and print, and whatever you like it nbdcampaign.ca. And we made a little green social media badge that just says, "I'll use your pronoun. No big deal."

10:16 Nathan: Did you get a pretty positive response from that or what was the response like?

10:19 LA: Yeah, it was great. I'm really excited whenever I hear about how far it's traveled. I've heard about it being used in some European countries. The University of Victoria put our materials all over their faculty of education building. People have made things in the American South, it just travels everywhere, and that's what I like about it is that I don't have to drive it; it's kind of like a driver-less car or... No, it's kind of like a stream that trickles. So it appears all over the place, and people can just take it and use it and make things however they want. And I really... One thing that I've heard from people is that it makes the act of just using someone's pronoun actually reflect what it is, which is using a word and doing your best. And I'm grateful for... Yeah, I'm grateful for all those messages.

11:06 Nathan: Now you're also a blogger. So can you tell us a little bit about your blog and give everyone kind of the Cole's Notes version of what some of the topics or that you cover on there?

11:16 LA: Yeah, I can... So this kind of, this is in the same category as my work with no big deal campaign. My blog is called "They is My Pronoun," and it's at theyismypronoun.com. And I started that blog quite a while ago in the explosion of gender diversity that's happening now, which is really cool. So I started that in a time that feels a little far away, which was 2012 [laughter] And in queer and queer and or trans-gender communities, there had been people who used gender neutral

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pronouns including they/them which in mine, and there had been different kinds of ways that people knew how to use these pronouns, but that hadn't really come into the mainstream. And so around the time that I started using they/them as my pronouns around 2011, I realized that there actually wasn't any kind of practical resource for people to access because so many of us, us/they people were actually coming into public life, and saying, "This is my pronoun, but people didn't know where to go if they had questions. So I wanted to provide something that was so practical and so accessible that it took away any kind of barrier except just the learning curve of using a different pronoun for someone.

12:25 Nathan: And I've been on your blog and I thought it was really cool, actually.

12:28 LA: Thanks.

12:28 Nathan: I can see the responses that you got from some of the posts and the resources that you put out there. And it really means a lot to a lot of people, which I thought was really, really cool 'cause blogs are a tough thing because sometimes you can start them and whether you have an audience or not, is a difficult thing, and whether you're actually posting anything meaningful. I am sure that I would not post anything meaningful if I had a blog, so.

12:49 LA: Oh Nathan, don't don't.

12:52 Nathan: Oh yeah.

12:53 LA: Well, it's funny that blog has changed a lot over time. So in the beginning I spent quite a lot of time on it. I posted almost weekly because the questions came and came and came, and eventually over time I've reached and pardon me the blog is based on... Used to be based on only answering questions. And then I started writing other longer pieces where I interviewed people who use or have to use in her daily life singular they. But over time I reached what we call in qualitative research, a point of saturation. So I wasn't getting any new questions.

13:24 LA: What I do now generally, is I get questions that I've already answered, and if I have time, I go and I direct people to posts the already exists, but I don't get much new stuff anymore, which is really interesting. I feel like I have a representative database of things that people worry about and they have to think about when they use a pronoun, themselves, like they/then or a neo-pronoun, like Z here, or when they have to do this for someone else. So I don't have to write it as much as I used to. It's more of an archive now and a resource.

13:52 Nathan: So, taking into account the no big deal campaign, and they is my pronoun as well. I know that this is where a lot of your research comes in, just in a really quick 60-second answer, "As a teacher, how can we ensure we're creating an inclusive environment for all students in their classroom?"

14:09 LA: Oh, that's very broad. [laughter]

14:11 Nathan: I know, and I'm asking you to do it in a short period of time, so challenge is on.

14:15 LA: How can you... I'll say one thing about, is that I think one of the most under-thought, but powerful strategies any teacher can use at any level is to actually put out into the world of your

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body language, and your facial expression, your tone, and also your words, sort of your whole presence that you are open to whoever people are. And that you were open to that changing. And that you are not privileging your own expectations of someone else over how they are presenting themselves. And I don't just mean queer people. I don't just mean trans people that if someone comes in and you have a pre-existing expectation of what they're gonna like or do or think based on, for example, their ethnicity or their religion and they surprise you, that you kind of back up that surprise and you keep it inside of yourself, and you don't give them a message that they have just violated some stereotype you had. So it just a monitoring how I give out messages about what I expected and just realizing that's actually a sight of a lot of, of drive-by harm. I think that's something all teachers should learn how to do.

15:20 Nathan: Absolutely, I think that's one of the things that when I was teaching it kinda struck me as being quite amazing that when I was in the classroom, even just being there and being open and being able to listen to whatever a student brought to you was something that really stuck with those kids, and that was something that... That's how those relationships are built, so I think that that's a great answer to have there because we really need to make sure that no matter what we're doing as educators, we're making it so that it's a safe space for them to come into the school and feel welcome, and have an opportunity for them to talk, so that's great.

15:52 Nathan: And it's a big... If I think about two teachers, one of them who and let's just use the example of trans student. One of them a trans student comes out and they start going on and on and on about how much they know about trans people and how totally supportive and great they are, and they start demonstrating all of this knowledge and preparation to sort of talk the kids ear off about it. We kinda have that teacher on one hand, and then we have a teacher on the other hand, who might actually not know very much at this time but they receive the information they say, "Great, thanks for telling me." Well, let's talk about what you need. My teacher-ed practice and in working and researching about gender diversity issues, I have come to be more interest in that second teacher and how I can help foster that kind of capacity in my teacher candidates.

16:31 Nathan: So we'll be right back with more Lee Airton, but first a word from our sponsors.

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16:40 Speaker 3: Are you an Occasional Teacher looking to improve your job prospects? Are you an experienced teacher trying to reach the next pay scale? Are you interested in improving your overall teaching practice? Queens continuing teacher education has you covered with easy to access online courses, you can log on to your course from anywhere you have access to the internet. Courses offered by CTE range from special education, to technological education, to safe and accepting schools. Queen CTE Courses work with your schedule, have supportive expert instructors that want to help you succeed. Registration is fast and easy with no commitment to pay until the Friday before the course starts. What are you waiting for? Visit coursesforteachers.ca for more information or to sign up today, that's coursesforteachers.ca.

17:36 Nathan: We are back with Lee Airton who has given us a little bit about the research that they do and also given us a little bit about the article that they wrote for the Toronto Star, but now we are going to get into what we think will be our most popular and favorite segment, which is the classroom confessions. Now, this is an opportunity...

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18:00 LA: Oh dear.

18:00 Nathan: Yeah, be ready for it. Now, this is an opportunity for teachers to talk about some of the funny things that they've done in the class, some of the funny things that one of their students has done. Obviously, we're gonna leave out names and identifiers, but we understand that there are all kinds of funny things that happen in a school and we're going to talk about it. So if you are one of those teachers that has a really funny story that you just wanna share or want us to share on the air, you can email that into us at popular.podagogy@queensu.ca. So popular.podagogy@queensu.ca. If we think that your story is one appropriate and two funny enough, that we should read on the air, then we will use that story in one of our future podcasts. But to start us off, I'm actually gonna start us with one of my stories so that I can give a little bit of a baseline for what we're looking for from me and then let Lee jump in with their story.

19:06 Nathan: So when I was a teacher, one of the things that I often came back to in the classroom was my students whining about one thing or the other. I know, as many of you can listen out there, you will understand that this is something that happens all the time, whether it's they wanna go out for additional recess, or they don't wanna do a particular thing in gym class, or they just think that we should do more of a particular subject and less of a not so particular subject. So when I would come back to this in my class, I would just look at my class as they continually asked me questions, and on the projector, I would go to YouTube and put on a play-list called sad piano music. And as my kids, my students continued to complain to me. All I would do was stare at them with a blank face. Have an image of broken piano keys, and me sitting there listening to terribly sad piano music.

20:06 Nathan: This became a little bit of a bit in my class and every time the kids would expect me to do it, one time we were on our way to a local park just to go outside. It was a nice day. So we were having an outside gym class, and my students started complaining about the fact that we had to walk in the sunshine and happiness. Nd so what I did is I had actually snuck my speaker into my backpack, my emergency backpack, so that I could ensure that just in case an emergency arose, we would have music. And as they complained to me along the pathway, I played some sad piano music, and the kids just looked at me and they said, "Does it just follow you wherever it goes?" And I dead-panned and said, "Absolutely. I want you to know that. Do not ever forget it." And that is my classroom confession for today. So we're gonna transition this over to Lee. Lee, do you have a classroom confession that you can share with us?

20:58 LA: Oh, I do. Now I am a very silly person.

21:01 Nathan: No, no, we don't see that at all, no.

21:03 LA: So it's very, it's hard for me to pick just one, but I'll talk about something that when... I learned something about popular culture, it was actually when I was teaching in the master teaching program at OISE. I'm new to Queens. I just started in July. And I was teaching... My teaching in the past years is unfurled mostly of teacher candidates. So I was at OISE and I was in my class and I was suggesting to my students who were writing in the master teaching program, they write quite a significant large research study of their own doing, and my job is to sort of coach them and help them through that. And I suggested them some ways that they could relax after they turned in their draft. And I like to be real about self-care and taking breaks and stuff like that. So I said, "Well you could do on a bunch of things after you hand this in on Friday..."

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21:56 Nathan: Did you suggest for them to make a master cocktail from your cocktail society?

22:00 LA: No, because most of them are members. I love to see them there but they weren't. But what I did... I said, " You could do all these things, you could call a friend, whatever, or you could Netflix and chill, and I just kept going on and they all started to giggle and I was like, "What's going on?" And they're like, "Well you said Netflix and chill." And I'm like, "What is funny about watching TV, and chilling out," and then because I am a very silly person one of my students who is very lovely, just said, "Everybody be quiet. Do you know what that means? Do you do you not know?" And I was like, "I don't know what that means." And she's like, "It means, it means you invite someone over to have sex." And I was like, "I didn't know that." I'm not like... Well, that's... I guess that's a thing, but I didn't know. And then they just lost their minds and I was like, "Well, I am..."

22:54 Nathan: So in case you're watching, Popular Podagogy with your class right now, it might be a good idea to rewind it...

23:01 LA: It doesn't mean just chill out and binge watch a show. Like it means you're gonna invite someone over for an interlude.

23:08 Nathan: Please do not say that you're going to Netflix and chill over your lunch break. That is what we're trying to tell you.

23:11 LA: But that's what I thought it meant. I'm just gonna go watch a little bit more Star Trek Voyager by myself.

23:17 Nathan: Well.

23:17 LA: Not what it means.

23:19 Nathan: I am speechless.

23:20 LA: I have also sat on the desk and ripped the entire crotch of my pants, by the way.

23:26 Nathan: Well we've all been there. Come on...

23:28 LA: For real. Just like, "rrrrrip." Gigantic. It's not like an issue. It was like boxer shorts. I'm just like, "What? What do I do?" And I just kept going and it actually was so magical.

23:41 Nathan: Well, that is one of our smartest minds at Queens everybody. So in case you're wondering what we are doing at the faculty of education...

23:49 LA: People wear pants and sometimes it is a problem.

23:52 Nathan: Alright, Lee, so what research are you working on right now?

23:56 LA: Well, I just received a series of small grants with my colleague, Dr. Kyle Kirk up at The University of Ottawa, and we are going to be looking at all of the Diversity and Equity Policies across all 67 publicly funded school boards in Ontario to see how they're making sense of this term

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"gender expression." Because right now, every single Ontarian has, as of 2012, the right to be free from discrimination and harassment on the basis of their gender expression, that's everybody.

24:25 Nathan: What a world we live in.

24:25 LA: Right, that's everybody. And so often we only think of that new human rights protection as applying to trans people, but actually it hasn't been interpreted in such a limited way. So we wanna see how people are understanding it and how schools are making sense of it, so we can make recommendations.

24:40 Nathan: It scares me a little bit, that it's only as of 2012, that we have that recommendation in there, but I'm really glad that you're getting that opportunity to look into that, and it's definitely something that we hope that our teachers will go and check out. So Lee, do you have anything else to plug or where can people find you?

24:57 LA: I do, I just wanted to say that if people are interested in finding me and more about the work that I do, you can find me on Twitter @Leeairton. You can also check out Leeairton.com, and the... Yeah, I think, Oh yes, I do have something to plug. This is so exciting. I have completed a manuscript for a book that is for popular audiences, and I'm really excited about this. It's gonna come out in October, and it's called, Gender Your Guide, A Gender-friendly Primer on What to Know, What to do, and What to Say in the New Gender Culture.

25:28 Nathan: I am so impressed that you remembered that title/

25:30 LA: It's very long. When you write a book, you have minimal say in the title. But I have to say I'm pretty happy about it, 'cause it says there were gender free times, so it's not ambiguous about what it's about. And it is a go-to place for people who are interested in gender diversity and trans people and trans issues and things like pronouns and things like how do I ask somebody, what's the law with the deal with bathrooms? It is your primer on the ways that gender is kind of exploding in public and open ways and it is very practical. So it really draws on the work that I've done with my blog, and "They is my pronoun." And I think it's gonna be really helpful.

26:04 Nathan: And where can people find this book?

26:06 LA: So it will be available for preorder on Chapters, but I will be plugging away at plugging it on my different social media channels when it comes out. And I'm sure that my colleagues on the faculty of Ed. Will also plug that for me.

26:24 Nathan: Thank you for listening to Popular Podagogy. If you like, what you hear, you can go subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud. CFRC website, the Faculty of Education website, or pretty much any website that's out there. Thanks for tuning in.