

Ep. 036: Legacies (or “Why We Teach”)

Illinois State’s 2017 Homecoming theme is “Building a Legacy.” In this special bonus episode, Claire and Jim discuss what teaching legacies they are a part of, whose shoulders they stand on, and what advice they’d give to their younger teaching selves.

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep036.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 again, Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Hey, it's homecoming week.

CLAIRE: It is.

JIM: And this year's homecoming theme, you know, they have themes every year. Some years are easier. It's easier to relate to teaching and learning than others, I think. And this is one year that we kind of latched on to it. The theme is building a legacy. Yeah. And so, we wanted to talk very briefly today, this is going to be a very short little episode, where we just kind of talk a little bit about the legacies that we feel we're a part of, in terms of teaching and learning and why we wanted to be teachers. So, if we can start out, I want to ask you a question I've wanted to ask you for a long time on our podcast.

CLAIRE: Oh, you're scaring me.

JIM: Can I have array? No, no, no. No, you know, seriousness, did you always want to be a teacher?

CLAIRE: I think I did. Um, I think, um, well, I, you know, I don't know. So, when I was a kid, I said, I wanted to be a writer. And I used to write little things, you know, but, um, I love I always loved playing school, and my poor brother. And my dolls, and you know, the neighbor, kids and everything. Because I always wanted to be the teacher. When we played school, I didn't want to be the student. I did that at school that wasn't playing. Right. So, I and then when I was in high school, I thought I would go to college and major in journalism, because that would be a way, I could be a writer and still eat. And but even then, my, my real motivation was that eventually I wanted to be a high school

journalism teacher. So, I like have this in my mind that I would go and I would be like, Brenda Starr for a few years, you know, and then I would start teaching high school and I would teach high school journalism. So, once I got to college and found out that a, if I wanted to teach high school journalism, I would have to have a teaching certificate, not just a bachelor's degree in journalism, and be that, you know, being a journalist didn't really wasn't really what I wanted to do. And I just had this moment where I thought, I'm gonna change my mind. I did I just, I didn't ask anybody I didn't I just went and changed my major. And then I called home and told my mom, dad, I'm I can change my major. They were so shocked. Yeah, maybe a teacher? Yeah. Oh, really? So...

JIM: Well, and you had teachers in the family, right?

CLAIRE: Yes. Yeah. I my, I say I'm a third-generation college teacher, my, both of my grandfathers were professors at Southern Illinois University, and my paternal grandmother taught math at SIU. And I've an uncle, who was a dean at an English professor and a dean at a small college in Pennsylvania. So, it's kind of something that I get from both sides of my family, I guess I can remember going with at least one of my grandfathers to one of his college, one of his cloud college classes when he was teaching No, really sitting Yeah. And sitting kind of in the back of the room, they must have, he must have, I don't know why I went, it's kind of my grandmother must have had something to do, you know. And she was like, here, take this child to class with you. So, I went and sat in the back of the room. So.

JIM: I find that interesting, because I had kind of a similar, similar experience. Now I went a little further into journalism. But I always had in the back of my mind, I remember sitting, doing working, doing TV here at Illinois State, way back in 19. herder. And sitting in a newsroom, and the the news director at the time was a professor in the School of Communication was talking. And, you know, got done, and we had a, you know, he helped me out with the store and everything. I thought I was kind of cool. You know what, maybe when I'm 60 or 70, I'll come back. I'll retire from journalists. It'd be great to come back and do this. Yeah. And it turns out, I was like, 35.

CLAIRE: A little faster.

JIM: They did. They did well, and I also realized that journalism wasn't necessarily I mean, I think it's a noble profession. And I think it's important but especially I was doing TV journalism, so they're, they're people who self-identify the journalists who are sneering at me right now anyway.

CLAIRE: Like you weren't a real journalist. You were a producer.

JIM: I was a producer. I find teaching much more rewarding. Yeah. You know, and I'm glad I didn't wait until, until you're presuming I actually could survive that long in the business in this day and age. Yeah, yeah. So was there was there someone who was instrumental to you because I was, you know, we always talk about mentors, we talk about those important figures. And whenever I have conversations with people, even if they're not teachers, many of them not all of them, but many of them often point to a

teacher, who was kind of an inspiration for them. Maybe not in terms of like a true mentor, or even a true guru, or whatever you want to call it. But was there anyone that kind of inspired you or that you thought you would like to emulate someday?

CLAIRE: You know, I had, I had a lot of good teachers growing up, and I'm not sure there was any one I can remember really, really liking my 10th grade English teacher, and she was young, she must have been not too long out of school. And she did a lot of she was doing a lot of innovative things in our classroom. And I really liked that class. I'm really embarrassed because now I can't even remember her name. But she was, it'll come to me. I mean, I do remember it off and on. Yeah, but but I don't. I don't think that she was like, the only one I you know, I really, I had so many teachers that I like I had, I actually only ever had, maybe one or two teachers that I didn't like.

JIM: It's the same with me. And of course, we both are people. We've talked about this before we we both liked school. Yeah, we both really liked school. And so, I did have a conversation once with a colleague, not here at CTLT. But at another institution. And they said, you know, I never had, because I had kind of asked, was there ever a teacher who you know? No, no, I really hated school. Now why they got into the profession they got into eventually? I don't know. They were a teacher. Well, they Yeah, they were a professor. And perhaps they're more interested in doing research, which is which, you know, but they still they still taught and whatnot. And we were talking about teaching. So, you know, and so, you know, people have had different experiences over the years and whatnot. I had, I kind of agree with you that there was never like one teacher, although there were a couple of teachers that I latched on to at the time that I really felt got me.

CLAIRE: We've talked about a couple of your teachers. Yeah. And we've just sort of talked when we're not recording

JIM: The ones that really took a personal interest in me. I had a seventh-grade English teacher named Mrs. Richard- Richard, who was about ready to retire. And she was, you know, she was one of those people who was inspired me in life. First of all, I don't know if we've ever actually talked about this even off Mike. You know, I grew up in the same town that my dad did. My mom and dad grew up in. So you know, I was second generation with some of these teachers. And so Mrs. Richards knew my name, and knew me and knew what that spark meant. And—

CLAIRE: Yeah, and there was a lot of you and your dad, too.

JIM: She was on- she was onto me from birth, literally, from my birth. And so, and she was really someone who was very supportive. She, you know, she did the student council, she was one of the first teachers I encountered that I knew really cared about teaching because she, she was about ready to retire. She'd done playing politics. And she had very strong opinions about whether students should be broken up in the tracks into an honest track. Yeah. Or, you know, run-of-the-mill track or remedial track or whatever they call it.

CLAIRE: Her Omar again.

JIM: She was again um, yeah, she was way again. Me too. Yeah. Well, there you would like to if you want to like her because she really stuck to her guns. And I remember going back and talking to her when I was about to get into high school. She said, what classes to take, and I said, oh, I'm taking hundreds English and she went there. I mean, she was supportive, but she stuck to her guns, you know, and she retired shortly thereafter. So yeah, yeah. So, you know.

CLAIRE: One of those things that kind of comes and goes, you know, it's different from district to district. So.

JIM: You went back and started teaching this semester? Again?

CLAIRE: I need to because I taught my last class yesterday.

CLAIRE: I did.

JIM: You had the opportunity to do that. We'll do a little wrap up on that, because...

JIM: Yeah. As we're recording this. Yeah. And it was an eight-week course as opposed to a 16 week course. So, we'll get into that. But, um, I guess my question is, how are you a different teacher now than you were when you were starting out? And maybe...

CLAIRE: Oh, my gosh-

JIM: Well-

CLAIRE: I am so much better of a teacher now. You know what I think? I think when I started my career, I was all about teaching. And now I'm all about learning.

JIM: Well, and so I'm just figuring out what the differences is.

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah; because I, you know, I liked teaching initially, um, you know, so we've talked about this before. I'm one of those eyeballs in the, in the, at the University and I'm an extrovert. And initially, the parts I loved about teaching was the standing up in front, the performance aspect, you know, I loved being the center of attention in the classroom. And, you know, if the students laughed at my jokes, it was great. And it took me not very long, but it took me just a little while to figure out that, that wasn't really what my job was, you know, I wasn't there to be the center of attention and tell good jokes. So nowadays, I'm more about what the students are doing than what I'm doing. And I really do, I'm not always successful. And I, but I try really hard to practice what I preach, and, you know, really engage them and things that will help them learn rather than just sort of, you know, talking at them, or whatever. So, anyway, my whole approach my whole philosophy, you know, everything is is different now.

JIM: Well, so, that would be a big message to deliver. But if you had a time machine, here's your final question for the day. Oh, thank you, if you had a time machine, and you could go back and talk to yourself, the young Claire Lamonica, just starting out

teaching, yeah, either high school or college or whatever, what would be the one most important piece of advice that you would give?

CLAIRE: Uhm, get to know your students and, and do what you can to help each of them be the best that they can be at whatever it is that they're trying to, to learn in your class. So, I, you know, that's really hard. And it's, you know, and it's, you know, I say that with the knowledge that there are people listening to this who have two 300 students at a shot, or no, in one classroom and saying, Get to know your students is, you know, totally unrealistic, but, but I think all of us know that. The times that we were most successful are when we were when we're being when we're being mentors when we're creating legacies. Yeah, you know, and so we're working with students in smaller groups or one on one, and really be, you know, passing along that legacy that, you know, whatever it was that somebody gave us, you know, passing that along to the next the next sort of generation of educators or of scientists or whatever it is that we're working with. Sure. And broadcasters.

JIM: Broadcasters, even, I think, when you're talking about, you know, if you have a class of 202, or 300 students, I would say the, yes, you have to recognize that you're not going to be able to get to know all of them, as well as maybe you would like to or you feel like you should, but at least create opportunities for those who want to engage with you like that. To do that. I think that's, I think that's a big, you know, that teaching on that kind of a stage, there's a lot of there's a barrier there.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And literally a stage.

CLAIRE: Because it's literally as well-

CLAIRE: Ass red stage on the stage, you've got a real stage.

JIM: So you have to create some sort of opening for them. It's welcoming, and you know, whether it's whether it's having more, like group office hours, or something like that, and we can we can talk about those techniques or something in another episode, but I think the sentiment is spot on. So.

CLAIRE: Yeah, so but I have to turn that around on you now. So what advice would you give your get not so much younger? Because, you know, it's not like you've been doing this for 45 years, like some of us.

JIM: You know, that's true, but it's been a while I started teaching about 11 years ago now. So 11 years. And, and, but see, the thing is, aspects of my jobs, plural that I had, when I was in TV, those those aspects that I enjoyed were ones that were as closest to being a teacher, if that makes sense. Yeah. So I think like I said, I think journalism is a very worthy profession. And, you know, I advocate for good journalism all the time. I think it's more critical than ever in our society. And I enjoyed some of that. But I did not enjoy managing people, which is something that I found that I was doing more and more. The one aspect of my job I did enjoy was working with younger reporters and younger producers, and sitting down with them one on one and working on the writing. Now, some of that is an egotistical exercise, just like you want to you like being

at the center of the classroom. You like being the guy with the answers. The trick, though, is that what I really found I ended up being pretty good at was not only giving them how you should do it, but why you should write it this way. Or how you know why we should why we should pursue this angle of the story. So I was doing so it was the teaching aspect. And so when I got the opportunity to leave commercial broadcast local television, and go teach down at Southern Illinois University, I was my teaching position. I wasn't actually faculty. I was actually a staff member, but I was running the television newsroom down there. And then I taught one class a semester so I I was kind of a tenure track, AP staff member. And, you know, it was kind of a natural transition there. I just kind of did more of what I liked. Yeah. Which was great.

CLAIRE: There's a deal.

JIM: So obviously, I'm avoiding answering your question, though, what would I tell? I think, I think I would go back in time and tell myself not to take teaching personally. In fact, I would go back in time and advice, I would go back in time and tell myself not to take most things personally, I would, I would go find a six-year-old Jimmy G. And say, Dude, don't take a chill. Yeah. Because I think so much anxiety in my life. And so much angst was was born out of it. When you take things personally, it's born out of insecurity.

CLAIRE: Yeah. Well, but you know, it's really hard not to do that. And I, I was reminded of that again, you know, as I was teaching this, you know, even this semester, you know, and, and a student disappeared, just quit coming to class. Yeah. And it was so hard for me to, you know, remind myself, no, it doesn't mean that he hated you. It doesn't mean that he hates it, you know, I mean, it was, it's very difficult not to take them personally.

JIM: And that's, you know, that's the thing I run into all the time when I talk to faculty members about mobile technology in the classroom and smartphones. It's not just that they're not probably learning as well. That's an important part of it should probably be the most important part of when you have a discussion about should you allow phones and you know, how do you control this stuff in the classroom? But part of it is it's distracting and why is it distracting to you the teacher, because they're not paying attention and that's offensive, right? It's, it's uncivil front. It is unsettled behavior and ah, well, so I would go back in time and tell myself to chill.

CLAIRE: Well, always good advice.

JIM: There you go. Well, 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. Find out more about our podcast at our website, CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. And you can see show notes for today's episode and also past episodes, you may want to check out, For Dr. Claire Lamonica and all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching!