

Ep. 023: Teaching on the Road with Dr. Meg Gregory

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Hit the road with Meg Gregory, who just completed her Ph.D. while teaching at several institutions, including Illinois State, this semester. Meg shares her perspectives on the diverse students she encounters while teaching across Illinois and reflects on how she's had to adapt her teaching to meet the needs of these different populations.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim

MEG: and I am Meg.

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 Megan Gregory. Meg is a doctoral, actually Meg you're a lot of things. So, first of all, welcome to the show.

MEG: Thank you.

JIM: Let's just go. Let's just do the rundown. First of all, in the interest of full disclosure, you are one of our two doctoral level graduate assistants here at CTLT. And invaluable in how you help us get our programming out to faculty and staff. You are also finishing up your dissertation.

MEG: Yep, that's right. So, hopefully, actually, hopefully, this weekend, soon, but I'm a six-year PhD candidate in the English department at Illinois State.

JIM: And you've been teaching for six or seven years on this campus as well.

MEG: Yep. Yeah, I was here for my master's degree as well. So, I taught English department for two years with a master's and five with a PhD.

JIM: There you go. And you're also teaching a couple other places too, right?

MEG: Yeah, I am. So, I adjunct at Lincoln College in Lincoln, Illinois, and through the aid program at Lincoln and Normal. And then I am also adjunct teaching at Webster University in St. Louis right now.

JIM: So, you're driving to St. Louis once a week to teach

MEG: I am. That's how much?

JIM: Well, that's good. And that's why I wanted to have you on because you have such a unique perspective on teaching. First of all, you're the first graduate assistant or graduate student we've actually had on the show, not that we've been doing this too long, but in you know, 20 episodes or so. So, I think it's important that we get your

perspective. And I think it's actually something that a lot of faculty members who may have been graduate assistants once upon a time, maybe recently, maybe not so much. But I think that that perspective is important. And I think it's always good. Let's just put it this way, I think it's always good that we raise the level of conversation about the important contribution that graduate teaching assistants make to student learning on our campus. Because there's about 400 of you, of various in various disciplines who are helping to support student learning. So, I want to start and just talk about kind of your general thoughts about the difference between the, the teaching environments that you've been in at the different institutions that you're teaching in this semester?

MEG: Yeah, I mean, on some, on some level, I feel really lucky that I've gotten to see three really different kinds of institutions and the way that you know, the different kinds of students that those institutions draw. So, obviously, ISU, I've been, been teaching here for a little while, but Lincoln, if I teach on Lincoln's campus, it's a lot of first-generation college students, many from Chicago that are moving to Central Illinois, and in a very different environment than the one that they grew up in. In a program, it is mostly continuing education students. So, it's mostly adult learners that are, you know, State Farm or Country, employees that are also trying to finish their degree along with, you know, working full time and raising a family. And then Webster is a small, liberal, private liberal arts college. So, mostly traditional students in that situation. And so, it's just it's three very different student populations, all in one semester, which is an interesting juggle,

JIM: It sounds like it. Are you teaching largely the same subject matter? Or what are you teaching?

MEG: No, I'm, in fact teaching very different things. So, this year, I've taught a couple of linguistics courses at Webster. So, in the fall, it was History of English. Right now, I'm teaching Intro to Linguistics. And then I taught Composition for Lincoln in the fall. And right now, I just finished Intro to Critical Thinking, which is sort of a philosophy course. In a program, so it's in my areas, medieval studies, technically, so.

JIM: Okay.

MEG: It's been an exercise in teaching things along with learning them this semester.

JIM: Right? Well, I mean, there's, there's an advantage of that are there? You know, there can be a joy in that too. I would imagine sleeping, maybe something that doesn't frequently.

MEG: Sleep. What is sleep?

JIM: Oh, yeah. So, even though you're kind of addressing different topics with these different student populations, can you give us an example of maybe how you have to change your approach to teaching based on who you're teaching?

MEG: I mean, one of the things that I think I do most often in my teaching is, is think about how whatever we're doing in that room is transferring to the student, you know, transferring to other parts of their lives or other parts of their educational experiences.

And at Webster right now, I have mostly English Ed majors that are going to be secondary teachers. And so that count returning over and over again to that conversation Okay, what is this going to do for you in the classroom? What are you going to do when this is, you know, you're having you have this, your student has this question, how are you going to respond to it? Whereas with, say, the folks in the aid program, it's, it's more practical examples, often, you know, what kinds of things are you seeing at work that that connect to what we're talking about? Or what do you see, you know, in your daily lives? So, the kinds of examples are the kinds of, well, the kinds of questions I asked are similar, right? Like, how do we connect this? Their answers are very different, and, and their approaches as students are really different than the different places and the different contexts?

JIM: So, have you been surprised in the last semester or two doing all of these different teaching in all of these different places? Has there been any moment in the classroom that you've really been taken by surprise, by the reaction to something or by the perspective that you're seeing the students talking about? You didn't expect?

MEG: I think the early realization that just because an activity or a topic or a text works really well in one place doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to work really well, with the new stuff, you know, population was something that I learned pretty quickly this fall. And there were some things that I've taught a number of times, at ISU that have worked well and have gone over well, that just did not work at Lincoln.

JIM: Right.

MEG: They just the students, there are, actually I think this is a really good thing. The students are really open to saying, you know, this is, this doesn't, this doesn't reach us, you know, I had a student slide a paper back at me and say, if you want us to read, it has to be interesting. Which, you know, on one hand is sort of confrontational, but on the other, like, there's an openness and a willingness to say, like, this isn't working for us, then I really appreciated with those students, and it made me really stop and say, oh, like, okay, like, well, let's see what what might work better for you. So, there's been an adjustment in that way. And I think, although I knew in theory that that was a thing, not every, you know, every, every classroom is different. It was a, you know, it's sort of It got real, real, real fast.

JIM: So, when it gets real, really fast, do you? Were you able to make adjustments during the semester? Or was it more of a well, I got to remember that for next time I teach this?

MEG: I'm a little of both.

JIM: Okay.

MEG: I definitely. So, the course I was teaching at Lincoln in the fall, there were two kind of large units, as I had designed them, and I definitely made some significant changes in terms of scaffolding. For the second, the second unit.

JIM: Now explain what you mean by scaffolding for.

MEG: So, I realized that the students needed I, a lot of times, I think of it as connective tissue, the students needed more connective tissue between the pieces and what I was giving them. And they needed a clearer sense of what the end result was supposed to be. They, they needed that kind of reassurance and that guidance as we went through. So, sometimes it was small things like, hey, so what we're doing today is going to feed into this larger project. And this way, sometimes it was assigning small pieces as we went. So, one of the big components was a lit review, it was a English Composition course. And they had to do a bunch of you know, it's a research focused course. And I, instead of having them have some big thing do with the, you know, after working on it for a couple of weeks, I realized that okay, having small chunks every day, is much better for this particular population. So, I did do some things differently in the second half of the course, and I tried to adjust to what, what they needed from me. But there are also a lot of things that I will change the next time around.

JIM: Sure. So, how do you? Do you take notes throughout the semester? How do you remember what you need to change? When are you doing your next teaching prep?

MEG: That's a good question. Um, a couple of ways. So, one, I always have something with me during class that sort of like, here's, here's what I think is going to happen. Of course, it's never actually what happens. But usually, after all of the students are gone, I take a couple of minutes and at least jot down a few things are like, you know, this went well, or this took way longer than I thought or this is a terrible idea. I never do this again. Hopefully not that many times. With that last bit, but sometimes, but I also have an electronic copy of the syllabus and the course schedule. And as we're going through the semester, every week, I insert comments into that so that when I go remake the course schedule for the next time, I have a clearer sense of like this piece really didn't fit or this piece worked so well keep it.

JIM: Well, I think it's good advice. I'm trying to do that more. I used to take I used to just take notes on the syllabus by hand and stuff like that. And then I found that I was making too many changes and then I also found that the syllabus didn't really wasn't really the thing that needed to be changed. And so, I was essentially taking notes about other things, but individual activities and stuff like that. So, now that's great. So, coming back to Illinois State a little bit. In addition to everything that we talked about that you're that you're doing right now, you are also a past Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award winner. And you are now on the University Teaching Committee. So, how has that experience has that impacted your, your teaching in any way,

MEG: I think it's been a really good experience in that, especially in the reading of the portfolios, which is one of the main components of what we do is basically getting a chance to see some of the really fantastic teaching that's happening on campus and see ideas from a variety of not just not just English department, but from a variety of fields, which has been really, really interesting for me. And I've gotten some, I think, practical ideas for things that I hadn't really thought about or things that I thought, oh, like I can actually adapt this to what I'm doing. So, this one of the things that I'm trying out, actually, next week is an exam wrapper, and I haven't done that before. And I never thought to do that. Because it's I mean, I don't give exams that much. But for linguistics, that's something I have to do. Or I feel like I should do, but because of

looking through other people's materials and seeing, you know, some of the different activities and some of the ways that they think about teaching for themselves, like, you know, has just given me kind of small ideas that are practical ideas that I'll take with me.

JIM: That's cool. We talked about exam wrappers with Juliane several episodes ago. So, we'll link to that on the show page for today's episode. But briefly, an exam wrapper is it's like a pre and posttest assessment about how prepared students felt they weren't for the assessment,

MEG: right? Yeah. So, it's basically opportunity for self-reflection. I mean, I use reflection in my classes all the time. It's something I'm really invested in. But I hadn't really found a way to work it into the linguistics courses in the way that I have in the literature courses. So, in the composition, so it's a good opportunity for the students to have some time to think about what they did, but it's also an opportunity for them to tell me what I can, you know, try to adjust to help their, you know, support their learning for the next time. So, it's kind of both of those pieces.

JIM: So, we were talking before we started recording today about your future plans. And obviously, your plans this weekend are to finish your dissertation essentially.

MEG: You know little thing, little things.

JIM: Little things. But as you said, hey, you know, like you do. But you want to you want to keep teaching in the academy.

MEG: Yeah, absolutely.

JIM: So, why?

MEG: I mean, it's the best days of teaching are the best days, right for me. I mean, I There are lots of things that I like to do and get joy out of but those moments when something is really clicking for students, or, you know, where I'm getting to share a thing, I'm really invested in and see the way that students are invested in whether it's the same way or a different way. Like, I don't, there's nothing that really matches that for me. So, I absolutely, yeah, the goal, the hope is to continue to do that.

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

MEG: Yeah, thanks for having me.

JIM: And hey, a quick post a script of sorts for today's episode. It was originally recorded a few weeks ago. Since then, Meg has successfully defended her dissertation, so congratulations to her. You can find out more about our podcast by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the podcast link at the top of the page. You can find out more about today's episode and of course how to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. So, for Dr. Megan Gregory, and all of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology until we talk again, Happy Teaching!