

## Ep. 025: Teaching and Culture with John Baldwin

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep025.shtml>

Culture, globalization, mentoring, and life-long learning: We talk this week with Dr. John Baldwin, a professor in the School of Communication and the 2016 Outstanding University Teaching Award winner for tenured faculty. John shares his insights on those topics and more, as he and Jim explore the link between students' self-identities and learning. They also discuss the importance of modeling positive behavior in your class—even when the discussion gets difficult.

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

JOHN: I'm John.

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. John Baldwin. He's a professor in the School of Communication here at Illinois State. He is also the 2016, Outstanding University Teaching Award winner for tenure track faculty here on campus. John, welcome to the show.

JOHN: It's nice to be here.

JIM: It is great to have you here. In the interest of full disclosure, let me just put it this way, when we talk about your teaching, I can speak about your teaching today from from experience, because I had the honor of being in several of your classes. And you had the honor of correcting all of my spelling and grammar in my master's thesis.

JOHN: So, hopefully, I put some funny comments in your margins.

JIM: You did you did you did a really great job. I mean, it was a great experience. And we're not talking about thesis today. And doing that, although that would be a great episode to do at some point, what I would like to talk to you about is you are very involved in study abroad. And also, of course, you're teaching intercultural communication. And we live in interesting times, as far as culture and communication goes, but you also have some exciting projects coming up. So, I'd love to talk about that with you today. So, to start, I'd like to ask you about the, the teaching award process, and specifically about the creation of your teaching portfolio. What was that experience like? And, and what did you learn,

JOHN: I learned a lot from putting together the portfolio, there's a whole bunch of different documents that you have to assemble, you have to think about a teaching situation that you've had, and how you would respond to that what you've learned from it, you have to have a philosophy of teaching, which made me think about what really drives my teaching, you have to summarize the evaluations, the quantitative and the qualitative scores. So, there are many different parts to this evaluation, you have to choose artifacts to go in. So, I might have letters where people have commented in my

teaching, or exercises, and I have to choose the very best to vote to put into the portfolio is painstaking, and actually, one thing I learned is, sometimes you're nominated more than once before you actually get an award.

JIM: There you go, well, and learning is often an iterative process in itself. So, there you go.

JOHN: I'm very honored to get the award because there are many, many excellent teachers here at ISU, and one of the reasons I like ISU is because while we do value good research, we especially value good teaching. And I tell students, if you want to study teaching, if you want good teachers, ISU is the place to be.

JIM: You teach in the areas of intercultural communication. I mean, you do a little bit of everything, right. But and also qualitative research and whatnot. So, you've done a lot of traveling over the years, and you've always been able to tie that into your teaching, tell us a little bit about some of your adventures, outside of campus and, and how you've tied that into your teaching over the years.

JOHN: Sure, and this relates to my portfolio, because one of the things I talked about my portfolio was mentoring, and we might come back to that. And one of them is really internationalization. And in the School of Communication, we actually have two different committees. One is on international experiences. And one is greater awareness of domestic diversity issues, such as women's issues in the classroom, transgendered students' issues, issues for people of color. And really, I believe that these two are related to some overarching global learning goals, about learning the place of American culture in the world, learning the, our role in that world as citizens. And I even tell my students sometimes up front, I'm not here to give you job skills, I'm here to make you better citizens, and communication partners and spouses or romantic partners. So, with that in mind, I focus a lot on internationalization in different contexts. One of those is bringing international ideas to the classroom. So, in most of my classes, we study culture, we'll have guest speakers and different languages and the structure of those languages in one course, in another course, we look at different cultural perspectives of communication and aging. And several of my courses are all about culture and communication, both being aware of our own identity in our cultural identities here within the United States, and also traveling abroad. The other thing that this has led me to is I've been trying for a few years to get a cross cultural program, getting our communication students into Latin America. And we finally have success with a trip to Panama coming up in June of 2017. And we just found out that we have enough students to make this trip with...

JIM: Oh, great.

JOHN: Yep, we have a good number of students coming into the trip with us and the way we're building this program actually is to have our students into the classroom with Panamanians. So, the idea is to have as many Panamanians in the classes that are Americans. Well basically spend the month in class with the Panamanians we'll have excursions around town, movie nights, because I'm teaching identity in the media. Oh, great. So, we'll get together at night and eat popcorn and watch Latin American films with subtitles, and with, with the Latin Americans to really see the world from their

perspective, that's great. And really, the whole point of this is to really get our students, even though we're going together as a group of Americans, to try to get them outside of the American mindset to see the world from a different view.

JIM: And that idea, the opportunity to finally be able to do this and provide that immersion for students is great, what tips might you have? or what have you learned about about trying to expose that to students who can't leave the classroom? In other words, bringing that that idea into the classroom? Are there little things you can do?

JOHN: Yeah, there are. And that really touches on something I was thinking about that is the notion of internationalization very often we think refers to us taking students to another country, but really internationalization as a way of seeing the world as seeing ourselves as citizens of something bigger than simply the United States or Normal. So, some of that deals with bringing speakers on campus. So, they have a Global Seminar Series where we can hear speakers about or from different cultures. Sometimes we bring it in different ways by having speakers come to our classroom. So, one year, I had someone from Iberia, John, who was over in psychology, and he came, and he spoke to my class about, about his culture. Yes, he did. Yeah. I mean, Rajeev culture? Yeah. So, I tried to have students, rather, I had tried to have speakers come from different cultures to my classes. Certainly not every class is useful for this, for example, if you're studying something like mathematics, or mathematics are much the same all around the world.

JIM: Right? Right.

JOHN: So, that's part of it is just bringing concepts to the classroom. But then also part of it is helping students see that they have culture from even wherever they're from. And there might be differences between Chicago land area, and rural farm culture, in Illinois, right. And each one of us is made up of complex identities.

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: And so, I have one whole class that are really that most of the assignments are focused on making the students aware of what they bring to the table in terms of their own identities.

JIM: And do you find because we're all kind of working through that, not just because of the times in which we find ourselves now, where we, it's obvious, we are, in some ways, a much more polarized country than, than we thought. And we've had some we've done some episodes, and we've had some discussions, and certainly we have done programming on campus about talking about these issues in your class, and whatever the appropriate context, you know, for your discipline, you must have experienced over the years, because you teach both graduate and undergraduate level intercultural communication still, right? Yes, you must have experienced a lot of shock on the part of some students when they have that realization, that the world isn't exactly what they thought it was. How do you deal with that? What have you seen? I guess I should ask first. And, and, and how do you help students kind of along that road?

JOHN: Yeah, because I teach upper-level students, mostly, I don't experience that as much, at least I don't see it, maybe the students are used to masking their shock when they talk about new cultures. I do think in today's mediated society, that it would be hard to show up on the doorstep of college without having some exposure to other cultures, right, because of the internet. So, I think students are ready, they see things in TV. Some students are resistance to analyzing, especially their own privilege. So, when we talk about white privilege in the classroom, that's a little harder discussion. And often there are other students who have thought through it. So, the students, we do a lot with discussion in the classes, because the students will learn from other student experiences much easier than they will for me telling them about it. So, we do try to have a lot of class discussions. And especially in these classes, we usually set ground rules for discussion and say, here's some rules, or how to talk about difficult topics. A lot of it, I think, is me trying to model the notion of openness, and sometimes being vulnerable. So, one of the things I talked about in my portfolio was the semester was coming along, and we were having an election and I was making little jabs at one of the candidates. Just little sideways, sarcastic things, not even mentioning the name, but everyone knew who I was talking about. And one of my students who was quite a different stance, and that much in minority said, well, you're promoting openness and dialogue, but you keep making these jabs at this candidate. How do you expect us to be open if you keep making these jokes? And I came back the next class and I said, You're right. I mean, apology. And from then on, I tried to say okay, we can talk about issues Let's not talk about personalities. And let's not make any claims without evidence. But all claims should be able to be made in the classroom. So, from there, we try to have some discussions at some points, my one student would make a comment and people would roll their eyes. Sure. And then we would call them on it. Yeah. I mean, maybe not directly, but I'd come back, and I'd say, Listen, open dialog means not rolling your eyes when someone says something you disagree with.

JIM: And that's one of the hardest things you can learn. Learn to do. But if you're right, you're absolutely right.

JOHN: So, now I'm in a class, and it's a smaller class as well. 27 people, but it's fairly open. So, we're doing this, everyone stands up in the classroom and says I am and then they fill in a group, or something that they identify with. I am a Cubs fan. I'm sorry. Yeah.

JIM: Now open, open.

JOHN: So, someone says I am a sister, and I am. So, we get towards the back of the class. And we find out one of our students stands up and he says, I am queer. And the one right behind him says, well, I am gay. Mm-hmm. So, then we talk about the differences between queer and gay, but the idea that the students would be so open in the classroom, right, and just discuss these things, as part of our ongoing conversation says that something hopefully good has happened by this time for people to be open.

JIM: Yeah. You keyed in on something important about setting ground rules? Do you address that in your syllabus? Or is it just a discussion you have at the beginning of the semester, or,

JOHN: I do this more; I have two intercultural classes at the undergraduate level. And one of them is the more experiential, we do more games, and we're exercises, our exams, our essays are about your identity, your own personal experiences observing or being the target of prejudice. And that's the one where I actually passed out a set of ground rules that we talked about, and I have a list of ground rules. And I've seen some other stuff. We'll even talk about these I saw these Bone Student Center one time we were talking and they was sitting on a paper...

JIM: Posted note thing.

JOHN: So, yeah.

JIM: An easel or something like that.

JOHN: Exactly. So, one of the notes says, when we're having these discussions, come, expecting to be changed. Yeah, come as you are. But don't leave as you were.

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: You'll pause to listen to understand where the person is coming from.

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: So, what I do now, and that the upper-level class is more about theory and research. So, I don't give them the ground rules. But we're still modeling it all the time. Where someone says something, and I don't show shock or surprise, and I listened, I validate the point, no matter what the point is. You know, that doesn't mean we have to agree with everything. But we talk about the ability to disagree.

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: If someone says something that we so it's not largely discussion, we're not discussing issues as much as the research, but then, because we just came from a unit and whiteness. So, I'm reading James Baldwin's essay *Stranger in the Village*. Okay. And I'm just going to say we're have a dramatic reading here. Oh, and I do a dramatic reading of James Baldwin *Stranger in the Village*, which is about being a black man in America in the 1950s. And I said, you can agree with him or not agree with him? That's not the point. The point is, can you read into his life, part of being a communicator is stepping into the shoes of the other person to see the world from that person's view? And I'm not asking you to agree with it, but I'm asking you to understand it.

JIM: See, I think and that's as I'm, as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking about in my own teaching, and, and with the faculty members with whom I work here at CTLT. When we talk about things like this, I think you've hit on something. And that's the, when you're when you're building this community in your classroom. What's the what is the thing that? How do I put this? It's the judgmental, it's that judgmental, full stop at the end of the thoughts. That's what we want to avoid?

JOHN: Yes.

JIM: That's, that's the thing that and, and so and I've never been able to quite frame it like that until, until I heard you talking about that. It's that you don't have to agree. But you know, we listen to everyone. And, and but you don't go that extra step, which seems so natural to us, as human beings, or Americans or whatever it is, it seems so natural nowadays. To that we have to put that judgment on there.

JOHN: I think there's something else that I really learned from my wife who teaches multicultural counseling in a much more homogenous audience than I do, okay. And she says that we're going to talk about some issues, and I'm not here to resolve the issues. I'm not here to resolve a discussion. I'm not here to make you less angry. And sometimes we feel that if there's people upset in the classroom, or there's this tense discussion that we must solve it for them. And my wife says, no, what we need to do is we need people to sit with them in their hurt. Yeah. And that's great. And we can say up front, we're not going to resolve the issues. We're not here to find the all the answers. We're here to ask questions and for you to continue thinking about it,

JIM: Which again, is somewhat counter to our nature because we liked it. We think in terms of stories, you're not You've talked about that a lot. And I've written about that. But we think in terms of stories, and we like to have an ending, yeah, doesn't have to be happy ending all the time. But we'd like closure we want; we want to put issues to bed. And sometimes you can't do that, at least not in the course of a class or a semester long course.

JOHN: So, this, this actually also relates not only to issues of diversity, and these very difficult discussions, but it also deals with teaching. So, again, I'm teaching intercultural communication at three different levels. So, sometimes it might be the same ideas, the same theory, but we deal with it differently each time at the lowest level, I say, these are some of the concepts, let's apply them.

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: At the second level, I say, these are some concepts, let's talk about the problems with these concepts. And let's see where they break down into the third level, the graduate level, the students are reading research and coming in where to discuss the theory. And everyone has read different articles, and students actually choose the articles you want to read. So, they have a lot of choice, not try to build a lot of choice, especially the higher we go, the more choice there is, even in terms of which questions you answer in the test. What form is the test going to take? What are we going to read for class? So, the students choose the reading, and then they come back? And the readings actually challenge the theory? So, we're reading the theory? And I say, okay, well, some of what you found disagrees with the theory that the articles about, and then we get to talk about that. And I promised them typically in upper-level classes, I promise not to give you a definition of culture. And say, we're going to we're going to challenge every definition there is, yeah, what his strengths and limitations are,

JIM: Yeah, and I still, I still get that. And I remember teaching comm 110, the, the introductory speech course, and there's a little bit in that about culture. And that that was hard for me not to try to define culture for them. But that was one of the great

pieces of advice I got. Let them figure it out. So, and that's true with a lot of the learning that they go through, I think,

JOHN: And that might depend on the level of teaching. Like if I'm teaching a lower-level audience, and it's not a class about culture, like we have a very basic introduction to communication theory class, and when I'm guest lecturing in that class, then I tend to say, here is a definition of culture that we're at work for today. Yeah, I'm not here to deconstruct this, I'm here to use the concepts, I always have to judge how much I analyze in terms of the needs for the class, right, what my goals for the class are, for the upper-level classes, I'm moving more towards their ability to understand and explore and do research as a theory and research course. And really, except that I want to evaluate the students in some way, I'm almost thinking like in my graduate classes, I stopped having exams. In my upper-level undergraduate classes, we move more and more to essays. And I tell them up front, I see is going to be in class essay exam here your questions.

JIM: Go get ready, yeah, go get ready. Well, because it's the preparation, that's how they learn is preparation. Going back to what you're talking about, about whether or not to define culture, I think that someone who's listening to this who doesn't teach in the discipline of communication, but it's still really striving to, to overcome that hurdle of having a group of people in class and actually building a real community of learners, it may make more sense to say, well, here's one definition of culture, because we need to talk about our own identities, because that's the important part. So, that facilitate so even if you're teaching a math class, or you're teaching some other, you know, you're teaching one of the sciences, or you're teaching a Health Sciences class, or criminal justice or something like that. I think that there are things that that faculty faculty could do there. There is a discussion to be had early in the semester about who are we, and we want to be respectful of each other's ideas. And so, I think, actually, you know, I've been going back and forth. But I think actually, you're right, putting that putting that least a definition of culture out there. Now, which definition you choose, I guess, depends on depends

JOHN: On your audience.

JIM: Depends on your audience, right.

JOHN: But you're talking about developing a community of learners. So, really, one of my underlying goals, and I try to model this also for my students is I want them to be lifelong learners, we're in the age of the internet. Yeah, we're in the age where the students going to sell back their textbooks if they even buy them, right. So, what I want is, I'm talking about intercultural communication out front, I'm going to say you are not going to be an expert in any culture. After this class, that's not our goal. Our goal is to give you the skills, the types of questions to ask, so that you get assigned to Mexico, or you have a worker in your department has from India, you can know what to do to explore and to understand what that might mean for them, if it's even relevant to that who that person is and how that person sees him or herself. So, I'm also here to try to get the students to love learning. So, of course, I continue to study languages.

JIM: You do, and I wanted to ask you about that too. How many languages have you studied thus far?

JOHN: How many have I studied?

JIM: Or well, I don't know how to phrase it. How many are you? How many do you I don't wanna say How many languages do you speak because I don't know what the threshold is.

JOHN: For me that fluent is that's a difficult question. Yes. Say I'm conversational in

JIM: Okay,

JOHN: In Spanish and Portuguese.

JIM: Okay?

JOHN: I can understand some basic French, probably German and Italian. There are other languages that I've studied and couldn't even write anymore.

JIM: Sure.

JOHN: Like Mandarin

JIM: Mandarin. I know you were studying Arabic at one point.

JOHN: I studied some Arabic.

JIM: Yeah. So, So why? I don't mean that sound judgmental? Why? What do you get? I know you're getting something out of this. What is that? I'm curious

JOHN: What part of it is I'm just a nerd. Let's be upfront about it. I got some computer games, I can always you know, I know that's inconceivable. So, part of it is I like learning just the languages of builds connection between people. So, when you can say when you greet someone, one of my friends from Morocco introduced me to his father, and I knew enough Arabic to say hi to his father, it's nice to meet you. And to say that in Arabic, and his father was surprised that I cared enough to learn

JIM: Yeah.

JOHN: Beyond Hello, but yeah, nice to meet you. God bless you, whatever, an Arabic. So, I do it for that. And also, because some of the courses I teach about psychology of language, when you learn the languages, you learn the ways that languages can change and how that might change the way we think about the world, when there are words or phrases in a language that just don't exist in English, because they serve a function, right? That is not as important to English speakers.

JIM: So, idioms or something like that.

JOHN: Like idioms. Sometimes it's even, even a particle. So, in Korean, there's a particle that you put at the end of a sentence or a different one for a question. Really, because shows that you have a higher status than me. Really? Yeah, it's fascinating. So, I would say if I'm saying hello, and your higher status, I have to say, how's it going, I say [Korean]. And that little [Korean] simply means it's this is a question. And I'm asking the question of someone of a higher status.

JIM: I see.

JOHN: So, what happens is early in the conversation, we must determine if it's not a parent who has a higher status, so that I can use the right word.

JIM: So, it's not something we're getting a little far afield here, but I'm fascinating now. So, it's not something like in German, where you have a formal way of addressing versus an informal way when you're speaking, doing a director address to someone else. It you actually because you just do that, as a matter of politeness. Typically, it's actually...

JOHN: It's like something that you add at the end of the sentence. Yeah, it'd be like saying, sir, or something like that. But at the end of every single question, you might say that. So, if you've ever listened to someone speaking Korean, you might begin to hear like, often at the end of sentences, there's a little sound almost

JIM: And it creates almost that sort of sync. What we would almost call a singsong sort of pattern to it to an extent.

JOHN: No not necessarily. It's just something that happens at the end of sentences, depending on, on the context of the sentence.

JIM: Gotcha.

JOHN: Whereas, now certainly, if you speak Spanish you say to usted, then you have to know when to use which one you know that that changes from country to country, even with some subtle differences there these rules. So, yeah, I can say sir, or ma'am in English, and I can use would you please pass the salt instead of hey, give me the salt. So, we realize we have these different registers in English as well. But the very fact that you have word endings in certain countries, yeah, to indicate this.

JIM: Yeah. Yeah.

JOHN: For me, it's just interesting. It's like a puzzle. I like puzzles.

JIM: Yeah

JOHN: But I like language puzzles more than anything.

JIM: Okay. So, one final thing is we're running a little long on time here. I did want to go back to something you mentioned earlier about mentorship or being a mentor. I find people are daunted by that word, because they realize that it is a big responsibility. Or on the other hand, well, of course, I could be a mentor.

JOHN: Yeah, a lot of my mentorship with students, of course, occurs to graduate studies. So, I have a lot of graduate students. And it's really something that someone said early on in my career in 1994, one of my students finished up his whole thesis, and he wanted to turn it into a journal article. So, I always tell the student Hey, that's up to you. I'll work with if you want to. So, he did some work. And then I wanted to do those corrections, like you mentioned early on about all my corrections and your papers. Let me sit down with you. Yeah. And walk you through my mental process as I'm reading this, and why I would change the wording here. And later, he said, he said, you know, we worked together for two years. And that was I learned the most from that sit down session where we wrote together. So, as much as possible at the students initiative, I tried to get my graduate students to conference, I try to get my undergraduate students to take their stuff to the Undergraduate Research Symposium. But even then, especially my theory and research class, I tell the students there's like 13 groups, it's a big class. And I said, unfortunately, for me, this is like 13 independent studies. And you can come to my office as much as you want, we can shoot the breeze and talk about your ideas. We can talk about how to make a good review of literature. We can talk about how to ask questions if you're doing an interview study and how to facilitate that. So, I said really, I will give you as much guidance as you want. In many classes. Sometimes that means I meet with each group several times throughout the semester. And but I really had to I want this to be a formative process where I'm not merely grading the end project. But I want to work with you through the types of decisions you would need to make to do a good research project, or good research in an organization, what sorts of things do you need to ask? And I just think students learn more from you walking alongside with them, then simply grading the project at the end.

JIM: And it's, I think there's an interesting relationship between being a mentor and facilitating a class the way we've been talking about today, that when you're building that community of learners, you don't want you're not that you're not the star of the show. You are the facilitator, you're the guide on the journey, right? Is that that phrase? It's kind of the same thing. When you're a mentor, you're no longer the hero. Right? You are, you are the mentor. In that regard. So, what do you have coming up next? I know you said, we've talked a lot about Panama, you are doing some things yet, this semester, with the Office of International Studies and programs, is that right?

JOHN: Actually, I am working with Office of International Studies and programs a lot. I am on the International Studies Advisory Council, which is people from all over the campus, one person from each college is on this Council to discuss issues pertinent to international studies. And then we've been meeting with people from Amali, which is the Asian Latin America, Middle East, Africa and indigenous peoples. Basically, it's what we will call global studies, though it's really focused on the nonwestern world, right. And we've been meeting together to try to find out what we would call a global learning objectives that could apply equally to Somali courses or to international studies courses. Okay. And then actually, the other interesting news is I've never been to Africa, and my wife and I are going, actually right before graduation, we're going to Africa, where my wife is going to be doing some training on trauma and talking to some people who deal with a lot of trauma community, and I'm going to learn I'm going to tag along and learn about African culture. Right? One African culture. Yeah. And then we'll come back just in time to go to Panama.

JIM: There you go. And while you're in Africa, you're not just you're learning, but you're also teaching, right?

JOHN: I'm teaching online. Yeah. I'll be teaching my students here. Yes. From Africa. And I hope if there's enough internet connection in this small city, that I am in, I hope to be sending podcasts from, from this belt or something. Yeah,

JIM: exactly. That sounds exciting. John, thank you so much for coming on the show.

JOHN: Alright, it's nice to be here.

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 what we talked about on our website at [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). Click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. You can also find information on how to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. For Dr. John Baldwin, for all of my colleagues here at CTLT until we talk again, Happy Teaching!