

[Season 1 Episode 2]

Metacognition and the Learning Philosophy With Melanie Bellwood

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W.Y.R.D., radio free Elsinore. I'm Lisa Dickson and these are some Wyrd Words about literature and learning in higher education.

In this episode, the art of learning: metacognition and the learning philosophy. We're learning all the time. From the moment we open our eyes and even after we go to sleep, our brains are busy making sense of our experiences, sorting, connecting, and lacing our thoughts into our muscles so that we can go out—or in our pandemic world, stay in—and put our knowledge to use. Research shows that people who spend time reflecting on their learning tend to be more flexible, creative, and resilient. And especially now, when we're all grappling with the new challenges of remote teaching and learning, these qualities are going to be especially useful to us. Metacognition—"meta," beside or above, and "cognition," thinking—is the practice of stepping outside of what we're learning to think about how we're learning. And it's an essential part of the ART of learning. That's an acronym, A.R.T.: "A" is for acquisition or how we actually get knowledge into us, into our minds and our bodies, "R" stands for retention or how we keep knowledge in there once we have it, and "T" is for transfer or how we apply our knowledge to solve the problem at hand, or to tackle problems in new contexts.

Part of the art of learning is the learning philosophy, a reflection on how we learn, why we learn and what we value in our learning. My guest today has thought a lot about the art of learning. Melanie Bellwood is a second-year candidate in the Bachelor of Education program here at the University of Northern British Columbia.

So hello, Melanie. Thank you for coming and joining us today on Wyrd Words and taking time out from what I'm sure is a busy, a very busy time as we lead up to the start of classes. So welcome to our podcast.

Melanie Bellwood: Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

Lisa Dickson: Excellent. Well, we're very glad you're here. So let's start with, who you are. So who is Melanie the learner? Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Melanie Bellwood: Sure. Well, I have a very, uh, I guess you could say tenuous relationship with learning where I've fallen out and in, and I've identified as a learner and I've told myself no, I will never learn again. Um, but essentially, uh, in the post-secondary world I have failed university twice and also hold my Bachelor's of Arts and Humanities in English and History. So, um, currently I am finishing my final year as a teacher candidate um, so it's, it's been a long road, but, uh, I identify as a learner and, uh, as a non-learner sometimes.

Lisa Dickson: Excellent. Good. So you've had kind of a, a winding path to your second degree now. Um, which I think is, is a really interesting story for us as learners, this notion that we kind of come in and out of those sort of formal learning experiences. And we pick up new things each time we come back or try something again. So we're going to explore that a little bit and the evolution, and your thinking about your learning as you've moved along that path. But before we start that, I want to start with something that we're doing in our classes

this year. We're developing our learning philosophies and the first step of that is a question that I asked the students, which is: if your learning were a building or a structure or a place, what would it be?

Melanie Bellwood: Um, so I've had some time to think about this. So bear with me. Um, but the way I visualize my learning is a giant open field, an open clearing. And I guess you can see maybe a tree line, surrounding me and in the center is this Hobbit house. I guess you could say that it has a strong dirt foundation and it could totally withstand the weather, but, it is very small in that vast expanse of land.

Lisa Dickson: Oh, interesting. So you have a cozy, safe spot in the middle and lots of space to roam. Yes. I love that. That's beautiful. The thing that prompted this question for me was I was talking to somebody on Twitter and I was trying to explain about how I'm trying to build some air into my courses this semester, so that we have some place to breathe and think and contemplate, and she replied to the tweet and said, it seems like you're trying to bring a cathedral, into your class. And I thought that is amazing! I love that idea right. Of those vaulted ceilings just covered with art and history and the past. So how we conceptualize our learning, I think, can show us a little bit about what we need as learners in order to move forward. So we're gonna we're probably gonna come back to that again at the end and see how that vision sort of permeates the other questions that I'm going to ask you.

So when we're thinking about, Melanie the learner, then, um, in your Hobbit house, in your wide open field, which is amazing. and I want to come and visit you there, I guess that's what we're doing right now. I'm visiting your Hobbit house. So what motivates you to learn? So, as you said you've had kind of a love-hate relationship with schooling at least. So what is it that kind of gets you out of bed or out of your Hobbit house and into the field every day or even over the long haul, right? So you're already in your second degree. And how do you sort of feel like that motivation has evolved over the years?

Melanie Bellwood: Well, I know after high school, a lot of my motivation for learning was simply to possess that beautiful degree that everybody looks for and that was the only reason I came to university. And I think that has a lot to do with why I wasn't very successful my first go around. Since then, and kind of going through different failures and different facets of the learning world, I now learn mostly for myself. It builds my confidence. It makes me feel really comfortable with other people if I feel like I've done my best to understand a situation or a subject. I would really like to understand younger learners and I'd really like to be able to actually be a force for help when they are on their own formative journeys. So that's my major external motivation and internally, it feels really good to know that I've done everything I can to build that understanding because now I can, I can interact with them and I can also interact with others, people that have similar goals.

Lisa Dickson: So you started out wanting to get a thing and now you're more interested in what you can do in relationships with other people with that thing, right, that you've acquired. That's interesting. So you've sort of turned from sort of an objective kind of model of "what you out of bed," "I have to go get the thing," to "who can I interact with or how can I use this in the world" in that sense?

I really like that notion of that evolution into a kind of social space of learning which is really interesting. And particularly for us now, when we're thinking about how do we build

relationships and community in spaces where we're not actually together with each other, and that's a whole other conversation that maybe we can have at another time

So what are those motivations, as you're thinking about that evolution, what does that tell you about what you see as the purpose of education, either just for yourself, but also education in a broader sense?

Melanie Bellwood: Well, and that's the thing I would highlight there, exactly what you just said, is that education has an element for self and also an element for the world, right? So in this collective journey where we're all trying to learn more and maybe it's like me where we're trying to learn to make ourselves feel better, or maybe we're trying to learn to make other people feel better, but it's always going to have both those elements. So I think education, when you're looking at its purpose for the world is to create a space where we're really empathizing with one another and able to learn from each other.

I feel like I've gained a lot of that ability from my background in history and in literature, because that's where I chose to empathize at the beginning of my journey.

Lisa Dickson: Interesting. So the subject matter that you chose is in an interesting way connected to that larger sense of purpose that you have as you're moving into the space of becoming an educator for yourself. And do you feel like you've become more empathetic?

Melanie Bellwood: I think that's a really tough one. And I, every day I feel like I could be working harder on becoming empathetic, but now I'm aware of when I could be working at it.

Lisa Dickson: Right, right, right. And that's that metacognitive piece where you can sort of step back and look at yourself and think about how you're acting in a particular situation or what your thought processes are in that moment, which is really important as we think about how we're learning in order to make choices in those moments. That becomes crucial, I think. So that's really, really interesting and that brings us, I think, quite nicely to the "how" questions, right? So we thought about what gets you out of bed in the morning, and what you think of as the overarching goals or ideas that frame your notion about what you're doing and why you're doing it. This is the nuts and bolts question. So how do you actually live those ideas in your day-to-day life as a learner? What are you bringing into your learning environment or into a particular learning situation, um, that helps you to embody those ideas and those values. So to just make it a little bit more concrete, can you give us an example of a practice or a strategy or a mindset that you've found that has helped you in maybe difficult learning situations?

Melanie Bellwood: Yeah. Um, well, and for anyone that's maybe attending a teaching program or looking into it, something you're going to hear a lot about is a growth mindset. And that I would say that's probably the one that has impacted me the most as a learner. And just for context, that's when you face a situation and instead of going, "man, I suck. This is the worst. I can't handle it," you alter the way you think about it. So whether you're saying out loud or in your head, you're saying, "man, this is difficult, right now, but I will get better at it." It's just implanting that idea in yourself that, uh, it will get better because it will. And because of things that you have done such as practicing or studying, or just learning more about what you're having difficulty with.

Lisa Dickson: Right. Excellent. I often think about that in terms of hip-hop class. So I take hip hop class. I'm pretty bad at it. I'm getting better. But, uh, one of the things that we've learned in hip hop class is, you know, you do a lot of very fast, very intricate stuff. And at the beginning of the class, it's impossible. Like, how can you fit all of that movement into four counts of music? But by the end of the hour, it's like, wow, there sure is a lot of space in these four counts of music. I could probably put more in here. So that idea of you can't judge yourself by where you start, right? Otherwise, we just give you an exam on the first day.

Melanie Bellwood: Well exactly, exactly. And also when you're, when you're starting, you have to enter that situation, not looking for those spaces where you are devoid of knowledge. You have to just be willing to accept that you are going to have those empty spaces and that they will fill eventually.

Lisa Dickson: Oh, that's interesting. I like that. So just sort of being, we have an open space that you know, you're going to fill in the blanks. It's like being an explorer, almost, right? That you've got a blank piece of paper and you can draw in it, as you fill in the landscape, maybe.

Melanie Bellwood: Absolutely, I love that.

Lisa Dickson: Yes. Yeah, I like that too. I love metaphors. I love metaphors. They make, they make my life so fun and I find them a really useful way to think through ideas. And we're going to be using a lot of metaphors in our first few weeks of class to help us to think about what does it mean to be someone who's learning in these, in these kinds of spaces. And so I really like that notion of having empty spaces that you know you're going to fill up, one way or another.

So, and I think that brings us back then to your metaphor of your learning space, your, your Hobbit house in the middle of a field, and I actually have a picture because we've got one just over here, so someday you can come out and look at it and I'll say, here's your learning space, Melanie. Yeah. Now that we've answered some of these questions, how does that metaphor fit into some of those larger questions about what motivates you or what education is for how you do it?

Melanie Bellwood: Well, that's a big question there.

Lisa Dickson: Yes.

Melanie Bellwood: Obviously, I can only speak to myself as a learner. And I think that I feel a lot of confidence having made it as far as I have, but with that comes the awareness that there's so much more that I will never know and that I can't know, and that I'm going to have to work really hard to know. Um, so fitting that into, to my imagined space, you know, my, my great big clearing and fitting that into my life in general, I think that, um, it's just important to remember that other people know so much more than I do about everything. And so if I'm not willing to ask the questions, then I will never know what they know. And ultimately it's up to them to show me what they know and it's up to me to show them what I know. And it becomes a beautiful conversation.

So thinking about my little Hobbit hovel in the clearing, I think about my foundation as a learner as very small, but very strong and just willing to take whatever it can from the land

and also give back as much as it can. So I don't know if that answered your question at all, but here we are.

Lisa Dickson: No, I think that that's a beautiful answer to my question. If I can sort of think about your metaphor a little bit, um, you know, when I think about your house built into the ground, so that the idea of living in that space of knowledge and getting out and wandering and, and seeing, uh, breathing the air and being in the trees and all of those kinds of things, that experiential part of it. But I also love the image of, of the Hobbit house. I think of that as being, um, a place that's really cozy and comfortable, but also hospitable. So I, you know, when I think about, about that kind of home, I think that's a place where I would love to sit down and have a cup of tea and have a conversation or to visit and I think that connects really interestingly to what you were saying about the purpose of education as being a place where we go to connect with each other. So while your house is sort of alone in the middle of a big field, it's also, at least in the way that I'm seeing it, it's also very friendly and open and I think that it would be a great place to go for lunch or to go and have tea or, you know, if it was raining out, I could knock on your door and say, "oh, let me in Melanie, I need a cup of tea so badly" and I feel like you would let me in. I would hope so. Anyway, I guess we'll find out someday.

Melanie Bellwood: That's what I'm trying to learn to do: it's to let those people in so that we can have those discussions.

Lisa Dickson: Oh yeah. That's beautiful. That's awesome. So just for our parting glass here. If you could give our students who are just starting out on this process, a bit of advice, what would you give them?

Melanie Bellwood: I would say try and ground yourself in what you're learning, on your journey to get that degree and focus on how you can use those skills in other spaces in your life. Um, because that's going to be the biggest thing that I probably took from my degree is I did a lot of different things and I wrote a lot of papers and I read a lot of words, but out of all of that, I am just really thankful that I, uh, I was given the opportunity to try all of those things because now I know where I want to go in the future.

Lisa Dickson: Excellent. That's very good advice. I love that. Thank you very much for that. So we've come to the end of our time. I'd love to keep talking to you for hours and hours but I'm going to let you go. So I want to thank you, Melanie Bellwood, for joining us and for sharing your experience with us today and especially for taking time out. If you're anything like me, you're starting to gear up mentally for getting into the classroom again. And, uh, and so I really appreciate you taking the time to come and talk to us.

And I want to thank everyone out in the podosphere for listening, and we'll have some more Wyrd Words with you very soon. The technical producer for Wyrd Words is Cecilia Alain. Our intro song "Doubt," is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings.