

Ep. 019: Great Expectations

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Communicating high expectations to students requires both clarity and empathy. It can sometimes be a difficult juggling act. We explore ways to incorporate one of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education into your teaching. Discover some of the pitfalls and the great promise in rethinking how you challenge students to excel in their learning. Claire and Jim also discuss ways to help students get back on track when they don't meet your expectations.

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. And joining me again, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Our director, Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: How are you?

CLAIRE: I'm great.

JIM: Hey, do you have high expectations for today's podcast episode?

CLAIRE: Oh, I do. I always have high expectations for you, Jim. And I am always sure that you are going to meet or exceed them.

JIM: Well, that that makes me feel really good. And you did a very good job of communicating them. At least the premise today we're talking about communicating our high expectations to our students. It's one of the Seven Principles for Good practice and undergraduate education. I always have to look at the flyer to get the title right.

CLAIRE: Me too.

JIM: Yeah. But we use them all the time, but they are there. And we have talked about him before on our podcast. So, when when you hear communicate high expectations, what are some of the pitfalls that you think as instructors we kind of we kind of fall into when we're trying to express our expectations to students?

CLAIRE: I think the, the biggest pitfall that people fall into is communicating high expectations, but not providing students with ways of meeting them.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: So, we often hear faculty say that, well, I'm all about high expectations, I really want to have high expectations. But you know, if I have high if I have high expectations, I get low teacher evaluations.

JIM: Oh, I see.

CLAIRE: Because the students get mad at me. And they don't like they don't like having high expectations. But, actually, the research suggests something different. And when you talk to individual students, even, you know, I shouldn't say even especially here on our campus, because that's what I know about. That's not what they say, you know, we have, it's very interesting. Each year at New Faculty Orientation, we have a panel of students, and we ask them some questions, and they answer and then the new faculty ask them questions, and this sometimes comes up, you know, or it or this will come up, what what's your favorite class, tell us about your favorite class you've ever taken it at Illinois State University, and I am amazed at the number of classes that students start they the number of times that students start answering that question by saying this, you know, this is really weird. Because this was a really hard class, but it was my favorite class at Illinois State University. And they'll talk about a class that had high expectations that challenged them. And they really got into it, they got involved, they got engaged with the learning. So, that's sort of what we're aiming for. With high expectations. It's not about increasing workload, it's not about being a harder grader, it's not about making sure that a certain number of your students fail. So, you can have a have a good bell curve of grades, right? It's not about any of that. It's about posing challenges for students that get them engaged in their own learning, and cause them to rethink the way they see the world and change, you know. Change their not just their brains, but also their hearts and minds.

JIM: So, I guess communicating high expectations, part of that, and this can I think, be where some of the... How do you do it comes in? I guess, communicating high expectations. Part of that, is also challenging the preexisting expectations that either you or your students have, in a way, because I think students bring a lot of oh, this is how you do this kind of class. Right? to the mix?

CLAIRE: Yeah, the, the poor Gen Ed teacher.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know, we talked about this a lot in workshops with Gen Ed teachers, where they say, Oh, the students, you know, they come in, oh, this is just a Gen Ed class, or they'll say, This is too much work for just a Gen Ed class, or just

JIM: a 100 level class or just a 200 level. I get that a lot. Just it's Yeah, I don't know what that means. I really don't.

CLAIRE: I don't know what that means, either. But but I think that, so the challenge for us is to create and maintain and communicate high expectations in ways that also let students know that we think they can meet them. So, when we started the podcast, they say, you know, I said, well, I have expectations, and I know you usually meet them. So, you know, it's showing your students that you trust them.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And that you're not dumbing it down because they can't understand it.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know that you have faith that they can that they can understand this content. And so, it needs to be appropriate. Obviously, you're you need to gauge the level of the content appropriately so that the students have the background knowledge that they're going to need, right? And that they that they see the relevance they understand the importance of, of the topic in ways that, that make them want to engage with the with the material.

JIM: So, when I was a little struck in, we talked about this before we started recording that when you look at the, the pamphlet, the blue plan fit pamphlet, we call it the of the seven principles, that the examples that were given in that original article from back in 1987, or 1986. And we'll link to that on our show page, as usual, are very institutional oriented. They're like programs that have been set up to encourage high school students to do this and all that. So, what we want to I think explore today are what can what are the things that I as an individual instructor, what can I do to communicate high expectations, and a sense of rigor without rigor being a negative.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: Sort of thing, or being perceived as punishment by the students?

CLAIRE: Right, right. So, that, you know, a lot of this goes back to Ken Bain. So, even though we're have a sort of a starting point, this seven principles booklet.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: In Ken Bain spoke about *What the Best College Teachers Do*, which we reference all the time, people are probably sick, if you're sick of hearing about them. I'm so sorry.

JIM: No, no, no.

CLAIRE: But I'm going to bring it up again. It's always a good time for a good time for Dr. Bain. But he has a whole chapter on what do what did the best college teachers expect of their students? And the short one-word answer is they expect more, they expect that students won't just satisfy themselves with surface learning that they won't just study to pass the test, that they will engage with the course in a way that changes the way they see the world. And that changes their hearts and minds. And one of the things that he says you know, is that then they also set up an expectation of success, and a support structure for helping students succeed. And that, and also that they think about, there's a quote in there, and I can't remember exactly, but it's kind of nice, it's, it's about not teaching the course, but teaching the students. So, you kind of have to know your students. And I understand that that may be sort of an unrealistic expectation, if you have a lecture class with 300 students in it. But you know, that's not our bread and butter at Illinois State University, our bread and butter is the classes

that have 30 students than them right, or, you know, 30 to 50, something like that. And in those situations, it is possible to, to know your students and, and to help them learn,

JIM: You had mentioned support structures, putting support structures in place, what would something like that look like?

CLAIRE: Well, so let me think.

JIM: I mean, would that be like creating an online forum? Or would that, you know.

CLAIRE: Okay, so there, there are a number of things that you could do a sort of support structure. So, if you are, if you're teaching a course that has, for example, specific prior knowledge that students have to have mastered, and you're not 100% sure that they are going to have mastered that. So, I have talked to instructors who provide some of that prior knowledge on their course websites, and then they feel like they can, you know, they can point students in that direction. Here's some, if you don't remember this from your prior courses, or if you never took those prior courses. Here's a place that you can learn, I don't know how to work this kind of equation, or, or what, you know, what these terms mean, or something like that. So, sort of resources for students to use. But I think more important, I'm encouraging students to form study groups.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: Is, is huge. That's a, that's something that not all students understand that it's okay. And sometimes, sometimes, the students who need it most of the ones who don't think it's okay.

JIM: I think we have just struck upon as we like to say, that should be a future episode of stock teaching, because I think study groups is something, how to help students shepherd them through the process of forming study groups. It's something I have absolutely no experience in. And I would love to learn more about. So, I see what you mean about the support structure, putting things like that in place. And so, you, then you make that as part of the actual communicating of the expectations, I guess, you say, I have high expectations for you to succeed in this. And here are some resources. And I have those high expectations apart because these resources are available. If you don't feel confident yet. In this material. You can, you can look at it.

CLAIRE: But I have confidence in you. Yeah, but I've got it, you know, that always has to be the thing. Yeah.

JIM: This I wonder I just had kind of a crazy idea. Maybe that, you know, we've been talking a lot in past episodes about assessing our teaching and the importance of assessing current teaching and getting feedback from students. This might be one of those times I think I've done this recently because I have a lot of project-based learning going on in my course I'm teaching right now. and saying, I have high expectations for this. Students in the past have said that they had to work for about a week on this in order to get it.

CLAIRE: Yes.

JIM: To accomplish. So, we're kind of tight, we're tying in that whole time on task a constant to, but using student feedback, previous feedback about how the course, how they perceive the course, to inform students who are in the course right now.

CLAIRE: Yes, and letting and letting them know that you. So, I do that even for my design your course workshop here at CTLT. In the summer, a couple of summers ago, I flipped it. And I saw people are doing a lot of work outside of our meetings. But I actually provide a kind of a breakdown of how long I expect, each task will take them.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, I say, okay, here are six things you need to do between now and our next meeting. And I think it's going to take you about three hours or four hours, and I've sort of broken it down. So, anticipate that you might spend X number of hours on this or what? And then I gather some feedback from the people in the workshop, and say, okay, did, did the tasks this week take you about as much time as they anticipated? Did it take you less time? Did it take you more time, and I can use that to sort of recalibrate and for future workshops? That's cool.

JIM: So, the other thing for communicating expectations, and I think we talked about this, we've touched on this previously. But I think it's important to kind of reinforce and that is not only communicating how long you think something's going to take. But also, when you're dealing with maybe we haven't talked about this when you're dealing with long term projects, the final paper, at the end of the semester, that is really supposed to be the culmination of a semesters worth of work. Don't just assign it and then not talk about it for two or three months. In other words, have checkpoints or have points where, where you're where you're where you're. So, you're not just saying I expect great things from this paper, I'll see you in December or whatever, you know.

CLAIRE: CMA, we actually talked about that in the time on tasks. Okay, that's right segment. So, that was, yeah, that's a big a big part of that.

JIM: Yeah, and so using that. So, all of these other things I see is kind of, they're kind of part of what you build your argument to students that you can succeed. And I That's my expectation for you, that you have these tools and these resources available.

CLAIRE: You can do some of that in your syllabus, I think the way you write your syllabus, and I can't remember if we've done a podcast, or we did on the promising syllabus, we did do a podcast on the promising syllabus. But making your syllabus not about all capital letters and bold faced and italics and underlined you know, they making all sorts of pronouncements about how what students will and will not do, but I'm actually talking a little bit in the syllabus, making it a starting point for your conversation with your students. So, I had the syllabus one time I was teaching a first-year composition class and I had read something. And I the syllabus kind of started out about it said recently I read an article that said that students fear the only thing students fear more than nuclear holocaust is first year composition.

JIM: Ouch.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And then I said, rest assured, this isn't going to be nearly as bad. As an apocalypse.

JIM: Now, publics, public speaking, I used to teach public speaking. So, I would say I would throw that in there.

CLAIRE: They actually, they actually are more afraid of that than they are freshmen composition.

JIM: But I see your point.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And then I went on to say this, this course is going to be a course in which you're going to have to work hard,

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: You're probably going to have to spend X number of hours a week outside of class.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Working on your writing. But I'm here to help your fellow students are here to help, it's going to be very interactive, you're going to be talking to each other about your writing, you're going to be talking to me about your writing. And by the end, I think you're going to be pretty excited about the amount of growth you see in your writing. So, you know, putting it in that kind of context that yeah, this, this might be scary. I don't find writing scary, but I get it that other people do. You know, so maybe it's scary, maybe it seems overwhelming, but, but we're here to help. And we're going to we're going to help you succeed. And, and I say at the outset, my expectation is that at the end of this semester, every single one of you will be a better writer than you are now at the start of the semester. And I think that's a very realistic expectation to have for that course.

JIM: So, also setting up specific expectations not being too general. And I mean, that's still you know, how do you design, you know, they can decide if they're a better writer or not. And you can kind of help them identify the points that they've improved upon. But that's that that's a nice combination of specificity, but also something that's personally relatable. So, it's that personal learning, right?

CLAIRE: And I don't put it in terms of grades. So, I'm not going to say oh, "X" number of you are going to get A's or I expect that everybody's going to earn and because I don't expect that they're all going to be better writers. And I know that some of for some of them being coming a better writer probably mean, it's going to mean earning an "A" in the course. But for some of them becoming a better writer is just going to mean earning a "C" in the course. But that's going to be growth for them.

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: And so that sort of brings me to another way that you can communicate high expectations. And that's if you do use a rubric are through your grading structures or your, your evaluation structures, and including your formative evaluations. So, I taught a grad course, a couple of years ago, which was blended. And so, a good a good deal of what was happening was happening online. And one of the things that was happening was a discussion forum. And after, I don't know, after a couple of weeks, I went in, I wasn't in the discussion forum all the time, because I really wanted it to be a discussion among the students. But I was kind of watching it. And after a couple of weeks, I went in, and I sent each student a formative evaluation of their contributions to the discussion so far. And I was pretty specific. And I said, you know, I see that you're doing a lot of summarizing, but you're not doing much synthesizing. So, I'd like to see you doing more synthesizing taking, you know, other people's ideas and your ideas and pulling them together or taking ideas from the various readings. And so, it was pretty specific. But synthesizing is a higher expectation that's summarizing.

JIM: Sure. Yeah.

CLAIRE: You know, if nothing else. And when I did that, just that little message that I sent to each student, all the sudden, the quality of the discussions skyrocketed. Like everybody was like, oh, I now, I get what she wants. And it is so much more effective than just saying no, I think that was a "D". Yeah.

JIM: And she just grades based on what she likes. I think, you know, because, because seriously, though, because students really do. You know, at some point, they just go, it's caprice, or it's, they don't like me, or whatever. So, in our final few minutes, I wanted to ask you a question, which is kind of related to communicating high expectations, which is, how, what are some ways in which you've communicated with students when they don't meet your expectations? How do you give or get people get students back on track towards those high expectations when they stumble?

CLAIRE: Yeah, you know, I think that's, that's really, that's where we get down to teaching the students taking the time to meet with them to find out what's going on. This is, you know, one of my most spectacular failures in teaching one time was my failure to actually sit down and meet with a student who not only wasn't meeting my expectations, but I felt was kind of poisoning the well of the class. And I didn't sit down to meet with him to find out what was going on. And afterwards, I, I discovered that, you know, it was something that maybe we could have talked about together, and it and it might have been helpful. So, I think you know, when you have students who really do seem to be struggling, finding out what the root cause of that is, and you know, and how you can help, is, is really important. Even just things like, we have a speaker here, when time actually the old Center for the Advancement of Teaching brought in a speaker who said something that I have always remembered, and that was about class attendance. Okay, and having a high, it's having high expectations for class attendance. So, my syllabus says, I expect you to be here for every class. And then it goes on and talks about why first of all, and yeah, what might happen if you are gone a lot. But anyway, he said, one, sort of that one approach you can take, is, if you see a student in the first few weeks of class, skipping, you know, missing here and there, just sending that student in email and saying, hey, weren't in class a day, we missed you?

Or you know, touching base and making it clear to them that they they do need to be there, but not in a pejorative way? And, you know, is there, you know, is there something going on, you know, whatever, are we missed you we you know, you make good contributions when you're there, whatever, honest and true. Yeah, but you can also use that and, and actually, he said, you know, if you make that intervention, which is the word I was trying to think of before, if you make that intervention in the first couple of weeks of class, attendance goes up and improves attendance in your class. So, it's a really minor thing you can do to get people to come to class.

JIM: And I think that's kind of maybe the lesson I'm taking out of our conversation today, which is that communicating high expectations does not to be does not have to be some profound pronouncement from the mountaintop,

CLAIRE: Probably better if it's not.

JIM: It's a little, it's a little act of communicating through those we can, we can, we can reinforce and, and help students meet those expectations that we have.

CLAIRE: It's more about the philosophy you bring to the classroom than it is about the little tactics or strategies that bring to the classroom. It's really having that expectation, communicating that expectation, and then doing what you can to make sure that students are meeting that expectation.

JIM: And I think consistency is important, too. So, this may sound easy, but it's something you have to do consistently throughout the semester.

CLAIRE: Absolutely. Yeah.

JIM: Well, Claire, thank you so much. It's been another great conversation.

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 and past episodes by going to our website at CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. You can also find about the many different ways you could subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. For Claire Lamonica and the rest of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, I'm Jim Gee until we talk again, Happy Teaching!