

Ep. 011: When Crisis Strikes Your Class

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What do you do when you lose a student to tragedy? A colleague? This week, we continue our discussion from earlier in the semester about “teaching in times of crisis.” In this episode, we focus on coping with crisis that occurs on a more immediate, personal level for you and your students.

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 is Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: So, today, we are continuing a discussion we began a couple of weeks ago, which we're kind of putting under the umbrella of teaching in times of crisis. Last time, we talked about national crisis or kind of big crisis that affects the entire community. And how do you deal with that, today, we're talking about something a little smaller, and maybe a little less easy to define,

CLAIRE: I think so. I think today, what we want to focus on is a crisis that might affect your class directly. So, for example, your students lose a classmate, you lose a student, from time to time, you may lose a colleague, your students lose an instructor, and someone has to go into that classroom and follow that,

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know, deal with it and deal with the aftermath of that. So, this kind of thing that can catch you unawares, but it's not outside the bounds of possibility that it might happen, because in fact, it does happen.

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: If not every year, then many years.

JIM: So, again, the scale of what we're talking about today is kind of working within that community of learners that you've hopefully built. What, what are some of the things that we can translate from what we talked about when we're dealing with big events that also apply in dealing in crisis in this sort of smaller setting?

CLAIRE: That's a great question. Um, I think the the biggest message is take care of yourself. You know, and we talked about that a little bit last time. And I do want to mention it again, because it's, you know, it's like when you're on an airplane, and they say, you know, if the, if the cabin suddenly loses pressure, the air masks are going to drop

down, and you should put on yours before you start helping the other people around, you know.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And it's basically, that rule of take care of yourself first. So, in either situation, I think you want to be a little attuned to how you're dealing with this, and what it's realistic to expect of yourself in helping your students deal with it. So, that's probably the that's probably the main thing. And and I think, similar to what we talked about last time, last time, we talked about how there were three sort of major modes of response

JIM: Along a continuum, right?

CLAIRE: Along a continuum, you know that there's the stoic response, which is, is just an acknowledgement that this event has happened, and an explanation of why you're going to move on with the course.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: There's a, what was that word that we used? Oh, and empathic.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And so any of those, again, might be appropriate in this case. And I think once again, the big thing to remember is that students aren't going to care so much what you do, or how you do it, as that you do something. So even that recognition of the event has taken place and moving on is preferable to just moving on and, and not saying or doing anything.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: An empathic response, which is sort of helping students process and yourself probably, um, all of you sort of going through the process of dealing with this emotionally together and helping each other through it. And then there was this integrative response, which was actually integrating the event into the course content, or integrating it with the course content.

JIM: Right. So I presume that if a student in my course, dies, someone's gonna tell me that.

CLAIRE: Yeah, that wasn't actually always the case. But it is the it is the case now. And, you know, because we're always living and learning. Right?

JIM: Right. Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, what what happens now is that you will be contacted by the critical incident response team here on campus.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: So, somebody is going to probably by email, somebody is going to notify you that a student who's enrolled in one of your courses has died.

JIM: And of course, we're kind of are examples are focusing on on that kind of tragedy. But I mean, it could also be a student who's been in a serious accident. I know that bad. Yeah, the last few years. A couple years ago, we had we had students who were in a really bad car crash on campus, it doesn't have to be death. So as people are listening to this today, keep in mind that there are other things we're kind of talking about the extreme example, right, because I think it's the one in some ways that we dread the most as teachers to have to deal with. But there are other going to be other situations that probably fall under "crisis". Sorry, I'm using air quotes on a podcast, "crisis". Yeah, that are not that are not necessarily dealing with mortality.

CLAIRE: Yes, thank you for that. Very true.

JIM: But you know, that also leads to that sort of discomfort with it. The whole idea. When we were talking about this, in preparation for doing our first podcast on this subject, you'd mentioned that a few years ago, before I got here, here at CTLT, we used to do a workshop and it had a great title. The first part was was, but I'm not a counselor, exclamation mark, exclamation mark. Right, when I'm not a counselor, and I think that really does some of that sentiment. So it does, once you recognize that there is a crisis that needs to be dealt with, what what do you do,

CLAIRE: You may you may not feel at all prepared to deal with this, you may actually be dealing with pretty some pretty complex emotions yourself. Um, you know, losing a student is a, I think, a particularly traumatic event in the life of in the life of an instructor, I think you need to be aware of of your limitations and understand that no, you're not a counselor, you probably have not been trained in dealing with the kind of emotion that this is going to elicit in yourself. And certainly in your students who may not have experienced this kind of crisis in the past, you know, they're younger, so they, you know, some of them will have, but some of them may not have had, they may have had fairly safe lives. So I think it's really important to remember that, no, you're not a counselor, and you don't have to be nobody expects you to be. So in this case, particularly, it's okay to actually call the Dean of Students Office, or to call Student Counseling Services and ask to have someone come to your class, kay, and that's okay, you can even ask for help in breaking the news to your students. So the students aren't going to receive an official notification, like, like you do. So you may, in fact, be the one charged with breaking the news. If you feel that's appropriate, you know, and you have to decide if it's, I mean, you know, if it's, if you have a large lecture class where there are 300 students, and one of them has been in an accident been injured, you know, even being killed, you know, you're going to have to take the context into account, the students who sit right around that student might know him or her, or, you know, they might be friends. But the class as a whole may not even be aware of this person. So, you know, you need to know, I mean, you kind of have to know your class, you know, whether students know each other in your class or not. And sometimes in large classes they do, and sometimes they don't, sometimes in small classes they do, and sometimes they don't, but in any case asked for help.

JIM: Yeah. And I think it would be good, not knowing what the reactions are going to be, in some cases, not knowing maybe exactly how well they might know each other. Although I will say in this day and age, I always suspect students are going to know that before I do, because they're so connected through social media

CLAIRE: They may, they may very well have they may already well.

JIM: But I guess in the class now, but I guess we can't assume that. Yeah, we can't bank on that. We can't, we can't rely on that. So if you felt like in normal circumstances, it would be appropriate to to notify them or to be the point of you know, to address it. And as we said, it's important to at least address it in some way. When you're dealing with this sort of stuff. When you talk to the to the Dean of Students Office and or the Student Counseling Services, and someone comes in, and then you move on and you know, the refer you say, if you need further to talk to someone further, here's this. What are the other? What are the other ramifications though, for the rest of the of the semester? What are the other ramifications in the class? What do you have to keep in mind?

CLAIRE: I think we all generally try to sort of keep our fingers on the pulse of a class. But but it might be particularly important to do that, because everybody responds to grief differently. So some students may not be, you know, maybe they didn't know that other student, well, maybe they feel like oh, well, you know, I didn't know him, well, I can move on. And then weeks later might be sort of a hit with this sort of import of this. So I think keeping you know, keeping your put your finger on the pulse of the class, remembering that one natural outcome of grief, grief is an inbuilt inability to concentrate very well. So particularly in the immediate aftermath, people may have trouble sort of processing your content. But that might reoccur at various times during the semester to I mean, it might sort of pop up later when you think, you know that everybody's moved on. So there's that I mean, I think you want to watch how students are doing sort of emotionally watch how they're doing in terms of their learning. And, you know, the same thing for you watch how you're doing and, and see, maybe even talk to the students about what they need, what they need.

JIM: Yeah, I think that's I think that's a really good suggestion because because sometimes I think we assume you know, we're not mind reader's right? And even though you may be relatively close in age to your students or like me, maybe not, you know, you're not gonna you're not part of you're part of a community, but not every community that they're part of. Right. And, and so they may be dealing with things differently. So I think that that that's actually a great suggestion.

CLAIRE: You know, I years ago, when I was working with writing programs, I had a pretty young instructor come to my office and say that he had lost a student over the weekend, and he was distraught. And I was upset for him. But I had no idea what to do. And you know, and he was really searching to figure out what to do. And I finally just said, I said, you know, what, how can I help? Is there anything I can do? And he said, Yeah, you can get us out of that room. He said, I just don't think we can go back. He said, we were there today, and nobody wanted to sit in that seat. Nobody's ever gonna want to sit in that seat. Yeah, and we don't want to look at it either. Yeah. And so you know, I

said, Hey, that can be done. And then you know, that actually turned out to be a pretty easy process. And the person who taught in the room next door was willing to trade classrooms, so it was no big deal. But it might be something like that, you just don't know what people are gonna want or need.

JIM: So so it also says to me that one of the other things that it's important to do as a faculty member is not only have that conversation with your students, but maybe go have that conversation with with your department chair or with absolutely a colleague in the Department who maybe has experienced this before, you know, and not that people advertise that necessarily, but but your department chair experienced colleague, yes, exactly, is going to know is going to know what to do. And to kind of work it from that, that angle as well.

CLAIRE: And your chair will know what resources are available to you. So we talked about the fact that you know, Student Counseling Services is there for students, there are also there is assistance available for for instructors as well through so it's called the Employee Assistance Program. Oh, right. And and you can you qualify for some free counseling, if you just need somebody to sort of process this with. So that's that's available to you, you know, you are your students are always welcome to call path, which is the local helpline. So, you know, yeah, don't hesitate to but it doesn't even have to be anything that formal, as you just said, it could be just asking your department chair or asking the person who, who has the office next door, or whatever. And you know, if it's a major if it's, if it's a student in a major class, your colleagues are likely dealing with the same issue. That's a good point. I know this, this could very well via shared students, and any number of you might have had that student in your class. If you don't, right now, you know, you might have had in the past. So that might be an opportunity for sort of a collegial conversation with others who may be asking the same questions,

JIM: Right. So, you know, I look back on my experience as a teacher, both here at Illinois State and at another institution. And I have never had, you know, mercifully I've never had to go through that experience of dealing with a death of a student, for example. And really, I've had some students who were, who were very ill, they didn't want to make a big deal out of it. And it really wasn't life threatening or anything like that. I've had students get in car accidents and stuff like that sometimes with the with the university car, that was always interesting. That's a different kind of crisis. That's a different show. But so, you know, I find myself sitting here putting myself into a lot of what if situations. You talked about a younger faculty member who came to you as part of the writing program, have you had to deal with the loss of the student or

CLAIRE: not during the semester, I was teaching, I, you know, both when I was a high school teacher and teaching here at Illinois State, I've lost students who were in my class the previous semester, or the previous year, but our students with whom I'd had other interactions, you know, in co-curricular ways, but I've never actually lost a student during the semester. Knock on wood, I guess.

JIM: Yeah, exactly. So when we're talking about crisis, like we said, we're not just talking about the death of a student or even illness or anything like that. Are there other examples that you can think of that maybe we need to address in some way?

CLAIRE: Well, I did lose a, I did lose a very dear colleague in the English department a number of years ago, and that was sort of a department wide, you know, bad moment. Um, and people had to go in and teach his classes.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: I don't know that I have a lot to offer from that. Except, you know, the same thing that I've been saying is, you know, take care of yourself, take care of your students. Do what you can. Don't do more than you can. You know, if students feel like they, they want to create a memorial or something like that, and they ask you for your help, you may, you know, that may be something that you feel like you can do are made, may not be, it may be a good idea to recommend that they work with somebody else. So, I don't know that the specific circumstances are as important as just a sort of general response to a difficult time.

JIM: And remember that we're not alone, either in terms of support from our department, or

CLAIRE: Always.

JIM: From across the university. And what else? So what other things do we need to talk about? As far as this topic goes?

CLAIRE: You know, I, I think we've covered it I you know, I don't know that we have to say a lot more except just take care of yourselves take care of your students do what you can, don't feel like you have to do more than you can just think that's the message we want to leave people with.

JIM: And of course, in terms of maybe dealing with strategies in terms of pedagogy, or in terms of, you know, if you have to take over somebody else's class, and you're not entirely sure what they're doing. Yeah,

CLAIRE: that's probably a different show.

JIM: That's a different show. But that's also something that we could actually help with, you know, you could come over to CTLT. Absolutely, or, you know, getting, you know, getting into their learning management system and all...

CLAIRE: Anytime at any time. It's a teaching related issue. Yeah, you know, that we're here for that. Yeah. So, you know, we're not counselors, either, but we do. You know, we get Reggie net, you know, we can help you communicate with your student and help you communicate with your since we can help you if you have to sort of take over a class mid semester. Right. We have resources and thoughts about that, so...

JIM: Well, great. Well, Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about this episode, including links to some resources at our website at CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the podcast link in the upper right on the main page. For Claire Lamonica and everyone else here at CTLT. Until we talk again, Happy Teaching.