TRANSKRIPT | Experiences Relating To The Teaching Award: Good Teaching Combines Scholarship, Creativity And Personal Development (#136 Diane Shooman)

Bella Kitzwögerer: In the Technikum podcast, we don't just talk about technology — we actually live it. Join us to discover how science, technology, and innovation are shaping our future. Great teaching happens every day, but it often goes unnoticed. That's exactly what UAS Technikum Wien wants to change. Since 2022, the university has been handing out an annual Teaching Award to lecturers whose concepts truly make a difference — helping students reach their goals and complete their studies successfully. But it goes beyond a single prize. UAS Technikum Wien sees the Teaching Award as part of a broader commitment to teaching quality: a platform to discuss, celebrate, and spread what good teaching really looks like. Today, I'm speaking with someone who knows exactly what that recognition feels like: Diane Shooman, who received the "Best Lecturer" award after being nominated by her own students. She teaches in master's programs — and today we'll find out what makes her teaching stand out. Welcome, Diane. It's great to have you on the podcast.

Diane Shooman: I'm so tickled and delighted to be here. Thank you, Bella.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Let's hop right in. What does being named "Best Lecturer" mean to you?

Diane Shooman: Okay, I have to say that my own reaction when I received the nomination from the students astonished me — because *an Bescheidenheit werde ich nicht sterben*. Modesty will not be the cause of my demise. So you'd think that when I found out my lovely students had nominated me, I would say, "Oh, no, nah…" or something like that. But I was so astonished and happy. I was deeply moved. It meant so much to me because I felt: *Oh my goodness, they see me.* They see, feel, and appreciate what we do together. And that touched me profoundly. Can I tell you what it was like when I actually received the news that I got the award?

Bella Kitzwögerer: Absolutely. Please share everything with us.

Diane Shooman: Okay. So what happened was — of course — I was sitting in a public place, in a café, which is probably not the best place to be when you get news like that.I read the message that I had received the award, and I just burst into tears. I was sobbing hysterically because I was so deeply moved that my university was acknowledging me and my contribution in this way. It really affected me profoundly.

Bella Kitzwögerer: And what do you think makes the difference? Because you can be nominated by the university — but it's something entirely different when the students themselves vote for you as "Best Lecturer," right?

Diane Shooman: Oh my goodness, it's huge. They're the ones with whom this intensive dialogue and exchange actually takes place. They experience this evolution in how they approach things and how they see themselves. So it was enormous for me because I truly put my heart, soul, mind, and all my years of experience — in teaching and in life — into what I do. And when students say: "Hey, this really had an impact on us, and we want to honor you for it," that's incredibly meaningful. Oh gosh, I'm getting emotional again just thinking about it.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Can you tell us more about the ceremony?

Diane Shooman: Oh, it was amazing. It was beautiful, joyful, warm, caring, celebratory, authentic, and sincere. And may I just say: the food was amazing. Of course, I invited the lovely students who had gone through the trouble of nominating me so they could also be part of the celebration and enjoy the moment with me. It had such a profound effect on me. My colleagues said the loveliest things, and you could genuinely feel that everybody was happy for you. It was just such a beautiful atmosphere. And Technikum Wien — they're not stuck-up with their noses in the air. Everything felt so down-to-earth, warm, and welcoming. It was fabulous.

Bella Kitzwögerer: I love that. I would have loved to be part of it.

Diane Shooman: And the music was awesome too, I must say.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Wow.

Diane Shooman: Yeah.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Diane, how do you see your role as a teacher and lecturer?

Diane Shooman: My job is to truly see my students — to see each of them in the very unique and special way they think, develop ideas, go through their process, and express themselves. It's my job to show them what is unique about the way they think and communicate, how they connect ideas and present them to the world. Our students come from all over the world, and many of them have received strange or even negative feedback about themselves, their thinking, or the way they express themselves — especially in their own languages and cultural contexts. I should probably mention that I teach writing. I teach writing processes, idea development, finding your original thoughts, and shaping them. So my work is very process-oriented. My role is to show each student what is unique, wonderful, radiant, funny, or special about the way they think and express themselves. And then — after giving them very detailed, very specific, and very positive feedback about their individual gifts — I also challenge them completely. I come in with a

metaphorical sledgehammer and say: “Now rewrite this entire thing.” I push them rigorously, but always with the intention of helping them go as far as they possibly can. So in many ways, that is my role as a teacher. And that’s why receiving this award felt so meaningful to me. I spend so much time trying to truly see my students and show them who they are in ways they may never have experienced before. And then suddenly, through this award, I felt seen by them. It came full circle.

Bella Kitzwögerer: So it's deeply personal.

Diane Shooman: Oh, yes. Very much so.

Bella Kitzwögerer: I want to deep dive a bit more into your way of teaching. You already shared that you teach writing and also process development, I would say. Can you elaborate on that a little more? What exactly is it that you teach?

Diane Shooman: Thank you for asking me that. It’s interesting — I feel that over the years, through my own research, teaching, and experiences in the world, I’ve learned that original thoughts and original ideas come from incredibly precise observation. For example, the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote an entire monograph about the color blue. He was so profoundly moved by Cézanne’s paintings that he said painters were teaching poets how to see differently. He walked through Paris observing every shade of blue imaginable and developed entirely new ways of describing them. In a sense, he expanded the boundaries of language. This idea of precise observation is usually associated with technical measurement and objective analysis — and of course, many courses at the university help students master exactly those techniques. But my courses turn that observation inward. What am I experiencing? What am I seeing? What am I feeling when I encounter something? What is happening inside of me? One of my students once suggested that the subtitle for all my courses should be: *“Putting the life back into science and the science back into life.”*

Bella Kitzwögerer: That's beautiful.

Diane Shooman: I know. I almost cried when the student said it. It was late in the evening and I suddenly felt completely energized. So I ask my students: Are you only scientists when you’re in the lab? Or are you always scientists — even while walking through everyday life and noticing strange, unexpected things around you? And that brings me to something very important. I recently read a discouraging study conducted at Yale University. It showed that many brilliant students are now so afraid of making mistakes or sounding unintelligent in class discussions that they use AI-generated responses instead of speaking authentically. The result is a flattening and homogenization of classroom discussions. Diversity of thought disappears. The process of developing ideas together disappears. My courses directly address this flattening. I also research the neurocognitive effects of screens — computers, phones, even windows — on perception. Screen-based perception privileges focused vision while suppressing peripheral awareness and our other

senses. It flattens our experience of the world. So I see myself as being on a mission to combat flattening and homogenization by giving students experiences as three-dimensional human beings moving through three-dimensional space — without screens mediating everything. I create very specific exercises for them. For example, I ask them to look through a closed window and observe what they perceive. Then they open the window. What changes? Then they close it again. What changes now? Or I ask them to sit in a tram and first observe visually, then close their eyes and experience the space through sound, movement, and other senses. These exercises emerge from my own research on dance, movement, and perception — topics I also publish and lecture about internationally. The students then document their observations in any form they choose and present them in class. And because they understand the relevance of embodied perception for curiosity, creativity, and scientific thinking, they feel an enormous freedom in how they approach the assignments. That's why my courses exist at the intersection between science and art. Both rely on precise observation — of the world and of oneself. And what's incredible is that every student responds differently to the exact same exercise. Every result is unique, imaginative, rigorous, and personal. I absolutely delight in that diversity of thought. The assignments feel liberating to them because they can engage both their creative and scientific selves — which are ultimately not separate at all. And writing in a second or third language can also be incredibly freeing. Many students have been criticized their whole lives in their native language. Suddenly, in English, they feel freer to experiment, express themselves, and develop their ideas. So all of this prepared the students for the second semester course — the one after which they nominated me for the award. In that course, they could choose one of four assignments and completely shape it themselves. My goal was to embolden them — to help them trust how they think, develop ideas, and express themselves. I spend a lot of time showing students exactly what they are already doing well. They often have no idea. I point out their imagery, their structures, the way ideas echo throughout a text, the originality of their metaphors or phrasing. And interestingly, I recently read a book by a psychologist who studied how art schools successfully teach creativity. He described exactly the same principle: You have to show people what they are already doing — because they themselves often cannot see it. Then you challenge them to go further. That's essentially what I do.

The second semester assignments include:

- creating a multilayered visualization of a complex scientific or technical process,
- writing a reflective essay about any topic deeply important to them,
- writing creatively — a short story, drama, or play,
- or presenting a complex technical project in a completely restructured way.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Does the reflective essay necessarily have to be about science?

Diane Shooman: No — absolutely not. You ask the best questions, Bella.

It can be about social issues, psychological topics, international development, hobbies, personal experiences — anything the student deeply cares about and wants to rigorously think through. And there's no fixed form for the essay. Each topic and each voice demands its own structure. I help students shape their work individually. I also require at least three rewrites. It's brutal — but students end up creating something they genuinely love. Writing is not flat. Ideas should exist simultaneously, almost like a three-dimensional structure or architecture rather than a simple sentence-by-sentence format. I help them think that way. And then there's the creative writing option. Students in highly technical master's programs often try creative writing for the first time in their lives — and the results are remarkable. Some continue writing afterwards because I encourage them to pursue workshops and develop further. The final option is a ten-minute presentation of a complex scientific or technical system. And here I completely reverse the traditional presentation structure. In Central Europe, students are often taught to explain tiny technical details first and only reveal the actual outcome at the end. I teach them to begin with the larger picture: What is this? Who is it for? Why does it matter? Then they explain how it works. Once students understand the relationship between the whole system and its individual components, the presentation suddenly becomes clear and meaningful. So yes — people sometimes think I'm just this airy-fairy artsy American. Which, to be fair, I absolutely am. But there's also an enormous amount of structure, rigor, and systems thinking behind what I teach. And honestly — I just love working with students. I truly love it.

Bella Kitzwögerer: You can absolutely feel that just by listening to you. Diane, I have one final question before we wrap up this wonderful episode. I honestly feel like I could listen to you all day. If a student wants to become more creative in their way of thinking — do you have one piece of advice for them?

Diane Shooman: Yes. Explore life through as many different forms of thinking as possible. Musical thinking, mathematical thinking, technical thinking, literary thinking, artistic thinking — these are all different languages of thought. And when you allow yourself to move through the world using these different languages, you bring so much richness back into the field where you ultimately want to create. Also: never take anything for granted. Question everything. Show your work to people who think differently from you. That helps you discover your blind spots and the assumptions you didn't even realize you had. My courses are also about collective dialogue — everybody participates, gives feedback, and gains different perspectives. And finally: creativity comes from precise observation. Even broad, imaginative ideas emerge from something deeply specific inside of you. That's what I would say.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Thank you so much, Diane, for your time and for talking to us. And congratulations again on receiving the "Best Lecturer" award. Thank you so much for this conversation.

Diane Shooman: Bella, thank you. It was so lovely talking with you. You listened so attentively and engaged so specifically with what I said, helping me expand my ideas even further. I'm very grateful to you. Thank you.

Bella Kitzwögerer: Thank you so much for listening, and we'll hear from you again in the next episode.