

[00:00:00] Bonni: Today on episode number 396 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Amy Lynch-Binieck joins me to talk about contingency and pedagogy.

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[00:00:22] Bonni: Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches, so we can have more peace in our lives, and be even more present for our students. Amy Lynch-Binieck works on writing pedagogy, literacy studies, and labor studies. Her book, *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor & Action in English Composition* is a co-edited anthology with Seth Kahn, and Bill Lalicker that explores the ways and means of labor reform on college campuses.

She's published in CCC, teaching English in the two-year college and academic labor, research, and artistry. She's a former editor of NCTE's forum: Issues About Part-Time and Contingent Faculty. Amy, Welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

[00:01:38] Amy: Thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:01:40] Bonni: You know that expression about how people slide into one another's DMs?

[00:01:45] Amy: [chuckles] Absolutely.

[00:01:46] Bonni: You didn't slide into my DMs. You slid into my tweets.

[laughter]

[00:01:51] Bonni: Fairly recently, a former guest on the show, Alex Shevrin Venet was responding to my request of who might have advice specific to people who are part of the contingent workforce and we'll talk about how complicated it is to even use a name for that. You were the first person to come up and I just

regard her so highly that I instantly reached out. I just want to say thanks for being here to have this conversation today.

[00:02:17] Amy: Oh, it's an honor and I feel so honored that she recommended me as well. I admire her work.

[00:02:22] Bonni: Let's get that part out of the way, though, because it's a naming thing. Would you talk about the 2,700 different ways we might be talking about around this particular set of ways we talk about this part of the workforce, and I even hate saying the word workforce but yes.

[00:02:38] Amy: Absolutely. Names matter. I think there's a lot of sensitivity for good reason around the words that we use when we talk about contingency. I tend to use contingent because it works as a blanket term to describe a lot of different positions. We don't have really agreed-upon terminology in the United States to describe people who are working off the tenure track. You'll hear people say non-tenure-track faculty, for instance, but that isn't perfect either because it emphasizes a lack.

It suggests that you are less than for not having tenure. We use adjunct. Some people use that to mean simply part-time, but others don't. It's often used in my state system, for instance, to describe people with full-time contracts. We use lecturer and visiting. In other countries, they'll use things like sessional faculty, or contract faculty. We've got lots of different terms and I tend to use contingent.

[00:03:40] Bonni: In addition to having lots of different terms, we also have just lots of different situations. What kinds of things come to mind for you just even trying to talk about this group? It's a lot.

[00:03:53] Amy: It's a lot. There's a great professor and writer and I follow her on Twitter, Paul Pat, she likes to remind me that we have to be careful when we talk about contingent faculty that we're not just discussing people who are all vulnerable or unhappy in their positions. There are some very good full-time non-tenure-track positions. They are contingent in that they are not eligible for tenure, that they might have multi-year contracts, or even one or two or three-year contracts, but they might come with benefits.

They might be positions that those faculty are very happy to be in. Those aren't the majority of positions though. We do have a remarkable amount of part-time faculty in higher education. In fact, non-tenure-track or contingent faculty make up 70% of the workforce in higher education. That's everything from someone who might be a visiting professor for a year to someone on a multi-year contract with benefits to someone who's working at three different universities cobbling together enough classes to make rent.

[00:05:05] Bonni: I know we're going to be talking a lot about how contingency can impact pedagogy. I'd like you to take me back a little bit first to how you first got into teaching in general.

[00:05:17] Amy: Absolutely. I come from a teaching family. My father was a high school English teacher for 35 years. My husband's a teacher and his father was a teacher and so I began as a high school English teacher. Like my father, because I wasn't making much money as a high school English teacher, I decided to begin adjuncting at the local community college in the evenings for some extra cash.

After about three and a half years of teaching high school, I just found myself more and more drawn to those evening classes. I loved it and decided that that was what I wanted to do. I quit my high school job and I started adjuncting at three different universities. I was the freeway flyer, as it's called, for many years. I had lots of different contracts. I'd eventually returned to school to get my PhD and really lucked into the position I have now. I'm a tenured full professor at Kutztown University. It was a lot of luck. I don't pretend it was anything else. I'm very fortunate to have the job I do.

[00:06:25] Bonni: Would you share a little bit more about your dad?

[00:06:28] Amy: Yes. My dad is my teaching role model and also the source of my interest in labor. He was a union organizer, not just of his own school, but he was one of the founders of the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers, unionizing Catholic schools in Pennsylvania. I spent many nights as a child sitting at union meetings at my kitchen table on my dad's lap. I walked straight lines with him, and learned a lot about labor relations, and how those intersect with teaching, and how important thinking about the material conditions of your job are to being able to teach well.

[00:07:14] Bonni: As you recall, on those early lessons that you can remember, where do you see them bubbling up in new ways, or perhaps even familiar ways, but maybe even amplified ways?

[00:07:31] Amy: Oh, goodness, I don't know. It's just been such a part of me for so long. I think the thing that has stuck with me and become most ingrained in who I am as a teacher, is that I really believe that to be a teacher in the 20th and now the 21st century, we have to also be a bit of an activist in some way. We see that education has been gutted in terms of budgeting, both in K-12 and in higher education. It becomes more and more difficult for us to do our jobs well.

We have to, as teachers, find ways, K-12 and higher ed, to advocate not just for ourselves, but for our students, for our campuses for our classrooms. When we

have high school teachers having to buy supplies, to take into their rooms, that's something that hits me every fall when you see these wish lists pop up on Twitter and on Amazon, where teachers are saying, help me buy books for my classroom. That's something that comes back to me again and again, that if we're going to do our jobs well, we have to find ways to advocate for better, for the whole system.

[00:08:42] Bonni: Well, and you're reminding me of that prolific, maybe prolific is the wrong word, you're reminding me a little bit of that Twitter thread that just people kept coming and responding to and that was a lot of it. Yes, please, explore these issues but also, can we talk to those of us that are not in such precarious positions for our roles and responsibilities to use our voices and our advocacy well. What comes to mind for you, but you'd want to make sure that people are really advocating for towards this community of more contingent workers?

[00:09:20] Amy: I've often said that the only way I can rationalize being a privileged tenured professor in this system, is to use my service and my research and whatever else I can to advocate for better. I think what we have to do is look at our own campuses and pay attention to how we're treating the most vulnerable of our faculty. I think that's really important. What's really important, there are too is that we're speaking with and not for. That's something I remind myself of regularly.

I think people in my position sometimes put ourselves in this savior position. I'm going to charge in and fix everything. I think it's important that we talk to contingent faculty on our campuses and find out what they need because it is very local. It is very different from campus to campus, what conditions are like and what people want. I would encourage people to begin advocacy by listening, by asking questions of the people who need them and just really listening.

[00:10:25] Bonni: I know there's a number of ways where your research has shown a distinct impact, a distinct context for the contingency workforce, and one of them has to do with time. I know that's specific to the writing discipline, there's a lot that you have to share in terms of the time, so I'm just going to ask you to reflect a little bit about how time comes in as a unique challenge here.

[00:10:53] Amy: Absolutely. I find, especially as a writing teacher, I bring that perspective to it because I'm a compositionist. So many contingent faculty are teaching far bigger loads than a typical tenure-line faculty is. They might be teaching one or two classes at a university, but they might be teaching six or eight classes entirely across several in order to make ends meet and so time is of the essence.

They have far more students than I do every semester and they're spending time on the road. As a writing teacher, I think about the best practices or the things that I see have a high impact in my classroom, and how much time that was required of me. For instance, when it comes to writing, feedback is of the essence. I try to give detailed feedback to all of my students on every assignment.

When you are multiplying that six classes, eight classes with 25, 35 students per class, the amount of time you can dedicate to that shrinks significantly. We know it's one of the most high-impact things you can do is give students that personalized feedback, but we're reducing it very often to shorthand or saying, "All right, I can only give the student three comments because then I have to move on or I have to use a bank of comments where I copy and paste. I don't have time to personalize it." That's one way.

[00:12:28] Bonni: As you think about that, I know that we need to be addressing the systemic issues, so I don't want to paper over that. Any advice for people at the individual level to address the reality of where we stand today?

[00:12:47] Amy: I don't have great advice to be the best you can while also teaching eight classes. It's hard because I have given professional development sessions to my own faculty about managing time better, but we're all working on the same kind of schedule, we have a 4-4 load because I'm a teaching-focused university.

It's hard. I would say that be kind to yourself. I think early on in my career when I was teaching across multiple places, I stayed up into the wee hours trying to personalize that feedback and do every project draft justice. I wasn't getting sleep, I was getting all stomach ulcers instead. My best advice is to be kind to yourself, and know that you can only do the best you can in the time you have and that's okay.

[00:13:42] Bonni: I find one thing that's incredibly helpful is find yourself a good screencasting tool that, automatically when you stop recording, puts the link in your clipboard.

[00:13:53] Amy: Oh, nice.

[00:13:54] Bonni: The other thing that I've been motivated by prior guests and the books that I've read about teaching, writing, I'm not an expert, but more feedback is not necessarily better so catching every grammatical error, that's not-- I think people have a misnomer that if I don't catch it, then they'll never learn where the comma goes or whatever and so-

[00:14:15] Amy: I'm so glad you said that because I don't equate feedback to copy editing. In fact, I tell all teachers, "Do not copy edit, that is not teaching writing." The feedback for me is about the content. It's about speaking back to the student as a thinker and a writer.

Copy editing is something we can do together in-class time, and that's where they're going to learn to do that. They're not going to learn to copy edit by me doing that. That is a mistake I made early on. I did spend time copy editing all those drafts as well, which is another reason I was up until 2:00 AM. Don't copy edit. [chuckles]

[00:14:52] Bonni: All right, the other one that I want us to spend a little bit of time on has to do with student evaluations, what have you found through your research is particularly important for us to consider with this context?

[00:15:07] Amy: There's a lot of great studies out there that talk about some of the problems the student evaluations generally write and the validity of them. They don't tend to tell us very accurately about a teacher's teaching. They often reflect more what grade the student got in the class, or believes they're going to get. There's been some studies to that show that they are often very sexist and racist as well.

We know that the majority of contingent teachers are women so the sexism angle is very important. One of the things about the contracts that many contingent professors are on is that their renewal is dependent upon good student evaluations. There's very little else.

Now, again, not true across the board, there are some physicians that have very detailed application processes to have contracts renewed but for the vast majority of them, it's, well what do their student evaluations look like? If that is the difference between my renewal or not, you can bet I'm going to try to teach in a way that's going to get those student evals up. I think that's natural, that's normal. There might be a tendency to do some teaching towards the student eval in mind, which is not necessarily the ideal pedagogical motivator.

[00:16:36] Bonni: Do you have guidance for people in terms of student evaluations? Before you answer, I should also mention that we do have a whole episode, I'll link to it in the show notes, about how we could more proactively provide other data points of the institution's not having these kinds of conversations on--

Again, I'll link to that, that's with Viji Sathy and Kelly Hogan, talking about some of the problems, but also, then, what are other ways that we might gather data

that could possibly provide an additional lens beyond just the course evaluations, but please, by all means, share whatever that you'd like on this.

[00:17:15] Amy: I think it's really useful to know your contract well and to know the policies of your department or your campus well, to find out what else you can provide. In a lot of places, a professor can provide a letter to provide context that goes along with student evaluations and respond to them and to absolutely do that, so yes, and in addition to the things I'm sure you talked about in that episode. Knowing the rules of your own campus can be beneficial as well.

I think also just also talking with your students about the purposes of student evaluations is useful to giving them context for what these are and why they are. Students don't necessarily know much about the inner workings of higher education, and what their purpose is, so I think they might take them more seriously or treat them a little differently with some of that context.

[00:18:13] Bonni: Absolutely. I'd love to have you share a little bit about some of your own activism. Also, I know you're not alone in this. Would you talk a little bit about some of the ways that people are trying to resist and trying to create change in this area?

[00:18:31] Amy: I think there's lots of different ways to get your feet wet if you're interested in taking this on and you have to find something that works for you and you're comfortable with it. Personally, I've looked to imbue labor issues into any service or committee work I'm doing on my campus. I am that person who it doesn't matter if it's the curriculum committee or the campus beautification committee [laughs] find a way to ask about how is there parody or equity here for our non-tenure-track faculty members. Finding a way to bring that up.

Activism doesn't have to just be like standing on a strike line or signing a petition, although it can be those things. It can be asking questions about why aren't our contingent faculty invited to the department meeting, asking why their expertise isn't a part of a conversation about a curriculum revision, which is often the case.

These are teachers who dedicate themselves to, for instance, in my discipline, most of first-year composition is taught by contingent faculty. They have remarkable facility with these classes, so many years of experience, and yet on most campuses, they're not included in discussions about curriculum revision, or design. Oftentimes, they're just sometimes even just given a syllabus and a textbook and a list of assignments, they'd not even asked, so their expertise is ignored.

You're being that person in your department who says, "Why aren't we tapping in to that expertise?" Ask those hard questions. Those are small ways that we can be activist. There's certainly other ways for sure. I could talk way too long about that. [chuckles]

[00:20:25] Bonni: Well, one of the things that you sent me in advance is a specific resolution. Did you want to share a little bit about that because I realize it's geographically specific, but I'm sure that there's tons of parallels?

[00:20:38] Amy: Yes, absolutely. One of the professional organizations in my field is the four Cs, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. At our annual conference when we're in Indianapolis, Indiana, a group of us we're part of an organization within your organization called The Labor Caucus. We came together and wrote this resolution to bring to the business meeting at the professional organization. Really asking for our professional organizations plural, not just the four Cs, but others as well, take labor seriously.

You can google Indianapolis resolution and find out more about it if your listeners want to. That's another thing we can do, is ask our professional organizations to make changes. In that particular resolution, I won't get into all the nitty-gritty of it, but we made some asks that were very practical and material. We've seen some of that come to fruition. For instance, now, that organization of four Cs has a labor liaison, who is a contact person in that organization so that contingent faculty members or any faculty members who have questions about labor issues can reach out and have someone who cares and get answers.

There is at the council for writing program administrators, they now have an archive online of all sorts of labor-related resources for folks. That was independent to Indianapolis resolution but intersected with it at some point as well. We can make asks of our professional organizations. I've started going to the Modern Language Association Conference and trying to understand how that organization governance system works, mostly so that I can infiltrate it and start asking annoying labor questions. [laughs] That's another way that we can be activists, is to ask more of our professional organizations.

[00:22:44] Bonni: Before we get to the recommendations segment, would you share about other types of university policies that affect this part of the teaching community?

[00:22:55] Amy: Absolutely, I think a couple of things come to mind. One of them is even something as simple as whether or not you will accept late work. This one just got hammered home, that may seem really small.

[00:23:10] Bonni: No.

[00:23:11] Amy: It's a policy on your syllabus, right? I saw someone on Twitter, I just retweeted them, I think it was like two days ago, who was noting how more and more people are saying, "Oh, we should take late work, every teacher should take late work." His response was or her, forgive me, I don't know, their response was, "Unless you teach 150 students across six or seven classes, then I can't do that. I'm glad you can, but I have way more students than you do." [chuckles]

My colleague, Sandy Leonard at Pittstown, she wrote a really excellent piece about plagiarism policies and how oftentimes pedagogically how I might treat that as a tenured faculty member, a contingent faculty member might not have that same feeling of confidence. For instance, in a writing class, if a student plagiarizes in a first draft or even a final draft, I often treat that as a teaching moment. You'll see end of the semester it's a little different. It's a teaching moment and we talk about, "How did this happen?" We talk about patchwriting and all sorts of things and there's a chance to do again.

Our university policy says that I'm supposed to write that person up and fill out an official form and report them to the dean. One of the things Sandy said was, "Well, if you are on a semester-to-semester contract, and you can be let go at a moment's notice, you can't necessarily ignore a university policy for your own pedagogical reason. You don't want to be called out on that." There's that worry. Where I see this as a teaching moment, another teacher might see it as a trap. Like, "Well, I better report that student." Even something like incomplete grades.

My union is disgusting right now in its adjunct committee whether or not our adjunct faculty feel comfortable giving grades of incomplete when they may not be back next semester to finish that. Who takes it up? Do they ever get those grades? That affects pedagogy as well. There are lots of times where I encourage students to take an incomplete because they're struggling and there might be something really important happening in their lives. I know they could finish this course if they have the time but if I'm not going to be employed here next semester, who's going to work with them to get that work, and who's going to assess it?

Even thinking more pedagogical and less policy. I did a study that showed-- it's a small case study, but it showed that contingent faculty were less likely to feel free to choose their own textbook for a class even if they were given that freedom. The WPA says, "We recommend these two or three texts but you can choose what you like." Most of the teachers that I talk to always took the recommendation even if they didn't like the text.

One teacher said to me, "I used it for seven years before I finally picked something else." I said, "Why?" Her answer was, "Well, I didn't want to insult the people hiring me, it seemed risky." [laughs] Even feeling free to choose the right text. I've been so excited lately about the ungrading wave, I'm on board, I've adopted it, I'm excited about it. I know there are some contingent faculty, again, it's different.

Everybody's culture, campus culture is different. Some are very much afraid of adopting-- to some seems a far-out approach that might be contrary to what their department chair or their WPA thinks is acceptable. They don't want to, as one teacher said to me, "I don't want to rock the boat. I don't want to draw any attention to myself because I'm here semester to semester." These are people who want to do really progressive things in their classroom but their employment status very often makes that precarious.

[00:27:23] Bonni: This is the time in the show where we each get to share our recommendations. I've got to tell you, Amy, it's one of those things. It is an absolute joy during this pandemic to just get completely enveloped in something. A colleague told me about a TV show, and it's a colleague who hardly ever watches TV. What she does, is going to be something good and I had to take her seriously. Not to mention the fact that then this particular piece of entertainment contained Steve Martin, who I have just loved Steve Martin for such a long time, and Martin Short.

[00:27:57] Amy: He's wonderful.

[00:27:58] Bonni: On and on it went. I would like to recommend a TV show that I watched the entire season of faster than I've watched anything in a really, really long time. The show is called *Only Murders in the Building* and it is featuring Steve Martin, Martin Short, and Selena Gomez, as well as a whole bunch of other great cast. It's both a comedy and a drama at the same time. It cracks me up too because there's a podcasting element to it.

All the different people get connected with each other because they all listen to one of those true crime podcasts series. They realize that each other listens through whether they see them listening to it with their headphones or whatever that is. They all get connected but they're very different people, very, very different people. It's got a podcasting element. It's got, like I said, some tremendous actors.

It made me laugh but it also made me just wonder what was going to happen next. It is just absolutely delightful. I cannot recommend it enough and I'll be linking to that in the show notes. Again, it was *Only Murders in the Building*, highly

recommend. All right, Amy, I'm going to pass it over to you now for your recommendation.

[00:29:15] Amy: Okay, since you went with something that is in this difficult time allowing us to escape into something else then I'm going to go with a nerdy recommendation. Everyone who knows me knows that I am a big nerd. I played *Dungeons & Dragons* for the past, oh gosh, 20 some years now. I have been watching what they call a live play, *Dungeons & Dragons* show, *Dimension 20: The Seven*. It is a group of seven women playing *Dungeons & Dragons* together. The game is run by a man but everyone else is a woman, and they're just having the best silliest time telling a story together. It is funny and it's exciting and it's ridiculous. It is exactly this escapism that I need after a long day at work and listening to the news and thinking about, "Oh, everything that's going on right now." That is *The Seven: Dimension 20*. [chuckles]

[00:30:16] Bonni: You're holding back on us. Do you think that you don't have enough time? I know you have more. We've got time, Amy. This was only us just getting started, okay?

[00:30:30] Amy: I can show all the layers of my nerdery here's with me. [laughs] Because when you said we are going to give recommendations, I've got so many things that I love so much. You mentioned podcasts. I'm a big podcast fan.

I've been listening to *SciShow Tangents* from Hank Green for lots of science nerdy stuff. I love it. It's very fun. Just three people talking about science facts on a theme for half an hour, because I am a science nerd and my husband is a chemistry teacher, despite being an English teacher, so that's very fun.

[00:31:07] Bonni: You got more for us?

[00:31:08] Amy: Oh, my goodness. [laughs] All right. Yes. During lockdown and the many, many days spent in the house, my husband and I rediscovered playing video games together and we've been playing *Elder Scrolls Online*. When I'm not playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, I'm online in a video game pretending to be a rogue, shooting arrows. That's very fun. [laughs] I warned you that I'm a nerd. I've been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with some English professors online too and learning how to do that and that's been fun.

[00:31:48] Bonni: I'm going to recommend something to you, but other people will hear me recommending it. I don't recommend things officially that I haven't tried. For you, I'm thinking anyone who's listening who might be in a position to buy you some gift for some occasion, this kind of thing.

Jesse Stommel who's been on the show many, many times in the past, his husband made just recently these amazing *Dungeons & Dragons*-- I think they're called dice. They looked absolutely beautiful. You've seen them? Beautifully hand-carved. They look incredible to me. I haven't played *Dungeons & Dragons* since I was probably 10 years old. [laughs] I literally wanted to buy them just because I thought they were so beautiful.

[00:32:33] Amy: Here's what's exciting is Jesse is one of the professors who's just joined our game. [laughs]

[00:32:40] Bonni: Oh, my gosh. The connections just are limitless here. This is so fun. I will be linking to Jesse Stommel's, what do you call them, dice?

[00:32:50] Amy: Dice, yes, that you roll dice in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

[00:32:54] Bonni: I'll put it in the show notes, but I won't personally be recommending them because I haven't tried them out for myself. Yes, anyone who plays *Dungeons & Dragons* definitely would be like the thing, yes.

[00:33:05] Amy: A lot of professors play. You'd be surprised. There's a lot of us out there. [laughs]

[00:33:11] Bonni: I absolutely love it. Amy, I am so glad to be connected with you. This has been just a delightful conversation. Thank you for your sensitivity to me, just in terms of feeling ill-equipped to have this conversation. You went very gentle on me. [chuckles]

[00:33:25] Amy: No, this was a pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity to talk more about this important issue.

[00:33:32] Bonni: I hope we can continue the conversation because I know that there's a lot more that you could share with your research and also specific to the discipline of developing people's writing skills. Thank you so much.

[00:33:43] Amy: I would love to. Thank you.

[music]

[00:33:47] Bonni: My sincere thanks once again to Amy Lynch-Binieck for joining me on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. If you'd like to head on over to the show notes, they're probably already in your podcast player if you swipe left or swipe right or up or down depending on the app or you can head on over to teachinginhighered.com/396. If you'd like to not have to remember to do that every time and you want to receive those show notes in your inbox once a week, head over to teachinginhighered.com/subscribe.

That will subscribe you to my weekly update and you'll receive the show notes and also other recommendations that aren't talked about on the podcast, some quotable words, and other good sources like that. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll see you next time on Teaching in Higher Ed.

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[00:34:49] [END OF AUDIO]

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