

Ep. 031: Diverse Learners

We present our seventh in-depth look at the *7 Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* with a discussion about meeting the needs of diverse learners. Claire and Jim (and Jim's obnoxious summer cold) begin with the problem of categorizing students as "visual" or "auditory" learners-- tired old concepts with little utility. They explore alternatives and look for ways to make at least some aspect of assignments multi-modal, to allow students to play to their strengths. Claire also explains the virtue of pushing students past their comfort zones.

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep031.shtml>

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

JIM: 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, our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Today we want to talk about, I think this is the seventh of our Seven Principles for Good practice in undergraduate education that we've been talking about, for, you know, on and off for the last many episodes. And today, number seven, respect to diverse talent and ways of learning. And we didn't, we didn't save this to the end for any particular reason. But I think it is one that I know I, as a teacher, I bring a lot of preconceived notions into the classroom whenever I start a semester. And so this is one that I think I really have to think about, and kind of remind myself of every semester. So, what's it all about?

CLAIRE: Well, I think in terms of preconceived notions, there are a couple of things. And one of them is, and this is, this is an assumption that it's easier to hold perhaps early in your career. But we always need to remind ourselves throughout our careers, we need to remind ourselves that our students are not us. It's easy to come into our classrooms thinking everybody is going to be just as excited about this topic or discipline as I am. And sadly, that's not always true, particularly when it's not a Majors course. So, so there's that, but I think I think most people are sort of aware of that, that they that they think that another challenge or another sorry, another assumption, which relates directly to this principle is that there is such a thing as learning styles. And if you ask a faculty member, or many faculty members, and you say, what's your learning style, they'll say, Oh, I'm an auditory learner, right? Yeah, here are things to be able to, to learn. Or if you ask a student, they hit students can usually tell you all I'm a visual learner, you know, I, you lecture too much. I can't- I can't learn from you. Because I

learned when I see things I don't learn when I hear things. There isn't any such thing as a visual learner, or an auditory learner.

JIM: This is sort of folklore that has been discredited in the research.

CLAIRE: Especially recently. I mean, there's been a lot of research in recent years. And it's and it's, it is a long time. dying off people are so this is so deeply ingrained in our belief systems that it's really hard to blast it out.

JIM: So much so that we were talking about a week ago when we were talking about doing this episode. It is pervasive beyond the academy. I mean, I hit my my sister said, well, I'm more of a I don't forget what she said she was but you know, and I kind of smile and say now you're really not but yeah, um, you know, that sort of thing. I used to tell people I was a kinesthetic learner, which I-

CLAIRE: –that's another one,

JIM: Which just because-

CLAIRE: –doesn't move around-

JIM: –it sounded impressive.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I need to do things with my hands. Right. To think stuff my hands. Yeah.

JIM: Anyway, so; So, these have been widely... you know, we have we have a human need to kind of categorize things right. And, and so I think that these are categories that we've clung to for too long. So, why are they not true, though? I guess what, what is the truth behind this?

CLAIRE: Well, I think the truth behind it is that we all do bring different strengths, to our, to our classrooms and to our learning, and different inclinations. So, I wanted to take them in I don't usually do this, but I wanted to actually read a little paragraph about this, this principle, and it says, people bring different talents and styles of learning to the college, brilliant students in the seminar room, maybe all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich and hands on experience may not do so well, with theory, students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them, then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come easily. So, I want to hold that last sentence for a minute, because that's a hugely important sense, okay. But I want to go back to the beginning, where it talks about different talents and styles of learning. So, the truth is, we all learned through all of our senses, we may rely particularly heavy on heavily on one particular sensor or another. But it's not that we can't you know, we can't learn if we don't have a given sense. I mean, we can all learn it's about learning. We do have however, we do tend to have different strengths. So, while I've kind of finally at last, and you know, it took me a long time to let go of this idea of auditory auditory learners and visual learners and kinesthetic learners, because it, you know, it was so engrained in my, in my mind, something that I like, though, is and I still like, although there are disagreements even here at CTLT about this is, is I

like Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. And I like it, because it reminds me that all of my students are smart in some way. I happen to be, I happen to be predisposed to reading and writing. So, you know, lucky me, that's because that's the way school is, is that's the way school is predisposed show. So, um, but but not all of my students are predisposed in that same way. Some of them are very talented in in other ways. Spatially kinesthetically, mathematically, you know, lots of things. And the challenge to me is to help them use their own strengths to do what they need to do to learn what they need to learn and do what they need to do in my classroom.

JIM: I think that's key to what we're talking about here. Because whether you agree with Gardner's work, or you or you are going to hang on to visual audio, all that other stuff, in some ways that framework doesn't matter. It's just recognizing that there are different strengths that that, students bring to the table that they have different talents. I guess my next question would be, as I'm beginning of semester, or during the course of the semester, how do I identify what those talents are? Or? Or do I do I not assess the students for those talents? And instead, I'm just making sure that the way I've structured structured the course kind of is good for all timezones for all audiences.

CLAIRE: You know, you're sort of starting to get to the area of Universal Design for Learning. And that's, you know, that's its own podcast or six. Right? But, but ideally, that's what we want to keep in mind, we want to have, we want to structure learning experiences, in ways that allow students to come at them in various ways, or from various areas of strength or predisposition. Okay, so if you assign students to watch a TED talk, as part of their homework, then that's good, because Ted Talks are closed captioned. And a student who likes to both listen and read at the same time, can do that with a TED Talk. If you find a find a clip on YouTube, and you want them to watch that, that may or may not be, you know, it's, I think that it's not going to be closed captioned, it depends on it may depend. But you know, it would be great if you could do some captioning. Because then both students who need that maybe they're dyslexic, or maybe they're visually impaired, or maybe their hearing impaired, and so some modality isn't going to be accessible to them. But if you present the information in more than one modality, then it's good for everybody. Students can choose to listen to it, they can choose to read the text, the captioning, or they can choose to do both. And, and something is probably going to work for them.

JIM: If there's a student who has an actual documented need, right? Then there's a mechanism here at the university to help with that as well to make sure that the videos that you're presenting in class are captioned. And we actually did a recent episode with Jim Bethmann, over talking about some of that and about accessibility. But more to the point, even students who don't have a documented disability, or anything that you would even consider to be a learning challenge like that. It's still better for them to have those multiple. See, you would say modalities, I would say channels because it's from a communication background. We know communication is more effective when it uses multiple channels. The same message through multiple channels, right. So, if you can read it, if you can hear it, if you can see it. Different different sort of thing.

CLAIRE: If you can feel it, smell it and touch it.

JIM: Yeah, yeah. Or you know-

CLAIRE: Feel it, smell it and taste it. Yeah. Even better. Yeah, right. Exactly. That's not usually the case in our classrooms unless we're in a really particularly wonderful, you know, maybe a horticulture class, right, yeah, yeah, food science class or anything. Yeah.

JIM: But you can, but you can also by coming up with different ways for students to apply that information. which is goes goes into other aspects of active learning and stuff like that, I think that you can still, that gives you more opportunities to find more different modes with which to work with the same the same knowledge. You know, going back to do. I always knew I was always a note-taker in class, I was trained to be a note-taker. And we may have talked about Mr. Bell, my seventh-grade science teacher,

CLAIRE: I don't think I've heard about Mr. Bell.

JIM: Mr. Bell, uh, he taught Junior High science. So, I had him for two years seventh and eighth grade in Washington, Illinois. And the main thing he taught us to do was actually how to take notes. And he taught us a version, it ends up that they were kind of they were like tea notes. Yeah, where you put, were you taking information now he was spoon feeding us, okay, this goes on the left side of the page, this goes right to the page. But then then after a while, he kind of took the training wheels off. And it was almost a version of Cornell notes of the Cornell note taking system, which, which, again, kind of divides the page left and right. But anyway, I I used to think that I could not learn if I did not write it down. And that that meant that I was somehow that type of a learner. But what it really meant was, No, I'm hearing it and I'm doing something else with it at the same time. And I'm doing I'm doing a different sort of cognitive, your workout, I actually processing it. Yeah. And it goes transcribing your processing, right, which goes, which goes to studies nowadays to talk about keyboard usage versus handwritten notes and student achievement and stuff like that. It's it's not the technology, it's how the technology being used. What I'm getting at, though, is that I found that I was doing better in courses where that's how things were taught. Now, fortunately, most courses were taught where someone was speaking. And I was writing down notes on what they said, oh, also, by the way, there are a lot of doodles in the margins. Yeah. So and that, and I don't know what that says. But so, it's it's a matter of structuring, you know, not everyone's going to learn, like I learned. So, what about those students who don't? Who aren't doing that? How do you get them to do that cognitive work? While they're learning? That's another way I think of approaching it. And I'm not sure what the answer is. I think it depends on what you're teaching.

CLAIRE: Right. Yes. Well, and yeah, a lot of it depends on what you're teaching, a lot of it depends on what they're learning. There's, I think, on this podcast page, we're going to have a link to a TED talk, okay, that actually addresses that issue that it's, you know, some kinds of learning require particular attention to some, some senses or some predispositions or whatever. But yeah, I think the more ways you can make information available to students, the better it is for everybody, right? That's the whole principle behind universal design. You know, the sort of metaphor for universal design is curb cuts, curb cuts, became sort of omnipresent, you know, after the

Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, because there was a lot of emphasis on making our towns and cities cityscapes of Vail, you know, useful for people who are maybe in wheelchairs? Well, turns out, people with strollers love curb, right, exactly. No, people on roller skates or skateboards, you know, I mean, there's just trip over their own feet. People trip over their own feet.

JIM: I came out of the movie theater a couple nights ago. And of course, I was distracted because of checking my email on my phone and all that other stuff. And I went, I stepped off the curb into the street and was like, oh, I didn't know. I couldn't very much use a nice...

CLAIRE: ...a nice, gentle slope to get down.

JIM: Yeah, so that's, and I think there are a lot of other examples. In that, too. I mean, when we talk about, and we talked again, with with Jen about this about online, design and layout, a lot of the things that that will certainly benefit someone who has a special need as far as using a website or using online resources that we post and teaching, it actually makes it easier for all of us to write because a lot of it is just making sure that it's well organized. And presentable. And and yeah, and that there's a flow to it and whatnot, as we talk about the okay, so we've been talking about kind of the conceptual level here. Do you have an example of either an assignment or or just a general practice that you've used over the years in teaching that you have changed, to make it more to respected, you know, diverse learners?

CLAIRE: Well, I'm sure people get tired of hearing me talking about talking about teaching writing, but that's what I teach. That's what all my examples come from. Yeah. But there was a time when pretty much everything that happened in my writing classes happened in writing, because hello, it's a writing class. Then I read a really smart book by a former colleague of mine, Patricia Dunn, who was here at almost eight University in the English department, she's now at SUNY Stony Brook. And it was called Learning Re-abled. And she had another book called talking, moving, sketching, or sketching, moving, talking or something like that. But the point of her work was that we can use student's strengths or preferences, to lead them in to the kind of work we need them to do, even when that's not a preference, what I did was search was start giving students choices about, for example, prewriting. You know, what, it's a writing class, at some point, you got to give me samples of your writing lots of them. But the way that you start thinking about your topic, that could be that could be anything, you know, you could sit down and play the piano for a while, if that helps. I actually, it was, it was very interesting. Yesterday, I was visiting with Elmo state writing project, which is meeting here on campus. And we were talking about, we were actually talking about personality type and writing, and how Myers Briggs Personality types affect the way you write. And I said, you know, my, my style of writing is get up and walk around for a long time and, you know, move and come back and sit down and write a paragraph and get up and walk around and come back. And so, it's, at one point, our assignment was to start writing. And I got up. And I walked over to the book table, and I picked up a couple of books, and I started just sort of reading through the books. And then I went back, and I, and I sat down, and I started writing. And it was just a perfect example of how what I need to do to get into that, and pretty much everybody else in the room

parts, some of them partly because it was the first day and they everybody was being pretty obedient. Right? Yeah, sure. Apply it. Yeah. But, and I, having worked with the writing project, for many years, felt completely free to do whatever I wanted. So, I was comfortable doing that. But everybody else in the room just got out their pens on their pads and started writing. Yeah. So, I think letting people come at what I need them to do, from a lot of different ways and not trying to over regulate that. Okay, and letting them know that there are options for how to get started.

JIM: So, two things come to mind when I when I hear that story, one of them is doing something like that. And I think you had mentioned before about how students who were more visually oriented at some point as a prewriting exercise, you would allow them to sketch or, you know, to draw or something like that, you know, to doodle, but but also you weren't going to Yeah, doodle Exactly. But you also were not going to let them turn in like an art portfolio for a writing project. Right? You know, so, so at some point, like you said, the rubber has to meet the proverbial road, but it's a way so doing what you're doing. It's a way of flipping it around when you have a student come to you and says I can't I'm not a good writer, I'm not a math person. I'm not a computer person, or whatever, you can find other ways to kind of ease them into a-

CLAIRE: What kind of person are you?

JIM: Yeah, let's look-

CLAIRE: And how can we use that?

JIM: Yeah. And get them to think about it. And that leads to the other thing, which is the other aspect of the story, you just told us that you are very aware and have reflected for a long time on what kind of learner you are and all of this other stuff. Whereas I don't know if students actually bring that level of awareness. So how do you? Do you have to have a conversation with students about finding their learning style? And your course, or...?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, as a matter of fact, I would not particularly when we're talking about learning style, I wouldn't. I think you will have students who will tell you Yeah, you know, as we talked about earlier, I'm an auditory learner. I'm a visual learner, I'm a kinesthetic learner. They they do know that that's been, you know, that's been out in the schools long enough, right?

JIM: That's a cultural thing.

CLAIRE: That's a cultural thing. It's it's out there. And students have identified themselves in those ways. But I think what you can, and I don't, I'm not somebody who spends a lot of time, you know, having my students take different kinds of inventories. I mean, in in a typical class, I don't do that so much. But I do spend a lot of time talking to students, both in class and outside of class 121. And when they're stuck, I'll talk to them about you know, what, what do you like to do? How do you get started doing that? You know, and see if we can't make a connection between the things that they feel are their strengths, the things that they that they feel comfortable doing? Is there a way

we can utilize that to, to push them to do something that's outside their comfort zone because you know what, if you're not outside your comfort zone, I've said this so many times before, if you're not outside your comfort zone, you're not learning anything? You're only comfortable when you're in, you're only comfortable. When you're already, you get to sort of roll around in what I already believe in no. And once you get outside of that you're not comfortable anymore. So, get and that's why I said, you know, we wanted to come back to that last sentence, right paragraph, which was, you know, students can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come easily. Because really, you know, we can't any of us always operate from our strengths. We just can't I mean, at some point, well, I hope my husband's not listening to this, I don't actually balance my checkbook. Okay, but, you know, best practice is that you sit down at least once a month, and you balance your checkbook, or you at least go through, you know, you you look at the numbers, and you make sure that everything makes sense. I don't get to ideally, I don't get to say, oh, I don't do math at all, you know, I mean, that's not the world I live in, at some point, I'm gonna have to fill out the spreadsheet, I'm gonna have to follow a recipe, I'm gonna have to balance my checkbook, I'm gonna have to pay my bills, I'm gonna have to figure out how much my tank of gas is gonna cost me. You know, I got to do math.

JIM: And it's understandable that there are degrees, but there are certain degrees you need to you need to do engage in an activity in order to just be functional in modern society. So, when people say they're not a computer person, that's acceptable. But what that really means to me is okay, I'm not going to expect you to build a computer for me. Yeah. But as far as at least finding information in a computer, that ships kind of sailed. We're all doing that now. I mean, yeah, you just got a new refrigerator. I bet that refrigerator is more computer than refrigerator.

CLAIRE: It probably is.

JIM: No, at least under the hood.

CLAIRE: It's, you know, I haven't looked under the hood. It's such a thing of the hood is so beautiful. But I'm sure it is because it has all these little digital numbers and things on the sides of the doors. Right. So, I mean, it can literally be my my new refrigerator can be programmed, right. So yeah, I don't get I don't have the luxury of saying, I don't do technology. Exactly. Also, cuz you know, it's in my job title.

JIM: Well, there's that part of it, too. Claire, thank you so much. This has been a great conference.

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 our podcast by going to our website at ctl.illinoisstate.edu. Click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. For Dr. Claire Lamonica, and all of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology. Until we talk again. Happy Teaching!

