

Ep. 042: Organizing Students' experiences

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Jim and Julie-Ann continue their conversations exploring ways to organize student experiences, including through the use of storytelling. They discuss the importance of moving students from behavior to cognition, and Julie-Ann introduces a new way for students to learn with those tired, old flashcards!

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

JULIE-ANN: And I'm Julie.

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. Julie-Anne McFann. Hi, Julie.

JULIE-ANN: Hi, Jim.

JIM: We are continuing our conversation; we decided to cut that episode a little short, because we were talking a lot about concept maps. And if you just have come across this episode, we'll make sure you have a link in the show page to get to the previous episode.

JULIE-ANN: Jim wouldn't let me just go on and on in the previous podcast.

JIM: Well, you know, we're talking about organizing student experiences. So, we have to organize our my defense anyway. We have to we want to organize, you know, the good, we know, digestible bits, we always talk about that information and digest.

JIM: Yeah, well, fine with that.

JIM: Yeah, we'll run with that. So today, we want to continue our conversation, and we want to talk about some of the other strategies. And all of this, of course, is based on how learning works, a book that we use a lot here at CTLT. We did a lot on concept maps. But what are some of the other strategies that as a teacher we have at our disposal to to help students organize their experiences?

JULIE-ANN: So, some of the ways we can help our students, in quote, organize their information for long term storage, are things we heard about when we were growing up and took a study skills class, you know, here's how you learn. And actually, they're tried and true. One of them is mnemonic device. And I use this a lot when I was a Special Ed teacher way back a long time ago. But that is where you help you give your students clues to

help them trigger memory to help them organize it. So, like several years ago, we had a keynote speaker with a difficult-to-pronounce last name. And I created a mnemonic device to help me remember it which I will not repeat.

JIM: Because yeah, we don't want to we don't want to get away who that was.

JULIE-ANN: No, we don't. We don't. But I shared it with everybody. And I went oh, yeah, thanks. That helps me remember it. But I think the one anybody who studied music at all will remember is "every good boy does fine" to help them remember the lines on the treble clef. So, if you can give them something silly, or some clue that is similar to it, to what you want them to learn, then that helps them organize it.

JIM: And what I always because before we started recording today, I said, Well, I think I said pneumatic Yeah, devices at first, which is, which is another—

JULIE-ANN: And I asked him to go check out the air in my tire.

JIM: Yes, exactly. Right. But mnemonic devices, yeah always seemed, seemed to be very basic to me. Like it was very low-level learning. But I guess it's really just to trigger everything else.

JULIE-ANN: Correct. Okay, correct. And in some ways, you know, you have well, thinking about the different types of knowledge will help you decide which strategy is most appropriate. So, if you have knowledge that is just factual knowledge, recall kinds of things that help provide the foundation for more complex thinking, it may be something like "every good boy does fine". It's just recall; students will need that information in order to help them with the more complex things; have the example we used in the previous podcast was, you know, as the instructor, you're the superhero leaping across the buildings and are and you want your students to be able to do that also. And so sometimes that providing that knowledge base, could be like the little afterburners on their feet. That will help them Oh, yeah. Okay. I can leap across it. So mnemonic device.

JIM: Yeah, yeah, no, that makes sense. And I think it also in a way, it allows you to then have, if you can remember the basics, then as you are creating, as you're analyzing or synthesizing information as you're, as you're creating new knowledge based on the experience or what you're observing, like, I had a conversation and I had to explain to someone why the laser beam in your BluRay player is more dangerous than the laser beam in your old DVD player. And it has to do with a spectrum ROYGBIV, red, orange, yellow, etc. And it's because blue light is at a shorter wavelength and can be more damaging or whatever that is. So, but you know, I had to remember the order of the spectrum in order to explain it. Now this light over here is of a different wavelength.

JULIE-ANN: I'm impressed because I didn't remember that spectrum.

JIM: So, there you go.

JULIE-ANN: There you go. Oh, another one that I don't think professors take enough advantage of is storytelling. There's a lot of literature that shows that if you tell a story about the concept, that or that elaborates on the concept you're teaching, your students may not remember, you know, a particular term, but it helps them understand that big picture of what's going on. And as they're trying to recall, or trying to organize their learning, they're like, okay, well, I remember that. She said that, if you really want to understand dirt, and told a story about going out in the mud and covered in mud, womping— and we're showing my age with the mud womping two people even mud womp anymore.

JIM: I have no idea what you're talking about. Okay, so apparently not.

JULIE-ANN: Apparently, that's a California thing. In my in my view, I mean, it rains, rain so infrequently that people go and drive in the mud.

JIM: Is that what it is? Yeah, no, I I've heard the term, but I never really was. Yeah, we got we got plenty of mud here. As you as you have learned over the last six or seven years, we have plenty of water out here.

JIM: So, so it's not a—

JIM: No. It's not a it's not. It's not it's not a moment for celebrate. Yeah. So, this idea of telling stories, to helping us learn really tickles an itch I have. Because I guess because in my discipline and communication and whatnot, and we and the narrative paradigm, and the and the idea that we really understand our world through the stories that we tell each other and tell ourselves, yes. You know, so that resonates with me, I guess, is a way to put it. So.

JULIE-ANN: And you have to think, you know, in classical times, the way to learn was to was through storytelling, right? It is definitely a tried-and-true method.

JIM: Right? So, when faculty members are trying to construct stories about a lesson, I guess there's probably a line between effective and overwrought, a little bit. Or something. Do you have any storytelling tips? Are there any storytelling tips that we can get from from this?

JULIE-ANN: Have fun. Just the the that also gets into how humor helps people learn. But make sure it's appropriate humor?

JIM: Yeah, humor, tough humor stuff on any level.

JIM: It is very tough.

JULIE-ANN: So have fun, but don't offend? Right. And what I've learned is sometimes if you make the story kind of outlandish, even the students will remember a bit more because it's not just the run of the mill, kind of something they'll encounter all the time.

JIM: So, what other techniques do we need to keep in mind when we're trying to help students organize experiences.

JULIE-ANN: Another way is association or elaboration. A lot of times we get frustrated because students aren't making those leaps or making those connections; we're saying, you know, they're not transferring what I taught them last week into what I'm trying to teach them this week. Be overt, show them, here's how these things connect, and how this builds on that or how this is similar or dissimilar to what you have already learned.

JIM: And that can be a challenge. I mean, sometimes like some of the things that I cover in the courses I teach are processes. And and they're broken up over several lessons. And so, it's that there's a natural, okay, last week, we talked about breathing this is how breathing supports the production of of sound and your throat. And it's it's very much there's a logical next step. Because we all know what the end result is that we're speaking. But I can imagine for in some other ways, that's not quite the case.

JULIE-ANN: So, what often happens is chapter one, you know, week one, chapter one, week two, chapter two, yeah, three, chapter three. And we forget that we need to go back and pull it forward. So, the literature says, as much as we need to revisit, I'm making a circular No, I am here to revisit what has been taught, and that that's how you can bring it forward, instead of saying, Well, we're on chapter four. So, we don't have to worry about what happened in chapter two. Right? And they're not gonna make, you know, those connections, if we are not overt about helping them make those connections, we cannot just assume that they can magically do it. That's magical thinking on our part.

JIM: Right, right. You know, it's funny when you mentioned chapter order, because there are a lot of times when I will use a textbook in teaching, and I won't, we'll jump around. And I think in some ways that puts the onus on me. I don't know if I actually succeed in this or not to help build those connections, because in some ways, I have to explain to them why we're reading chapter 11. Next and not chapter three, correct. And that sort of thing. Yeah. So that's interesting. I'll have to look back and make assuming that they just they're just going to figure out why.

JIM: And that's a great point. Because it makes sense to you why you're doing it. Yeah. But they may be not making that leap from rolling the building with you.

JIM: Right. Okay. That that's a that's a good point. When before we started recording this this episode, we had talked a little bit, you know, following up on our discussion of concept maps, and you had mentioned flashcards. Oh, and I probably gave you that look, because again, like like mnemonic devices, flashcards to me have, I've always seen that as being about really basic rudimentary stuff. But it's more than that, isn't it?

JULIE-ANN: Well, so...

JIM: Or can be more it can be.

JULIE-ANN: It can be. So, your students are going to make flashcards because what they're trying to do is make something that is basically cognitive into something that is behavioral. And so, they can write a piece of fact on a card, and then flash it in front. I know what this is, or I don't know what this is, that's very behavioral. Yes, no. Um, so how we can take that tendency to make it cognitive, again, is have them join, create kind of a concept map type of thing using the flashcards. How do you organize how these cards go together?

JIM: Okay,

JULIE-ANN: How, what are the connections that you see, and it requires laying it out on a desk in front of them or a table or self, so forth? It's, it's a great kind of interactive activity where you have your students work in pairs, or three or four and say, okay, how would you organize these cards? And they are, they can organize their own and that their own, they can organize their own?

JIM: Right, right. Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: And then see how other people organized their set of cards, right? You can see kind of the little mind explosions going like, oh, wait, I didn't realize that one of the my favorite activities to do when I'm doing a workshop on helping students think beyond flashcards, is to use a set of superhero Flashcards.

JIM: Right, right.

JULIE-ANN: And it's always interesting to see how the different participants organized those cards; some arrange them by publisher, Marvel vs DC, some of them are arranged by human versus non-human, by radioactive or right, yeah, I'm getting into your territory, Jim. And it's just really interesting seeing how they lay these things out. And so, you can do something similar with the facts that your students are focusing on to help them build that into how do these things work together?

JIM: So, when we say using flashcards in this way, we are shattering most of the preconceived notions that exist about how do you use flashcards,

JULIE-ANN: Correct.

JIM: Flashcards, are we think of flashcards being a solitary activity?

JULIE-ANN: Yes.

JIM: We think of flashcards being a very linear activity go through the deck one after the other. Right, right. This is a social activity. It's a group activity of what you're describing. It is a it's one where you're not going through the cards one after the other. You're looking at all the cards at once. And you're organizing? Yes. So, it is so that so that's a very interesting sort of, sort of thing. And I do remember sitting in a workshop where you did the superhero exercise, which I thought was really neat. How do you introduce an exercise like that? Do you how do you do you talk about; I'm going to stand here and

look and see what patterns you put together? How do you how do you introduce this new concept, because it's something students will never have done before in terms of flashcards. So how do you introduce this to them? And how do you teach them how to do it so they can do it on their own or in groups?

JULIE-ANN: Well, I would do it first without their fact. Flashcards, I would do it with something like superheroes or flowers or whatever is appropriate for the course you're teaching. So, it's kind of low stakes. And oh, this is fun. And oh, isn't it funny how the different people how people lay them out differently? And then you can talk about how these are all facts. But we all looked at it from different ways. So, let's now pull out that giant stack of flashcards that you have that probably have a ring around it, you got it at Office Depot color coded, right, you know, Pinterest has pictures of them and all that kind of stuff. And let's let's start looking at yours. How do you arrange it? How do you how to how is how you do it different than how somebody else does it? I think if you focus more on this notion of let's explore let's play. Let's play with this rather being how are you doing it?

JIM: Right, right.

JULIE-ANN: You know, let's see if you're doing it right.

JIM: Yeah. Well, and you know, isn't that one of the great challenges that we have when we're talking about helping students or organize experiences or other aspects of learning? They are so much more. When I talk to students nowadays, I get so much more than just tell me how to do it. Yes. As opposed to understanding that no, figuring out how to do it is as much a part of learning and remembering as anything else. Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: Yes. And process is so important and teaching our students how to go about that learning process, instead of necessarily focus, making sure that you're not just focusing on that end goal of that exam, that whatever that being overt, here's the process, here's how I do my process, the modeling it, and then I'm having fun with that. There's a reason that you are, you know, you have an advanced degree in your discipline, because you found something fascinating about it. Help your students find that fascination too. Yeah. So

JIM: Great advice. Great advice. So, one final little thought, and I'm going to, I'm going to make a prediction here, based on the fact that we had a really good conversation in a previous episode about the difference between assessment and grades. Yes. So, I'm going to guess we probably should avoid trying to grade the flashcard exercise.

JULIE-ANN: Absolutely. Okay. If I find out somebody is trying to grade, I was sick, I will sic our student worker on—

JIM: Our student worker make you feel guilty.

JULIE-ANN: That's right.

JIM: They'll just you'll just sit in your office and look and look downtrodden. Yes. So. And the reason for that is why?

JULIE-ANN: Because then it's no longer about the learning. And it's about the great, instead of focusing on how can I use this as a way of learning.

JIM: So, if you want to assess if this worked or not, you're going to find some other instruments, some other mechanism, then later on to test for that.

JULIE-ANN: Yes. And I think if you really are feeling itchy about it, make it a formative assessment, a low stakes kind of thing that will help you understand whether, help you gauge whether your students are understanding what is happening, what you're trying to help them learn. And if they are, you know, putting the knee bone with the elbow, and saying, oh, yeah, they're connected directly, then, you know, some teaching needs to happen.

JIM: Exactly. Dr. Julie McFann. Thank you again.

JULIE-ANN: Thanks for having me.

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 the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology at our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Find out more about our podcast and how you can subscribe by clicking on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. For Julie McFann, and for all of my colleagues here at CTLT, until we talk again, Happy Teaching!