

Ep. 006: Teaching in Times of Crisis

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2016/ep006.shtml>

So far, 2016 has been a tumultuous year, marked by truly horrific acts of violence. When a crisis occurs, how should we address it with our students? How can we balance the need to cope with traumatic events against the need to keep learning on track? There are no easy answers. As we mark the fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, we look at the research resulting from that national crisis, explore options, and offer a few practical tips for teaching in times of crisis.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. Joining me is Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: And today we're talking about teaching in times of crisis. This is a podcast that we thought we would record and kind of put on the shelf until it was needed. But then the more we went through it, we thought that maybe we should just go ahead and do it now. Right?

CLAIRE: Yeah, you know, I, as I looked at the literature, a couple of the articles I read, were actually about how professional development professionals can help faculty in times of crisis. And one of that is just providing them with resources. Part of that is just providing them with resources. And I think this is a resource. And I think, you know, some people may choose to listen to it now. And then they'll have some ideas for if they ever need them. Some people might get, we might get to a place where there's a crisis, and they might choose to listen to it, then, if they remember it.

JIM: Right, right. God forbid, something happens. We will, of course, remind people, and we should probably define today that when we're talking about crisis, this is actually one of the first topics when we were talking about doing this podcast that we felt we needed to do. I remember when we originally had conversations, and part of that was informed by the fact that keep happening. Yeah, 2016 is that we don't want to get to modeling because we want to we want to give good practical advice for our 20 minutes today, but the summer has been has just had awful national news. And going back into the spring, I mean, the worst mass shooting ever. Yeah, in Orlando, violence against individuals, you know, racially based violence, and then and then violence against police officers. And it's just been a it's been painful. And I remember over the summer, we were we had all this going on, we're like, oh, we need to we should address this. So this is our chance to do that. And to give some practical advice on how

to address it. So what are some of the questions of the faculty member? When something in today we're not talking about on our campus? But we know,

these are bigger scope items that we're thinking about today. And and I think we can do another podcast later about, you know, when something happens, maybe that that causes a crisis in your classroom. Right. But, but we're thinking today about crises on maybe a local, you know, we had an incident where several members of the university community were killed in an airplane accident, and they were probably students well, um, I know that there were students and faculty and administrators, staff who were personally affected by that. Anything from that level on up to 9/11. You know, the shootings at Pulse, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, all of those sort of ongoing difficulties, that spike in individual crises.

JIM: So what are some of the questions that that teachers should be asking themselves when something like that happens?

Oh, I think the first question that any of us would ask is, oh, my gosh, how do I respond to this? What's the best thing for me to do? There's been a 9/11, there's been a Hurricane Katrina. There's been a Pulse shooting, what's the best thing for me to do? And the answer to that is something. Okay, there was a sort of a spate of research obviously, conducted at post 9/11. And that sort of gave birth to this there was another spate conducted after the shootings at Virginia Tech. So these these event incidents precipitated a lot of thinking on the part of various people. And actually, there were some folks at Virginia Tech, who did some, uh, not I'm sorry. There were some folks at Carnegie Mellon, right. Okay. Yeah. Who did some research specifically on what how did faculty respond to 9/11? And how did students judge those responses? How did students react to those responses? So the basic finding of that research was that faculty responses ran the whole gamut. There was a whole continuum of faculty responses all the way from, I'm not even going to acknowledge this.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: To we're going to do a class project,

JIM: Which, which. The form...

CLAIRE: Incites a class project.

JIM: Something the scale of 9/11 I don't know how you don't acknowledge it in some way, but other but other I can see how you would just not want to engage with it.

CLAIRE: And depending where you are, and so on and so forth, and how you personally are affected. I mean, there's there are a lot of factors that affect how a professor responds to a crisis. So um, and we should talk about that. But, but I think the the main thing that came out of the research was that, you know, students said, students reported

appreciating pretty much any kind of response a faculty member made, except just ignoring the whole situation.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So even someone who just came in and said, I know we're all concerned about this event that's unfolding or has recently unfolded, I think the best thing we can do is to just move on with our regular work. And make sure that nobody thinks that the terrorists won, because they they disrupted our classroom.

JIM: So and this is for personally, this topic is interesting for me, because I, for the longest time have dealt, have taught in a discipline where this is an instant teachable moment, because I'm teaching journalists.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: I'm teaching journalism students. And so we talk about dealing with with horrible things all the time. But if I'm teaching a chemistry class, and again, not to pick on colleagues and chemistry too much, but if I'm teaching a chemistry class, maybe that sort of response is more appropriate, because you're not going to be tying it into the, to the actual lesson there.

CLAIRE: There may not be there may not be a connection to your to your discipline.

JIM: But it still needs to be acknowledged because your community of learners in the community is affected by this news.

CLAIRE: Because you are a community of learners. Because you know, and your your learners have been affected by this, right. So I think the one thing we have to keep in mind if in fact, we choose to sort of land on the end of the continuum, which is, you know, let's pause, acknowledge, move ahead or not even pause and acknowledge, but just move ahead. It would be unrealistic to assume that all students are, are in a place where they can learn, we can, we can keep teaching, but they may not be mentally capable of learning at that moment. And so we may need to offer some, we may need to offer some help for that. So, say 9/11 happens. And on 9/12, you have a quiz scheduled, and you're of the we need to move on and not let the terrorists win frame of mind. And you might say that to your students. But you might also say, however, I understand that it might have been difficult for you to study for this quiz that it might be difficult for you to take this quiz. And so please remember that you're allowed to drop a quiz grade in this class. Or if you don't do if you don't perform up to your expectations for yourself, I'm going to allow you to retake this quiz. Or this is normally a 20 minute quiz. But I'm going to allow 40 minutes for the quiz. So, you know, some kind of accommodation for the fact that students brains just aren't going to be functioning really well. Right? On 9/12.

JIM: And of course, we're not talking always about an event. That's the scope of 9/11. You know, so that's one type of response. What other sorts of responses are there that you can do? Is there more that you can do that integrates the news of what's happening more into the fabric of we're talking about?

CLAIRE: No, Sure, because, you know, as I said earlier, it's a continuum. So you have at one end of the continuum is this sort of limited acknowledgment what some people have called the stoic level of violence. There are also other places along the con-continuum, so one of them is identified as the empathic response. And that's basically allowing your students to time to process this event and its impact on them. So this is kind of this is, let's pause for a moment of silence. Let's take some time to have a conversation in our class about how you know how people are doing how people are coping, you know, how has isn't is this affecting you or your family? Um, so that kind of emotional processing, piece or approach and then there's a third kind, which is identified as the integrative approach or possibly a recommitment to learning approach, which actually does sort of what you were talking about. It takes this moment and it turns it into a learning opportunity. And that may be a learning opportunity for that day or it may be a learning opportunity for the semester, so there were professors after 9/11, who reworked their classroom projects their semester long projects, because this was early in the semester, right? Yeah. So it was there was there was time they said, Okay, so we are going, you know, maybe an art class might create a classroom Memorial or something like that, where the, the incident becomes sort of a precipitating incident for a major piece of the class.

JIM: So how do you tell what type of response is most appropriate for your teaching situation? What are some of the factors that inform that?

CLAIRE: Well, I think, you know, I think the big thing is going to be you, you know, because truly, I would never encourage anyone to move down a path that was going to make them personally, deeply uncomfortable. So, you know, the way that we respond, is probably informed by a number of things, it's going to be informed by the sort of what we call interpretive frames, which is just basically, how do you understand your role as professor, because each of us understands that role in a different way. It might be in front, it might be a form, by your past experience, you may have been traumatized at some time in your life, and that might make this harder to talk about. Or it might give you a feeling that you're in a position of expertise to help students to help students move through processing this. There might be some sort of procedural pressures, you know, like, oh, my gosh, you know, this is happening at the end of the semester, the final exam is looming. We still have a good deal of content we have to get through because the students have to move on to the next course in their discipline. We don't have time to take a class session and just basically write it off.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know, that that's, that might be a situation? What are your peers doing? You know, do you have support among your peers? Do you know what other people are doing that might help you come up with ideas?

JIM: Yeah. And, I think that's, I think that's a really good point. Because I think the other side of it is every class that students have that week, everyone is talking about this all the time. So I think coordinating within your department, and it can take a little bit of pressure off of the Getting back to business, it may make getting back to business a little bit easier if if you address it in different ways.

CLAIRE: And if and if you know, I think it would be hard on, quite frankly, I think it would be hard on students, if every class they went to was embracing this sort of empathic, let's all talk about this. And at some point, the students are going to get to a point where they're like, you know, I just I'm just...

JIM: I just want to learn. Yeah, isn't just...

CLAIRE: I need to move on. I need to do something.

JIM: Can't we get back to what we were supposed to be? Yeah, yeah. So it is a fine balancing act. So that's why again, I think it's a great suggestion to talk to your colleagues within the department. Let's talk a little bit about when we talk about students being traumatized. I suspect, teachers are not going to want this to be an excuse for students not to do what's required of them. But when we're talking about traumatized, we're talking about people who are deeply affected by even though they didn't witness the event firsthand. I mean, I guess all you have to do is think back to where you were on September 11. That morning, and everyone remembers where they were. And if it's that level of event that I think we can probably assume that there's some trauma that

CLAIRE: and you were watching that? Sure. I mean, you know, over in some cases over and over and over again, right. You know, I mean, it was like it was like an unending loop on the cable news. You know, how many times how many times did we watch the Challenger explode? Right? How many times did we watch the planes crash into the twin Twin Towers?

JIM: You know, an interesting observation is that the students who are freshmen now, because this the 15th anniversary of 9/11, they weren't they weren't even kindergarten. Yeah, they weren't even in kindergarten yet. So they haven't necessarily had that kind of there have been other events, obviously, since

CLAIRE: then. Other events, so I, you know, they they're, they're more recent, more recent events that have impacted their psyches.

JIM: Sure, sure. And they've and they've gone through school, certainly different than you and I, they've gone through school with a with a perception of threat or perception of anxiety.

CLAIRE: You know, one thing that's happened that our students, you know, Sandy Hook happened. Yeah. So that was four years ago, five, four years ago, I think so. You know, our students were maybe middle schoolers, maybe high school freshmen. So, you know, for many of our students, when we grew up, I think, you know, school was pretty well, when I grew up, we were ducking and covering in case of atomic attack. Yeah, I didn't know it'd be unrealistic to think that school was ever perceived as 100% safe environment but I think To a certain extent, schools were perceived as safe as safer. Yeah, you know, and that's, and in fact, statistically, our, our students are safe our 18 to 22 year olds are safer on a college campus than they are anywhere else. 18 to 20 year olds, 22 year olds who are in college, right, um, fewer bad things happen to them, you know, for a variety of reasons. But that's, you know, that's true, but it

doesn't mean that they're 100%. Safe. We know that from Virginia Tech. We know that from Northern Illinois. Yeah. So you know.

JIM: So what other things to wrap it up today? What other things do you want to do want to should people have top of mind?

CLAIRE: Well, I think I think the big thing really is just to realize that it takes time recovering from trauma is, is a process, we need to somehow sort of reestablish our personal sense of safety, you know, not feeling like we're, you know, I remember on 9/11, you know, nobody was entirely sure that this was all going to be contained on the East Coast. Oh, no, you know, for a while the whole country was sort of, on alert, thinking this could this and we didn't have a sense of safety.

JIM: And when you see one event, you you an event on a college campus someplace else, there's always concerned that there's gonna be a copycat, or is it a coordinated thing or whatever, right. So yeah, right.

CLAIRE: So that, you know, so you need to before you can sort of overcome this, you need to reestablish that feeling of safety. It helps if there's a time for remembrance and mourning, you know, I mean, we do we are, our brains are our, probably our bodies and our psyches are going to remember and mourn for a bit. And then we can be ready to sort of reconnect with ordinary life, we can we can say, okay, you know, I'm ready, I can move on. And this, you know, we're all familiar with this, even just from personal events that impact our lives. But you know, what, a National Event the, the impact is just broadened there, there are a lot of us going through this at the same time, although not necessarily for the same amount of time, right? People are gonna recover pretty quickly. Other people are going to be worried and concerned for, you know, months, possibly years, it's, you know, it's gonna depend.

JIM: Okay, so, again, a big topic, as a lot of the topics are that we're covering on this podcast, this one in particular, if you do want to have more of a discussion in your class about about what happened, sometimes these horrible events are centered around very controversial issues.

CLAIRE: Well, and even if it's not, it's a horrible event. Yeah, you know, that conversation is going to be an emotional one. More emotional for some than for others. It could be a, an incendiary one, depending on the nature of the event. So I think in another episode, we might want to talk about how to handle more difficult conversations in your class. But, you know, for now, I think the big thing to remember is just do something but make it something that you personally, are comfortable with. So don't you know, if you can't if you just can't go there, I think the thing to say to your students is, I just can't go there. You know, I'm sorry. I can't go there right now. And that's, they'll respect you for that. That's, that's an acknowledgement. So there you go.

JIM: Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM:

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