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Interactive Poetry Education with 'The Green Pen' Podcast

Anna Cohen

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RWU Associate Professor of Creative Writing Renee Soto and her longtime friend, Julie Funderburk, Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Queens University, laugh as they remember when Funderburk's mask scared Soto at a Halloween party during their graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

“You were so freaked out! It was a mask that covered half my face, so you could see my eyes, but you didn’t have any context for who I was. You couldn’t stand it,” says Funderburk.

What sounds like a casual conversation between friends is really an excerpt from a new educational podcast created by Soto and Funderburk. The third episode of *The Green Pen*, a podcast created by Soto and Funderburk, opens with the professors connecting their experiences with masks to the concept of persona in poetry.

This moment is just one example of the many ways Soto and Funderburk are leveraging their 20-year friendship and mutual passion for poetry to create engaging asynchronous educational experiences for their students through *The Green Pen*.

“The podcast is much fun to listen to,” said Lexi Dubovick, an RWU senior who heard *The Green Pen* in one of Soto’s creative writing classes. “Their friendship shows through, so it is fun to listen to them banter and go off of each other. Even though they are not there with us, it is actually really conversational and interactive.”

Soto was inspired to create *The Green Pen* when experiencing “Zoom fatigue” during the spring of 2020. She wanted a way to help students develop their listening skills as an alternative to Zoom, and decided to make a podcast designed specifically for poetry students in her distance learning courses.

Soto knew she needed a collaborator to record the podcast as a model for scholarly conversation, and immediately thought of Funderburk. Funderburk, who is also teaching remotely, was eager to join forces.

“The collaborative nature of the podcast is very important,” said Funderburk. “We both have taught for many years, but collaborating with someone makes you see things in new ways. The podcast comes from each of us, but it is greater than the sum of its parts. We are making something together.”

The Green Pen is named for the late Professor Jim Clark, who mentored Soto and Funderburk at UNC Greensboro. He always used a green pen to mark student work, and inspired Soto and Funderburk, along with many other students and mentees, to do the same.

The podcast includes discussions of fundamental poetry concepts, analysis of poems read aloud by Soto and Funderburk, and interactive activities for students spread throughout. At the end of the podcast, the students are given a poetry writing assignment and an open-note quiz.

Soto and Funderburk have recorded four episodes of *The Green Pen* so far, with more to come. Each episode, which runs for approximately 20-35 minutes, is the product of 30 hours of work. While it takes a lot of effort, each professor reports that the end result has been worth it. Students apply the concepts they learned in the podcasts to their class discussions and their writing, and Soto and Funderburk learn about teaching through the process.

Both professors plan to continue to use *The Green Pen* in their classrooms, even when they resume teaching in-person. They appreciate the way the podcast gives their students “structured alone-time” with the content, allowing them to be thoroughly prepared for class discussions. Students, too, appreciate the

effort their professor put into making a podcast designed for them.

“It’s really obvious that Professor Soto took so many hours to make this course, especially making the podcast. Even online, we are still learning a lot, and she’s doing a great job of using different methods to keep it engaging. What it comes down to is how much a professor cares and wants to put in,” said Dubovick.

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