

Ep. 091: Final Reflections

<https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2024/ep091.shtml>

Whether as a means to promote transformative student learning or a way to empower our own professional development, "reflection" is a word often heard on this podcast. For a very special episode of Let's Talk Teaching, former CTLT director Dr. Claire Lamonica returns. She and Jim discuss her thoughts about teaching since her retirement. They explore how fiction can serve as a gateway to reflection (bonus: Claire gives some summer reading suggestions). They also discuss Jim's upcoming return to full-time teaching and how the years-long journey of this podcast will impact how his students will learn.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching!

(Music)

JIM: Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching. A podcast from the Center for Integrated Professional Development here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee, and we have a very special episode today, special for a couple reasons we'll get into, but mainly special because my guest today returning, my partner in podcasting crime, I guess, our former director of the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, Dr. Claire Lamonica, Hi Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi Jim.

JIM: Welcome back.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: What do you think of the new digs?

CLAIRE: Well, this is a pretty fancy studio you have here. This is a step up from sitting across the desk in your office.

JIM: The desk rattling around...

CLAIRE: ...People walking by.

JIM: ...The air conditioner rattling and all that other stuff. Well, thank you so much for coming back. So another reason why this is special is because we never really had the chance to do a final episode when you retired almost four years ago?

CLAIRE: Yeah, let's see. This is May, four years ago, the end of this month.

JIM: What the hell have you been doing?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, there was a year there where I didn't do anything just like everybody else. Well, no, I mean, it's - you know, everybody else kind of went on doing their work, right? And when people ask me about retirement advice, I say, "don't retire at the start of a pandemic." That's my sagest advice. Because, you know, there's just not a lot to do. So when you're there at home, you know, terrified for your life...

JIM: And I think the last episode we actually recorded was "it's going to be okay, people, just get done with the semester and land the plane."

CLAIRE: Get through this, and then things will be better next semester. Which I hope they were. I mean, I think they were.

JIM: No, they really were.

CLAIRE: They were at our house, you know, the teacher at our house stepped right up and kept on teaching.

JIM: Well and when we went back face-to-face, your successor, on an interim basis, Dr. Jennifer Friberg who's been on our podcast many times. My new partner in crime, as it were. Turns out, she's also a speech pathologist. So our first episode was how to teach with a mask on.

CLAIRE: Oh, oh, I'm going to have to go look for that.

JIM: You're going to have to go look for that. And you too, at home can listen to all of our past episodes. Go to ProDev.IllinoisState.edu, yeah. We'll do all that stuff at the end too. So I just wanted to talk today a little bit, because the other thing that's going on is that we've done about a little more than 90 episodes at this point. Depends on when this one's actually released, but you had a bit of a life change about four years ago. I'm looking at changing positions on campus here and getting back to teaching full time.

CLAIRE: I was going to ask you if that was a secret or...

JIM: No, not at all. It's out there. No, it's Facebook official and everything. It was posted. And so this may be kind of our series finale for Let's Talk Teaching.

CLAIRE: Wow.

JIM: So I certainly wanted to have you back for that as well.

CLAIRE: Full circle.

JIM: Full circle. Yes, yeah, actually, we should just talk about having a successful first day of class. I think that was our first episode. It's the one I posted the most certainly. So when we were talking over text and email about coming in and doing this, you know, I talked about reflecting on a career in the academy, and you had mentioned, you know, I didn't really have a very typical career in the academy, and I think that's true. What

do you miss about life on a university campus, a professional life on a university campus, which is not so you're not still involved here.

CLAIRE: Yeah, but I'm really not. I mean, I'm not professionally involved here anymore, and I do miss that. I miss - I, you know, every time I walk through campus, I realize how much I miss being on campus, just physically being on campus. You know, the quad is always so beautiful. And you know, I miss my little jogs between Williams Hall and Hovey Hall when I was running late for a meeting, back the other way, when I was late for the next meeting. And I miss the people. I love it. I just saw Richard Hughes when I was crossing between Milner and and the Bone. And he said, "Hi." And I said, "Hi." And I thought, "Oh, that's so nice just to see Richard, you know." And so I missed that. And of course, I miss the students, just that, all that energy, even when you're not in the classroom, that's a very - that energy is there, you know, surrounding you and so and I'll always miss teaching. I don't miss grading, but I'll always miss teaching.

JIM: I was going to say, if you do miss grading, it is finals week when we're recording this.

CLAIRE: I can probably find somebody.

JIM: I'm a little behind if you want to come and -

CLAIRE: I imagine that there are a few people with essays out there who'd be happy to let me look those over. That's not the - that wasn't my favorite part. I love talking to students about their writing, but I never loved evaluating

JIM: Well, and that's part of the thing. I'm going to be a writing teacher again in a form, because I'm going to go back to the School of Communication full time. I'll be working with the television and radio, the broadcast news students, and I teach, you know, I'll be in the newsroom all day with them, but I'm also teaching introduction to news writing. So it's a different kind of writing than you taught.

CLAIRE: Yeah, although I have taught that.

JIM: Oh, I'm sure you have. I'm sure you have.

CLAIRE: But yeah. Well, if you need any help, let me know. Except for grading.

JIM: Oh, well that was pretty quick. Yeah, no, I will. I will. So well, I mean, the whole origin of this podcast was twofold. One you and I had such great conversations. I wouldn't leave you alone. I mean, I constantly darkened your doorway. I told Jen Friberg, we're going to get a cardboard cut out of me that will occasionally just be lowered into her view and then be pulled back. But we had - and I learned so much from those conversations. The other, the other reason, of course, is because I really didn't want to do a newsletter.

CLAIRE: I didn't - I'm not sure I knew that part. I probably did. I just forgot.

JIM: When your boss had been an English teacher for 40 years, and a writing teacher.

CLAIRE: You think there should be a newsletter.

JIM: Right. But we had such good conversations, and so you are helping me out when I go to teach, I became a far better teacher over the last - because I've, you know, I've still been teaching a semester, you know, or two, when I can, every year. And I'm a far better teacher for not only working here at our professional development center, but also all of the discussions that we had.

CLAIRE: Well and teaching makes you better here. So, I mean, that's always sort of been my philosophy is, you know, the people who work here learn from their teaching and bring that expertise here, and the people who work here take expertise out to their teaching. And, you know, it all works.

JIM: Yeah, it is. I mean, I hate to use the word synergy, because it always makes me flinch in the broadcasting business, it's what consultants say, but it really is. There is a sort of synergistic sort of thing that happens with that, that it's greater than the sum of its parts. You're able to make those connections and so I've been doing a lot of reflection lately. And reflection is that word that we used often in our podcast episodes, to talk about reflecting in terms of professional development, getting our students to reflect. What are your thoughts on reflection in your fourth year of retirement? Do you reflect differently in retirement?

CLAIRE: Oh, that's a really good question.

JIM: You knew there was going to be at least one.

CLAIRE: Oh, no. Now what do I say? I think for me, and I don't think this is true for everybody. You know, when we were talking about retirement, and I said, "The thing I've discovered about retirement is there are as many different ways to do it as there are retirees." I mean, everybody does it differently. For me, I think that the reflection is more on a personal level than a professional level. I still work with some adult English language learners, so that's how I get my teaching fix. And obviously I reflect on what their needs are, what's the best way to do that, because they come from different places. They speak a heck of a lot more languages than I do, and so, you know, trying to find - and they're adults, you know, they have families, and so trying to meet those needs. So I still reflect in that way, but I think more, it's just reflecting on what have I been doing for the last 71 years? You know? What do I want to do for the next, you know, hopefully 20 years? Sure. I mean, that's sort of where that goes. I read a lot, and I don't read heavy stuff. I don't read professional stuff. I don't read philosophy. I read largely detective fiction.

JIM: I was going to say I am somewhat disappointed that you haven't solved a murder yet in your retirement.

CLAIRE: I have not. I'm just waiting for someone to ask.

JIM: I had this whole thing planned out of you and your garden-

CLAIRE: Me and Mrs. Fletcher.

JIM: Yes, yeah, exactly. Well, she's probably the murderer if you think about it.

CLAIRE: Well, I've stumbled on - so I'm reading, I'm actually right now in the process of rereading a series of books by a woman named Louise Penny, who is a Canadian author, okay, and she has a little village that she writes about called Three Pines, which is not on any map. And they're very much like Cabot's Cove, just a lot of people get murdered there. I don't know. There may be 500 people living in this village, maybe, and a lot of them get murdered. But they're funny about it. They, they know. So somebody will come into town and go, "Oh, this, you know, looks like nothing ever happens here." They'll just raise their eyes and go, "you'd be surprised."

JIM: So, you know, I think that actually raises an important point, and it may be something that there's some teaching value in as well. We can find the gateway, the material to help us, the fuel for our reflection. It doesn't have to be serious academic study that you're doing in your retirement years, I'm like you the most of the reading I do is entertainment. It is, it is to take the burdens of life off my shoulders for a while, but you still think about things.

CLAIRE: Yeah, well, and, you know, and good fiction, that's part of its function. It gets you thinking about things. And so, I mean, I think a lot about community, and what kind of community I want to grow old in, you know, and what kind of people I want to surround myself with, and how to kind of build that community, that, you know, some people might call it a bubble, but, but, you know, I think that's okay.

JIM: Well, that sounds a lot like what we always talked about doing as teachers, too. Building community. And whether it's a bubble, or it's a big hug, you know, the thing we've always talked about with culture and community is that as you define something as something, then there's a natural human tendency to define other stuff as the other and so that's always a trick in building community. But I think the bubble is, in some ways, a natural start. And then after that - and in terms of students and everything else, there's the obvious commonality that you start building on and stuff like that. I've been really excited because I got - so there are two different course numbers, and then a number of independent studies and internships and stuff that I'll be supervising. So I finally got access to that stuff in the computer system, so I've been looking over all the students, and it looks just on the surface, looking at names and faces and years in school and stuff like that, I'm looking forward to getting to know them. I actually know a surprising number of them, because I've had them in class before, including at least one student I had years ago, well, two years ago in Comm 110. Which is a statistical unlikelihood.

CLAIRE: Aren't they going to be surprised?

JIM: Oh my. I need to go back and find out how we did. I did make a note to research that.

CLAIRE: Well, you know, sometimes students do that on purpose. So, you know, my husband often has people who have him for Intro to PR, and then they sign up for his sports communication class, because that's, you know, whether or not they're sports aficionados, which is, you know, but when it just happens. I had one poor student, I mean, I think he was okay with it, but I think I had him in at least, well, I had him as a

freshman, and I had him in a methods class when he was like, a junior or senior, and then I supervised his student teaching, and then I think he came back to the writing project. I mean, he and I just kept, like, running into each other, and I'd be like, "I hope you're okay with this." Every time he'd introduce himself, I remember you, surprisingly.

JIM: I had an experience last spring where I had a student for the first time take the class again. They had not passed the class the first time.

CLAIRE: From you? From the same teacher?

JIM: From me.

CLAIRE: Oh, you - Oh yeah, that's fun.

JIM: It's their second time around.

CLAIRE: That does happen. You just hope they're onto you by then. But use that first time as a learning experience.

JIM: Exactly. We had a very straightforward conversation. They did not end up finishing class again, but that was, but there was something else going on.

CLAIRE: Things happen in people's lives, as we used to always talk about too. Students have lives.

JIM: Yes, students do have lives. And actually, that was something that I brought up in a recent episode we did with our colleagues over in student affairs about, you know, the importance of all of us who teach to recognize just how busy your students are than when we were in college and how, I mean, it's not say that we weren't busy and I didn't have a part time job and stuff like that, but it just seems the distractions are much more.

CLAIRE: Yeah, and the world is much more with them, I think. I mean, you know, I went to college in the 70s, so the world was with us, but I think the world is very much with them.

JIM: No, very much so. And we talk about the pervasiveness of technology, so here's some things you've missed in the last four years.

CLAIRE: Okay, oh, wait, I can't wait.

JIM: You ready?

CLAIRE: I know I missed canvas.

JIM: You missed the transition to a new learning -

CLAIRE: Somebody tried to ask me a question about that the other day. I was like, "I don't do that! Never seen it, sorry!"

JIM: I don't do that much anymore either. For those listening who aren't familiar, Illinois State University, we transitioned from our kind of bespoke - that was my spin on it - learning management system, you know, online classroom system called Reggienet, which was based on Sakai, which was an open platform source. It was not being supported as robustly as we would have liked. So we decided it was time to move. Went to Canvas, which is the 800 pound gorilla of all this - surprisingly easy. I mean, I don't want to minimize the hard work that all of our faculty colleagues did, and I did too. I mean, there were some bumps in the road, but the difference with Canvas is that you can go on Google and Google it, and you can find an answer, because it is so pervasive, you know, it is the metaphorical - or figurative - 800 pound gorilla. I'm sorry, I'm in a room with an English teacher. I'm a little self conscious. What's a metaphor? Place to keep cows.

CLAIRE: Metaphors be with you.

JIM: Yeah? Oh, thank you. Canvas transition - generative artificial intelligence.

CLAIRE: Yes, I am watching that from afar and being so glad that I don't deal with that.

JIM: It's impacting all of us. I'm very grateful and proud of some of my colleagues here, especially Jen and David Giovagnoli, who've been working with Roy Magnuson, who's been with the provost office this year, to come up with some strategies on all of that. And then the other thing that we were talking about beforehand was, you're right, the world is with these students much more closely, and sometimes they're having trouble disengaging from it. And so a combination of concerns about discipline, but also what we're really talking about, I think, is student mental health, yeah, and how we identify all of that.

CLAIRE: You know and discipline and mental health are clearly related. So, I mean, that's - and, you know, I was thinking about that. I was thinking, okay, so I was in college in the 70s, and clearly there was a lot going on. But, you know, there was a difference between everything that was going on in the world at that time and everything going on the world this time, just in terms of how ubiquitous it was. I mean, I could go to my room and shut the door and get on my typewriter and write, you know. I mean, it wasn't right there in my face. I didn't have a device sitting right next to me with alerts popping up.

JIM: Yeah, and a social need for that to happen, that there's a peer pressure, there's a cultural pressure for that to happen, to stay in touch, and do that. I recently, you know, I kind of gave up, other than for the for the day job, I kind of gave up the Facebook thing.

CLAIRE: Oh, did you?

JIM: Around 2016, really 2020. But, you know, one of those political seasons, and I've had to reengage because part of my new job is also engage with alumni and all that other stuff. And it's been interesting. I still haven't turned on all the alerts, though. I just, I just check a few times a day.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I don't pay attention to alerts, but I - and I use it primarily as a social tool.

JIM: So Claire, as we wrap up, what's the best piece of teaching advice you ever got?

CLAIRE: Long pause while I think about that.

JIM: Please do. Please do. This is a chance for me to thank our editor, Colin Winkelmann.

CLAIRE: Doo doo doo doo... the best piece of teaching advice I've ever gotten...

JIM: -Or one of the best, it doesn't have to - You don't have to -

CLAIRE: I can't remember how it goes, but it's something about "they'll care when they know you care." You know, that students need to know that you care, yes, about your subject, your discipline, but they also need to know that you care about them. And, one of my - I don't know if I've ever told this story before on a podcast, probably - but one of my most touching moments ever as a writing instructor was sitting next to a student at her computer, talking to her about what she was writing, and she turned around and looked at me and she said, "nobody's ever cared about my writing before." And I, of course, wanted to burst into tears.

CLAIRE: Because I'm like, oh my gosh, you're 18 years old, and nobody's ever cared about you and your writing before? You know, you as a writer? And so I just think that's, you know, that's where you start. That's where it all starts. So that's the best piece of advice I ever got.

JIM: I would have too.

JIM: Well, that might be the best piece of advice I ever got, either. I'm going to take that into the newsroom over in Fell Hall.

CLAIRE: Oh, there you go. Yeah, that's going to be, that's a whole new teaching place.

JIM: It is. It is.

CLAIRE: Only, it's not, because you're going back. You've done that before.

JIM: I did it down at Southern Illinois University. But, you know, I had not ever considered, I had not ever considered being what it took to be a teacher. Good teachers make it look easy. I had some inspiring, good teachers in my life, and I thought I could just walk in - and everyone else did too. I mean, I started down there and it was like, "Hi, welcome Jim. We're glad you're here. Here's your class. Good luck." And it wasn't until I came back to Illinois State University and went to graduate school, and went through the training program, the professional development program for Comm 110, a nationally recognized program to train graduate teaching assistants, and my second day there, I was like, "why the bleep didn't anyone ever tell me this stuff?" And that led to 11 years doing professional development with you and others here and so again, I think I'm pretty well prepared to go back in there, and I do like that bit of advice.

CLAIRE: Well, good, take it with you. There's a parting gift. I didn't bring you a goodbye gift. So that's it.

JIM: That's okay. That's okay.

CLAIRE: Should've brought Twizzlers.

JIM: Well, that, yeah, my infamous for the individually wrapped Twizzlers. That and Tom - I patronize Tom's - The PR students have a merchandise table, so I was patronizing that. So...

CLAIRE: Yeah, you need some shirts that say "School of Comm."

JIM: Exactly. So I stocked up on that.

CLAIRE: I don't think - we never got - We never had - We had CTLT everything, but shirts. Did we have CTLT shirts?

JIM: That's a story we'll talk about off mic.

CLAIRE: There might have been some CTLT shirts once.

JIM: There was a lot of discussion about it.

CLAIRE: We talked about it a lot. That's what happened. Yeah, we talked that to death.

JIM: There was a lot of discussion about it. But I got some ice scrapers if you want to pick up one of those on the way out.

CLAIRE: I don't need it today.

JIM: Well, Claire, it's been great seeing you.

CLAIRE: Thank you. It's good to see you. I haven't seen you in like, four years. I mean we've done some emailing.

JIM: We've done some emailing. And big events.

CLAIRE: I do turn back up at the teaching symposium.

JIM: The teaching symposium, and I think it was our colleague Charles Bristow's retirement party. We briefly orbited each other. So anyway.

CLAIRE: Well, thank you so much for having me.

JIM: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more, and find out all about all of the episodes we've done in this series. You can go to our website, ProDev.IllinoisState.edu, look for the Let's Talk Teaching link on the home

page. For Dr. Claire Lamonica, for all my colleagues here at the Center for Integrated Professional Development. Until we talk again. Happy teaching!