

30 Brave Minutes Transcript Episode 69

30 Brave Minutes Podcast

"Beyond the Curriculum;" Research and Creativity with Professor Brandon Sanderson

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Dr. Richard Gay

Hello everybody! Welcome to *30 Brave Minutes*, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. I'm Richard Gay, Dean of the College, and with me are Associate Deans Dr. Joanna Hersey and Dr. Ashley Allen. Joining us today is Professor Brandon Sanderson from the Art Department, so get ready for *30 Brave Minutes*!

Brandon, tell us a bit about yourself please.

Brandon Sanderson

Hi everybody, I'm Director of the Pembroke Undergraduate Research and Creativity Center and a Professor of Art in the Art Department. My work is mostly traditional printmaking now, but it's combined with new technologies, sort of new technologies, such as CNC and laser, and 3D printing, and it mostly revolves around a personal narrative having, my experiences having a hearing disability.

Dr. Ashley Allen

How did you get into this field?

Brandon Sanderson

My first career was computer programming, computer science, that's my first degree. So I worked as a, I guess for about ten years, as a computer programmer and in IT, and then I decided if I was going to try to be an artist, or go to school for art, that I should do it while I was still relatively young.

Dr. Richard Gay

Well, I had the privilege of working with you in the Art Department for many years, and I know you're being kind of modest. I mean, you are a very talented printmaker with a very prolific exhibition portfolio, you've exhibited internationally, you've been a great supporter of the students, so I would love for you to tell us a little bit more about your exhibition record, because I know it's quite impressive. And maybe perhaps a little about your work at Frogman's too?

Brandon Sanderson

Oh, sure. We just had a couple of exhibitions. One is a big exhibition of work on the back of solar panels which was distributed throughout Ukraine, and I sent you a couple pictures of the soldiers holding those.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

We'll put those in the show notes, great.

Brandon Sanderson

So the Artnaughts is a global arts collective, and I've been a member since 1996, and normally what we do is we all put, there's, oh I think there's maybe like seventy of us now? I can't remember. We all pitch in funds together and send people to different countries, with the point that it should be places that are experiencing social conflict. And we work with museums and various places to set up exhibitions, that's a discussion of what's happening there, not necessarily in an expressed opinion. But with the solar panel project, it was different because we wanted to do something to actively help people.

So we worked with some high schools in Colorado, Peace Corps workers, and a couple global health organizations, and we were able to get all these solar panels, I think it was a couple hundred of them, and then we produced artwork that was put onto the back of them with messages for the citizens. And we just shipped them over there, and we worked with an organization in Ukraine to distribute them. They have, they can purify water, they can charge their cell phones, basically they can plug USBs and other things into them. So it was more of a...we just wanted to do something to help people there.

Dr. Richard Gay

Sounds like a real humanitarian effort.

Brandon Sanderson

Yup. We had an exhibition in the jungle in Columbia, and it was in an area with no electricity or running water or anything. And then we're having an exhibition in Rwanda, at the Kigali Genocide Memorial in a couple weeks, and then there's one in Sarajevo right now, we're going to have an exhibition in June in Northern Ireland. So that's what I am doing now, and then I also have a solo exhibition at Methodist University which is next week.

I also am Director of the Frogman's Printmaking Workshop, which is the largest printmaking workshop in the United States, and I've been involved with that for twenty-

two, twenty-three years, or so. Basically we get all the, what we consider the best printmaking faculty in the United States, all together at the University of Iowa, which is one of the printmaking centers of the United States, and people from all over the country and the world come and attend. So I help run the workshop.

Dr. Richard Gay

Excellent. See, as I said, you've got a lot going on, and I appreciate you sharing that with the group a little bit, and I would also add that I know many of our students have had the privilege of participating in activities at Frogmen's, assisting, learning, and it's been a really rich experience for our students, so your professional activities have a direct impact on the education of our students, and I think it's really wonderful, and it's a great example of that at the university.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Can you give our listeners a little bit of a run down about exactly the scope when you say printmaking that is involved in that? What kinds of things are you doing and are our students doing? I think we can all imagine maybe a block of wood that's inked and stamped, but I know it's a lot more than that. Can you talk a little bit about what you do?

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah, I've always liked printmaking because I like to do a lot of different things at once, and I can't just sit down and work on one type of technique. I've always called it the jack of all trades of art, because it has elements of sculpture, you're etching metals, carving metals, and woods, and there's elements of chemistry that you have to understand in order to do lithography, which is working with stones and metal plates for printing. You have to be a little bit of a mechanic in terms of operating machinery. We use commercial printing processes that are still in use today, and some that go back two thousand years old, because it's essentially making art using the history of commercial printing, and everything that that encompasses.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Okay. So do you use mostly metal? Or is it a variety?

Brandon Sanderson

I kind of do, most of it, and I think that's because I'll get a little bored if I just do one thing, and I remember when I was a student, and I've actually been thinking about this since I've been teaching for a while now. A lot of my professors, when I was a student, they just did the same thing, and used the same processes and basically made the

same art over and over again once they got to a certain point in their career. And I thought, for me it's important for myself to grow and also as a kind of a model for the students to be constantly learning and trying to do new things. I think it's very important for us to be students, you know?

Dr. Ashley Allen

So do you incorporate any of your computer science background into anything that you do in printmaking?

Brandon Sanderson

I do, especially with several grants I got, setting up software, and to run lasers, being able to work on them when things go, and being able to repair them affordably when things go bad. Because often times the commercial package, where it does everything for you, is much more expensive. So being able to code and do certain things, I've been able to draw from that skillset.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

What role do the lasers play?

Brandon Sanderson

Well, I actually got really interested in it because after thirty-some years of carving I was having trouble with my hands.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Right, sure.

Professor Sanderson

So being able to take a step back from that and allow a machine to start to do some of that, allowed me to stay productive, and then I started getting interested in, how do you, there's people, I've had students that can't do wood carving and can I direct them to alternatives if they're still interested in printmaking, and I think that can be applied over into sculpture.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

The machine can laser cut the design that you feed it.

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah, they can use drawing processes, which aren't as physically demanding, and then the machine can...

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Transfer.

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah.

Dr. Richard Gay

One of the things I've noticed over the years of working with printmakers is that the ones that I know tend to have a very good attention to detail and work really precisely, and I think that's something that many people don't think about when they see a print that's been made, the amount of precision that goes into it, particularly if you are printing in multiple colors with all the registration. I also think about your work sometimes with Chine Collé, when you combine that and the various shapes of Chine Collé. Would you mind just talking a little bit about how you have to be precise in these processes to get the effects that you want in your finished work?

Brandon Sanderson

Sure, yeah, and I think that's where my IT background was very helpful for me as an artist, you have to understand the technical processes and the chemistry, and everything has to, you have to print things in layers, like yellow is one layer, red is another layer, they combine to produce orange, etc and so you have to be able to execute all those processes correctly in order to get the results you want and you also have to understand how the tools work to get the results you want. It's kind of interesting that you mention that, because after all these years of working super technically, I feel like my work has just gotten more and more condensed, and in a lot of ways, my recent body of work has started to move away from that. Like when I was a student I was inspired by expressionist woodcuts, and so I've kind of returned to looser works that I can make in less than a week or half a week, just as kind of a way to change things up.

Dr. Richard Gay

Sure. It goes back to your comments about developing as an artist throughout your career, and not doing the same thing all the time, and I think there's a lot to be said about that. I think our students sometimes think, 'okay, I am X major and I'm going to be X for the rest of my life' and that's not the case in the United States, we have an opportunity to change, and we've talked about that with other people on the podcast. You started in computer science, my undergraduate degree is in biology, I got a PhD in Art History, so many of us are able to change directions and follow our true passions, and many of us don't even know what they are when we first come to the university

and we discover those as part of our growth process. I've really valued the opportunity to be able to change my focus throughout my career, and I think that also applies to making a transition from being in the classroom to being more of an administrator, it was part of that continued growth as a person. So I think this is a really valuable lesson for everyone who may be thinking about a change in how they work or think about things. So go out and learn something new today everybody!

Dr. Ashley Allen

Brandon, you are currently the Director of what we call PURC, the Pembroke Undergraduate Research and Creativity Center, one of the reasons you are perfect for this job is because you are an amazing undergraduate mentor, and so I would love for you to talk a little bit about how you approach that relationship with students when it comes to helping them achieve their goals, get to their next step. What are some principles that guide you in that space.

Brandon Sanderson

Well I've been involved with PURC almost since the year I came here, and I've always volunteered with every Director and on the council. I think my basic principle is, you know, students that want to go above and beyond in terms of research and exploring ideas, our job is to facilitate that as much as possible. But it's also a great way for students, I've found over the years, that aren't all that interested in grades but are interested in intellectual exploration to find their way to understanding why their grades are important. So we do everything from supporting student travel to conferences, nationally and regionally, to paid research experiences, to small grants to introduce incoming students to research. All those things I think, allow us to facilitate the students that want to go above and beyond in different ways.

Dr. Ashley Allen

Yeah. What have been some of the interesting or inspiring student projects, that either you've worked on with your own students, or that you've funded as a Director of PURC.

Brandon Sanderson

One that stands out to me was thorough Renee Locklear White, I believe her name was, it was the Native American Foodways project, and there's a couple reasons I thought that was quite interesting, because she was the first online-only students that did PURC projects and presented PURC projects. But she also went on to present her project at the National Council for Undergraduate Research Conference in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

One of my students, Ally Horn, she did, I don't know, maybe four or five PURC grants and student travel funds, and she went to several conferences and that resulted in her being offered a full ride to graduate school, plus a stipend, everything paid for plus they paid a stipend every month, and so I think that, and there's numerous students that have gotten opportunities like that, it's really a way for those students to distinguish themselves, and from all the other competition. Yeah, we are really open to if somebody has an idea, faculty or students, they want to try to do something, we'll try to make it happen if we can.

Dr. Richard Gay

I'd also say that PURC is open to all disciplines, right? We've been giving some examples in the arts but there are projects that come from all disciplines at the university, and so it's an opportunity to get involved no matter what your area of expertise is.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

And sometimes we see them crossing right? Interdisciplinary.

Dr. Richard Gay

Absolutely.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

I remember some with athletics, and health, right? Can you think of examples where we've seen them cross the disciplines or the colleges?

Brandon Sanderson

Well there's been quite a few, there's been ones combining physics and art and english, and a variety of other things. I think what has happened is for many years the PURC Symposium, which is our annual Symposium for Undergraduate Research, which is going to be April 10th, it was very science-heavy for a long time...

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Right.

Brandon Sanderson

...and it's starting to grow into other areas, and as people see, they're starting to talk to each other, and come up with ideas to work across areas.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Right.

Chancellor Cummings

This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion driving our region forward. Our commitment to southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at www.uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening. Now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Ashley Allen

So Brandon, tell us a little bit about your own undergraduate research experience, and whether that helped you as a student, both in terms of personal achievement at that time, but also lessons that you might have learned then that still relate to you now.

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah, I had, and I think this was largely true at the time when I was a student, there weren't undergraduate research centers, and I didn't even know that I, coming from a rural, farm background, I didn't even know what scholarships and things like that were. When I was studying computer science and art, I found out about the art program just by, I would leave my computer science labs, we would code in the labs and I would just wander around campus to get away from the keyboard and the screen. I went over to the art building and they were using a lot of tools that I had been used to using on a farm, like angle grinders and saws, and I found a professor that was using this giant printing press one day and I started talking to him, and he asked me if I wanted to help him. So I did, and then he said 'okay do you want to learn how to hang a show' so I would help him. None of this was through any program, it was just like, he showed me how to hang an art show, then he said, 'do you want to learn how to build an airplane hanger' so we built an airplane hanger.

Dr. Richard Gay

Just a random airplane hanger, right!?

Brandon Sanderson

Coming back to what you were talking about, he had a really broad skillset that allowed him to do a lot of things successfully, which is really important if you're transitioning or

moving around in different roles. Like he was an airplane mechanic, he was a pilot, now, he's retired, now he's a flight instructor, and he was a printmaker, he ran the art gallery, and he also built race cars. And so, like I helped him with all this stuff, and then one day, I think I was a sophomore, and he said 'we're doing this art show in Mexico, so you want to go with me' and I said 'okay' and he said 'we don't have any money, you gotta figure out how to make it work' and so we went to Mexico City, and that was my first experience with Artnaughts, which is this artist collective that I've been involved with. It was a group of fifty of us from all over the United States, we all went together and had a show in Mexico City.

And that led to going to all kinds of opportunities, which I consider all those things to be informal undergraduate research experiences because it allowed me to see how I could apply, especially as a first-generation college student, like how I could apply what I was learning in the classroom to maybe something professional in the field or in other fields.

Dr. Richard Gay

That's really an inspiring story, the idea of mentorship, and the fact that it happened very organically for you, and this one guy clearly had a real impact on your future projectory, and I think that's something that so many of us here at UNCP aspire to because we want to be instruments of change, in a positive way, and I think these research opportunities and mentorship opportunities are a perfect way to do that. Given the size of UNCP and given the size of our student body and the student-faculty ratio, there are opportunities for this to happen across campus and I hope it's happening every day. But I know you have been a great mentor to many students over the years because of the number of PURC awards you've worked with the students, both now as a director but previously as a mentor as well. We really do change lives through education here I think.

Dr. Ashley Allen

Absolutely.

Brandon Sanderson

Students really, in order to be competitive and find financial opportunities, they have to go beyond just the curriculum, and pursue and have a wide skill set. When I was talking earlier about Ally Horn, the reason she was able to get such a good offer for graduate school was having work experience in the gallery, work as a studio tech assistant, having undergraduate research experience, and all those things that, basically you can put in a graduate assistant role and be able to do any of the stuff that they would want you to do. One of our recent graduates is a studio tech at a

community college in Maryland, and their art department is like, five hundred people, and she helps run that program.

Dr. Richard Gay

We've had a lot of students have success with careers in the arts afterwards, we have people on faculty in Texas and a variety of places, so good work being done over there.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

And I'm glad you brought that up, because I think sometimes we do fight a little bit of a myth that there's no money in the arts, and here at UNCP, the whole idea is what you said, to grow the diversity of skill set within the students of all of our majors, especially those where creativity plays a large role, and there isn't a set path. Like there's a pretty set path for becoming a nurse and going on and having a career in nursing, and there's maybe less so of one in printmaking or playing the euphonium, and so this sense of really developing the student so that they can go out in a very entrepreneurial way and create this career, which you alluded to, and I think there's a group of students that really appeals to, that like the unknown and like the creativity of their own career, and we're here for offering them that as well as nursing and those other paths.

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah. I think in art and in a lot of creative disciplines, you have to, it requires you to have a broader skillset in a lot of ways than in other fields.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Yeah.

Brandon Sanderson

In my own case that was certainly the, I could have been a computer programmer, and as long as I knew, the thirteen programming languages and had the understanding of architecture and hardware, then I had a job. You aren't required to have skills outside of that. That's a broad generalization, but that was my experience. In art I felt like in order to be successful there was also a lot of other things that I had to do, and that was one reason why I was also attracted to it.

Dr. Richard Gay

Well, we have two very accomplished artists, we have a great musician with us here today in Dr. Hersey, and we have a great printmaker over here with professor Sanderson. I wonder if you guys would mind talking just a little bit about the discipline involved in the arts, because I think many people are under the impression that art is,

you're born a creative genius etcetera and what I've seen is that artists of all types work really hard if they're going to be successful, and I was wondering if you could talk about the discipline in your disciplines for a bit.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

I'll start just by saying that I think one of the things I've always seen in our students, is this idea, we sort of call it the American Idol syndrome, this sense that you're instantly successful, or you might as well forget it, and that talent goes a long way. I know in music a lot of us feel like talent might be this sense that you might, slightly have a bit of an easier path in some ways, but it doesn't overcome the fact that a hard worker will catch up, and there is a bit of a sense that, if you don't have the talent, that you won't make a career, and I believe that you just need to keep going, and that if you really put your heart and soul into something, that comes through to the audience, and that might not look like what you expected when you started out, but I coach the students to find where they feel can feel comfortable experimenting and just staying in the game, I think is the most important thing, and I don't know, in your side of the fence in art what do you think?

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah, its, I remember my first drawing class, I never had like drawing, art in high school or anything, I basically took the work ethic that I learned on a farm and applied it to my art, I didn't come into it with any misconceptions. I was like, it is interesting to me, and I want to be good at it and I didn't have any background or aptitude, I just had to, I noticed there were a lot of students that were really good right away, and by the end of my first semester I had caught up to them, and then I just kept doing that. I always tell the students, don't assume your limitations are going to define you, if you would just go into this willing to work and allow yourself to be surprised, you'll be amazed at what you can do, right?

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Yeah.

Dr. Richard Gay

I often think about students, sometimes they'll say, 'oh I don't have enough work for my show' or whatever, and I'm like 'paint another one, print another one, draw another one, play another one' and it'll come, that effort, the repetition, and I think that's interesting that's something you both share as well is the idea of repetition, the rehearsal...

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Right.

Dr. Richard Gay

...and repeating, and you work in multiples, right? We didn't really discuss that but one of the reasons that you're able to show all over the world is that you produce multiples of an object, right? Do you have any thoughts on the idea of the multiple? I do think it makes a big difference in how one is able to pursue a career.

Brandon Sanderson

Yeah, it's a nice thing for me, because I find there's a physicality to the printing process, and it's like a workout you know, the equipment's heavy, you're sweating, it's not like printing with a computer, and so it's like bricklaying or a lot of other, carpentry, or a lot of other things in many ways, and I find it very meditative, but it also allows, like in terms of selling work, it allows me to sell work that would otherwise cost thousands of dollars at the hundreds of dollars level and so in that way an accessibility and democratic quality to it. Going back to what we were talking about, discipline, one thing I try to explain to students is that you have to be willing to fail and make mistakes, and you have to be willing to put, even just what's required in class to get a certain grade, if you want to be really good at this you have to be willing to go above and beyond that. Then, I explain how I actually log my hours for my work, and I have to for my own research, and I think those of us that have been doing this for a long time really understand this, I say, this is the most time you're probably ever going to be able have to work on this stuff. In the future, like in ten or fifteen years, you're going to have to schedule that time, or it won't happen, in order to practice and make it work.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Yes.

Brandon Sanderson

My studio time is totally scheduled now [laughs].

Dr. Joanna Hersey

It's hard to carve out but I think it's a joy to carve it out, and still be doing it, and we tell the students too, it's not pie. There's room in the career, and so it's not there's only a certain amount and you'll get there and have to push someone out of the way. There's room for your printmaking and my printmaking, and your tuba playing and my tuba playing, because it won't be the same, if it's truly authentic. And there's room for all of

them, out there in the world to create and make money doing that, but yeah, they're going to have to try things that don't work first.

Dr. Richard Gay

I'm thinking about the application of that in the writing, right?

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Oh my gosh!

Dr. Richard Gay

How many times do we rewrite that paragraph to get it right?

Dr. Joanna Hersey

And then you get it and it feels to good.

Dr. Ashley Allen

So Brandon, tell us what's next for you and what's on the horizon for PURC?

Brandon Sanderson

For PURC we're just trying to grow, and include more people from different disciplines and areas and colleges, I'm hoping that will be something that will happen at the April 10th PURC Symposium. And then for me, I have some upcoming international exhibitions and I'm excited to be taking my work in a different direction.

Dr. Richard Gay

Well, I've really enjoyed our conversation today and I think I could keep talking about the arts for a long time to come. Thank you so much for joining us today Brandon and I know this is just the tip of the iceberg of the great work you are doing here at UNCP, I really am thankful that you took time to come share it with us today, so thank you.

Brandon Sanderson

Thank you everybody.

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