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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Mike Theune and Bob Broad, November 12, 2017

Laura Kennedy: Be it in the classroom or in a reading group, we're constantly judging what we read and the new book from Illinois State University English Professor Bob Broad and Illinois Wesleyan University English Professor Mike Theune aims to help us in those efforts. *We Need To Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry* reveals a technique that can help readers learn how to evaluate poems and also learn more about each other by discovering what it is we value. The professors began work on the book about twelve years ago, says Broad, when Theune expressed the desire to come up with a method for getting people to figure out what they really value in contemporary American poetry.

Bob Broad: And there a pause and I said, "Mike, you know I wrote a book called (Theune laughs) *What We Really Value*, right?"

Mike Theune: It's just a book.

(both laugh)

Broad: I'll lend you a copy, Mike. So, and then the project was born.

Mike Theune: Bob's method in rhetoric and composition- he calls it Dynamic Criteria Mapping, and I-

Kennedy: -ooh! That sounds very serious.

Theune: (overlapping) it's great, right? Well, it's – it's a great name for a great method and when people kind of think about value, they think that what I can do is just kind of sit there, maybe I'll read something on my own and I'll think about my own values more deeply and I will come to understand them better. And it turns out that Bob's work with Dynamic Criteria Mapping – he kinda says, "No, that's just not the case." What you actually has to do is you have to sit down with other people, you have to look at texts and you have to discuss those texts and in those discussions your values become... are kind of revealed through that process. So –

Kennedy: -So that's something you have to do in a communal-

Theune: -(overlapping) that it is-

Kennedy: -kind of situation.

Theune: So, Dynamic Criteria Mapping is communal, is vital, right? So it is, in part, that kind of human interaction, that vibrant that sometimes antagonistic, often dramatic interaction with people where ideas are sparking, it's where values are really revealed and what you do is you record those conversations and then you analyze those conversations. So Bob and I, relatively late in the process, came up with a metaphor for – one way of valuing things is, right, you try to dig deep and you try to discover values as if they're sitting there like entities to be achieved by just working to get to them, but – but what we thought was value just doesn't behave like that. Values aren't these kind of solid little nuggets that we go after. They're much more quirky and quirky are value-shift depending upon the time of day. They shift depending upon-

Kennedy: - it depends on the people you're with-

Theune: -and the people you're with. And it's completely contextual-

Broad: -and whether you had your coffee-

Theune: -and whether you've had your coffee, indeed. (Kennedy laughs) And so, so we said instead of thinking about a metaphor of kind of, that a process is kind of digging down to try to find these nuggets of value that—what we're doing is kind of creating a method that actually is more of a particle collider, right, so that you have values discussions and the values slam into each other and we learn about those values by seeing them interact and by being able to record them and then analyze those recordings.

Kennedy: Are there universal values?

Theune: No... (Laughs)...

Kennedy: Really?

Theune: Sorry- sorry – sorry to let everybody know-

Broad: That was a great question and a great answer!

Kennedy: I'm surprised.

Theune: Yeah, so one of the other reasons for this project is people either approach value in one of two ways. Either they thought that value was objective, that we should be able to kind of discover what the values actually are and what we should all believe. Or they thought, well, value is merely subjective, right? So I think this, you think that, and there's nothing to do in the middle there. Value clearly isn't objective. People value different things. It's just not objective. And it's- doesn't feel like it's subjective because actually our behaviors put that to the test. We actually think that it's important to discuss our values and to maybe even try to persuade other people of them.

Broad: Laura, I'm gonna tell- tell a quick – give a quick example. You ask this great question, are there universal values in poetry? Mike gave the correct answer, the answer is no... (Theune laughs)... here's a quick illustration (overlapping)

Theune: (overlapping)... of course ... (laughs)

Broad: -you read the book... (all of them laugh)... There's a poem, a well-known poem called Short Order Cook. The poet is...

Theune: ... Jim Daniels.

Broad: Jim Daniels. The poem is a description- a first person narrative of a short order cook fulfilling an order for thirty cheeseburgers and thirty fries. It's a sort of heroic accomplishment... (Theune laughs)... for the short order cook and one of the poets in the group said, "After a couple people had said what they love about this poem- it's working class, it's male, it's kind of gutsy, it's very, you know, gritty," and another poet said, "There's nothing smart in this poem and there's nothing beautiful in this poem. If there's nothing smart or beautiful in it, what's good about it?" So that shows to me some people value smart, beautiful poetry and some people value, sometimes, poetry that's about work. As – as one of our

participants said, “crappy work”... (others laugh)... he also said, “This poem makes me want a cheeseburger and I’m a vegetarian.”-

Kennedy: - Oooh! That’s a good poem.

Broad: -so just one example of how people value poetry differently and at least, in that situation there was nothing universal. There was an argument because they were valuing it differently.

Kennedy: So, of course, your book is something that will be used in classrooms and it will be used in academic settings. But what about us ordinary poetry schmoes? If we have like a reading group or something, is that something that we can use off-campus as a work?

Theune: Yes! Here is what I think our book can do for a reading group is it can offer the reading group some ideas about why it is that you don’t all agree about which book you should read next and it might also give you a way to begin to actually, even focus in some new way- some of your discussions about the poems that you’re looking at. It’s an important process to undertake to discover those values so the point isn’t to get a lesson from it, the point is to actually do it.

Broad: Laura, I was thinking that WGLT might like to read the book because you might decide you wanna help your listeners, articulate what they value in their radio station. Michael and I, and a few thousand other people in this community donate money to WGLT because we value local media, we value public media and we love the people who work here, so that’s three criteria ...(Theune laughs) right off the top of my head. Yeah, but we could dig deeper and find out more about what people value about WGLT.

Kennedy: How in a group situation, in a communal evaluation do we keep people being civil to one another with regards to evaluation?

Broad: Some of the rules of Dynamic Criteria Mapping are that everyone’s reading the same text, each participant’s job is to articulate what she values, and to listen to what others say they value. If I value one thing and you value another, if I value beauty and intelligence and you value working class, you know, representations of crappy work, we are obligated to listen to one another. And I can say, “Oh, I don’t value this poem because I don’t think it’s smart and beautiful” and you can say, “I love it because it’s about something you never get to read about in poetry which is like making hamburgers,” and we’re obligated to listen. There’s not really any basis for argument because we’re not trying to decide which is the correct interpretation or which is the correct evaluation. We’re trying – because we’re in a community together, we’re trying to learn what our community values. Our main job is to listen and to speak and to learn as a community to gain clarity about what we value and our values do not have to agree. I love pointing to the example of the Supreme Court of the United States. Because that’s a body that makes crucial decisions for our country and they do not agree. They are civil, they argue passionately, they get upset, they write, you know, stinging dissents and yet they are a community and we can study their decisions and learn what they value that way.

Kennedy: That’s Bob Broad and Mike Theune. Their new book is *We Need to Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry*. I’m Laura Kennedy.