

What Is and What Should Be

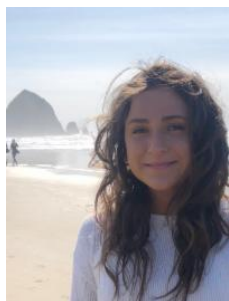
An Interview about Writing with Dr. Scott Phillips

by Katy Foley

Note: This is one in a series of interviews of University of Denver professors conducted by a undergraduates in the Minor in Applied Writing, as part of the 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.



Dr. Scott Phillips teaches Sociology and Criminology at DU and additionally teaches courses required for one of my majors, Socio-Legal Studies. His academic work is focused in two lines: a empirical consideration of the constitutionality and justice surrounding the death penalty; and more theoretical work on the nature of conflict (in line with Donald Black’s academic research) . He received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Georgia, his Masters in Sociology from Louisiana State University, and his B.A. in History from Texas Christian.



At the time of this conversation, in March 2021, Interviewer **Katy Foley** was a senior at the University of Denver pursuing a double major in Socio-Legal Studies and Public Policy and a minor in Writing. She grew up in Portland, Oregon, with her mom and twin sister. Being raised in an all-female household in a progressive city greatly influenced her values, in addition to having been raised in an ardently political family. Starting at the University of Denver in September 2017, she arrived in Colorado with an unswerving belief in public service and the capacity for justice to serve the common good; these values led her to work in Colorado politics, which she plans to continue after she graduates in June 2021.

Foley further notes: “ I was speaking with a friend who had taken Professor Scott Phillips’ notoriously clinical and difficult Methods of Socio-Legal Inquiry course. I am currently enrolled in this class. My friend noted, ‘Professor Phillips may be the most clear and articulate teacher that I have ever had.’ I agreed: ‘And thank god because I don’t know how successful I’d be at learning the SPSS software if this was taught by anyone else.’ I prompted Professor Phillips to address his (nearly) perfect attendance record to close out the interview. In his response his character shines through: Professor Phillips is an honest, professional and dedicated teacher. Once, he reluctantly canceled class for a gas leak in his home. While he may have thought my closing question didn’t

underscore his values as a teacher, noting that showing up is just part of the job, it should be underscored that he shows up every day without fail and teaches masterfully. My friend was right.”

Katy Foley: How did you land in your particular area of expertise?

Professor Scott Phillips: I got my PhD in 2000 from the University of Georgia, and for my dissertation I looked at why some conflicts escalate to violence, but others don't: lots of people have arguments and disputes; some of those get out of hand, but others are solved peacefully. So my initial interest in the field was in why people sometimes turn to violence when they have arguments and disputes with each other. At my first job at the University of Houston, another professor stopped me in the hall one day and said, “You should study the death penalty,” and I said “lots of people study the death penalty. I'm not sure I have anything to add.” And he said, “But you live in Houston, Texas.” I originally thought I would spend my career studying interpersonal violence, but I ended up studying state violence, and I've been doing research on the death penalty ever since.

Foley: I find it fascinating that you've done this incredible research alongside teaching. How this has shaped your teaching style and your approach to education?

Phillips: You know, I think teaching and research are pretty connected in the sense that, I feel like I'm at my best when I'm teaching about something I research. The research gives me an understanding that goes a little bit deeper into the subject. In some of my classes, I don't do research in that field. I know enough about the field to teach the class—that's not the question—but I don't enjoy it as much, and I don't feel that I can go quite as deep. What we really want is people to be teaching subjects that they do research on because that's really more of an area of expertise. So, most of my classes I'm doing research in that field, and that makes me a better teacher.

Foley: In your class, Methods of Socio-Legal Inquiry, we studied the infamous Baldus data¹. Who pioneered the most valued writing and research techniques in your field?

Phillips: In terms of research techniques, I do (as you know from class) quantitative research, and those techniques started with statisticians and economists and have been adapted by sociologists. So a lot of the methods in the social sciences, at least when it comes to quantitative research, has fields borrowing from another. It's interesting because I don't feel like there's been a superstar person that I've looked to as a writing model; instead, I've looked to my major Professor from graduate school, who was always a terrific writer. I can't write the way he does because his writing is really sort of arresting and has a punch to it that my writing doesn't have, but I've always thought that I was a

¹ Eds note: Professors David Baldus, George Woodworth, and Charles Pulaski studied homicide cases in Georgia and discovered, among other things, that death sentences resulted from 21 percent of cases involving black defendants and white victims, but only 8 percent of cases with white defendants and white victims. This data was presented in *McCleskey v. Kemp* to argue against the death penalty of a black man given the death penalty in 1978 in the murder of a white police officer during an armed robbery, though the Georgia Court of Appeals rejected this claim.

good enough writer, a decent writer. I honestly don't think my writing is anything special, but I do think it's clear and organized and structured and I tried to try to keep it simple, because I think too many people who work in academia want complicated and confusing for the sake of complicated and confusing. I appreciate shorter sentences that get straight to the point—you know, if you can say it in 10 words, why use 12. Actually, Ruth Bader Ginsburg made that point in something she said about writing, and I agree. It's actually nice to hear it for someone who is so accomplished, and so successful because then, that gives you license to say it's okay to go with simple and straightforward and clear instead of confusing and complicated.

Foley: In our class we've been studying the concept and development of theories and that is mirrored in my theories of writing course. Theories are expansive, but at the same time, they have to apply to everything equally, so I'm wondering what is a theory of writing or research that you believe in and adhere to in your work?

Phillips: Here's a theory of research that I believe is true, although by the way, I think a lot of people might disagree. I was taught sociology as a social science that there's an important distinction between science and morality: science tells us what is and morality tells us what should be. This idea goes back centuries to a philosopher named David Hume who coined the “is, ought distinction;” the distinction between what is and what ought to be and argued that what should be cannot be deduced from what is. An example that I sometimes use in class is to say, hypothetically, that states with more guns have more school violence. That would be a scientific statement about what is: more guns, more school violence. What should be, though, doesn't flow automatically from that statement. People on the left might argue that more gun control is needed, and people on the right might argue that we should arm the teachers. Obviously can't reduce guns and our teachers at the same time, so it's not just that science and morality are different; one tells us what is and one tells us what should be. Many have argued that what should be can't be automatically deduced from what is, so a scientific finding doesn't have an automatic moral implication; that moral implication is filtered through politics, religion, beliefs and so forth, and the same scientific finding could be used to support moral implications that are contradictory. Right?

So, what's the point of all that? The point of that is when I'm teaching and when I'm writing, I try really hard not to say what I think should be. I try not to say what my personal moral beliefs are, because if I'm a social scientist and if science can only tell us what is and not what should be, then if I talk about what I think is right and good and moral, then one can argue I'm moving beyond my expertise as a scientist and moving into a realm of morality. As an example, in my capital punishment class, I never say how I feel about the death penalty. When people speak against it, I often speak for it and when people speak for it, I often speak against it. A lot of students have come up to me, after the class ends and they'll say, “now that I'm done with your class, I want to know how you really feel,” and I say “now, you have as much expertise on whether it's right or wrong as I do, I'm just here to tell you how it really works, and then you can come to your own conclusion.” That guides both how I teach my classes and guides the writing that I do.

Foley: Your role as an educator is a socializing force. Could you talk to me a little bit about the ethics behind teaching and how you approach that, especially alluding to your point about trying to steer clear of your personal beliefs seeping into your education style?

Phillips: For me, being ethical means that I am actually not trying to push any sort of agenda in the classroom other than the agenda of learning. To me, success doesn't mean that students feel a particular way by the end of the quarter, it's that they have learned a certain set of ideas, by the end of the quarter and that they are hopefully a little sharper in their critical thinking skills and writing skills. So, to me, part of being ethical is being neutral and not trying to push the conversation in one direction or another.

Another part of being ethical for me is trying my best to treat all students exactly the same. As you know from class, one of the ways I do that is through anonymous grading. Students will email me papers or hand them in class back in the days before the pandemic and just put their eight seven numbers on them. Then I shuffle the deck and I truly don't know whose paper I'm grading. That can break down a little bit, for example: if a student has to turn in a paper late because of an illness and 29 out of 30 papers are graded. I know who that person is, but I would say that 95% of the time or more, I have no idea who's paper I'm grading. It's not that I think I would be biased, but it is that humans have biases and we're often not aware of them. To me that's part of ethics: taking every step that I can to make sure that all students are treated the same.

Foley: I see a complete parallel between what you teach in the class that I'm currently taking with you and what you're saying here.

Phillips: Well that's good!

Foley: Education looks different now. We can try to have the same etiquette on zoom as we did in the classroom and underscore the value of discussion on zoom like you would have in the classroom, but norms have changed quite a bit. I guess moving into the fall (when, hopefully, you're able to be a person again (I'll be graduated, but other students will have the pleasure of working in person again) how do you think just norms of education will look different and do you think theories of traditional education will adapt to that?

Phillips: I think we have invested in a lot of technology and DU did a great job of ramping up quickly to be able to offer classes in a way that was different. I don't think we're just going to throw it all out the window. I think we're going to find ways to use that technology and incorporate it. One of the problems in higher education is that it's so expensive; just so unreasonably expensive and it could be that technology will help us address that problem, because if we can reach more people then each person would have to pay less, and we may be able to reach more people through technology. That being said, I have to say, teaching online has not made me fall in love with teaching online. In our statistics class, my perception—although maybe this isn't true—is that I'm having to go over the same topics several times. I think it's happening because it's so tempting when you're at home to turn off your camera, get a snack or shop online, but (at the same time) it's hard enough to concentrate when we're face to face. I think, when it's possible to just turn off your camera, it's so

hard for a lot of people to concentrate. The ramification I'm seeing is that we have to go over things ten times before they get through, which is not entirely fair to the students who got them the first time, because they're bored and they don't want to hear it for the fifth time, but I sort of need to say it for the fifth time because some people just aren't there yet.

On one hand I feel like we've ramped up, we did a good job (especially on a short time frame) to get a new type of education, overnight almost, and I think it could be used to expand our reach, and maybe reduce costs and make college more affordable for a broader array of people and that's all amazing. At the same time, I don't know, there's something about face to face that just can't be replicated, or at least I haven't been able to replicate it. I feel like I have a lot of students who are only partially paying attention and that has some not-so-great consequences.

Foley: What I'm gathering is it has opened up a whole new avenue for accessibility, but at the same time the traditional value of that face-to-face learning and interaction provides is invaluable and unmatched in an online format. I remember in class you were on the road one week and you mentioned in passing that you hadn't missed class or rescheduled a class in however many years of teaching, and you were like "I'm surely not going to have today be a first." Could you speak to that a little bit more?

Phillips: Oh sure, I have to confess that, after I said that I realized that about three years ago I was at home and about to leave for campus and I smelled gas [in my home]. I called Excel and I thought there was a gas leak in the house and so I thought, you know, I can't just leave if the house is going to explode. So, there was one time that I missed class and I'd forgotten about that.

Foley: I can assure you that no one would hold that against you!

Phillips: Well, you know, putting that one aside, I just feel like it's important for me to hold up my end of the bargain. Students have invested in their education and they're paying a lot of money and I hate to focus on that, but at the same time that's real right and that is true, and they deserve professors who are on time, who are prepared, who don't skip class, (unless it's serious, obviously) There are perfectly good reasons to miss class, on occasion, but I've just always felt like this job is no different than any other job, right. It's a job, and you show up on time and you do the best you can and shouldn't miss unless you absolutely have to so there's nothing special about this job. Sometimes I think when people start off as college professors, they think it's sort of special, but I think the longer you do it, you realize it's just a job. I happen to love it, but it's just like any other job. It's important to be conscientious. But you know if I'm traveling, I can do class from a hotel room, especially if we're doing zoom anyway, so I didn't mean it to be self-promoting and pat myself on the back, I just meant it's important to be here. I can't ask students to work hard, if I'm not working hard.

Foley: I wanted to ask that, as my final point, just because I think it speaks to your values as an educator. And then I also, I think it speaks a little bit to the social contract behind education, social and I guess economic contract behind education, but I wanted to let you know that that that wasn't missed on the class with you said that but now the truth comes out that you did miss class once!