

Ep. 020: From Camp to Classroom

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We sit down with [Tracy Mainieri](#), Asst. Professor in the School of Kinesiology and Recreation and recent Teaching Initiative Award winner. Tracy discusses her experience creating a teaching portfolio and the process changed her take on teaching. We also explore ways to encourage students to reach for that “wow” factor in their projects and how summer camp taught her valuable lessons about teaching.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

TRACY: Hey, I'm Tracy.

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. Joining me today is Tracy Mainieri, Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Recreation here at ISU and one of the 2016 Teaching Initiative Award winners. Tracy, welcome to the show.

TRACY: Thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here.

JIM: And I can go ahead and spill the beans and say you're also a subscriber to the podcast.

TRACY: I do subscribe. I am a podcast fiend and so I listen to them while I'm cooking dinner usually,

JIM: That's great. We want to talk a little bit first about the award. And then I'd like to get learn a little bit more about your approach to teaching because you're on the recreation side of Kinesiology and Recreation. And I and you have some interesting experiences that I think have informed your teaching. But first of all, talking about the Teaching Initiative Award and the portfolio process that you went through what was that like for you?

TRACY: Well, first, it was such an honor, I had several colleagues of mine come and suggest that I should consider applying. And that's so, flattering. Being an early career faculty member, that was a great, just being nominated was amazing. But then the teaching portfolio experience, it's pretty extensive process. But I thought it's so, rewarding to have time to really sit down and reflect on my time here at ISU. This is the start of my fourth year, and really see where I am with my teaching. And then also has you really think about okay, what should my next steps be in terms of teaching. And so, I was able to use that reflection time to really some of the courses that I've taught several times, I'm like, okay, now it's time for me to take those classes to the next level. So, the portfolio process was really a surprisingly rewarding process. At first, it was pretty intimidating. It's a big, big process to go through. But I certainly got a lot out of it.

JIM: And we'll link to a past episode. I think one of our first episodes we ever did was actually Claire Lamonica, our director talking with Erica Cousteau, who's a colleague from Canada who had visited over the summer of 2016. And they talked extensively about the process. But for you in particular, I'm interested, what are the sort of I don't know how to phrase it, the sort of data points, the touchstones, what are the elements that went into that you reflected upon within your portfolio?

TRACY: Well, the first part, of course, is your teaching philosophy. And that's something as a doc student that you're encouraged to start writing. And I was lucky to have great experience as a doctoral student, student teaching. But it's different when you're an actual professor, and you're in control of those classes. And so, just comparing the evolution of my teaching philosophy, but certainly, one of the great things that happens in KNR, is we get feedback from the students, we get feedback from our peers. And I try to be reflective throughout the semester about what's going well, and what's not going well. So, I was able to pull on those documents to really understand where others see my strengths. And where I see my strengths. Are they lining up? Or are they not? And for me, those data points of having other people's perspectives of how semesters are going is really important.

JIM: Can you give us an example of something that maybe you've changed, specifically change in your teaching based on this, this process this reflection?

TRACY: For me, I've taught several classes several times, while I've been here at ISU, and one of them, for example, is my upper-level trends and issues class. And that's a class that really encourages critical thinking. And what I realized is, I need to make sure that I am sending that message of critical thinking throughout the semester, I do a lot at the beginning of the semester. And then sometimes when we get caught up in the actual trends, we forget that we need to continue to talk about those tools. And so, this semester, I'm really making sure that each class I'm emphasizing this is why we're thinking about thinking right and why that's important. And trends are one way that we're applying that. And so, just being consistent with those messages, it really came up as I was revealing people's feedback and my own reflections on my experience.

JIM: I think that's fascinating because it's true for all of us that when we're when we're teaching and we're talking about something that is topical or trending or whatever, that it is so, easy to slip back into kind of that what I guess is kind of our human default position of just getting caught up in the in the in the emotion in the in the drama of it or the in the trend, the flow of it, and not taking a step back and looking critically. So, that's great that you're making this conscious decision to do that. How did the students respond to that?

TRACY: There was a little weirded out at first, they're like, why are we spending so, much time thinking about thinking and I but I tried to make, make a connection with where they're going. They're all very career oriented. They want to make sure that they're going to be successful professionals. So, I say, you know, if you have the skills to think through any trend or issue that comes up in the future, you're going to be able to deal with those changes in a more effective way. As opposed to if we just talked about but the trends going on right now. Those are going to change as they move forward. And

so, they connect with, with those stories that show them. This is how I can use this when I'm in the field doing something that I love to do.

JIM: You said something very interesting there that resonates with me, because they are very career oriented in KNR. And I've done some consultations over there and whatnot, I've done some midterm chats, how do you balance out the need to let's be honest, to help them get a job or prepare them for the workforce, but also to make them more complete thinkers and critical thinkers and kind of better human beings by the time they when they leave? How do you balance it?

TRACY: Well, one of the unique things about recreation is there are so, many career paths that our students can take. It's, it's not just one career path that they might be preparing for. And the reality of a recreation professional is that they might go through a couple of the different areas of our field. So, we talk a lot about if you have the skills that transfer to different areas of our field, you're going to be more effective as your career advances. And so, we talked to them a lot about, let's think about the skills and knowledge that you need for any of the areas of our field, as opposed to just thinking about one job.

JIM: Right, when you're working with students who are going to be going into the field of recreation is, is there, why do you find that they're interested in that particular topic? And how do you then build upon that, as far as their learning goes?

TRACY: One of the things that we talk about so, much about our students is, name a person who doesn't have leisure in their life. And we can, leisure is a part of everyone's life, leisure, Recreation, Sport events, you think about the best times in your life, the places where you really learned about who you are, and most of them took place when you were in your free time at leisure. And so, that's how a lot of our students end up finding us is, you know, they'll be a part of a sports team or a camp or an event. And then they find out, hey, I can do this as a job. And then they come to us and having had those experiences that they can remember being so, important to them when I was part of that team, and I learned about who I was, and I met my best friend. And those type of experiences help lead students to our majors, both recreation and therapeutic recreation. And so, connecting students and having reminding them about those stories and saying this is how you can help others have those experiences is pretty powerful for the students. And that's usually how they find us.

JIM: So, when you're talking about making this connection to the future career, how do you put and I'm going to use the word rigor, although that's, that's a trigger word for some in academia. So, how do you how do you put the academics back into it the academic rigor or the academic work? How do you connect it?

TRACY: I mean, we talk a lot about the things that you'll be the expectations that you'll encounter as a professional, the people who advance in their career, the people who do a little bit extra, they put in that wow factor. And so, when we're looking at rubrics, for example, I'll have a wow factor in the rubric and say, you know, it's those people that will separate out and whether or not you're going to advance and take that next step, the people who just meet the minimum requirements, that's great. But those

that put that little extra in, not only are going to exceed, exceed in the classroom, but they're the ones that are going to exceed when they get out.

JIM: I like that phrase, wow factor. In fact, I'm envisioning a rubric that I'm, I'm modifying, because we're going to be doing this assignment here after spring break. And this that actually may be a phrase that make it that makes it in there. I think that's great. Because you're right, it is it is how do you communicate, we just did a podcast on how to communicate high expectations to students in this the challenge is to say, okay, this level of achievement is still good. But I expect you to actually, you know, to really excel, this is what you have to you have to achieve.

TRACY: And it's uncomfortable for students. I mean, you tell them, you know, you're going to be graded on the wow factor. Well, what does that mean? What do you want? Yeah, well, that's not something you can always articulate and say, If I'm telling you this is X, Y, or Z and wow factor, then it's probably not going above and beyond, right. And so, I'm talking to talking to them, and really, instead of answering their questions, asking them questions back to help them discover what the wow factor is going to be for them.

JIM: And I think you had talked earlier, sometimes they have an initial or initial frustration or whatever, that's probably another one of those stages where you have to kind of talk them past that initial, why aren't you helping me with this?

TRACY: Yeah. And it's just about being very transparent and having, if I can't tell them, the reason why I'm evaluating them in a certain way, or we're learning a certain thing that I'm not doing my job, and I challenged them, I say, if you're not sure why we're talking about this, ask me, right? If I can't answer we're going to move on. Because that that's my part of the experience of setting up that experience. They have a huge part in that, but I can set up the groundwork for that.

JIM: So, speaking of experiences, you said something very interesting before we started recording today, which was talking about where you learned, kind of your initial experience with being a teacher, can you, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

TRACY: Yeah, I was actually in a CTLT workshop over the summer, and one of the questions that was asked, like, where did you first learn how to teach? And I hadn't really thought about that. But the answer came pretty quickly to me. And that's summer camp. My professional background is at summer camp, I started as a counselor on right out of high school. I was a camper before that. And that's where I learned how to teach. And not everyone thinks about summer camp, as you know, a place to be teaching. But what I learned there is the campers love having fun. And when they have fun, they're willing to take risks, they're learning, willing to learn new things, because they're enjoying where they are.

JIM: So, how is that then? How do you translate that into a stodgy old college classroom?

TRACY: Yeah, it's about breaking down the style of college classroom, right, and kind of flipping those expectations. A lot of the comments that I get on evaluations are you know what, now, each class is different, right? I'm and so, making sure that I'm incorporating

experiential learning and hands on learning as much as I can. And having the students get to know each other another power of summer camp is that you're with this group of campers, right, and they really get to know each other and rely on each other. And I feel like a lot of times are in the classroom, we can forget to help them forge those connections. And then once they forge those connections and those connections with me, then we become a community that's willing to take risks together.

JIM: So, I want to ask you, what advice do you have for early career faculty who are, you know, moving along, maybe, maybe not quite where you're at, but they're moving along? And specifically, about the feedback that they get from students say, on those end of semester surveys and whatnot? How should they be reading those? And how should they be using those in your opinion?

TRACY: Sure, I think I have two areas advice associated with that based on what has helped me and the first is to make sure that that's not the only place that I hear from students. And throughout the semester, I make sure that I'm doing mini evaluations. So, I'm hearing from students throughout so, that I can react to the students' voices and let their voices be heard. Because when they feel empowered in that process, then what comes down? At the end isn't as much of a surprise.

JIM: In what form does those, those evaluations take that you do?

TRACY: Yeah, so, I just did them this past week, actually, I call them early semester check in and they're really simple, right? So, I have them take out a piece of paper, I say, don't put your name on it, I say tell me two things that are going well, two things that can improve in anything else that I need to know to help support your learning this semester. And then a week later, I'll present back to them the results. So, I'll kind of qualitatively analyze them, present it back and come up with some action steps that we can do together to move forward. And for me, that helps. Because before I kind of know what the comments are going to be, prior to getting my official evaluations back, and I did some of my own evaluations throughout the semester. I think the second piece of advice is to ask for help. You know, if you know, if you notice something that you're struggling on those evaluations, go to one of your colleagues that you look up to and say, hey, can you come observe my class? Can I observe your class? How have you dealt with those situations for me, I know I haven't gotten here without the fantastic support of the people who came before I came to ISU and then my colleagues at ISU, I've learned so, much from them. And I've been willing to kind of step out and say, I need help. And I need I need some advice from you.

JIM: Well, thank you so, much. This has been a great conversation.

TRACY: Thank you for having me. It's pleasure.

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 and about what we talked about on today's show, and our website at CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Go to the podcast and link in the upper right-hand corner of the page. You can also find out how to subscribe so, you don't miss future episodes. For all of my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology until we talk again, Happy Teaching!

