

Ep. 034: Claire's Midterm Report

This week, we catch up with CTLT Director Dr. Claire Lamonica, who is back in the classroom for the first time in years. She's teaching a special half-semester course called Learning in Communities, so her "midterm" has already come and gone. We discuss how well her expectations matched with the reality of teaching freshman after 12 years, what she found unexpected about their behavior, and how she decided to assess the course at its mid-point. We talk about prior knowledge, about common misperceptions concerning digital natives, and we ponder how high school may inform how this cohort of students use (or abuse) smartphones. Plus-- a shocking confession about lesson plans!

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep034.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, our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Hey, we're doing a little update episode. Today we are. We talked originally about the course you're teaching this semester, well, before it started, you were in the planning process. And just the way time and space kind of warp when you're doing a podcast, we are already halfway through your course it also kind of has to do with the particulars of that course. So, we wanted to do a little update today.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I'm excited.

JIM: Yeah. Well, you were you kind of floated back into the building after your first day of teaching. And I knew ah, for an update I did. So, tell us first of all, this course is called LinC. What does that mean? Again? And what's it all about?

CLAIRE: It's IDs, 122, freshmen seminar learning and communities. It's about, it's about transition to college. So, there are three elements that are shared among all, all sections. And those are civic engagement, diversity, they, they go to the human, the Human Library, and career and major exploration. And then, other than that, we're you know, we're doing some things about how learning works and time management and some of the things that they were kind of worried about at the beginning. Yeah. So, and this is, it's great. It's but it's only eight weeks long, right? So as of Wednesday, Wednesday, you know, a couple of days from now, we're halfway through, we're done, right? Our first four weeks.

JIM: So, it's already midterm for you.

JIM: Yes, it's midterm.

JIM: And we should also mention, I think, if you had mentioned before, that students self-select into this class. So, it is not a this is not a special program that...

CLAIRE: They're in a population of at-risk students, anything like that. A lot of I think that athletes are required to take some sort of class like this, not necessarily this one. But other than that, yeah, they're just self-selected.

JIM: So, it's midterm. But let's talk about before the class started first, because one of the things we talked about in that last episode, which of course, we'll link to, in the show notes for today's episode, one of the things we talked about was preparing your syllabus that you're just getting ready to do that. So, I wanted to ask you, are you happy with the syllabus as as you ended up with it?

CLAIRE: You know what? I am pretty happy with the syllabus. Um, I don't yet have a course schedule. So that's a little embarrassing. You heard it here. First. Your first I've told Pam Ambrose who's the the Associate Director of University College, and she sort of oversees this, this course. And so, I have I have made my confession to Mother Pam. And she seems to be okay with it. I'm actually just kind of having to feel my way through it. Based on what the students seem to need and how much time things take. It's, I'm, I'm finding I'm struggling a little bit with timing. It's a 50-minute class. It's a long time since I taught a 15-minute course. And too short or too long or too short, too short. Okay. Pretty much for every session, I plan what we're going to do, and then I go back, and I cut it by a third. Yeah. Oh, yeah. So um, I just didn't have good luck trying to sort of, except for just the big thing, so Okay, well, we'll do community engagement first, and then we'll do Human Library. And then we'll do you know, career and pager exploration. So, I sort of put those chunks in but I'm, I'm filling in the in-betweens as we go.

JIM: Well, Mother Pam is a friend of the of the show. I know she is forgiving. You are going through now and you're approaching midterm. And we also talked about we've always talked about the importance of assessing a course at midterm. Yes. What did you finally decide on as far as how you're going to do that?

CLAIRE: Well, actually, I just worked that out this. This course has a peer instructor assigned to it. I have a wonderful peer instructor. Her name is Kateri and she is a sophomore. She took this course last fall. She's a dean's list student. I'm doing very well with her her own study. She's looking a little tired to me these days. She does a lot. But she and I just this morning sort of figured out how we're going to do this so on on Friday on Wednesday. At the second class of the week, we only meet twice a week. So, on Wednesday, she is going to pass around a piece Paper and have each student choose a unique identifier. So, she'll get their names and their unique identifiers. And then she's going to take that away. And then I'm going to create a survey that pretty much asks the standard midterm chat questions about, you know, what? What's helping them

learn what's making it difficult for them to learn, are there things I could be doing better? Are there things they could be doing better; I'll have them enter the unique identifier. So that way, we'll have a list of identifiers, and we'll know who's done it. So, they can get some participation credit for having done completed the survey. But I won't have any way of connecting names to individual responses, because I want to see what those unique identifiers are Kateri can just, you know, right, she could take care of the bookkeeping, and she won't see what their responses were.

JIM: So, you've created sort of a wall there. So, where you can wall, you don't have to bring in take the extra time in a class where, again, you're halfway through it already. This semester, you'd have to take the extra time of bringing in someone from the outside to facilitate this, you've created sort of a blind...

CLAIRE: Yeah. And I would, I would have loved to have a mid, I actually would have loved to have somebody from here, come and do a midterm chat as threatening as that might be. But... But I, you know, I just I just don't have time. I mean, we're halfway through and I can't believe that I just, I feel like we just started, so.

JIM: So, well. And essentially, you just did plus you had Labor Day off. We talked about how that's a challenge for those of us teaching on Mondays this semester. And you know, it happens every semester or every, almost every semester, or something that always lands. Do your students realize that the class is almost halfway over? I mean, you seem very keenly aware of it that it is, I would imagine, it's unusual for them to have such a compressed learning experience in some ways.

CLAIRE: Well, I think it's very unusual for them, because these are first semester freshmen. So they're basically used to courses that last 185 days. I mean, yeah, you know, they're coming from high school, where not all but many, if not, most courses last for the whole year. And they and they have four quarters. I actually said to them this morning, you know, where, on Wednesday, we're halfway through this class, and they sort of jerked their heads up and looked around a little bit. Yeah, I would imagine or the headlight-ish. And I said, you know, that means, you know, by at the end of this course, you'll be halfway through your first semester of college. So, you're halfway through your, yeah, you're halfway through your first half. Yeah, you're halfway through your first half. So um, a few of them looked a little dismayed or taken aback, but nobody kind of been ran out of the room or anything.

JIM: Well, that's true. And you have you did tell me you had a couple students dropped the class. But that's, that's normal for me.

CLAIRE: It just breaks my heart, you know, and I don't know, one of them came to college and immediately got very sick. And I get that, and I don't know, she came in, she came to class after missing a couple of classes, and I'm so sick and, and she looked awful. And so, she was either physically sick, or she was just frantically homesick, one, you know, one or the other. So that when I sort of expected, there was one that was just a total surprise, I was like, whoa, I don't understand this at all. And another one sort of hadn't been doing the work. So, the writing was kind of, well as it were, yeah, I wasn't entirely surprised, because they had just sort of disengaged. But anyway, so but it still feels like

I really started out the semester, meaning to catch people really early. And I did at the end of after four classes, I emailed for students who were not turning in all their work. And I said, hey, let's meet to talk about your progress in this class. And maybe that was too threatening of language, because two of them immediately dropped. The other two came in to see me and we're very, very grateful. Yeah. And and clueless, they had no idea that they weren't doing well, I think, because, you know, at that point, it was pretty early, and there hadn't been a lot of work. Just missing one or two assignments was really hurting them. Yeah. And so, it didn't seem like a big deal to them until it sort of was.

JIM: And plus, timing-wise, you know, after four class periods or two weeks for this particular course, it was quarter of the class. Well, it not only was it a quarter of the class, so it you know, the grades are having a little bit more significance. You're a quarter of the way through the semester, but also that's about the same time that the deadline is to drop a class and still get all your money back and everything else. So they had, so I think they probably had.

CLAIRE: Yeah, they may have had that deadline. I used to keep track of that deadline. You kind of let students know if you know, I thought they might.

JIM: Yeah, aren't you always afraid? Aren't you always afraid to bring it up though? Yeah, I'm kind of like that.

CLAIRE: Like whoa, are they gonna run you know?

JIM: Yeah. Would you like to if you really hate this course then you're out, it's pack your parachute?

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah.

JIM: Well, you know, we all have we all have students drop courses all the time.

CLAIRE: I mean, I know better to take it than to take it personally. But you know, that's just who I am.

JIM: We always wonder that the one that got away, right. So, what, you know, when you went into this course, with a lot of questions about what do 18 year old, fresh on campus, college students, what are they like nowadays because you hadn't taught in about 10 years you haven't taught freshmen in about 12 years.

CLAIRE: I think I was terrified. Are you still terrified, said that? I think I said that. You know what? I got into the class the first day and it was like, I've never laughed. I mean, it was just, it was it. So, it felt so good and so natural for me. So, I, I sort of got over that initial, you know, awfulness right away, or that initial terror. But I I, and, and I discovered that the students are, you know, we, I don't know, if people here understand how amazingly nice our students are. I mean, our our students are incredibly, just incredibly nice human beings, you know, for them. I mean, I guess I can't say that about all 21,000 dogs, but you know, we were, generally speaking, and

they're still nice. Yeah. They weren't. I, they, they have not appeared to me to be any more needy or wanting their hands held or anything like that than freshmen ever have been. So maybe it's because I'm used to teaching freshmen, maybe that sort of doesn't show up until later, maybe people teaching juniors and seniors don't expect them to need that anymore. And they're finding that they do, but I'm not I'm not finding that I'm actually finding them a little reluctant to ask for help. Yes. So, and that's, that also has not changed. Yeah. That, you know, that's always kind of been the case with freshmen. I think the thing that surprised me that shouldn't have is, you know, there's a lot of literature out there that says, hey, just because they're digital natives doesn't mean that they're great with technology, or the kinds of technology that they need to use for, for their schoolwork. Right. So, one of the things I asked them early, I had them do it a student information sheet. After the first day, I asked them how comfortable they felt with technology. And almost all of them said, oh, yeah, I'm comfortable with technology. One student said, well, my dad and I had built three computers, but I'm not sure I really could say I'm comfortable with technology. I was like, Well, okay, that's fine. But in fact, many of them have been flummoxed forth by things like I asked them to insert a photograph in a document. And or to insert a photograph into their blog on Reggie net, their their journals. And they just they would write the whole journal entry. And then at the end, they'd say, well, I have a picture, but I don't know how to put it in here. Right. And so, you know, we were having to address some of that. And I wasn't surprised that they weren't altogether comfortable with Reggie net. Although I think more and more our students are coming with some experience with learning management systems.

JIM: Yes, I think so. too. yells. Yeah.

CLAIRE: But you know, ReggieNet is different. But I have had a couple of students, sort of, I don't know, they have state that has been the stated cause for late assignments or something I think I had trouble with I didn't know how to do that. And ReggieNet. Right. And so could be an excuse, but I think not in every case. I think sometimes they just didn't. So.

JIM: Well, you know, one of the first things I do, and this is with juniors even in a but I also did this when I when I taught freshmen a few years ago, and ReggieNet was was new and young. I actually created assignment where the assignment is essentially to upload something. And so especially if I'm dealing with media files other than Word documents, yeah, I have them record it. And you figure out how to get that off your phone and on the ReggieNet. Yeah. And we'll talk about it in class next week. Yeah. Talking about it tonight.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I actually, I probably should have done that. And I could very easily have done that on the student information sheet because I could have had them include a picture of themselves that I have been incorporating into the assignment. links to the videos for students on that the student help videos that we have on the CTLT website. Yes, there's loads of little videos like how to how to submit assignment and check your grades how to check your grades and ReggieNet. And so, I've been putting those as hyperlinks, but we didn't have one for example on how to create your how to create

your blog in ReggieNet row and right. So, I sort of tried to give instructions for that but that wasn't as successful. So.

JIM: Yeah. So, well, you know, and I think when we talk about digital, so the phrase digital native, to me has changed a little bit. I think the original assumption is just like you said that they're all computer wizards, because they grew up, you know, with computers next to their quizzes or whatever.

CLAIRE: I know they just, yeah, they just absorbed it.

JIM: Right? I really think, though, that what it really speaks to is more of a cultural impact, that they're used to being connected, they have a need to be connected in ways that we're not they're used to being able to, they're they're much more of a 'look it up on the spot' sort of generation than we are people who would read books to figure out things and stuff like that. So, I think that doesn't surprise me to hear you say that.

CLAIRE: They do like, so a couple of times, I've asked them to bring things to class. And I've said, Hey, I need you to have this work in class, you can bring it as a hardcopy, you know, printed out on paper, or you can bring it on your laptop or your phone or you know, whatever mobile device you have with you in class. And they like that, and they tend to bring it they seem to be well; I don't know. Maybe they're about 50/50. But at least half of them want to do that they want to bring their phone or their usually it's a phone or their laptop, and just show it to us that way. Yeah, and call it up. So.

CLAIRE: There was an interesting study that I've used in some of the workshops I do here at CTLT, a few years ago, that talked about students' attitudes, and looking at the difference between social behavior. Yeah, social behavior, what we call off task behavior in class with these devices, and educational purposes for using this technology. So social, social reasons to use technology and educational reasons. Students like to have the option to use stuff for educational reasons, but they resent being told they have to.

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah.

JIM: Catch 22.

CLAIRE: I honestly didn't care. So yeah, I you know, as long as they had access to the work, I it is interesting, you know, I didn't, I don't think there's even a technology policy or statement in my syllabus, because I sort of thought, well, I'll wait. And if it's a problem, we'll talk about it, and we'll figure it out. I've had, I've had zero problems with kids being you know, on their cell phones, or, you know, yeah, they, you know, they're, they're using them, I have a couple who come in there, there are several of them that this is their first class of the day, and some of them tend to get there pretty early. And so, they'll come in and sit down in the class, you know, or out in the hall, you know, 10 or 15 minutes before class starts, but, and they'll have their phones out, or they'll have their plugs in or whatever. But pretty uniformly, and maybe this is because they're still freshmen, and they're, you know, they're used to high school rules. But they're-

JIM: I think that's probably exactly yeah, you know, I think that's, that's what it is, when, wait, wait till I have MS. Juniors, a horror story, a different story, because they will know, because when I again, when the last time I taught freshmen would have been the fall of 2015. Okay. So, two years ago, it has not that long ago. And that I swear, that was the first kind of cohort of students who went through all four years of high school. Oh, and with a mobile device, or at least most of them did. I mean, there's always the socio-economic thing, and can they afford it? But I think almost all of them probably had a cell phone at least or something like that. And they had been told to put the bleep and thing away for four years. So, no matter how egalitarian how open, I wanted to be building a learning community now they actually were reluctant at first to take them out. So that might be some of what you were-

CLAIRE: That's probably that's probably I mean, I don't think it's any kind of magic bullet or anything. No, no, I just as I say, I didn't even address it. I just decided that I'll wait till it comes. If it becomes an issue, we'll talk about it. But it has not yet. Okay. Looks good. So lucky me.

JIM: Yeah. Know, you kind of lucked out there. Now. Now you may find it, I'll be interested to see if that's reflected in the midterm feedback that you get in some way. And we'll have to see how they, you know if they say anything about it, or if they're just not sure what to make of it yet, because again, it is early days for them.

CLAIRE: They may not be sure what to make of me yet.

JIM: Well, whoa, you know, there lady, there is something we've talked before about how exciting it is to have freshmen their first semester on campus. And teaching is always an awesome responsibility. But you do kind of feel that you that the pressure is a little bit more because you know, you you are going to be judged. But but also, but also you may end up being what they judge everyone else by subsequent...

CLAIRE: Oh, I hadn't even thought about that. Yeah.

JIM: Oops. I don't know.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I'll say the thing that I that I was worried about has, to a certain extent come to pass. I as I was leaving the class today, there were some other people coming into the classroom there. I'm not sure that there's a class. I don't think there's a class in that classroom right now. For me, but there is a reading group that meets in there occasionally. And last week, there was some random thing. I don't even know what it was. But anyway, there was somebody coming with students, and they were using the room. But this morning, as I was leaving, some of my colleagues were standing in the hallway and they said, Ooh, master teacher, the here's a master teacher from her work. And I was just like, don't even- don't go there. Because, you know, I, there's still plenty of time for me that just fall on my face. And I have no idea what what the students are thinking? I mean, you know, yeah, except for the three left, but

JIM: well, but I don't think it has to.

CLAIRE: But so, I'll know more after the midterm feedback. Yeah.

JIM: So, let's wrap it up with one final question. And we could have discussed this a little bit before we started recording recording. Have you had an aha moment? Or have the students have you seen the lights turn on, at some point this semester?

CLAIRE: We had a funny moment this morning; they that this morning, they were quite engaged this morning, and I wasn't sure how they would take this. I had told them; we would spend some time this semester or this eight weeks talking about how learning works. So, they could sort of apply that to their other classes. And so, we spent some I plan to class today where we would talk about prior knowledge, you know, which is something we always talk about here, you know, activate their prior knowledge, make sure you're, you know, connecting what they're learning with what they already know. And of course, what the research tells us is prior knowledge can help or prior knowledge can hinder you know, it depends on the circumstances. But I wanted to take that from a student perspective. So, what if you're a student and your instructor isn't spending the time activating prior knowledge? So, what what could you do as a student, so I told them that it's their job to access and assess prior knowledge. And they need to sort of figure out what the topic is. So, for example, if they have a reading assignment, they can look at the reading assignment, see, you know, read the title, read the subtitles, you know, get it, get an idea, and then think about what they already know about this topic, and what questions they have, but they should also think about how sure they are Oh, okay. And it's interesting. We had talked earlier in the semester about cognitive dissonance and what that meant. So anyway, I had them, they had come to class with lists of things. We think we already things we already know about how nerd learning works. And then I had the meet in small groups. And as a group, they had to come up with three things that we're sure of, you know, three things that we think probably aren't really true. And, you know, some questions that we have. So, the I said, okay, so what's one thing come in drawing on the group's, what's one thing that you're, you know, sure about? And sure enough, the first thing that came out of their mouth, somebody raised his hand and said, we all have different learning styles.

JIM: And you said, I have a podcast you should listen to.

CLAIRE: I said, Okay, I'm so sorry. But that, in fact, is not true. Yeah. And they just all gaped at me.

JIM: Because it's so ingrained in the culture. We've talked about that.

CLAIRE: It's and I told him, I said, you know, this is cognitive dissonance for you. And I said, believe me, it's cognitive dissonance for me. I said, I have spent a 40-year long, you know, teaching career with this in mind. And I said, Now, you know, whoa, whoops, here. Here's the research. So, yeah, we all had kind of an aha moment. They and I think it would help them to know that even we as teachers, or maybe especially we as teachers, yeah. Have moments. Yeah. Where we have to stay. Okay, well, yeah, I've been doing that for 30 years, but oops, yeah. And we have to, you know, readjust.

JIM: So, we do.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. To find out more about our podcast, go to our website, CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. You'll find links to this episode and past episodes as well. For Dr. Claire Lamonica, and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology. Until we talk again, Happy Teaching!