

## Ep. 010: Claire's Bookshelf

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Get inspired again about teaching! This week, we take a look at a few of the “must read” books we always recommend to those who teach at the university level. Claire shares why she finds these particular works so, compelling and how they have impacted her teaching and the teaching of countless others.

### 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. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today. Claire's back. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. And we're going to go on a little bit of a different journey today. We've been talking a lot about best practices and teaching and how to do this and how to do that. I think today, let's take a step back. And let's talk about what helps inspire you, as a teacher, where do you go to kind of get some, maybe refueled to get some ideas? And so,, we're going to take our first which of what may be many trips. To Claire's bookshelf.

CLAIRE: Claire's bookshelf. That's where, that's where all English majors go for inspiration...

JIM: I would imagine.

CLAIRE: Their bookshelf.

JIM: That's great. Yes, well, that's exactly true. And I think a lot of us who weren't necessarily English majors, but we all have our kind of our favorite collection of books. And again, it's not just something that's very prescriptive, you have an interesting selection of books here, what we're going to talk about three or four of them today, what do they all have in common?

CLAIRE: If you were going to recommend three or four books that I should read about college teaching?

JIM: Uh huh.

CLAIRE: What books would they be, and I have three that I always recommend, and then a fourth one that I think adds a little dimension to the first. So,, the first one is, *What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain. The second one is the *Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. And the third one is *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* by LD Fink, okay. And then I've sort of added for today, *What the Best College Students Do*,

which is another book by Ken Bain. And it, it gives another perspective, provides a nice dialogue with *What the Best College Teachers Do*, as one might expect.

JIM: So, we've talked a lot about Ken Bain so far in our young podcast here, when we were talking about the syllabus is a feast. I remember that metaphor. Yeah. Which I think is from *What the Best College Teachers Do*. How does that really speak to you? What resonates about that?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, it's, the thing I like about it is that it is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. So, it's not a how to teach book. It's more of a, here's how a select group of very effective teachers teach. And we're going to look for similarities. So, they, so, that's actually what he did. That was his methodology was he, he and his researchers, over a period of quite a number of years, identified a group of Best College Teachers and you know, you can read about the methodology, how they, how they define that. And then had them talk about their practice of teaching. And they looked for themes of in what in what they said, and so, you get a very richly descriptive presentation of effective teaching and what effective what what teachers do to create effective teaching.

JIM: And and going back to what you what you said, originally, what impressed me about this book in particular is that I went into it thinking it was oh, this is just kind of a veteran university teachers, Opus, you know, a treatise on on everything, here's everything I learned. And it really isn't. There was a method and there was research that was done into this. And so, he really does paint a picture but the but the, the materials he's using have been well have been well researched, well sussed out

CLAIRE: That it did, and and...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: and really looked at across a big body of work. So, so, when he talks about when he talks about the promising syllabus, he has looked at, you know, dozens, maybe hundreds of syllabi created by this group of highly effective teachers and looked for for commonality. So, it's, um, so, what if you want to find out how to create a promising syllabus, *What the Best College Teachers Do* isn't really a good place to go. Because he doesn't go into a lot of detail about what a promising syllabus might look like, you know, he really talks in much more general terms, the book answers six or seven questions. So, things like, how do they prepare to teach? What do they know about how students learn?

JIM: How do they create a creative learning environment?

CLAIRE: Right. Yeah. How do they? How do they assess student learning a lot, you know, just big, big questions like that. And then each chapter addresses that in, in the sort of broad terms, gleaned from from his interactions with all these teachers.

JIM: So, again, it's not prescriptive. So, it's not a lot of how to do this. How to do that. It's a it's a good, it's a good way, I think, to be inspired.

CLAIRE: Yes. But yeah, it's inspirational. And it's aspirational.

JIM: Yes. Yeah, exactly. No, that's a good.

CLAIRE: The first time I read it. He talks early on about the four questions that when he's talking about how the Best College Teachers prepared to teach, he says, well, there, there are four basic questions that they, they ask themselves

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And I literally thought, Oh, I wonder if I can think of them and I closed the book. And I wrote down what I thought were four questions that I might ask myself as they were preparing to teach. And it turned out three of them were right. So, I gave myself a C.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: Moved right on.

JIM: Yeah. And the fourth. And the fourth question was?

CLAIRE: This fourth question was, this is very embarrassing. The fourth question that he asks is, how do I evaluate my own teaching is sort of the shortcut question.

JIM: And that was another Ken Bain moment that we talked about in previous podcasts when we were talking about midterm assessments of our teaching. Yes, let's do assessing our students work. That is a tough one.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: That is tough.

CLAIRE: Well, I just, you know, I done it. I just had never thought about it as a formal part of my pedagogy.

JIM: Moving on.

CLAIRE: Yes,

JIM: We should cross as we move along, move down the books, I might have put some sound effects in or something else like walking along the polished oak round of your stack. Yeah, browsing the sticks. Moving on to I think the second one you mentioned was the Parker Palmer book.

CLAIRE: Yeah. The Parker Palmer.

JIM: Which has a great title,

CLAIRE: The Courage to Teach. And, you know, I resisted this book. Yes, I did. You know, it was recommended to me. And I thought, seriously,

JIM: Does it sound a little teach to the sun a little too? Self Help?

CLAIRE: Yeah. Yeah. And yes, it was and and actually, my response to the opening chapter was, yeah, yeah, yeah. Khumba Yeah, I'm okay. You're okay. Let's all teach, you know, I mean, I was I, but I love this book. I love the premise. And I love I love his conception of teaching. So, So, Parker, Palmer comes out of a Quaker tradition.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: And so, he brings that tradition to bear on teaching. And a part of that tradition. And I'm not a Quaker, and I, and I don't want to miss characterize it. But my understanding is that Quakers examine things. Yes, it takes them decades to arrive at consensus around important topics that they're that they are examining. And he conceives teaching as an examination of, of important topics. And so, he, rather than talking about teacher centered teaching, or student-centered teaching, he talks about subject centered teaching. And boy, that's where he got me as soon as I saw that, I thought, wow, that's just that's cool. That's and so, teaching is a shared examination of a subject by a community of learners. That includes that includes the instructor. So, the instructor really joins in this circle of learning. And I just, I loved the way he talked about that. And I, I also love the way he talked about why teaching requires courage. I also really like the notion of the fear that we all bring to the classroom.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And, and not, not just us as instructors, but our students as learners. And he has this great story, where he talks about the student from hell. And we've all had the student in our classroom. It's the kid who sits in the back of the room. Arms crossed body language shutting us out. Eyes possibly rolled up in the back of the head, facial expression says, just tried to teach me I dare you.

JIM: I dare you, you know.

CLAIRE: Yeah. He talks about his encounter with one such student and the things he subsequently learned about the student that explained that that demeanor and that attitude didn't come from. It didn't come from a sense of aggression or challenge, it came from the students own sense of not belonging. And the students fear. It was this was a first-generation college student living at home with what was essentially an abusive parent who never missed a chance to tell the student, you're wasting your time. You don't belong there. They don't want people like you there. They don't want people like us there. And so, you know, that was that when you think about the courage that it took for that student just to come to class every day, but afraid that he might fail. And so, you know, if he puts up this front, then the failure is not really his fault. You know, I mean, it's really, it's really, just, it's a very comp, it's a very, you know, it's much more psychology than I could do. But it's, but it's, you know, there's that, and then there's the fear we bring in that we won't be able, you know, well, somebody will ask us a question that we don't know the answer to, that we won't be able to reach that, you know, the student from how all of those fears that we bring with us, and then how those fears interact, to interfere with the teaching and learning process.

JIM: And I think our colleague, Julie-Ann and I may sit down and actually do a podcast because I know she's been talking a lot lately working with instructors on the the imposter syndrome.

CLAIRE: Yes, like that.

JIM: We all go through at some point that we I really don't I really shouldn't be here. Yeah, I'm really faking it. And they're gonna find out any moment.

CLAIRE: Somebody's gonna know.

JIM: Some one's gonna they're gonna someone's just gonna stand up and point a finger at you and yell Jack...

CLAIRE: Yeah. You, no idea.

JIM: Well, so, the courage to teach? And again, I think that's why it's a great. Yeah, I think it's a great title, because it does have once you get past that sort of self help thing.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I mean, you know, you just have to get you have to get into the part where he's read, where he's really talking about the implications for teaching, you know.

JIM: And doing the examining.

CLAIRE: And it's wonderful.

JIM: So, what's next on the bookshelf?

CLAIRE: Well, the third book that I often recommend to people, yeah, is D. Fink's creating significant learning experiences. And, and it's, it's a very different book from either Bane or Palmer. And the reason that it makes it into my you know, if you can only read three books read these three list is that it? It essentially operationalizes Bane, it is very prescriptive. Probably overly so,. But it it interesting, it offers basically Estelle a 12 step process for creating a course. Wow. Yeah. Right. And who knew there would be 12 steps and right they are, and all the way from thinking about the context within which the course is being taught to designing the various assessments, so, and designing your course schedule for the for the semester. So, it's very, it's very prescriptive, as I said, perhaps overly so. But it's a great, it's a great process to go through once. Okay. And I think, after you go through that process, once, then you will find ways to, to make a process your own or sort of to develop your own process, which might not involve all 12 steps. Or maybe it will work by 12 steps.

JIM: Not all the time, and...

CLAIRE: Not all 12 steps every time. Maybe not all 12 steps in order, I think I would might approach things in a slightly I think I do approach things in a slightly different order. I also don't see it as a linear process, which it's laid out in a very linear fashion in the book, and I see it as a very reiterative process. So, you know, I think, well, I you know, he talks about designing, learning outcomes, learning goals, he calls them, and then,

you know, then deciding your assignments, and so, on and so, forth. And what I have come to realize over 40 will teach you, years of teaching,

JIM: I can believe that. Yeah.

CLAIRE: ...is that I often start out with a pretty concrete idea of what it is that I want to accomplish during the semester, but then I'll sort of go along and I'll be thinking about the, the tasks that I want my students to complete. And if I try to match those up with the things I'm trying to accomplish, there's not always as high a correlation as I would like to see. And but and that becomes a sign to me that I need there. I either need to rethink the tasks or I need to rethink the outcomes and sometimes it's that I've missed an important outcome. So, when I ask myself, why is it that I think it's so, important that students engage in this task, then I realized that there's something that I want them to learn. So, for example, this happens all the time with writing, people, you know, people talk to me a lot about student writing, and how to help students how to support student writers. And they'll say, but I don't, you know, I don't really want to, I don't spend a lot of time on it, I can't have a lot of time to talk about this. And so, I asked them, Is this an outcome for your course? Is improved writing an intended outcome for your course? And if it is, then it deserves some time? And if it's not, yeah, it probably doesn't deserve so, much time, but maybe it also doesn't deserve as much weight. So, you know, you have to kind of balance all these, you have to kind of balance all these things out. So, I, but I, I really like think I like that I like the process. Okay. I really like his taxonomy of learning goals. He has a he has a very nice taxonomy of learning goals. Not bloom-ish. But think-ish. So, yeah, which is a different thing. But it allows you to think about things that you don't always think about, when you're looking at bloom, which is purely cognitive. Yes. And, and he combines that with some of the affective domain. So, caring, you know, the human, the human dimension, and the caring dimension, and the learning to learn dimension, which is cognitive, but you know, something a little bit different. So, so, it's all kind of wrapped up in one taxonomy. Very nice. I like it a lot.

JIM: So, for someone who's been teaching the same course, for a long time, would this be a good gateway to reexamining that course? Or is it more about course design?

CLAIRE: Well, it's about course design. But I think I think it might be an interesting way to, to reconsider a course and I and I sometimes have people do that. I use this as the basis for the design your course workshop for early career faculty.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: But frequently they are. They are essentially redesigning courses. So, inherited a course they've inherited a course. And they need to sort of rethink their way through that course. So, so, it's a nice way to do that.

JIM: And we should mention, you've used the Palmer book and the Ken Bain book for various other workshops or teaching learning communities. Yeah, that we have here at CTLT. And some of our colleagues have as well. So, yes

CLAIRE: Yes, so, hop, hop in a lot of ways.

JIM: That well, they do, and we talk about them a lot. And we will continue to talk about them a lot here on our podcast, I guess, *What the Best College Students Do* is a good way to wrap this up, because it is kind of the fourth book of our three.

CLAIRE: Yeah, that's a good description. It's the fourth book of three.

JIM: It's the fourth book of three. It approaches, the idea of being a teacher differently, because you're kind of following...

CLAIRE: Because it's through student eyes.

JIM: Through a student's eyes. And you're and you're and you're and he and he uses their stories to kind of challenge some of the preconceived notions with which we approach teaching.

CLAIRE: Right, right. Yeah. So, he, so, what the best college students do is written with an audience of college students in mind. Right, our students approaching college. Yeah. And I, I actually recommend this one as a high school graduation present, right, I think I think it's a it would be a great high school graduation present, whether you can get your 21st century high school graduate to to read it, without being required to do so, is another question.

JIM: I don't know if there's an audiobook version of it.

CLAIRE: There might be there might well be but I, I actually I asked Ken Bain the last time he is here. I said so, seriously. Our high school graduates or high school students, college students going to read this book. And he said they are reading it. He said there are there are colleges who are that are using this book as the foundation of a freshman seminar, or even as the foundation of a course for students who, who are at risk for not of not succeeding, and they in the university, and he said, you know, they're reading, they really are reading it, and they are really are getting things out of it.

JIM: So, and he approaches this from a very, it's a very experiential sort of perspective.

CLAIRE: It's really an argument for liberal education. It is and that's, I mean, that's what's at the core of the book. It's it's an argument for a liberal education, and it's a guide to making the most of a liberal education. So, why is it that we have these sort of foundational subjects that we make everybody study, you know, you come to college, and you're going to take, you're going to take these core subjects, you're going to take some math, you're going to take some science, you're going to take some social sciences, you're going to take some English, you're going to take some communication. And it it takes that and it shows how that can be seamlessly interwoven with the courses in your major no matter what that is to lead you down a pathway to success, because you are coming at whatever you decide whatever questions you approach in your life, you're coming at them with a prepared mind. And so, that notion of a well prepared mind. And what that does, to help us be curious to help us be creative. Is is really something that I've been interested in a long time. And I think that a student who reads this, and only takes that away, taking away the most important thing.

JIM: So, one final question. In what order? Would you read these?

CLAIRE: Oh Wow! Well, I suppose that's a really interesting question. And I hadn't thought about it. But you know, I think Parker Palmer provides a philosophical base. Okay. And then, um, *What the Best College Teachers Do* provides a descriptor, a descriptive approach to thinking about teaching. Okay, um, and then maybe, you know, D. Fink provides a, a, how to actually know how you're gonna, how are you going to do this? How are you going to operationalize it? And then coming back to what the best college students do, you know, and sort of looking back and might help you sort of pull all of that together. So, read them that way.

JIM: Claire, thank you so, much for joining us today.

CLAIRE: Thank you. This was a great idea. I love this. Let's do this one again,

JIM: We will. So, that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology on our website that [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). Until next time, for all of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, I'm Jim Gee. Thanks for listening.