

## Ep. 016: Time on Task

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Surveys show our students spend more time learning outside the classroom than we think... but it is enough? Explore the concept of “time on task” and how we can help our students engage with meaningful learning. We’ll look at the age-old vicious cycle of lecture and reading assignments, other ways to encourage students to come to class prepared, and how and why you might hold students accountable for their learning.

### 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. Once again, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Our director, Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim,

JIM: How are you?

CLAIRE: I'm great.

JIM: Claire, I have to ask you an important question. But do you think I spent enough time preparing for this podcast?

CLAIRE: Probably not.

JIM: Okay. And the reason I it's okay to say that is because a lot of people don't spend enough time working on the tasks at hand. And that's why we're talking today about

CLAIRE: Time on task.

JIM: And what is time on task, we touched on it briefly in a previous episode, but just to refresh everyone's memory.

CLAIRE: Yeah, time on task is one of the Seven Principles for Good practice and undergraduate education. It's actually principle number five, if anybody cares. More, if you're keeping score at home. Basically, it refers to the time that our students spend engaging in the learning activities that we've designed for them.

JIM: And this is in class and or at home, or

CLAIRE: Out of class. And I think, you know, it's easier to sort of manage that in class time, because they're right there with us. And so, we know that occasionally they're going to, you know, they get distracted by a phone or by something that's happening outside

the window, or something that's going on in the hall or whatever. But we can usually bring them back from that, you know, pretty quickly, as long as we're, you know, being engaging and, and have, they have something to come back to. So, that's, that's good. It's that out of class time that we may not spend enough time thinking about,

JIM: What, what does the research show us? What are the numbers show us as far as what students say they're doing outside of class?

CLAIRE: Well, actually, we had a director's desk about about this, a year or so ago, and I'm sure we can link to it on the on the page, article. Page. Yes, it was an article from our, from the CTLT newsletter. And I wrote that after getting some numbers from the university assessment services, which looked at the NESSE, and the BCSSE, and the FSSE, you know, which are all surveys of student engagement and faculty engagement. Send me an email, if you want to know what those are. And the the, the column had a lot of charts and numbers and things like that in it. But I think the bottom line was that students spend a little more time than we think, preparing for class, but not nearly as much as we would like.

JIM: Mm hmm.

CLAIRE: So, I think we need to get beyond just hoping that they spent time thinking about our classes when they're not in them, and actually start thinking about that time outside of class as an extension of our class.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, actually planning things for them to do, and holding them accountable for spending time doing those things.

JIM: So, what are some of these activities that they should be doing outside of class? Because we're talking about in general terms, thinking about the class, but really,

CLAIRE: Right. Well, you know, reading the textbook, yeah,

JIM: Number, number one...

CLAIRE: ... answer number one answer on the board. If we were playing Family Feud, that would, everybody would talk about that. It's really interesting. You know, we as faculty often complain about what you know, if they would just read the textbook, and students when we go out and do midterm chats, and I am sure I am not alone on this. Because when I go out into a midterm chat with a class, and I asked them what they could do as students to promote their own learning to, you know, to make a better learning experience, almost always the number one or number two answer is, oh, well, yeah, we should probably do the reading. And so, they know they should do it. We want them to do it. And we get caught up in this vicious cycle, where we don't think they did it. So, we take class time to lecture over what they should have read. And then they know they don't need to read it. Because the next time they come to class, we're going to lecture on whatever they should have read.

JIM: So yeah, I had that conversation, that exact conversation with a faculty member yesterday after the midterm chat and she was just very forthright and said, You know, I don't feel like they're going to read and then I said, well, but if you don't set the expectation for them to read, then they're not going to read, you know, because they're going to they have been trained over years. This is something that we inherit from students or that we inherit from our predecessors who have taught these students to some extent, they've gone through school, I think, especially on the college level, a lot of them thinking that they can get away with this. Well, it's, it's not really a matter of getting away with it, like, Oh, they're going to, oh, I stole this, you know, it's not like they're the, they're the Hamburglar or something like that. It's more along the lines of it's just this natural sort of expectation

CLAIRE: You know, what, students are busy people? Yeah, they prioritize, we're busy people we prioritize. So, they prioritize the tasks that they have to do that they know they're going to be held accountable for. So, if they have a quiz in one class, and they have a paper due in another class, and they have a reading assignment for your class, guess which class comes last on the list? Right? Unless, unless, and so this is the key, right? We have to provide the expectation that they will not just read but engage with the reading. And we need to offer them ways to do that. And we need to hold them accountable for doing that. So, people who hold students accountable for having completed the reading, I think find that students are much more likely to have completed the reading. And there are a lot of ways to do that. I mean, you know, some people put a little reading quiz on ReggieNet, you know, that's probably one of the least effective ways that unless the reading quiz is really well done, because

JIM: there's usually very superficial stuff. And yeah, it's superficial. Depending on the class, it could be very knowledge level stuff, that it's easy for them to kind of guess at.

CLAIRE: But you know what, it's better than nothing. Yeah, it's so much better than nothing. And you know, other people have students, you know, provide study reading questions, things that students should be thinking about while they're reading. Other people have students bring discussion class questions to class, based on the reading. Back, you know, back in the way back days of foundations of inquiry, there was a really popular teaching strategy called the ticket in and lots of people who were teaching FOI, had students bring a ticket in and it was some evidence, written evidence generally, that they had read the reading, read the assignment and engaged with that in productive ways.

JIM: And, and just so people know, Foundations of Inquiry was a used to be a general education course on campus. And the content of that was moved into some different areas.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And it's so long gone that most people don't even know about anymore.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: There was a pretty invested community of teachers, right, you know, involved in thinking about that course, tickets in was one of the outcomes of that.

JIM: Yeah. So, explain to me again, quickly, how did the ticketing system work again?

CLAIRE: Well, it was just, you know, usually it was just a piece of paper. But it was something, you know, maybe the students needed to bring a summary of the reading, my favorite thing to do is to have students create a response to the reading and I, I will hand out at the beginning of the semester, a list of like, 15, or 16, different ways to respond to a reading. And then, and they can choose, they can pick any one of those, or they can respond in some different way. If they, if they think of it, you know, it might be create a concept map of the reading, or it might be find one thing in the reading that you disagree with, and, and write about why you disagree with it. I mean, you know, lots of you can come up with tons of those.

JIM: And importantly, not, not basic level questions like What are the three things your textbook author said about this necessarily, you want to push them towards doing more thinking.

CLAIRE: Higher level thinking

JIM: Higher level thinking, when they're when they're doing this reading, because that's how they're truly we know, they're truly engaging with it. Right?

CLAIRE: And, you know, if it's a really particular if it's really difficult reading, if it's something new if you know, if it's an introductory level class, and students are completely new to this, this discipline, there's nothing wrong with just asking comprehension questions. Yeah, I mean, you can, you can do that. The problem with that is that that's easier for somebody to just get somebody else's answers to the comprehension question. Now, you know, there's some value in just copying somebody else's answers. I mean, it's

JIM: Yeah, true.

CLAIRE: You know, it's not...

JIM: We don't like to advertise.

CLAIRE: I wouldn't advertise that at all. But you know, but writing something down, you know, can put it in your credit in your brain a little bit so,

JIM: and it helps sometimes that That's enough to fill in the picture that's needed for them to make their own judgments about a right topic or to think critically,

CLAIRE: To figure out, oh my gosh, I really don't know anything about this.

JIM: Right. It is. Ooh, there's, there's a paper there's a paper we may write someday. Cheating as formative assessment.

CLAIRE: Self-Assessment. Yeah,

JIM: Yeah. Cheating a self-assessment that could end up that could end up burning up the internet. So, we spent a little time talking about reading, which is appropriate. And

we'll always come back to reading, of course, as we have our discussion, because that's how we roll. That's the way it works. Well, but there are other things that students should be...

CLAIRE: Absolutely and spending time on. So, I think that there's an important distinction to be made between assigning work and making sure that students spend time on task with that work. So, for example, it's very easy to say to a class, you have a paper due in four weeks, about whatever. And then not to mention that again, until you know, I mean, maybe once a week, you say, hey, don't you know, don't forget, you got to pay for doing three weeks, yes, oh, don't forget, you got to pay for doing two weeks, oh, don't forget, you got a paper due at the end of this week. That's not really that's encouraging them to spend time on task, but it's not really demonstrating that they're spending time on tasks. So...

JIM: And it's not providing the structure that you are talking about

CLAIRE: You're not providing is not really providing any structure that encourages them to do that. So, you know, some people that I've talked to, some people have them turn in parts of the paper in, you know, at various stages that might work. So, me people will have them, for example, at the end of the first week, they'll say, hey, I need a proposal, you know, I need I need to know what it is you're going to write about, and so on and so forth. And then, you know, I'm good, I'm going to need, you know, at the end of next week, we're going to, I need you to bring a draft to my office.

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: And you know, we're going to cancel the class on Friday, next week. And instead, you know, everybody's going to stop by my office and show me their draft and ask me questions.

JIM: So, we're talking about longer term assignments.

CLAIRE: Yes,

JIM: Typically, and that may naturally lend themselves to being broken up into, into little parts, or at least have little checkpoints in them. So, I, for example, I've worked with faculty members in kinesiology or even in business where there's a client involved where they're doing something for either real students or as a group, or even individually, or working with either a real or fictitious client, depending on the circumstances. And so, because they're involved in a process, the process itself naturally lends checkpoints. Right, just little touchstones. Hey,

CLAIRE: Milestones.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Yeah, check, you know, checkpoints, whatever.

JIM: And I don't know, if there's points that, you know, we're getting into grading now, which may be too much into the weeds.

CLAIRE: You know, it doesn't matter.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: I mean, you know, you can, you can, you can assign points for these things, you know, if you want to, and if you think that that will increase student engagement, you can also have that, you know, if they're going to bring something and show it to you, you don't have to grade it. I mean, you have to, you have to see that they've done it, right, if they, you know, it's helpful if you pass your eyes over it, or whatever, but it doesn't have to turn into Oh, my gosh, you know, as a matter of fact, if you're somehow tempted to correct their grammar, or, you know, their common usage, don't, yeah, right. You know, sit on your hands, while you while you look at what they've got,

JIM: but tell them that you're not going to do that, too. I think it's important to let students know exactly what you can expect. Because we also don't want them to be turning in a lot of stuff to you, but they're like, well, you never give me any feedback on it.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: And it's, and you have to specify this isn't the stuff that you're getting detailed feedback on, that's to come this is to make sure that you're on time. And

CLAIRE: You may give feedback. I mean, it depends on you know, it depends on what it is. Right.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, I mean, if it's a draft, you may give them some feedback. But if it's if it's a proposal, then the feedback, feedback may be, yeah, this sounds like a great idea. Or, yeah, you know, let's talk about this, because I'm not sure this is really going to work. There's been, you know, this has been written to death. So, you know, let's look for something different to write about.

JIM: So, I have a question for you. When I was thinking about, I did actually think a little bit ahead about today. How do we give students a good sense of how long it should take to do particular tasks associated with their learning in our course? How do you estimate that?

CLAIRE: Well, yeah, it's really hard to estimate it, because of course, everything's going to take them longer than it would take you. It's not a bad idea to do an assignment. It's actually a really good idea to do an assignment. We could talk about that some other time, but it won't give you a very accurate idea of how long it's going to take them.

JIM: Oh, when you say do an assignment you mean me as the instructor do us the instructor do an assignment.

CLAIRE: the assignment.

JIM: Urrg.

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah. really real.

JIM: I think that's the reaction you're going to get. Urrg. Yeah.

CLAIRE: It's a great idea. But yeah, I talked about that. But you know, I'm over time you can develop a good sense. So, here's what I started doing. A couple of years ago, I flipped my design your course workshop in the summer, right? Yeah, I remember and took a lot of the stuff that we were doing during our face to face our time together and asked people to do it on the, in the, in the empty spaces the time in between. The first time I just guessed, you know, because I had told people I had said, you know, we're going to spend X number of hours together each week. And I also expect that you will spend X number of hours working on things in between our time together. And so, the first time, I just guessed, I mean, I, you know, I guess it was an informed guess, I had done the readings, I was doing the readings, I figured, you know, other people with similar education levels could probably do the readings about in about the time it took me. But then I asked in ReggieNet. So, I had, I use Lesson Builder, and I had the various assignments listed in lesson on a Lesson Builder page on a lesson, I guess it's called. And then at the end, I had a little it was like a, a poll, and it said, for the time you spent working on this assignment, was it more than I approximated or less than I approximated, and I put the approximated time next to the assignment, right. So, I said, you know, okay, read this, read this chapter in D. Fink's book, and, and then I put in parentheses 45 minutes.

JIM: Because and so I like that, because that I think that's helpful that I think there's something that even students can relate to, because lately in our lives nowadays, you go on, you know, you're asked to fill up surveys all the time, whether it's actual social scientific research, or it's something from your bank or something like that. And they will say, and that's good survey design to say, how long do you think it should, it should only take you 10 minutes to do this?

CLAIRE: Tom had a political, Tom, my husband, Tom had a political pollster, call him last night. And he usually, you know, hangs up on those people. But the guy said, this, we're asking you to participate in a survey. It's going to take about four minutes. Yeah. And Tom was yeah...

JIM: Okay, did he really break out the watch did it. Did it take four minutes?

CLAIRE: I think, well, it seemed to me that it took a little longer than four minutes, I didn't know it's going to take four minutes. And I wondered why he was on the phone for so long. But, um, that could have just been because dinner was waiting.

JIM: So, so people may approach some of these time limits with a little suspicion anyway. But so it may be better to lowball them a little bit. The first time around to you get some feedback.

CLAIRE: Well, I, I hoped I was highballing.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: Actually, because I, I wanted people to sort of set aside that that much time I see to do the work. And so, I tried to sort of overestimate what, what how much time it would actually take them to do it. Because I figured if they set aside 45 minutes, it only took them 30 minutes, they feel, you know, they liked me better. Why can I feel like,

JIM: They feel like they accomplished something?

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah. And if I say it's going to take 45 minutes, it actually takes an hour and a half, they're going to be mad, or they're only going to spend 45 minutes on it.

JIM: Or they won't, or they will, they'll do it once. But they won't do it again. Yeah,

CLAIRE: Right. Yeah. So, So, I actually tried to sort of overestimate

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: And, you know, I, it took some people longer, some people shorter, but I was able to sort of see some trends, and then adjust that for the next time that I did the workshop.

JIM: Okay. So, what else do we need to know about being time on task?

CLAIRE: There are some sort of recommended practices that go along with this. Okay. So, there are things like expecting students to complete assignments promptly. So, you know, holding fast to deadlines. There's a lot of you know, there's a lot of chatter about that. That's a whole that's another let's, let's Yeah, teachings, you don't need to go into that. But yes, but you know, yes, on the whole, I think we do want to set reasonable deadlines, and we want to, we want to, we expect students to, to meet them. Telling students how much time we expect them to spend on the class. I think that's something that belongs in our syllabi, you know, at the very, you know, this class, you know, the successful completion of this class is probably going to require that you spend between three and five hours a week outside of class. Working on the learning activities that that I'm going to be preparing for you and

JIM: I think that's better than what a lot of and I have done this before. Students are talking about, either they have an excuse, or there's, you know, there's some there's some issue that's come up or we don't think that they're doing the reading or something and you say, you know, the university handbook says you're supposed to spend three hours for every credit hour that you are, and they all come. Yeah, I won't make the noise but usually it's a Yeah, right. Yeah. So, um, if you're going to, if you're going to do that, it's probably good to be explicit about it.

CLAIRE: Well, and I think be, you know, be real, yeah, be real, you know, tell them how much time you really expect them, and then give them things to do that will actually take about that much time, and maybe, you know, maybe take a stab at saying, okay, you need to read chapter six. And you need to create three discussion questions based on



the chapter. And this is probably going to take you about an hour and a half. And that can be in your, you know, in your course schedule, or whatever that information can be. So, you know, asking students to rehearse in class, you know, presentations, or, I mean, you know, it's really, there's just lots of things that you can do lots of ways to encourage them, but the big thing is going to be designing things that are engaging, holding people accountable for doing them. And then you know, moving on, don't get sucked into that, oh, they didn't do the reading, I'm going to have to lecture over the chapter, you know, don't let yourself get sucked into that. Time in class should be value added. So, once you are pretty certain that you've assigned them to do the reading, you've held them accountable in some way for doing that reading march on to do the next thing. And you know, a really good thing to do in class is to engage them in tasks that require what they should have learned from the reading

JIM: To make a building an iterative process, right. Learning is an iterative experience.

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah. So, that's sort of that's sort of flipping someday we should talk about flipping. I keep mentioning that mentioning that today.

JIM: Yeah, we did talk about that a lot today. And I think that is a good one. And that's a that's a big topic in and of itself. I know. So, one, one final, very quick question, when we're talking about set expectations, and then hold them to those expectations. I just want to know what your thoughts are on this; I have found it a little valuable to have a, some sort of an exam early on. Sometimes I've done you know, we actually talked about this a few days ago off mic, I started giving them the, the final exam the first day, you see what they do use it as a sort of formative assessment, or, or at least a pretest sort of thing. Do you work with anything like that? Or is it a?

CLAIRE: Well, I tell you something that I think is really helpful is a is any kind of prior knowledge probe. And that's one of the things that that giving the giving the final exam on the first day, you know, that tells you sort of what they already know. And it gives you it lets you know whether there are things that you can spend less time on than you thought you might need to or spend things are going to need to spend more time than you thought you would. But there are there are lots of prior knowledge probes out there. There's lots of ways to lots of strategies for doing that. And I think that that's always, you know, it's if students, students need to know their stuff, they don't know. Yeah, and you know, specifically in relation to your course. And that's, that's yeah, that keeps them engaged.

JIM: Yeah. And that may help you adjust assignments that you're expecting them to do, for example, outside of the classroom, it's probably harder to keep students on task, when the task at hand is something they think they've is to them review or something that they don't feel they need to spend as much time on.

CLAIRE: And if you do a prior knowledge probe, and you discover that, you know, almost everybody knows this stuff, there's a couple who don't, then you may be able to design some out of class learning experiences for those people to kind of catch up.

JIM: Oh, that's a good idea.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And then you know, then you can kind of move on, you don't have to pull everybody else back and say, okay, well, there's three people in this class of 30, who don't know this, so we're going to spend a week talking about it.

JIM: Well, Claire, thank you so much. So, me great ideas and some stuff to think about. And I'm sure we'll touch on this and the six other principles. Other work. Yeah. For good practice in undergraduate education at some other point. So, thanks again.

CLAIRE: Okay. 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 our podcast on our website that [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). Click on the podcast link at the top of the page, you will find a link to this particular shows notes. For Claire Lamonica and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. I'm Jim Gee. Until we talk again, Happy Teaching.