

## **CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription - Episode 71: Ernest Solar**

Record Date: June 10, 2019

Length: 45:46

Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*, a CPI podcast. This is your host, Terry Vittone. And today, I'm joined by Dr. Ernest Solar, the assistant professor of special education and literacy in the Division of Education at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Hello, and welcome, Ernest.

Ernest: Thank you, Terry. It's a pleasure to be here.

Terry: Thank you for flying out to do the show today. We really appreciate it. And let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Dr. Solar has been involved in education for the past 15 years, equally dividing his time between private therapeutic education, public school education, and higher education. During his time in the classroom as a special education teacher, he worked with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. At Mount St. Mary's, known as The Mount, his research focuses on crisis and de-escalation training, the effectiveness of mindfulness with teacher candidates, motivation to write and the use of creative writing in the classroom.

We'll also discuss a study Ernest conducted about the outcomes of CPI training initiative for resident advisors in a university housing setting. These will be the focus of our interview today. To begin, Ernest, before your professorship at The Mount, you worked for 10 years as a special education teacher. Could you talk about that experience and how you adapted to the experience and how you managed behavior in that environment?

Ernest: Sure. I would love to, Terry. I started my educational career later in life. I was a career changer and kind of fell into special education by accident. I had known a gentleman that ran a therapeutic school for students with behavior disabilities and he seemed to think that I would work really well with his population of students. I had no prior experience working with students with disabilities, especially students with behavior disabilities. Personally, I thought he was slightly crazy thinking I'd be good at this. But I gave it a shot and honestly fell in love with it the first day.

I was hired as a substitute teacher during the summer and then carried through into the school year. And then I eventually went on to get my master's degree in teaching and special education and then got my PhD in education leadership. But when it came to behavior management, I was literally thrown into the deep end. I really, really had no experience, had no formal training in de-escalation, in behavior management, and understanding what these children were going through in a moment of crisis, which is in daily life. When a student would go into a crisis mode or a situation, I would kind of step back and I would think about my own youth.

I grew up with a speech impediment, so I had many experiences of frustration with that speech impediment, of not being heard or being in a crisis because of the speech impediment in the school setting. And so I kind of fell back onto that knowledge and thought about what would help me in a situation like this. And to me, it was communication and it was just the art of listening. You know, at the time when I was first in education, I didn't understand this but, you know, behavior is a form of communication. And when a student is acting out, they're trying to communicate something to you.

And kind of taking a step back, giving them some space, giving them time to kind of go through their own cycle and then taking the time to listen to them, it was just kind of common sense to me. It was things that worked for me when I was younger. And so I used that with these students and was successful with it. And then obviously, as I learned more about the education field, I started to learn that there was a framework of ground behavior management that was similar to my common sense, ideas, or thoughts.

Terry: Well, you very much just described CPI *Supportive Stance*<sup>SM</sup> in that approach right there.

Ernest: Yeah.

Terry: Right.

Ernest: Please, go ahead.

Terry: Okay. No, that's great. And so that lasted 10 years.

Ernest: Yes.

Terry: And through that progress, you went to get your master's and you went on to get your doctorate.

Ernest: Yes.

Terry: And our interview today will focus a lot on your experience using CPI's *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® training. You had an intuitive grasp of some of the concepts through your work as a special education teacher. How did you first become aware and select CPI training for use at your work in Mount St. Mary's?

Ernest: So when I first got to The Mount about five years ago, one of the initiatives was for our teacher candidates to learn verbal de-escalation skills to help them in the classroom when they enter their internship to kind of give them those skills to learn how to communicate and talk with students if they're in a crisis situation or just on an everyday basis. In my previous experience as a special education teacher, I had been certified in de-escalation training through a different system. But so I kind of did some research and I looked around and I found CPI and what we liked about CPI was that the focus was on the verbal de-escalation.

And to me, that was key. In my 10 years of working with students with behavior disabilities, I only restrained one student and that was because the student was in a fight. It wasn't because the student was in a crisis, per se. I was protecting the safety of another student and that's why I had to restrain the student. And it was really, you know, three or four seconds that I restrained the student. I never personally believed in physical restraint. I know, personally, I don't want to be restrained. And so I wouldn't want to do that to a student.

And I had this rapport with my students. You know, when they were in a moment of crisis, they could tear up my classroom. I said, "This is your safe space. You can tear up this classroom." Jokingly, I would say to them, "Just don't tear up the lamps and the posters because I paid for those. Can you leave those alone?" And amazingly enough, they never tore up my posters or

the lamps. And so I think it's that, again, it's that communication, it's that rapport. And that's what I felt the verbal de-escalation piece of CPI potentially brings to a person that learns those skills is that they can establish that rapport, they can establish that communication, and then you never have to get to the restraining part of it.

Terry: Well, I think it really says a ton, because a lot of times when you tell kids who are especially acting out not to do something, for them to respect you saying, "Look, I paid for the posters and the lamps so just leave those be," [means something]. If they had a different opinion, say of you as a teacher, you would think they would be the first thing that they go for, right? The fact that they left them alone says, to me, volumes about how they felt about you as someone who respected them as individuals and just not in such a rigid role as an authoritarian teacher but as a human being that listen to behaviors, communication.

Ernest: Thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. So it's really fascinating to me that you brought *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® training and verbal de-escalation skills in for your student teachers. In fact, you told me in our pre-interview that the primary reason that you selected CPI training was its emphasis on verbal de-escalation. Do you want to expand on why that's so important to you a little bit?

Ernest: To me, communication is key. I think it's definitely an art that we're losing, in many respects, because of technology. With the verbal de-escalation piece of CPI, it provides this framework of how to listen, how to think about your words in a moment of crisis, and in many ways, teaching the person how to look at patterns. And I tell this to my teacher candidates all the time in the classroom. Our job as teachers is to look for patterns in student behavior. And if you see these patterns, which in CPI would be the Precipitating Factors, in education, it would be an antecedent behavior. But if you can identify those Precipitating Factors, then you can modify that behavior.

And so it's a matter of you being aware of what's happening in your classroom. You know, with the *Crisis Development Model*™, I talk about the piece of Anxiety. So as a teacher or, and we'll get into it with the resident advisors, you're with these individuals on a regular basis. You see their normal behavior. And so when they're not acting normally because they're anxious, that should be one of your first patterns or first signs you pick up and like something's not right.

And at that point, you should almost start the verbal de-escalation process and just go over and be like, “Hey, what's going on? Like, is something up? Are you okay? Are you stressed? Are you upset about something?” And sure, the student may say, “I'm fine.” Right? Okay. But at least you put it out there. At least you lay that groundwork so that if their anxiety increases, then at the back of their mind, they're like, “Wait, there's someone I can go to. There's a safe place I can go to.” And so you've already started that de-escalation process without it getting to a crisis mode. And that's what I think was so valuable about the CPI piece is that it becomes intuitive; it becomes common sense if you use it in that way.

Terry: And you had used, I think, in our pre-interview, you said you were aware of the Mandt program previously and so you selected CPI training as a—I mean, you were aware of the option.

Ernest: Yes. I was definitely aware of the option. And my experience with the Mandt training was more of the restraint piece. And I think it was more—the school system I was working for, it was more of like, you know, to cover yourself. In case this ever happens, you know, we have this training. And so we never really focused on the verbal de-escalation piece. But when I train individuals, I focus on that verbal de-escalation piece because I think that's what's most important. I've taught the restraint piece to individuals before. But again, my thinking, **my logic is let's take this intention, let's take this kindness, let's take this communication and wrap the CPI framework of verbal de-escalation around it.**

And let's focus on the individual and bringing them to a state of calmness or a therapeutic rapport without ever putting your hands on them. And I think that builds trust. That builds communication. To me, that speaks more volume than a physical restraint.

Terry: I see. When were you first certified as an Instructor in *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® training?

Ernest: 2016.

Terry: And so I understand that you train resident advisors or a staff that work in the dorms to assist students with whatever issues they might have in that environment in CPI's *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® training. Could you talk about that initiative in detail? I know we're also going to get to a scientific study that you did about it. So why don't you set up how this began?

Ernest: Sure. So part of the initiative was for me to get certified as a trainer in CPI so that I could provide this to our teacher candidates as part of the curriculum. So before they go into Internship II, I provide them with the CPI training in *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*®. So they all get that little Blue Card™. And at first, we only did it with our special ed instructors but then we expanded it and, you know, realized that, well, hey, this is good for all of our teacher candidates. So every fall semester, we have about 50 teacher candidates that are going out into the field for their second internship, which is full-time teaching, and I provide them this training.

But as a service to the university, my dean and I thought it would be good to offer to other populations on campus. And the other two populations we thought about was the resident advisors because they're living in the residence halls with the students on campus. And then the other population was public safety. So we contacted the dean of students and proposed this idea of teaching the resident advisors verbal de-escalation to help them in their job training working with students on campus. And, you know, the way the world works, things kind of happen for a reason and a purpose and it all kind of fell into place.

At the same time, the Office of Residence Life was going through a transition with their professional staff. There was a new dean of students. They didn't have a full capacity of resident advisors on the halls. So the number of incidents is reported to the Office of Residence Life and 2014-15 school year was over 300 and they thought that was a bit excessive. So they had changed their training module program for the resident advisors to be more of a consistency of care model and thought. And they wanted more hands-on type training.

And so I presented the idea of the CPI training and the piece that they really liked about it, and which I haven't talked about yet, is the simulation piece of during the training, you know, we actually put the individuals being trained into quasi-real-life situations, which is, I believe, completely valuable. And the reason why I think this is valuable is, in general, most human beings don't like confrontation. Most human beings don't like to fight. And so when you find yourself face-to-face with somebody screaming in your face, you have this fight or flight response, and which is, you know, if you're tasked to de-escalate somebody, you can't fight with them because behavior influences behavior and you can't flee.

But it's a different experience to sit there and have someone yelling at you about something. So with the simulation aspect of CPI, the individuals get to practice those scenarios in a safe setting because we start the setting and we end the setting and then we process, and we talk about what the person did well and what the person can improve. But what I like is our minds and our

bodies have a memory to it. So even though it was in a simulated setting, when that trainer or that person who was training is in a crisis situation and they're getting yelled at, they kind of think back, "Oh, wait, I've kind of been through this before. I know what it feels like in the pit of my stomach. I know why my hands are shaking but I know what to say. I know how to react. I know how to de-escalate this."

And obviously, you know, the more you practice this, the better you become. But then at the same time, we hope that they don't have to experience it or practice it. But that the simulation piece is important. And so I kind of got on a tangent there. So the Office of Residence Life and the dean of students really liked this aspect and then said, "Yes, let's train our resident advisors in this." So the 2015-16 school year in that winter, so halfway through, I trained the current resident advisors. And then in 2016-17 and 2017-18, I trained all the resident advisors, both of those school years, in CPI and I provided refresher courses if that was needed. And then, of course, you know, being a researcher, I was like, "Hey, let's collect data on this. Let's see if this is working."

Terry: And how big of a group were the resident advisors?

Ernest: So when it's a full capacity, there's about 50. There's about 50 and I usually do two trainings of about 20, 25 each because I'm the only one that's trained at the school. So a group of 50 is quite large. A group of 20 is—

Terry: A lot! (laughter) That's a lot to get through, I mean, to get everybody into those practice scenarios that you—I mean, that's a lot of people to direct and to observe at one time.

Ernest: Yeah, you know, it is a lot. And I always think in my mind like, "I should really do groups of like 10 or 15 to make it smaller." But logistically, I can't. And so you have to kind of work with what you have. But I still think that the students get something out of those simulation practices, and they do a really good job of providing each other with feedback of what they did really well. There's always a handful of students that are goofy about it, but overall, the majority of it, they give really good feedback to their peers of like, "Hey, you know, when so and so was screaming in your face, you did a really good job of staying calm," or, "You didn't back yourself up into a corner," or, "That was great how you knelt down and got on their level as opposed to standing over them." So they learn from each other, which is important.

Terry: Now please give our listeners a frame of reference for some of the behavioral situations that a resident advisor would be in. And I know in your paper, you start with three examples. There's a stereo being played too loud, there's some alcohol involved. Why don't you talk about some of the behavioral conflicts that a resident advisor might experience?

Ernest: Sure. So, you know, resident advisors are basically semi-professionals. They're hired by the university to, in essence, be the first line of defense. Defense is a strong word. But the first line of contact for the students when they're in a moment of crisis or when they're having a difficult time. These are potentially students that have never lived outside of their house before. So this is their first apartment experience, first taste of freedom. And so they kind of might not think things through all the way and are scared, anxious, nervous.

So you have behaviors of a student who's in their dorm room trying to study and their neighbor's playing their music too loud and they can't concentrate. And so they go to the resident advisor and say, "Hey, it's after hours. Can you have them turn the radio down?" Or it could be something as simple as it's really hot outside and they don't have air conditioning and they only have a fan and so it's really hot in the room. And so they're hot and they're bothered by it and so they get upset with the resident advisor about that where obviously, the resident advisor doesn't have any control over the air conditioning but still, it's somebody that they take it out on because it's the first person, like, "Oh, you're in charge. I'm going to take it out on you."

Of course, there's cases of people drinking too much or not obeying the rules. So it's just those little things that can escalate to big things because these individuals are learning how to live with other groups of people that they've never lived with before. And so there's that negotiation aspect of how to live and the resident advisors are tasked with, like, go manage that. And that's a big undertaking. That's a big task. And so the idea of the CPI training gives them that framework of let me learn who these students are. Let me learn who these residents are so I can understand their behaviors, I can understand their anxieties, I can understand their fears, and then help them de-escalate when a situation occurs.

Terry: All right. And so let's talk a little bit about the research paper you did. I think we talked about a title yesterday that I'm going to look up here because it—in the copy I got, it was "RAs in CPI Training," but you mentioned a working title, "A Safer Campus Through De-Escalation." I really liked that.



Ernest: Thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. Why don't you talk about how the study was conducted and what it found?

Ernest: Sure. So we kind of did this mixed-method approach to a study where we collected quantitative and qualitative data to kind of look at both aspects of if CPI training was effective for students, and for the resident advisors, as part of their job component. And looking at the numbers from a quantitative standpoint in 2014-15, as I had mentioned, the number of reported cases to the office, Office of Residence Life, was an excess of over 300 reported cases. And from my understanding, this is where the student or the resident violated a code of conduct that needed intervention by a university professional, right? And university leadership, you know, felt that that (300) was an excessive number, right, which is fair.

And so then we implemented the training the following school year, halfway through, and that number dropped to below 300. And then we implemented the training to all the resident advisors, and like I said, 2016-17, and 2017-18. And in 2016-17, the number of reported incidences dropped down to just over 100, which was a 62% decrease from the 2014-15 school year, which is a significant drop in a number of reported cases. And then the following school year 2017-18, there was a 65% decrease from the 2014-15 school year. So, you know, we did have this dramatic drop in reported cases. You know, at the same time, I would love to say it's all because of CPI, right? It's all because of that verbal de-escalation training piece.

And I do think it provided them the language and the knowledge to approach difficult situations and de-escalate them to the point where it didn't violate the Code of Conduct. So it didn't need to be reported to the Office of Residence Life. It didn't need a university professional to intervene in it. You know, I mean, the overall training program for the RAs did change at that same point in time, but CPI was a part of that chain.

Terry: I see.

Ernest: They had more resident advisors employed on the halls. So more of a presence of this paraprofessional was in the residence halls, which all plays a factor. But again, I mean, I think it was really this verbal de-escalation piece of, you know, paying attention to the Precipitating Factors, paying attention to the residents and looking for those behavior patterns, and then

being able to communicate through active listening skills and being empathetic towards, you know, the residents on the halls and being able to find a compromise and a workaround to whatever crisis might be brewing. So I do think it did play a significant role in the decrease of reported cases.

Terry: Well, you know, in a group of—it's hard to imagine that the behavior of the students, I mean, to see that much of a sustained decrease after the training—like you said, it could be other factors—increased RA presence might have had something to do with it—but it's also dubious to think that students just got more mature over that period of time. Also, I mean, there's got to be—training makes sense, and I think the numbers bear that out. So we're excited about those findings, certainly.

So, speaking about new teachers, and so you train these teachers, you give them verbal de-escalation skills. What do you think, when they go out into the field today, that some of their greatest challenges are?

Ernest: It's a good question. I think one of their greatest challenges is probably the art of communication, the form of communication. I'll go out on a limb and say that individuals seem to be sensitive these days. (laughs) So with new teachers, you know, they need to learn this communication skill of being able to talk to parents, being able to talk to their para-professionals, administrators, their peers, in a way where they feel confident in their knowledge, but are [also] confident that they're not going to upset or offend somebody. And a lot of it comes from active listening skills, a lot of it comes from being empathetic with CPI and verbal de-escalation, you learn those skills of how to communicate effectively with other individuals in a crisis situation or outside of a crisis. And for new teachers, I think that's vitally important. I think it gives them some tools, it gives them some background confidence of being the expert and being able to communicate effectively with other individuals in their profession.

Terry: And I know we've talked about this also, I think it's a fascinating thing to bring into the classroom for student teachers, and that's the concept of mindfulness. I know that's in your curriculum for student teachers. Could you talk about why and how you introduce mindfulness and how you think you can help teachers to stay calm during crisis situations?

Ernest: Sure. I've been practicing mindfulness—or some form of meditation—for about 15 years now. And I'm working towards becoming a qualified mindfulness base reduction—sorry, mindfulness base stress reduction instructor. It's a mouthful. And so when our students are in Internship II, we provide them with a professional seminar course to help them complete their binder or

their portfolio to present to the State of Maryland that, “Hey, I’m a qualified teacher and I should get my teaching certificate.” So I asked my dean, you know, “Can I have an hour a week for seven weeks to introduce mindfulness to our teachers as a tool for them to prevent burnout, to increase their resiliency as a teacher?”

And I was blessed to be given this time. So for about seven weeks, an hour a week, I have the graduate students, then I have the undergraduate students, and I introduced them to mindfulness, and we talk about the purpose of mindfulness, we talk about the daily qualities of mindfulness and how to use them. We talk about how becoming more mindful, you’re becoming more aware of the present moment without judgment. And then we practice different mindfulness meditations and formal practices and informal practices. And again, as a researcher, I collected data on this process. So at the beginning of the training, I measure their self-efficacy as a teacher, and I measure their perceived stress level. And then after seven weeks, I measure their teacher self-efficacy and their perceived stress level again.

And the fascinating thing that I found was, in that moment of time, their self-efficacy as a teacher increased and their stress levels decreased. And what was fascinating about that was their stress levels decreased at a time when they are the most stressed in their teacher education program, right? This is the time where they’re turning in their final research project, they’re teaching full time, they’re finishing up their final portfolio to get their teaching certificate. You know, this is crunch time, right? And this is when their stress is the lowest but their self-efficacy is also increased. And so as much as I would like to sit back and say, “Hey, mindfulness caused them to have better teacher self-efficacy,” you know, again, there’s other factors at play here because they’re in the classroom learning how to be a teacher, but I can confidently sit back and say, **“Because they are less stressed, they’re more open to learning how to be a teacher, which increases their self-efficacy as a teacher.”**

And we’ve been doing this for about three years now. And, you know, we’ve gotten a lot of good feedback from the students. And a lot of school systems are starting to incorporate mindfulness practices into the classroom. So we, you know, we’re sending our teacher candidates out there with this background knowledge of mindfulness, which, I mean, a typical mindfulness course is usually 90 to 120 minutes once a week for eight weeks. So I’m only giving them a brief snapshot, right? **But I think in so many ways, mindfulness and CPI and verbal de-escalation go hand in hand.** So I teach them this framework of how to communicate and de-escalate a crisis situation, but at the same time, I’m also teaching them how to be present and aware in the classroom.

So if you're present and aware in the classroom and you've cultivated this intention of including everybody, by law, we have inclusion, right? A student with a disability can be included into a general education classroom by an IEP through the law. But there's the hospitality piece of it, right? So just because you include someone in the classroom doesn't mean that they're actually a part of that classroom community. And mindfulness helps cultivate this hospitality of including everybody, regardless of a disability, regardless of their culture. You know, everyone is a part of this group, part of this family, and students feed off the teacher. So if the teacher is cultivating this kindness and this love to include everybody and to be present in the moment with everything that's going on, they're going to identify those precipitating factors. They're going to identify those anxiety behaviors and be able to, again, de-escalate before it ever escalates.

Terry: They are in that supportive mode by being mindful. That first step of the *Crisis Development Model*<sup>™</sup> is that Supportive. So that's a really interesting connection between mindfulness and effectively using a behavioral model such as the *Crisis Development Model*<sup>™</sup>. It's really fascinating. Is there a text that you would recommend for mindfulness if people were looking for something to begin with?

Ernest: It's a good question. Yeah. I mean, there's obviously a lot of research out there. I would definitely, if someone is new to it, or once the ground level information and knowledge, I tend to—when I learn something new, I tend to like, “Hey, let me go to the source. Like let me start from the ground up.” So I would definitely check out *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which really gets into the whole modern mindfulness movement. And then Judson Brewer's book, *The Craving Mind* is another fascinating book. And he talks about his neurological research that he did with mindfulness with individuals to help them stop smoking and his success rate with that and how mindfulness can help curb that, you know, our craving minds for technology for cigarettes or whatever it may be. But it's this—

Terry: *Full Catastrophe Living*, that's a provocative title.

Ernest: Yeah, yeah, it kind of throws a lot of people off when you first hear it. And it took me long to kind of figure out what the title meant. And it's actually a really good title because we all live it. And I'll give you myself as an example. I'm married. I have five kids. I work full time. I'm a writer on the side. I like to hike. I have two parents that are older that I help care for. So there's a lot of full life going on. And it's just like, “Wow, like, how do I manage all this?” And it's this idea of like, “Let's just stop and breathe for a second. Let's just be in the moment. What can I do right

now?" As we talked about yesterday, I mean, I am definitely a different person than I was 20 years ago. And a lot of it has to do with a different outlook on life.

But I think the mindfulness has really helped me to be in the moment, and when something doesn't work out, you can kind of be like, "Okay, it's not how I really wanted it to work out, but it'll work out eventually. What can I do now to kind of move forward?" And Jon Kabat-Zinn talks about that in his book with *Full Catastrophe Living* and how to incorporate mindfulness in these daily qualities of living into your life so that you can be more present and more in the moment without this judging piece. And so, yeah, it's kind of those titles that kind of trips you up a little bit, but like, once you get into it, you're like, "Oh, yeah, I get it." (laughs)

Terry: Yeah. Well, that's a good way as well. And let's move now to as you're a published author yourself, titles including *The Well House*, *Two Moons Rising*, and *Spirit of Sasquatch*. These are all now available on Amazon and I believe also at Barnes and Noble.

Ernest: Yes.

Terry: And so being an author yourself, I know that you use these writing in your curriculum for student teachers. I think that's fascinating to bring the creative element into that. Can you talk about your own creative process and why you think it helps inform student teaching?

Ernest: Sure. So I've always been a storyteller in some capacity. Through my teaching, I tell a lot of stories. I give a lot of examples. You know, as the special education professor at The Mount, I need to teach students about the different disabilities that are identified in the school system. And I've worked with a majority of these disabilities. And reading a text about emotional disability and hearing the story is two different things. So when you relate true life stories, it helps them make that connection. And the funny thing is is I have so many students come up to me afterwards, like, "That didn't really happen." And then they go off and teach, and they come back, and they're like, "Wow, that really happens." (laughs)

So I've always enjoyed telling stories and I enjoy to write if it'd be a research manuscript or a creative short story. To me, writing is a beautiful form of expression. It's artistic. To me, it's the most effective way to communicate. If I have something difficult to say, I'll resort to writing it out as opposed to having a verbal conversation. I mean, I may end up having a verbal

conversation, but at least my initial thoughts are out on paper. And so I was asked to teach a literacy course at The Mount for our secondary students—these are students working on the high school level—and bringing these literacy skills and this content to secondary teachers to [help them] teach literacy in the classroom to students.

So we do talk about different literacy strategies for students to understand novels and texts and new media like text messages, emails, web pages, graphic novels, things of that nature—and visual understanding, visual components of pictures and things like that. But as part of that course, I incorporate a creative writing aspect into it. I have this firm belief that to appreciate a novel you need to write a short story. To kind of understand that the words we use as a writer, we pick those for a reason. We didn't just randomly put words together. Like there was thought, there was the structure of putting the story together. And so if you engage in that activity of writing a short story, I believe that you'll have more of appreciation for novels, for fiction, for writing in general.

So the final assignment in that class is we read eight novels throughout the semester and we talk about them and discuss them. But the final exam is they take a component of one of the eight novels and write a fanfiction piece, right? So they could write a prequel to the book, they could write an alternate ending, they could write about a minor character, but something, and it has to be about 1,000 words. And what always cracks me up is so many of the students complain. Like, “I can't creative write. This is not something that I can do. Like, no, I don't—” And it's okay. Like we do writing activity so the whole entire semester to kind of filter that creative writing process, so it's not like this cold-turkey-type thing.

And then I have these students that write these fantastic short stories and I'm like, “Do you know that there's a writer inside you?” And we do other things. Another writing piece that they do is they have to reflect—I do this with the graduate students. They have to reflect about themselves as a writer. So they have to kind of think back about their years in school and their writing through school and what influenced them to be a writer or to not be a writer.

And then we also do another project where they reflect on a piece of writing literature or a thank you note or a letter that impacted them as a reader because, you know, reading and writing go hand in hand. And to be an effective writer, you have to read. It's just one of those art forms that kind of go hand in hand. So in this course, I kind of bring it all together. My students always joke because I've never assigned my own novels in my class. (laughter) I'll be honest, it feels a little conceited to do that. But there's always that little hope.

Terry: Some temptation there, maybe?

Ernest: Yeah, there's always that little temptation, there's always that little hope of like, "Wow, I wish they'd read my book," but, no, I've never assigned my own novels or my own manuscripts to my students to read. But I do try to find many ways for them to incorporate the reading and the writing together so that they can find that synergy of the two.

Terry: I think it's fascinating that you read about some of these people that think, "I have no capability as a writer," would then turn in really good writing. I think there's something very deliberate about good use of language.

Ernest: Yeah, there is, definitely. There is. I mean, it's definitely practice. It's an art form and you need to practice it. And something that I've noticed with my own writing, I use a different language when I write as opposed to when I talk. Like if you read my fictional novels or you read my technical manuscripts, it's definitely a different language than when I verbally speak. And, to me, that's fascinating, in general, that that kind of happens. But when it comes to writing, there's definitely this deliberate intention of using certain words and certain ways for combination of words and phrases in certain ways to kind of get your point across.

Terry: Well, it sounds like you have some very fortunate students. You bring a lot to how you teach. That seems very apparent. And I've really enjoyed talking with you today about how you do what you do. I want to thank you very much for joining us. Our guest today has been Dr. Ernest Solar; he is the assistant professor of Special Education and Literacy in the Division of Education at Mount St. Mary's University. That's in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Thank you so much, Ernest.

Ernest: Thank you, Terry. It's a pleasure.

Terry: All right. And thank you all for listening.