

Audiences and Making Research Valuable: An Interview with Dr. Kara Neu¹

By Katy Foley

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Dr. Kara Neu is Visiting Teaching Assistant Professor at the University of Denver and a research fellow at the Sie Cheou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy. Dr. Neu received her Masters and then her PhD in 2018 from the University of Denver and says that teaching afforded her the lifelong opportunity to continue learning. Dr. Neu was a recipient of the ICNC 2016 Research Fellowship Award.



Katy Foley writes of herself “I’m a senior at the University of Denver pursuing a double major in Socio-Legal Studies and Public Policy and a minor in Writing. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, with my mom and twin sister. Being raised in an all-female household in a progressive city greatly influenced my values, as did having been raised in an ardently political family. I arrived in Colorado with an unswerving belief in public service and the capacity for justice to serve the common good; these values led me to work in Colorado politics, in which I plan to continue to work when I graduate.”

Foley further notes: “Dr. Kara Neu shocked me on my first day of class. She doesn’t know this but I, and I’d assume my fellow classmates, were blown away by her intersectional approach to Gender and International Relations. Within the first 30 minutes of the course, she had weaved an expansive and complex narrative between many of the issues that are central to gender studies. Dr. Neu is an encouraging

¹ This is one in a series of nine interviews of University of Denver professors. Each was conducted by an undergraduate in the Minor in Applied Writing, as part of a course, “Theories of Writing.” The interviews explored professors’ early memories of writing; influences on and thoughts about their own development as writers; some of their current writing practices; and other matters related to writing and teaching. For more information about the interviews, the course or Minor, or about writing at DU, please contact Professor Doug Hesse, dhesse@du.edu.

professor by nature (perhaps you could attribute this to her extensive experiences as a student or simply her character), but for every comment in class she thanks the students for their perspective and contribution. The care that she brings to her classroom, in this unique case, our zoom meeting, is one that translates to her teaching style. Dr. Neu stresses intersectionality in all of her presentations. This theme underscores her value of holistic, comprehensive, and caring education.”

Katy Foley: How did you become a professor?

Dr. Kara Neu: I thought about being a teacher at a middle school level or high school. I hadn't really considered the undergraduate or graduate level. I don't have any professors in my family, and I'm the first in my family to receive a PhD, so I wasn't aware of it as an option. I realized that I could study international studies for the rest of my life and also teach students and interact with students in a university setting, and that was extremely appealing.

Foley: I love the idea that teaching is still participating in that learning process.

Neu: Lifelong learning, I think. I assured my family that I will not be pursuing any more degrees. I'm done, and I will not be going back to school. But yes, I think, continue that learning alongside students and through my research and other areas. It's really fun to be able to do that.

Foley: To what professors can you attribute some of your valued writing practices and styles?

Neu: It's interesting that you don't take a writing course as either a master student or a PhD student. If you want to be an academic, you just kind of absorb it over time through reading academic articles and academic texts and working through them with your mentors and professors.

So much of my research mixes quantitative and qualitative scholarship and research methods, so I do some statistical analysis and also some case study analysis. It's more positivist than post-positivist, just given the nature of what I study. I feel comfortable with that philosophy of science in order to answer some of the questions that I'm interested in, though I'm not normatively only committed to it. I took a number of research methods courses as a PhD student, and most of those were focused on the positivist method.

One text that is both very useful, but also infuriating in some respects (because it's very narrow) is King, Kohane and Verba. It's abbreviated KKV. I guarantee, if you would mention that to any person in my field, they would automatically know what you were talking about.

Foley: I'll keep that one in mind then!

Neu: Yes! But it is kind of like a “how to guide” and is useful in the sense that it provides clear standards for what is expected. It also gives you a really good foil that you can argue against if you think that those dangers are bad, which many people do. And that's fine. But that's probably the best-known text for research methods. Writing itself really is just kind of trial and error and practice, and it varies also significantly across specific sub-disciplines. I work in conflict and peace studies, and that has a very different writing style than development or economics and different journals. So, as an academic you submit research to different journals, and they have different expectations for writing styles as well. But in all of them, I think the premium and the emphasis is on clear writing, organized writing, and writing that is persuasive but empirically based on arguments that you present and the evidence that you provide. Those are pretty standard.

Foley: You just spoke to one question that I already wrote. I do have one that comes to mind: what are the central tenets of ethical writing for you?

Neu: One that comes to mind is being very clear about what you found and what you haven't found and to be very aware of your audience. But it's also important in the field to be able to say something to those other audiences and who, we hope, use the work to make the world a better place. Keeping in mind that audience and writing for them is different than how we often approach research. If we want research to be valuable and useful (and also to not be used for harm or towards unjust or unethical aims), we have to be aware of our audiences and how they might differently interpret our work.

Foley: I think that speaks to the power of researchers. I want to bring this back to your role as an educator: I think there is a power dynamic in every classroom, and so looking at this role as principal and socializing force, it's fair to say you have a lasting impact on your students. Could you talk to me about the ethics behind your approach to teaching?

Neu: It's a role that I take seriously in the sense that I don't think of myself too highly as an educator. In my house, I know the power dynamics, but I also recognize that students all are very educated and smart and have their own homes. To allow you to provide and to contribute to the course means that I don't want you to feel intimidated by me in any sense, but I take the role seriously, knowing that we may only be together for one course or for ten weeks. But it's very possible and I hope, of course, that what we discussed and what you learn impacts your life and future in some way. With your generation in particular, I'm very optimistic and hopeful because you are educated, interested and involved, and I think many of you are frustrated and angry, in some ways. I want to do my best to provide you the tools that you need going forward. I say tools very deliberately because I think one problem that I had with some of my own professors (and I didn't recognize this at the time) [was that] they were very good at providing their views and their information and were less good at providing the framework for thinking about other information and other perspectives. I would come away in a course thinking, “Wow, that Professor was brilliant.

I learned so much,” but not recognizing that there was so much more to learn about the topic. So, I hope that you'll remember some specific readings, maybe remember some specific facts, but much more: you'll be equipped with the tools to critically evaluate plans and evidence and to effectively communicate. Going forward, you can integrate and make sense of things in a way that allows you to be effective in the future.

Foley: What are some of the main values of a traditional education system, and how has the pandemic changed these?

Neu: Well, the pandemic has changed a lot. However, I think in many ways, what we would consider traditional education has been changing and has been challenged for the last decade or so on a number of levels. First and foremost, much as I was describing with my own experience, is an expectation that university was what you saw in the movies: the lecturer stands at the front of the room and talk for two hours and the students just kind of passively take the information in and don't engage with it themselves. It was just kind of an imparting of knowledge, more than anything else. I think that has been challenged as research is showing us that that's an ineffective way to learn. There's actually not much imprinting that's taking place in those contexts. The challenges of our 21st century world is that we don't need students who can just regurgitate information, but we need students who can think big and think critically and think creatively. I think this sentiment has been challenged for a while now, and some professors have taken that more seriously than others, because it's difficult to change the way you've been doing things if you've been doing them for 10, 20, 30 years or so. The pandemic has certainly changed that.

I imagine a lot of efforts to assess what worked and what didn't during this time. I don't know if we'll come up with clear conclusions or not, but the traditional education system is broken in many ways. I would hope some positive change comes out of it.

Foley: What's so interesting with the pandemic is our education system was flipped on its head in a month, so I think it shows how dynamic the system can be. In my Theories of Writing class one of the points that we've been talking about is the drafting process. When you write a paper, you'll revise and create another draft, then you'll keep revising. How do you know when that process is done if theoretically this could be a cyclical and endless process?

Neu: That's tough. I'm kind of a perfectionist by nature. I think most people in my position are. As a student, I wanted my drafts to be perfect when I submitted them because I wanted the best grade possible, but now, partly due to the pandemic as well, writing time is just reduced and I don't have nearly as much time to just spend writing and editing and editing and editing. I have to be more satisfied with submitting things, especially for peer review, that I might not think are absolutely perfect but are good enough--at least to get a review and hopefully to move on to the next stage of publication. With that iterative process, the most important thing is just to get something on the page and just get some words down. Don't agonize over it and don't feel that your first draft has to

be good or even really good. It's words on a page; it's a structure that you can work from and that can be difficult.

I go back and forth: Is editing or is writing more difficult? It depends what stage I'm at. If I have to edit, I'm like, "oh I hate this right now." But when I have a blank page, it's also very difficult to just start writing from nowhere. So, I am very much a proponent of editing (and editing a lot). I think there's probably no firm answer about being done. It's recognizing when you've said what you need to say and you've said it as clearly as you can. Now you just need someone else's eyes on it to help you improve it. Being open to the criticism and the critical feedback, which you'll likely get, is important. Even if I feel that something's perfect, others will not agree. Be aware of that and assume when you submit something not that's perfect but rather "it's pretty good, but I think it could be improved with feedback."

Foley: Again, I guess that goes back to your ethics about research and writing: you have to consider the audience. You can write until you reach personal satisfaction, but an audience's perspective will look at it differently.

Neu: Very true.