



# Research That Reaches Out Podcast

## [Episode 1: Reframing Ethics with Dr. Charlotte Thomas](#)

Hannah Nabi: Hello, and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, GA that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real-world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

We're excited to sit down with Dr. Charlie Thomas today, who is a professor of philosophy and co-director of the Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles at Mercer. Dr. Thomas completed her undergraduate degree here at Mercer and her MA and PhD at Emory University. She's been teaching at Mercer for 26 years and just recently published a book entitled *The Female Drama: The Philosophical Feminine and the Soul of Plato's Republic*.

Dr. Thomas has been teaching an Introduction to Ethics course for many years, but about a year and a half ago did a total redesign to incorporate service learning into the course. She was selected by the Research that Reaches Out office for a Spring 2019 Semester Project Funding award, which is one of the funding programs offered by our office to support faculty innovation with service-research in the classroom. A year later, Dr. Thomas is still doing service-research with her Intro to Philosophy students and seeing positive impacts on her students' learning and in the community partnership, and we are thrilled to be speaking with her today. Dr. Thomas, welcome.

Charlotte Thomas: Hey Hannah, so happy to be here with you.

Hannah Nabi: Let's go ahead and start with the basics. Tell us a little bit about your Intro to Ethics class and what the students are doing each semester.

Charlotte Thomas: Sure. Each semester, in this new form of Intro to Ethics that I'm doing now that incorporates service, we begin with a few weeks of intense orientation both to the issue of housing insecurity in the United States, in the contemporary United States, and also to the Daybreak Center which is a local homeless day center for folks struggling with housing insecurities. And so it's a place that that offers a lot of different services to people who are either homeless or are in a situation where their housing is fragile. So we spent several weeks at the very beginning of the semester reading about housing insecurity in the United States, learning about the Daybreak Center, having folks from the Daybreak Center come to the

classroom and do orientations with us. We go to them. We really immerse ourselves.

And then, after a few weeks of that, it kind of, in, during the tail end of that actually while that's still going on, students propose either individually or in groups, a semester long project for the Daybreak Center. And ideally, this is a project that really capitalizes on what they've already done at Mercer in terms of their major, or perhaps experiences that they came to college with, and so they're looking for the intersection between who they are and what they can do, and the issue of housing insecurity and the work of the Daybreak Center, and the way that they can become a part of that work from a particular place that they're coming from. So they propose their projects individually or in groups. And I give them a little bit of time to sort of get going on that. And while I'm vetting those proposals with representatives from the Daybreak Center and some others that we'll talk about later, they're getting started on theory. And so we shift gears, and they start reading and talking about ethical theory and at the same time, sort of push the pause button on these projects until they're approved. Then when the projects are approved, that's about a month into the course, then the whole rest of the semester they're both implementing their project and at the same time learning ethical theories and taking those ethical theories and using them as lenses to evaluate their own work.

And so they're doing that in discussion boards and discussion in class, through journals that they write to me, and also the sort of key piece is they do three big theory practice essays where they look at their own work from a particular ethical perspective. And that goes on the whole semester. At the end they do some reporting if their project has a product that gets turned in. I like to sort of celebrate the project somehow – the poster presentation or some celebration at Daybreak Center to kind of wrap it up. But that's the arc of our semester.

Hannah Nabi: Cool. Tell us a little bit about why you decided to switch up your course.

Charlotte Thomas: Yeah, so I've taught ethics for many years, 25, 26 years, something like that. Not every year but practically every year. And I, honestly, I never loved it. It was part of the job that I knew was valuable and I wanted to do well, but I didn't love it and I kind of knew why I didn't love it all along. That was that the students engaged the theory too abstractly. I mean, either the theories were so far-fetched that they couldn't really apply them to their real life or they sort of could apply them in real life, but it seemed kind of trivial and sort of irrelevant to anything important, anything that really mattered to them or they could think about. So we always were in this either "it's so trivial and abstract that nobody cares about it" or "it's these exaggerated crazy cases that we can't

relate to.” And on either end of that spectrum, it's really hard to do thoughtful meaningful relevant work.

So I was always looking for ways to try to find, to get closer to the middle of that spectrum. Things that weren't so far-fetched like the trolley problem, but things that weren't so trivial that students really didn't think that what they were doing was important. And we do it through literature, and I would try to find good cases, but it never really hit. And it wasn't until we sort of switched to the service model that I think students really, we found that sweet spot so that students thought that what we were doing was important, but it was also happening on a scale that seemed relevant to their lives.

Hannah Nabi: So what kinds of differences in student learning are you seeing as a result of these changes?

Charlotte Thomas: Well, I wanted to do service learning because of its inherent value. I believe that it's important that people like us who are in a remarkably privileged position – and our students – that we're engaged with our communities. There's a lot of poverty, and in Macon the poverty rate far exceeds the national averages for poverty, and lots of things that Mercer students aren't really in touch with because Mercer is such a nice, safe, self-contained place full of happy prosperous people doing interesting things that it's easy not to realize that we sit in the middle of this community that has a lot of issues. And so I wanted to do service learning for that reason.

And I've done service learning before. It's been awhile since I've done a serious deep dive like this course, but I kind of figured that there would be some sacrifices in terms of the theoretical content of the course or, you know, that kind of stuff that gets done in conventional classrooms. What has been the most wonderful surprise of this whole thing is that there has been no trade-off of that sort at all.

I am getting such good theoretical work from my students, while at the same time, there were engaged in the community. And we're out there actually doing things that are meaningful and helpful to other people. And I think they're, you know, kind of finding their path forward in terms of trying to become better people themselves without any trade-off in terms of the theoretical work. So in terms of student learning, I am so pleased. I consistently, in the six sections of this course that I've taught in the last year, consistently getting better, more thoughtful, deeper theoretical work out of the students while doing the service. So it's been great.

Hannah Nabi: One of the things that I love about your course is how well it aligns with best practices and ethical engagement. So it's focused on, you know, being intentional about equitable partnership, shared decision making, upholding the

dignity of vulnerable populations, and transparency. And it may seem sort of like a “no duh” for an ethics course to do these things, but in reality upholding these principles and practices is really challenging and it takes a lot more time in the planning and implementation when you're including all the stakeholders in this process. And from the start of your partnership with Daybreak, your course design and your partnership has been a model for these good practices, both for your colleagues and for your students. How did you establish this partnership and, as a faculty member, as a professor, what steps are you taking to maintain the level of mutual benefit in your partnership that you and Daybreak experience?

Charlotte Thomas: We are so lucky to have the Daybreak Center in Macon and to be at a university with such a good reputation for being partners in this sort of work. So one of the reasons that this partnership was so easy to get off the ground, and we really did get off the ground very quickly, was because of all the good work that people at Mercer and the Daybreak Center have done before. So the Daybreak Center was ready to get on board with me, even though I was proposing something unusual. Not because of me, but because I was coming from Mercer and they were inclined to take a chance on somebody from Mercer. So I'm very, very appreciative of the institutional context in which all of this stuff happened. But, you know, Gaye Martel, who is the volunteer coordinator at Daybreak, just got on board immediately, and I spent a lot of time talking to her about how best to do this, how best to make this work. We – and I involved her, not just in a sort of advanced planning stage, but as we were doing it the first time, we were very much aware that that, you know, we were not piloting it exactly. I mean, we had the students and we knew what we were doing, but we knew that we had never done it before and things might have to change. So we were right there together at every step of the way, not just trying to make the project work but also thinking about how to tweak the model. And it's that – I mean that's the answer to that – is from the very beginning, Gaye was a full partner in the design of the class and of the way that more students engaged the work at the Daybreak Center. And every semester, you know, it's changed a little bit. But it's changed, the changes have come out of those conversations. And you know, it's like anything service learning. Like, I tell people about this with my study abroad program, too. I've had the best partner in the world in Eric O'Dell, who does study abroad with me, with the McDonald Center – Will Jordan is just the best partner in the world. If you can find somebody that you can work with on these things and be in conversation with them about what's working and what's not working and what your goals are, and you're flexible, then you can do remarkable things. And so I think it's that, she's, you know, the Daybreak Center is a full partner in what we do. I don't think of myself as sort of serving them. I mean, we're

working together to do this thing and I am – I really emphasize – and the students get it, that we need to say thank you to them because these learning opportunities that my students have through this work would not be possible without open-minded, flexible, imaginative community partners. And the Daybreak Center has absolutely been all of those things for us.

Hannah Nabi: So you give your students a lot of autonomy in these projects, and they can sort of go whichever way they want within, you know, the boundaries and approval of Daybreak and you, but accountability can be a really big concern when you're giving undergraduate students a lot of autonomy. How do you communicate with your students about their responsibilities, and what measures are in place to help hold them accountable?

Charlotte Thomas: Yeah, I mean I think incentives matter a lot. And I think sometimes we can sort of outsmart ourselves a little bit about some of this stuff. So I definitely take a multi-pronged approach to accountability, and I'll try to talk about all those different levels, but students are grade motivated. We lament that. You know, we don't want them just to, like, be grade motivated, but they are grade motivated and so I use that.

You know, one of the things they their first big essay, which constitutes a big chunk of their grade. If they can't, they have to have done some work – some real work – that they can think about and analyze and reflect about in order to make that essay work. And it's a big chunk of their grade, so I harp on that. I say, look, you know, we have a month to get these projects going and then you have several more weeks to sort of wrap your mind around the theory. But if, when you sit down to write this paper, if you haven't really done some work, you're not going to have anything to write about and that's going to be a problem. It's going to make your, it's going to make it more difficult for you to write your paper, and it's going to make it more difficult for you to get a decent grade.

So I definitely do that. I mean that's just, you know, the way that American higher education works and it's what our students come in with. So that. I do that.

Another thing I do is, once the projects are up and running - so the 10 weeks in the middle of the semester, they write a journal directly to me every two weeks, so five journals every two weeks for ten weeks – and they just have to tell me what's going on. And I tell them, if they do a "just the facts, ma'am" kind of journal, you know, "I went to the Daybreak Center. I was there for half an hour, you know, it was fun." Like the best they can hope for is a C on that grade. And so I, again, use the grade thing to incentivize them to be more talkative about their experience and more reflective.

And then I respond, you know, I respond, and I say to them, so every student every two weeks, gets something from me that says, Wow, you guys are ahead of the curve and that's great. Or that situation sounds a little sketchy to me, did you talk to a staff member about that? Or huh, I'm concerned because I'm looking back at your last journal and it doesn't appear to me that you've done anything since the last time you wrote me. And so they know I'm looking. So that's the second kind of thing is that, and they also know I'm not the only one looking. I have - they know that I'm in close contact with the folks at Daybreak Center and there's all sorts of accountability – signing in and all sorts of things that they do there. And then I have help. I have preceptors in the class who are student assistants who also help with this accountability.

So, that's the second piece, the grade piece is the first piece. The second piece is just they know we're watching, right. They know they have eyes on them and we're paying attention. And that, you know, it's just a human thing if you know you're being watched. I try not to make that creepy, right. They also, you know, they have lots of time to do this in their own way, but they know that we see them.

And then the third thing is, I do make the moral argument. It's an ethics class, right. So I'm very clear at the very beginning of the semester that this is not a normal class and if they don't, they want a conventional "come to class, listen to a teacher talk, write a paper, take a test, have a few discussions," if that's what they want, they just need to drop the class and there will be no hard feelings. I try to make that clear. I tell them to ask their friends who've dropped my classes before, but that's just not a thing that bothers me so do your thing. Only stay if you want to stay. So that's, you know, the first part of the moral argument. And the second part is you cannot break promises that you make to these people. These are, the people, the participants of the Daybreak Center often are people who have dealt with really problematic, damaging broken promises. And when you go in there and we say we're going to do something, you're going to do it. These are real human beings. None of them are having their best day, and we are going to treat them like human beings. And that means promise-keeping, so forget your grade for a minute. They won't, but I say it, forget your grade for a minute. Forget that I'm watching you. Just, you know, be a decent person and don't break promises to the people at the Daybreak Center. And honestly, my students – again this is the sixth section of this course I've done – that has not been a big problem. I mean, the students have been really, as soon as they get down there and they meet people and they engage them, they are very aware of this being engagement with real human beings and they're very conscientious about it. In fact, I find in the proposal phase that often I have to scale back their promises. You know, I have some groups that want to go every week or, you know, for multiple times a week to do things, and they want to set the schedule up at the beginning of the

semester and I say, look, you guys. You're a full time student at Mercer and you've got tons of work. And things are going to get crazy. At some point, whatever you promised to do, you've got to keep that promise. So, you know, scale back. You can always add stuff later. You can over-deliver, but you cannot over-promise. So it's those three things. It's grades and it's keeping eyes on them and it's reiterating the moral argument pretty, pretty regularly actually.

Hannah Nabi: You mentioned preceptors and how helpful they are in your course. And for those that don't know, preceptors at Mercer like undergraduate teaching assistants. How do you manage your preceptors and what impact do they have on the class, and on you? And how are they impacted by their precepting experience with this particular course?

Charlotte Thomas: Yeah, I love using preceptors in all kinds of classes, not just this one, but they do have a very special and important role in this course. So as you said, preceptors are undergraduate teaching assistant, but they do not grade anything. It's structurally forbidden for our preceptors to do that work. They cannot grade anything. They are not aware of the grades the students have, so that makes them very different than like, when I was a teaching assistant in graduate school, or you know what a lot of other schools do with teaching assistant. I am the teacher of the class. I do all of that work – all the delivery of the content and all of the assessments - that's all me. The preceptors help me though. And in this class, they helped me both with theory and with the projects, but they are really important in the coordination of the projects. So I recruit preceptors from the class. One super fun thing is that I always have students in my classes who want to precept in the future. Already, this semester isn't even over and I have students in the class now who want to be my preceptors in the fall, in part because - I'm sure we can talk about this a little bit later - many of their projects had to be modified or interrupted because of Covid. And some of them want to come back and be preceptors next semester so that they can encourage students to follow through on the projects that they started with this semester, which I think is just pretty great. But typically, that's not typical. Typically people finish their projects. Typically the preceptors are people who really enjoyed the service, who are pretty good at the theory, are getting a good grade in class. They come back, they sit in every class, they're always there. And so they're available to students for if they have questions about their writing or about the theory. They're there for that. And they're a part of the process. When the proposals come in from students for the service projects they want to do, the preceptors are full partners in that work of evaluating proposals. I will also say that I appreciate, Hannah, you being a part of that process and your office being so supportive of the work that we do. We all sit around a table. So it's representatives from QEP

office, which has been Hannah, and representatives from Daybreak, and me, and all the preceptors. And we all have the proposals and we've all read them, and we look at them, and we talk about them. So the students get to see the process from that side.

And then after the proposals are approved and students have projects, I assign projects to each preceptor. So for example, this semester, I have two sections of this class. There are 14 different projects, and I have three preceptors, so each preceptor has four or five projects that they run point on. Now I'm still reading journals from all the students, and I'm still going to Daybreak Center and checking in on the students when they're there. I'm not always there when they're there, but I go and check on them.

But whereas I have 14 projects to kind of think about, each preceptor has three or four. And so I expect them to be in contact every week with their groups and to try to be at the Daybreak Center to see them in action, and to let me know if I need to know anything. You know – is anything fabulous happening, is anything problematic happening. Do they seem to be doing the work. Even like interpersonal stuff that's always an issue with groups. Is, you know, is everybody working together okay. And so they just, in a sense, they really make it possible. I don't know how I could keep eyes on all of these projects, if I didn't have their help. Just because of them, very few things, I think, slipped through the cracks and without them, I'm sure lots of things would.

Hannah Nabi: So something that's kind of unique about your course is that you teach it, both in person in the fall and spring, but you also piloted it last summer as an online course. How was that experience shifting it to online delivery and what did you do to adapt it?

Charlotte Thomas: You know, one of the interesting things about this model is it worked really well the first time around. And when something, you know, when something goes wrong, you don't always know why it went wrong, but you know, often you have a sense, you know, of why something went wrong. When something goes right it's also not clear why it went right. And the first semester, this course went really well and why did it go right? You know, I'm not sure. Well, one of the things that we had in the first semester was funding from the QEP Office. And so when I taught the course the second time I didn't have that funding. I mean, I've since then gotten a little bit more funding from the Office for poster presentations for the students. So I don't want to make it sound like I haven't gotten funding. I didn't ask to get the same kind of funding to actually offer financial support for the project's themselves like I had that first time. So, second time I ran the course, I thought okay, let's just see what happens if I don't mention the money. Let's see if they can make it work. And they did, you know. They found community partners to support what they were doing, and



the fact that we didn't have grant money to buy their supplies, it didn't slow anybody down.

And then the summer thing happened. I'm like, well, clearly, the reason this course worked was because the partnership with the Daybreak Center. Again, I am so committed to the partnership with the Daybreak Center and I value it deeply, but we can't do it in the summer. The students are all over the place. They're not in Macon, many of them. And so, so if I was going to do this online. I was going to have to decouple it, you know, from that partnership. I was going to have to open it up and I had no idea whether it would work or not. So I tweaked the proposal process. We still started the same way in deep dive into housing insecurity, but I tweaked the proposal process so that they had to find their own agency or project. And a part of that requirement was that they found somebody who was willing to be in contact with me for accountability. And so when they turned in the proposal, one line that was on it for the summer that wasn't on it in the school year is, who is your contact person, you know, what's their contact information. So while I was evaluating the proposals, one of the things I was doing was contacting these people. And in the cases where these were agencies, nonprofits that had no clear web presence and I can do research that was super easy to sort of know was legit and work through, and in other cases I had to just have conversations with people and make a judgment call about whether this was the right thing or not.

You know there may have been one student who was trying to game the class out of 30, you know, but I'm not even entirely sure. It actually went really well. Most of those partnerships, the very first person they connected me with turned out to be somebody I was in touch with the whole rest of the class and who was very responsive and responsible and helped me know that the students were actually doing work.

Otherwise the course was pretty much the same. They were all doing different projects. Different places all over the United States. And they were learning ethical theory and then they were applying the those ethical frameworks to the work they were doing. So on the one hand, I, you know, obviously I missed the, I miss being able to see them with my own eyes, although I did get some video content from several of them, but I missed seeing them with my own eyes. I missed having this sort of collaboration with the Daybreak Center, which I really enjoy. But it was also pretty cool to think about Mercer students all over the country doing this work and thinking about it.

So it's different, but I'm doing it again. Everybody was fine with it and we're in pre-registration right now, but the class is totally full and I've got a second section open. It is already beginning to get some students so apparently the word on the street among students is that it works as an online class. And that was my impression too.

Hannah Nabi: That's awesome. Congrats on your enrollment for the summer. Getting to the second section, I hear, is pretty tricky. Since you've gotten some experience teaching this online, and then we just had, in March, our emergency shift to online learning in response to the Covid-19 crisis, how did this mid-semester shift in your partnership with Daybreak affect your course?

Charlotte Thomas: First of all, let me just jump to the punch line and say it's going really, really well. We've got, we're going into our, our basically about another week before the semester. And so we're not quite done yet. But it's going really well and I'm very proud of my students and I think really good things are coming out of this. And so it's a happy story. I think there's going to be a very happy ending to this story, but it was really dodgy because, at the time when all this stuff started going down my parents were living with me, they're both in their 80s. And so they're vulnerable to Covid and so even a few weeks before everybody else was sheltering in place and self-quarantining and being, you know, really careful. And, I mean, I was about two or three weeks ahead of the curve because I needed to make sure that I took care of my parents. So, the first thing that happened was I had to, you know, run a class from home using Zoom. But the other thing. So, so the first thing was, look, you're not going to be able, I'm not going to be able to go meet with my students face to face. And that was weird, but I was like okay you know they're working on their own a lot anyway. And I've redirected a lot of time to their projects. So this isn't like a normal class where normally I would be seeing them three hours a week in two or three chunks. I only am meeting with them about once a week, so you know this, we can make this work. It's not a big deal. But then like the next day the word came out, and I was expecting it, but the next day the university policy was that no students could be doing direct service. So I have this class that's completely built on direct service and we can't do it. Again, Hannah, you and your office was incredibly helpful in sort of connecting me with resources about indirect service, and I did a lot of my own sort of thinking and research about indirect service and then, I mean, it was another one of these sort of light bulb moments with these class with this class. But I realized that I did not need to be the one to figure out how each of these students was going to make this transition. They needed to figure that out. So I put together some guidelines for indirect service and links to some of the same resources that the Mercer QEP office had given me to what indirect service looked like in a lot of places and I relaunched a second proposal process for the class. A much quicker one. They only had a week to turn it around. And it had lots of parts, but the main thing was restate the goal of your original project, that was kind of at the top. And then describe your, you know, what your process has been or was intended to

be this semester. And then they had to answer a question. Can you continue with this project as is, given the new guidelines for indirect service? Can you modify your project to meet those guidelines? Would you like to be assigned to a different group, and tell me what that is. Or would you just like to be reassigned completely and I'll do it for you, no problem.

And so they each had about a week to decide what they were going to do, and they all just did it. You know, they all just did it. I have, I think, fewer than five students who just asked to be put into other groups. I had some groups that were able just to stay the course. They'd already done enough. For example, just to not to be coy about this, one group had done a sort of a ceramics arts and crafts activity with the Daybreak participants and they didn't get to quite finish it. They made bowls and the bowls had not yet been glazed, but they've been made and so what they did was, they did the firing that they needed to do with the bowls and they put together sort of glazing kits and those go to the Daybreak Center and somebody else at the Daybreak Center can coordinate the people. I don't want to get into the weeds here. The Daybreak Center's being very careful too, because of Covid. And so, only a few people are in the building at a time. Fewer than 10 at a time. There's not a lot of contact. So it's not like they're going to be a group of people sitting around a table painting bowls at the Daybreak Center, but the people who started that project are going to be able to finish it. And the students made that possible. So they were able to follow through on their project as it was proposed with some modifications on how they did that. Other people had to change their things entirely and a few just asked to be reassigned to other groups, which I did happily, and they're working on that.

And, you know, this could have gone terribly wrong. I have 14 different projects, I've already mentioned that. I'm worried about one of them. But 13 out of 14 projects, and that's 47 students. Just did it. They just pivoted from direct service to indirect service and they've already written one theory practice paper with their indirect project being the focus and they're just, they just did it. You know, they didn't know that they couldn't. So they did.

Hannah Nabi: I'd like you to leave us with your thoughts on why your Intro to Ethics course is Research that Reaches Out

Charlotte Thomas: Well, the students in this course engage in a serious study of ethical theory. It's an intro course, but we don't pull any punches. We look at the history of these theories and also the most current forms that are being debated by contemporary ethicists, and I hold them to being accurate and responsible and thoughtful about theory.

But at the same time, you know, I asked them to think about how these theories inform how they can become better citizens, how they can, how their

engagement with people at the Daybreak Center can be meaningful and helpful. How, you know, how they want to think about becoming better human beings. So the serious theoretical work absolutely 100% enriches the service, and the service has transformed the theoretical work. And that seems to me to be what Research that Reaches Out is all about.

Hannah Nabi: Well thank you so much for talking to us today.

Charlotte Thomas: Thank you so much, Hannah. It's been a real pleasure talking to you and I just want to thank you again, not just for this podcast but for everything that your office has done to encourage me to think about this course and then supporting me every step of the way in terms of its implementation. I wouldn't have done it without you guys, and I certainly couldn't have made any of this happen without your support. So thank you.

Hannah Nabi: Well, thank you. And thank you for for talking to us today, but also just for doing this great work.  
And thank you to our listeners for tuning into the inaugural episode of the new Research that Reaches Out podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at [QEP.Mercer.Edu](http://QEP.Mercer.Edu).