Long Life Learning **Podcast - Yale School of Management Executive Education**
Episode 4—Stephanie Dunson
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Kavitha Bindra (00:06)

Hi, I'm Kavitha Bindra from the Yale School of Management. This is *Long Life Learning*, a podcast where we sit down with thought leaders and innovators to discuss living with inspiration and vitality. This season, we're having conversations about midlife and longevity and ways that inspire purpose and connection in anticipation of our new program, the Experienced Leaders Initiative, also known as ELI. For our fourth episode, I'm so pleased to be sitting down with Stephanie Dunson. Stephanie is a reflective writing practitioner and teacher as well as a renowned facilitator who uses writing as a tool for problem solving and collaboration in both the academic and corporate worlds. She's also one of the instructors who will be working with ELI Fellows, and we're so excited to have her invaluable expertise as part of the ELI experience. Stephanie, welcome to the podcast.

Stephanie Dunson (01:02)

Oh, thanks for having me.

Kavitha Bindra (01:03)

So the way we like to start these interviews is with a discussion of one of our core ELI values, and that's the power of curiosity. When do you feel that you first experienced curiosity, and how have you embraced a curiosity mindset in your own life?

Stephanie Dunson (01:19)

Oh, curiosity. I mean, it's one of those things for me, it's almost invisible. I think I've gotten to the point where it's just like I'm so curiosity-driven that I have to stop and think how does that actually happen? I'm drawn to those things that make me sort of want to know more. I'm drawn to gaps in information. I recently heard a really great sort of description of curiosity as awareness of a gap in knowledge. And to me that feels very true. The idea of getting to the edge of what you perceive, the edge of what you are imagining and being able to peek beyond that, I tend to have in some ways a restless temperament.

I tend to be really activated when I see a situation where there's something that I perceive as pertinent that's being overlooked. That's often what piques my curiosity. It's not so much something that I cultivated. I think it's something that I've always had. I sort of joked with someone once that part of the way that I look at the world was informed by the fact that I grew up in a small town on a farm and I was bored. Curiosity to me is sort of the antithesis of boredom. And so I think that growing up in a situation where you just had to find ways to be entertained, that to me is sort the source of my sense of curiosity is avoiding the status quo. That was a long answer. I'll try to get them shorter.

Kavitha Bindra (02:47)

No, it's great. Thank you.

Stephanie Dunson (02:49)

It's such a big question. It's hard To know how to—

Kavitha Bindra (02:51)

It’s a huge question, and I'm actually really interested in how curiosity motivates your work as a teacher, and is that a quality you're seeking to sort of engage with in your students or to draw it out in them?

Stephanie Dunson (03:05)

Yeah, I mean, I work with students at all different levels and certainly when I'm working with undergraduate students, people new to academic thinking, one of the key things I'm trying to teach them about is about cultivating curiosity. Those students in particular come from a world where it's sort of like, what's the answer? What's the right, what's the wrong? And in that situation, getting students to appreciate and embrace the idea of pursuing uncertainty, to not feel that the ultimate goal is the rightness or wrongness of something, but really the sort of engaging in the process of looking at something. And part of the challenge, even in that sort of population of really talented students, was to get them to sort break away from the certainty of right and wrong and enjoy the play and the discovery that comes from taking risks of asking the unasked question, asking the obvious question. I think in terms of other grades of students, levels of students who I work with, a lot of times what it comes down to is the blanket term of process. That's often sort of the language that I use to get people to lean into uncertainty that so often our objective seems to get to the product, to show the product, to get to the end result, and helping people, giving people leverage to be comfortable with process and lean back and see the value of not getting from A to B, but the sort of route between.

For most people, once they have the opportunity to start to reacquaint themselves with that, that it's something that becomes very exciting and very compelling. This is where the idea of reflective work comes into play. Being in process is about being comfortable with reflection with the standing back and instead of just ascertaining the shape of the world, really standing back and absorbing it, asking yourself questions, leaning into uncertainty, and the kind of release and excitement actually that comes from leaning into uncertainty when you're invited in that direction.

Kavitha Bindra (05:08)

So here at SOM you work with, I would say, a different type of student. So you work with students in the Broad center, urban superintendents. You've worked with some of our Yale Global Executive Leadership Program students, these are C-suite learners. You will be working with our ELI cohort. So I'd love to hear a little bit about what that work is like to work with those kinds of students who are well into their careers and what excites and energizes you about working with those students.

Stephanie Dunson (05:39)

Yeah, I mean, it's certainly not a population I sort of anticipated working with. It's interesting how I got brought into SOM. I was working with a number of faculty in other capacities and I would talk to them about the way that I worked with students in the classroom in particular sort of using writing as a tool for thinking creatively and synthesizing information. People would say that would be really great if you could sort of package that for people in business because that's something that so many people are hungry for. The way that I think primarily got drawn into SOM is, especially in terms of Executive Ed, are these situations where people come to SOM for really intense training, a lot of information in a short amount of time. And the work that I do in those situations is to help people slow down and synthesize.

There's a great quote by John Dewey attributed to John Dewey, anyhow. That’s like, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” Working with those populations to give them an opportunity to really sit back, especially in terms of making it a transition from the learning space to the working place, to have an opportunity to think about what their learning will look like in the real world, to introduce prompts and questions and ways of thinking that invite that kind of observing

something in that transitional space. In those situations, one of my roles is as a closer, it's like, here's all this information. Now let's take a moment and think about what stuck with you.

Where did you lean in? Where did you feel pushed out? What feel like opportunities? What does this look like in the real world? Who are the people in the outside world who are going to be impacted by this? Who will welcome it? Who will resist it? What will it look like to work with them?

So using writing as a tool in that way to create a space for people both to reflect on what they're learning, but also to project forward in terms of what does the information look like in your hands. And the way to sort of make it meaningful is for people to reinvent it in an organic way in the way that they actually work and think. And so before they're sort of launched out into a world where those kind of values aren't reflected to use the program as a place to say, this is the opportunity to start doing that.

Kavitha Bindra (07:53)

So speaking of transitional stages, we've been talking this season about the concept of a new phase of life that's emerging in public discourse and in psychology research, whether you call it midlife or middle essence or the third act. Do you have a language you'd use to describe this stage of life?

Stephanie Dunson (08:14)

Wow, A language. I mean, I don't know that I do. I mean, I am someone who's been impacted by it directly. As someone who actually has gone through that process myself… If I found a language, it'd be a language of continuity. It wouldn't be a language of shifting gears that feels too dramatic.

I think it's sort of the continuation of an arc, right? A continued sense of development to have gotten through one stage of your life or your work or your experience, and have that opportunity to reflect and having the choice and the options and the wisdom that you didn't have earlier to stand back and determine for yourself what's going to be a meaningful direction. How do you want to engage in the world? How can you serve the current questions and crises of the world? I don't have a specific language, but it's a life situation that feels very immediate to me.

Kavitha Bindra (09:06)

Yeah, it's funny. I think until recently I would sort of daydream about knowing what I know now, how would I have done X, Y, Z differently? And recently I've been sort of shifting my viewpoint to think more about, okay, well, knowing what I know now, what will I do?

Stephanie Dunson (09:24)

Exactly. Exactly.

Kavitha Bindra (09:25)

And that feels like the real sort of shift in thinking.

Stephanie Dunson (09:28)

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. I think that sort of looking back the kind of regret, “Oh, if I'd only known.” It's natural, but it's kind of an empty gesture.

It's a sense that somehow there aren't choices. There aren't opportunities that still exist, and so we're always sort of looking back and trying to repair the things in the past. But I mean, I think there's a different kind of energy that comes from just like, well, of course I didn't know then what I know now, but I know it now, and what do I want to do with it? The idea of society changing and not feeling like the

direction that we need to go is just to sort of an end point and then we're done. How much wisdom, how much possibility is lost if we only think of it as a fast stop? But yeah, exactly what you're saying. It's just like, instead of saying, “I wish I had done this differently,” the idea of, “Well, what do I want to do now?” It feels like a much more sort of exciting, meaningful direction to go.

Kavitha Bindra (10:24)

Great. Well, I'd like to pivot a little to talking about the incredible work you do with writing. You're a great believer in process writing, which you referred to earlier as an act of self-discovery, transformation, and translating thought into action. For leaders who might not be familiar with it, what does process writing entail?

Stephanie Dunson (10:44)

Well, process writing, it's a term that comes from the world of rhetoric and composition, and it's often in those worlds called metacognitive writing. It's writing about what you were thinking as you were doing another piece of writing. So standing outside of a piece of writing that you've done and really sort of thinking about how your mind moved, how you went through the changes, not just describing what you did. A good example of a kind of process question that I'll sometimes ask is to sort of present someone with an opportunity to write about something. They have to determine the direction of it. And then a metacognitive piece would be, “What are some things that you thought about writing but you chose not to, and why did you choose not to?” Once people can have that inward look, there's a recognition of a whole sort of sub conversation that's going on that often is an extremely rich area.

I will often have a situation where I ask for people to write in two very different ways about something, and then ask for them to do a process piece to talk about the way that their relationship between their writing and their thinking shifted as they went between those things. Metacognition is a powerful sort of piece for people to apply in a range of different kinds of contexts.

Kavitha Bindra (12:01)

Going through metacognition and this framework you just described, how have you seen writing help those you've worked with, especially those undertaking personal and professional transformations?

Stephanie Dunson (12:13)

Yeah, I mean, there are a lot of different ways. I mean, I think especially in terms of transformation, again, because it's so easy for us to be trained to think about product, about just reacting to things. I mean, it's the way that we get things done in the real world. It can be extremely powerful for people to open up this other landscape that exists for them, as I say, to sort of recognize the choices that they're making and also sort of recognize the truncated nature of the way that they're thinking. Often the trick is to design or conceive questions that give leverage for people to reflect on the spaces in between that get overlooked. So the writing becomes a place to think about writing as a process, and you're not self-conscious at all about how it looks or whether it's spelled right or how it's structured.

Writing is an extremely powerful inward-looking tool. The thing that I will often have people do is to sort of write in response to a question, but then to continue writing past that, and common inclination is if I ask you to write about something, you're going to write about what you think you have to say about something. But if you get into the habit of pushing the writing past that first thought, then you start finding the kind of ideas that are emerging that can be a little messier, but also more interesting and more promising. And so sort of activating people that range of internal possibilities, the thing that you had to say that you didn't realize that you had to say, writing is a really valuable place for that kind of

introspection, and it's different than just spending time just sort of thinking. The writing actually does become a vehicle for moving deeply, and it becomes a vehicle for recording the thinking.

So the other powerful thing about working in this vein is that it allows you then to work with others. You can work in a collaborative context where people are very much sort of building from their internal experience, but through sharing it, making their internal experience accessible to other people. I will sometimes tell people, if you present something that's written and it's completed, there's not really room for someone to get into it. But if you're, you're writing and you're allowing it to be very porous and all over the place, even if it doesn't seem like it's no one else is going to understand this, when you actually read it to somebody else, there's a meaning that comes from it. Not just that, but because it's not complete, there's an interesting way that it gives people access to your thinking as the thinking is developing. So there's a different kind of collaboration that can happen around it. So in addition to writing being the tool for the introspection, it can also be a mechanism for bringing people together around new ideas.

Kavitha Bindra (14:56)

I love this idea, especially in this age of AI, where the writing is about the journey, not the product. I'd love to hear a little bit about some of the common mistakes and barriers you see process writers encounter and how they can overcome these challenges.

Stephanie Dunson (15:11)

Well the first thing is to get people to use writing in this way is to sort of break free of expectations of what writing should look like. There's this concept, the composition specialist, Peter Elbow talks about, the “editor on your shoulder,” and it's the person, the sort of internalized sense of what you should and shouldn't do in writing. The thing that I tell people is that if you're someone who's making a grocery list and you stop to make sure that you spell something right… Why? It's just the sense of there's someone in your head who is telling you, or the assumptions that you're making about what the writing should be. It has to be spelled a particular way. It has to be structured in a particular way. You really have to completely evacuate any sense of commitment to standardized writing.

The thing that really I'm trying to get people to move toward is a relationship between thinking and writing that is much more akin to the way that we think about the relationship between thinking and speaking. Where if I have an idea in my head, I don't know what form it's going to take when I speak it, but I trust that if I just start talking, the meaning will come. And that's the kind of relationship between thinking and writing that has to happen where it's just like, I don't know where this is going, but I'm letting the writing move me forward. Usually that's the sort of sticking point. If there is a sticking point.

The thing about process writing is that it's kind of ridiculously easy. Once people get past that barrier, once people relax into that, there's not a lot else that can go wrong. It can't be written wrong, it can't be directed wrong. I like to tell people, it's just lean into tangents, contradict yourself. The thing that can happen is that sometimes if you go off on a tangent, what happens is surprisingly that tangent leads you to some insight about the thing that you were originally writing about. So there's not a lot of ways to do it wrong. The only way to do it wrong is to feel like there's a right way to do it, to sort of resist the direction that the writing takes you. It's hard to do process writing wrong once you get past that.

Kavitha Bindra (17:10)

Thank you. So one of your many talents is as a facilitator, and we've spoken with Pacus about the importance of an individual sense of identity and journey, but we haven't gotten the chance to really

unpack the importance of group identity. What can you share with us about your experience facilitating groups of people toward the fulfillment of shared objectives?

Stephanie Dunson (17:33)

Yeah, yeah. This is sort of getting back to what I was saying about people sharing what they've written, that if you give people an opportunity to write and explore something on their own, I'll ask for them first to when they get into usually small groups, to read what they've written, not to paraphrase it, but read it as it's written off the page. It's also a lot more efficient. It takes people less time to read what they've written than to paraphrase what they *feel* like they've written. That's powerful in the way, as I mentioned before, that the sort of porousness and unfinished nature of the writing brings the listeners together.

But the other sort of component of it is that I'll ask for everyone in the group to read what they've written first before having any discussion. And there are a couple of reasons for this. One is that if you ask people to discuss a topic, the person who speaks first consciously or not is usually the one who dictates the direction of the conversation. They sort of start the conversation and people sort of gravitate toward that, but that oversteps all of the other possibilities that people in the group would've had. So to have everyone read what they've written first allows the group to entertain the whole range of possibilities before any discussion. It also democratizes the process. It's not that there's one voice that leads a discussion. It gives an opportunity for everyone in the group to be part of the process, and it really levels the playing field between those sort of extroverts and introverts, the fast processors and the slow processors, because the writing gives the individual space to sort of find your footing. The sharing with the group allows all the voices to the table, and so there's a different register. There's a different caliber of conversation that comes out of it that ends up being very collaborative, that ends up being very binding.

I mean, people find that when you're talking with someone and you have a sense of their ideas that are emerging, there's a kind of investment that you have in them. There's a kind of connection that you develop. Maybe the person has started writing something and they haven't even quite gotten to the thing that they were trying to say, but the other people in the group can sort of see it and provide that for them. So it works as a very powerful kind of network and bringing people together in a group. It's one of the things that I really enjoy seeing most in the work that I'm doing is a way that sort of seemingly solitary practice of writing and especially reflective writing, actually can be so instrumental in bringing people together to collaborate and really support one another in substantial ways.

Kavitha Bindra (20:04)

It's really interesting. It seems like that kind of exercise allows people to become more vulnerable. It's a way of creating vulnerability versus creating a space in which they can be vulnerable and then writing. So that's really interesting that you use that as a tool to create that space that they can feel safe and open with each other.

Stephanie Dunson (20:25)

And I mean, the trick of developing the prompts is to develop prompts that really privilege those vulnerable spaces. Where the thing that's being asked for is the uncertainty. Getting people to sort of lean into the thing that's confounding to them, to see that as an opportunity. It's a really powerful practice. Writing can be so transformative in the kind of group environment. And it's not like it has to be vulnerability where it's just like you're exposed, but it's just permission to not know, permission to lean into the thing that is evading you, permission to speculate, permission to imagine, permission for a thought to be incomplete. I think that's something that people find really gratifying and grounding in a

weird way. So it is a sense of maybe I'm sort of exposing what I don't know, but it doesn't feel like exposure. It feels like kind of commitment to the group. It feels like a thing that is bringing people together in a way that feels like a strong bond as opposed to feeling exposed in a group.

Kavitha Bindra (21:31)

So you have a book that's coming out: *Group Thinking: Helping Smart People to Be Smarter Together*. Is there anything from the book that you think would be particularly helpful for ELI Fellows and others approaching major life milestones?

Stephanie Dunson (21:45)

The interesting thing about that book is that it's now going through some major rethinking and revision in part because of the work that I've been doing at SOM, where the thing that often happens after I've worked with people is they want some direction on how to cultivate reflective writing in their own life. What should that look like? And because of that, we'd done rethinking about how the book is going to be framed. Initially, it was going to be a hard lean into the group dynamic. It's not going to have that name anymore. The realization is that once people use it in a group context, they're more and more interested in how to activate it in their individual lives as a place to do that kind of and inward thinking piece of it.

It's not going to be called *Group Thinking* anymore. I'm not sure at this point what it's going to be. But I mean, if I were to think about sort of the book as it was originally conceived, it is that sense of what we were talking about before, that role of writing as something that can bring people together, a way for people to be collaboratively innovative, a way for people to invest in not just one another's product, or admiring of one another's product, but actually involved and invested in one another's process.

Kavitha Bindra (22:55)

And I love what you were talking about earlier around creating that permission structure to have things not be complete or fully thought out or ambiguous, and whether that's in a group setting or not, being able to create that space, whether you're with others or reflecting on your own. Because sometimes we're really tough on ourselves, even in our most private moments.

Stephanie Dunson (23:17)

Yeah, for sure.

Kavitha Bindra (23:18)

So what are a few stories you can share with us about individuals whom you feel are thriving in their third act of life?

Stephanie Dunson (23:27)

People who are thriving? This is sort of taking a personal turn, but one of the situations that I have loved most to observe was the final chapter of my own mother's life. I grew up in rural Ohio, as I mentioned. And my mother, when my father passed away, decided that she was going to sell the farm and move from Ohio to Massachusetts where I was living at the time, and she moved to Amherst, Massachusetts where I was living, which is a great town. It has a very vibrant senior community and a very rich culture. This woman who in her sixties, was of a generation where she was used to her husband making all of the decisions, making the decision herself to sell the farm, to leave the place where she had grown up,

where her family and friends were, to strike out completely on her own at a new place was something I was so proud of her for.

And the way that she really thrived in the years and that she got to do things that she hadn't done before. She was a woman who was of a generation where her whole life had been taking care of other people. And I remember when she got her apartment and she was decorating, she said it's the first time that she had been able to just decorate something just based on what she wanted, what she liked. And so she had the last 10 years of her life, this final chapter that was incredibly vibrant and exciting. She had friends, she was involved in the arts. She was a great volunteer in her community, and I think it was this sense of she was in this new space and really had this opportunity to think, what are the things that I value? What are the things that I enjoy doing?

I think she would've said that her last years were some of the best years of her life. I mean, that's taking it maybe in a more personal direction, but I think it's at that sort of thing where circumstance may be provide someone with an opportunity to reinvent themselves, to think about the world in a fresh way, but it's, for me, the situation that I just love seeing her thrive in that way. I used to joke, I don't have kids, but I said, the closest thing I'll ever have to a daughter going off to college is my mother in her senior years, because she was involved in so many things.

But thinking in a professional context, I could be really superficial and also say that I feel like I'm an example of it. I had spent my career and my life in the academic world, had been director of writing programs at Williams for a number of years, and just reached a point where I was ready to just sort of move on. I wanted a different challenge, and so making the decision to leave Williams after a number of years, to end up at the School of Management here at Yale doing the work that I do is not something I would've imagined in a million years. But being open to the opportunity and looking for different opportunities and willing to step out in a different way were really keys.

I feel that more and more people are sort of taking that as a norm. I hope that more people are taking that as a norm to realize that they're done with one path before they're done with the work that they want to do in the world. I hope that we're living in a society where people have more permission for that kind of self-reflection. The language of the gap year for adults I think is really fabulous and necessary. I think there are problems in the world that need wisdom, that need experience and need originality for people of substance and of talent to think outside of the realm that maybe they've operated in too easily.

Kavitha Bindra (27:01)

Yeah, I think that's really beautiful. I mean, I think, I don't want to say easy, but I think it's instinctual, especially as you're getting older to move towards the familiar and find safety in the familiar and the life that you've built and the friends that you have in your community. So to take steps, uprooting yourself from everything you've known and finding new ways to contribute, I think that takes a lot of courage, and hopefully, as you said, is becoming more and more of the norm

Stephanie Dunson (27:33)

In a conventional way of thinking, it takes courage, but it shouldn't have to take so much courage. It should be sort of common sense, right? You've worked so hard to reach certain milestones. It shouldn't feel like it's a leap of courage to say, “I've checked all those boxes and now what's next?” I mean, I have all people in an academic context. It's so much a matter of you do this, you do this, you do this. There's a particular kind of professional chain that you go through that's so easy to feel painted into a box. I have a friend who was also went to grad school with me, and we met later in our lives, and she says, “It's funny, the more I move forward in my career, the less I feel like I can do.” Right? But we fortunately live in a

society where many people have more choices than they recognize, and sort of recognizing those choices, there are possibilities there that I think that benefit the individual, but also benefit society.

Kavitha Bindra (28:23)

And finally, we always love to end by asking what books, videos, and other resources should listeners check out next if they want to find out more about what we've discussed today, what's inspiring you? What are you thinking about?

Stephanie Dunson (28:36)

After I've worked with people, people approach me and ask that question. There's not one place to go because it's a range of different things. I mentioned that the composition theorist, Peter Elbow has a book called *Embracing Contraries*, which I think is a good one.

John Dewey, again, sort of educational reformer. He has a book on thinking that's just sort of instrumental and rhetoric and composition in terms of identifying the features of process writing, the idea of the role of metacognition and thinking.

Jack Meserov has a number of books, *Transformative Learning*. He's another practitioner of thinking and thinking broadly and thinking differently,

Oh, *The Evolving Self* by Robert Kegan. That's a good one. And John Dewey's *How We Think*.

Any book on… I mean, I'm a Buddhist. I think any book that I picked up on reflection in the Buddhist tradition.

I'm a big one for looking for features of this in creative context. The story *A River Runs Through It* is one that I returned to. That book about family and fishing has some incredible insight about the reflective self that's really powerful.

There's a wonderful essay called "Meander," Palmier Smith, that's about sort of the way the mind meanders through writing, and a wonderful book by Sarah Ruhl called *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, and these little mini essays that are just sort of snippets of her thinking are wonderful and funny and wise and rich to sort of show just how observing your thinking without an objective toward a product can be such a powerful, such a powerful thing.

Kavitha Bindra (30:23)

Well, Stephanie Dunson, thank you so much for joining us. It was such a pleasure to talk to you.

Stephanie Dunson (30:28)

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Kavitha Bindra (30:34)

Long Life Learning is a production of Yale School of Management Executive Education. The podcast is produced by Rebecca Barry, and was co-founded by Tracy Sheerin, Kristen Sorek West, Kelly Jessup, and me, Kavitha Bindra. Special thanks to the Yale SOM Media Team for their tech expertise and use of their studio, especially Froilan Cruz, Abraham Texidor Sr., Jessica Rogers, Donny Bristol, and Enoc Reyes. This podcast would not have been possible without help from Ben Mattison, Joanne Legler, and many others. Our theme song is "How It's All Connected" by Yan Perchuk.