

## Ep. 047: Researching Midterm Chats

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What are your students really thinking? In this episode, we discuss CTLT Director Claire Lamonica's new research into Midterm Chats, also known as Small Group Instructional Diagnoses. She provides a preliminary look at how faculty members at Illinois State believe this process improves their teaching. Also, Claire and Jim talk about the importance of making little changes, instead of wholesale revision, to one's teaching.

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

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 once again, our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hey, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: How are you?

CLAIRE: I'm good. It is 2019. We wanted to add a guest.

JIM: And for once we're not recording this podcast early enough, or I'm not late enough editing it to where we're actually recording it in 2019. And it should, it should premiere a couple days at most after I record it. Because we're talking about something topical; we're at the beginning of the fall, or I'm sorry, the spring semester, and we're going to revisit our old friend the midterm chat.

CLAIRE: Yay.

JIM: So, let's start out; some folks may not be familiar or may need a refresher about a midterm check. Because the, and we'll link to the old episode we did it goes into more depth about what it's about. But that was back in 2016. I think we recorded—

CLAIRE: That it's a while ago,

JIM: It was one of our— was one of our inaugural episodes. So, what is the midterm chat? What are the virtues of the midterm chat? How do they how does a midterm chat differ from other forms of assessments of teaching?

CLAIRE: A midterm chat is basically a way of collecting some information from your students about their experience with your course, before you get to the end, of course evaluation period. So, we're talking about midterm fifth to eighth or ninth week sometime in there. Basically, what happens is that a- uh, chat facilitator from CTLT

comes to your class meets with your class, you're gone. We ask them for questions, we ask What is there about this class that helps you learn? Is there anything about this class that makes it difficult for you to learn? Do you have any suggestions for ways that your instructor could make this a better learning experience? And do you have any suggestions for ways that uh, students could make this a better learning experience? So, they answer those four questions, and then we come back? Well, I should have said there's a process of consensus building, the students go through a process of consensus building. So, when we bring the data back to our offices, what we're looking at is not individual student responses, but a consensus of the class. And I think that's the main thing that delineates a midterm chat from other kinds of evaluations, even the kind of self-administered midterm evaluations that I know, we know a lot of instructors do where, and a lot of people actually ask those same questions of their students at the midterm, rather than having us come in, probably because it's a bit of a time suck. You have to give us ah, you have to give us a day session, basically, unless it's a long, you know, it usually takes 40 to 50 minutes. So, depending on the size of the class, the difference between asking those questions yourself in a survey or whatever, and having us come is the consensus piece. So, when you're doing a survey, you're still going to get that sort of disaggregated data?

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And it's not going to tell you as closely sort of what are the things that the class as a whole agree on?

JIM: Because when we come in, and we do that consensus, the consensus part of it, we're fostering a discussion among the students- right extent. And so, and we only have the answers in the kind of the final report that students have gotten pretty close to consensus on. Yeah, it may not be 100% consensus all the time, I think, but it's pretty close.

CLAIRE: Pretty close to us, we usually, I think most of us, you know, we usually tell students, hey, you know, if there's something we just can't agree on, that's okay. It's not a big deal. You guys can talk about that on your end of semester evaluations, we really want to concentrate on the things that you can where you can come to a consensus. Sure.

JIM: And then the other thing along those lines, we asked the instructor to go back to the and talk to their students about some of those consensus,

CLAIRE: Right, that's kind of a that's actually kind of an important point is that there's a after the midterm chat, we, we meet with the instructor and give them our give them our feedback, the feedback from the class. And then we do ask them to go back and talk to the class and talk about the feedback that they got. And we usually say, "hey, pick something, you know, it doesn't have to be a big thing. Pick one of the things they mentioned. Say that you're going to tweak that, and you know, and then pick one of the things that they mentioned that they could do a students, and ask them to tweak that as well." So becomes sort of a mutual, mutual tweaking process.

JIM: Mutual tweaking.

CLAIRE: I lost the word, well lost language.

JIM: It beats the I think the official name in the research for this as a small group instructional diagnosis, diagnosis.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: A small group instructional diagnosis, which to me always makes it sound like there's something wrong or somebody's sick or something like that—

CLAIRE: —There's a plague and we try to make sure to try to figure out what it is.

JIM: So mutual tweaking certainly is an improvement to that. So, we've been doing this for a long time. And we had in our previous episode on midterm chats, we've kind of talked about the history and how they came about here on campus at Illinois State. We've always kind of taken it to an extent on faith that they were that they were valuable. We everyone seemed to be happy, the students seem to be happy. You know, you and I both have talked about students who come up to us after doing one of these chairs, and they say, “you go do this for Professor someone?” And we're like, “No, we can't; we have to be invited into this.”

CLAIRE: Volunteer?

JIM: Yeah. But most of the time students seem to react positively in in that moment, or, you know, when classes dismissed, they feel like that they've had their say at least. But now, at long last, you've been able to work with a research assistant, and you are kind of showing research well, and, and showing that there is some value to this?

CLAIRE: Well, it's really interesting, because there's actually been a lot of research done around small group instructional diagnoses. Especially early on when they were when the process was first developed. And there was there was a lot of research. But the really interesting thing was that it was always, even the original write ups about the process, sort of posited this as a way to improve teaching. But then, none of the early research really focused on whether it improved teaching, basically, what researchers were doing, were going in and talking to students and asking things about motivation, and course ownership and, and questions like that; things that we know, probably do affect student learning. But nobody that we've been able to find, ask the question; does this specific process improve teaching over time, right. And that was what we really, you know, if we were going to go out and pitch these to people and encourage them to take part in the process, we wanted some evidence that it really was going to help them. So, we designed a little research study. Our research question was specifically, do midterm chats affect the instructional practices of individual instructors at Illinois State University in lasting and positive ways? So, spoiler alert, yes. That's like, I think we're done now. Right? I just gave it all away.

JIM: Well, it's a very carefully phrased question. And it has to be because, you know, we've talked before, from a general standpoint, how difficult it is, to find a direct correlation

A to B between professional development and student learning outcomes. Yes, it can be done. But there are so many dimensions in so many different things that affect the student learning outcomes. You know, we have to we have to show—

CLAIRE: That correlation research—

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: Far exceeds our center's ability to research.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I mean, we we couldn't, we don't have the research team. Sure. Here to answer that question. Right. Right. But this was something that, you know, basically, I undertook it with a part time graduate assis— assistant. So, she's been great. Gina Campbell. Yeah. Shout out to Gina. She's been wonderful.

JIM: And we'll we'll also link to, we have some pictures that we'd put up on social media, you and Gina presented this data. In the fall of 2018. At the annual pod conference, we did. Were here we have some fans of our podcast,

CLAIRE: We have it turned out we had some fans of our podcast, and people were very interested in our research. So, we spent, we did a lot of talking at the poster fair,

JIM: I can, I can imagine, write down some of what you've learned, in particular, what's some of the data that you you were able to glean from this and some of the conclusions you drew from it? Yeah,

CLAIRE: I'm gonna, you know, for the conference we just focused in on on four basic questions. I'm going to I'll talk about those a little bit. We're still crunching the data from from, the other questions. And we also have, as part of our research we set for so I should say the research consisted of Part One was a- an online survey sent to 270 faculty who had participated in midterm chats. Part B was those people were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed. And so, in a way that kept their, their identity, separate from their responses, obviously. And we had quite a few people agreed to be interviewed. So, we're, we actually aren't even quite finished conducting the interviews. Sure. So, we're also starting to code some of that qualitative data. So, the first question we asked was, whether Not faculty had found this experience to be valuable to their teaching. And 88% of them said yes. So yay, Ra. That's pretty that's, that's a big number, then we asked how valuable, right, um, and 70% of them said that it had been at least moderately valuable, right.

JIM: Looking at that pie chart, it is spread across several different levels of valuable, but which actually makes sense to me, because midterm chats are not about wholesale change of your course, the instructors I work with at least usually find one or two little things that they can tweak, as, as we were saying that they and their students can work on for semester. So, it's not about you know, we don't want people to reinvent their course every time they do a midterm. Just, it is a for a little mid-course correction

and a chance to reflect at the end of the semester, when you compare what you talked about the midterm chat with the end results you get with those end of term surveys and stuff like that. So, it makes a lot of sense to me, actually.

CLAIRE: And I think so too. And then the third question that we focused in on was that we asked faculty, to what extent would you say that the midterm chat affected your instructional practice? And 70% said at least at least a moderate amount? So once again, you know, we have that's a pretty good-sized number for even moderate. Yeah, even though you know, we don't we didn't intend for it to affect their instruction on a wholesale level. We were really aiming for those small changes. So, it if they changed their teaching a moderate amount, they rock; that probably that probably meets our goal. It does sort of lead us to ask, in what ways has your teaching changed as a result of the midterm chat? We identified a number of ways, the sort of highest number of changes came in terms of modifying their communication strategies, students, modifying in class teaching techniques, modifying their methods of delivering material or content, modifying this the actual material that was that was pretty small, you know, like, 5%. And that's not really what we were after; we weren't we weren't looking for people to change their content. That's not our purview, you know? Faculty are experts on their content. So, we really wanted to look at teaching.

JIM: Yeah, I've never had I've never done a midterm check for someone and have them come back to me and say, I'm teaching the wrong subject.

CLAIRE: Yes, not really, that's not really the point. We're really looking for people to change things like communication strategies, or in-class teaching techniques, things like that.

JIM: I will say the one exception is, I can think of one or two times where a faculty member we've gone through the midterm chat process, and students were saying, we've done all this stuff already. Oh, and so it turns out it shed a need to have a discussion on a programmatic level, about how much repeat content are you giving?

CLAIRE: And where are we? Where are we going to cover this content? And are we you know, and at the opposite end? I think sometimes you hear you know, they think we know stuff we don't know. Yeah, and so that that's sort of prompts the same conversation. But that's not really we don't direct those at all.

JIM: No, and we talk about prior knowledge and assess students' prior knowledge and point them to other podcast episodes in the series. And, and let them move on from there. So, what else there was, it looks like there are a couple other things on that

CLAIRE: There's a very tiny, tiny percentage said no, they hadn't made any changes. But that was that was just really, really small. So, you know, we were we're, we're pretty happy. I mean, we we have some we do have some qualitative data, we, we've pulled a few sort of quotes from faculty from the from the interviews. So, one of them is, for example, I feel like my teaching is getting better. Having had that experience was a useful part that probably factored into the way my teaching has been evolving. So, you know, that's, that's pretty insightful, you know, your teaching is going to evolve over time, whether whether you do something like this or not; but saying okay, so this was

one useful piece that has helped me helped my teaching evolve, perhaps a little more rapidly than it would have without this. Sure. So, it's kind of a and another thing that I noticed, and this is okay, I'm moving from not anecdotal, but I'm going to generalize based on the quantitative data and and I think that most of the people that I have interviewed at the time of the midterm chat were fairly early in their teaching careers at Illinois State. Okay, so we have people of at all levels of experience we sometimes do these with people who've been teaching for decades.

JIM: Ah, yeah, I was gonna say I can think of a couple. Yeah.

CLAIRE: Um, but at least most of the people who said yes, they they would be interviewed. When I asked, you know, when did you do this? It's like, oh, wow, it was, it was a while ago, it was my first year at Illinois State or it was my second year at Illinois State. So, it seems to have, it seems to be particularly helpful, I think, either early in your career, or perhaps early in your teaching of a particular course.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, I think another reason that people come to us as well, I was assigned a new course. And I just want to find out how, how it's going, or maybe I'm teaching a course that's a little bit outside my comfort area. And I need to know, I need to know how it's going. So, there can be there can be a number of reasons. But a lot of times people are worrying about their evaluations, their student evaluations, you know, well, I just wanted to hear what the students were thinking so or—

JIM: Or more broadly, sometimes they just sense that something doesn't feel right. Yeah, it's just not working so far, but they're not sure what it is. So, they come to us to try to investigate that. Which is why when we you know, we didn't say this upfront, but we have a pre-chat conversation with a faculty member before we go into the class to do the chat. And oftentimes, that's where points of data to look for, at least when we're actually can, I think—

CLAIRE: People often come with a, a sort of a general sense that things aren't going as well as they would like, but also some specific hypotheses about what might be causing that.

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: And so usually, in those pre-chat meetings, they'll say, "Well, you know, I think it might be this or I think it might be that," and it's it's very interesting, and I haven't done any specific research on this, but- and okay, so anecdotally, this isn't part of the research.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: A surprising amount of the time the faculty are dead on their hypotheses are exactly what we hear from the students. So that's, you know, and I always praise that in my report, you know, right as, "hey, wow, look, your instincts were dead on." So, this is great. Now you know, your instincts were right, and you can kind of move ahead and do the next best thing.

JIM: Now, I will say I have had a few. And we've, I think, we talked about this in that previous episode. I have a few regulars that I do midterm chats for. And they have been trying to build a longitudinal view by taking each of these snapshots and then kind of putting them together. That's a little beyond the purpose of of a given chat.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: You know, as but, but it can't, you can't go back and kind of at least you just use it as a tool of reflection on how things have changed. We always have to keep in mind that students change to not, not just, not do we just- not only do we evolve, what our students are changing over time. Now students now are different than they were three years ago. And so that's another reason to kind of, you know, if you think that there's, we're not connecting for some reason, then that's another reason to do one of these.

CLAIRE: Yeah, that's true.

JIM: And of course, as we always say, any sort of midterm feedback is valuable. So even if you can't, even if you can't come to CTLT, and work with us, give your students that that midterm survey and take to heart what they have to say, right? Talk to them about the results. And you know, you'll, it will be a good experience for everyone. So, if folks are interested in doing a midterm chat yet, this semester,

CLAIRE: There's still time,

JIM: There's still time spring of 2019. We, we usually say like around the first full week of February, we'd like to get these handled, we will accept them a little after that. But we have a limited number of folks who do this here at CTLT. And it is kind of first come first serve, we'll do two sections for you. So, it could be two sections of the same course or a section from different course members. And, obviously, there's some scheduling things and whatnot. You can request a particular person to do it, but odds are, just go in, fill out the form, go to our website, [ctl Illinoisstate.edu](http://ctl Illinoisstate.edu). Look for the consultations link. And you'll see midterm chats right there. Just fill out the request form and I can guarantee whoever you get will do a good job for you.

CLAIRE: You know, we we've worked pretty hard we worked especially early on but also as we brought new people on board doing chats to make sure that this experience transcends the facilitator. Yeah, that we all we all sort of, you know, we all do it the same way. We're all committed to—

JIM: Yeah, we kind of, we kind of did. We did midterm chat bootcamp and then we had the we had to we had to shadow other people who've done it before.

CLAIRE: Yes, yeah. If you're- if you- if you come new on staff at CTLT, you can't do midterm chats until you've- yes, been through boo camp and then shadowed somebody else doing some chats and then done a chat with somebody else shadowing you, so—

JIM: Yeah, I've got more- I got more training to do midterms. Yes. And I did, to do teaching originally, because they just they just said, "Oh, welcome aboard, your classroom's over there." Yeah.

CLAIRE: Okay. Yeah. You know, my first ever teaching experience, "here, your books", What wait, wait!

JIM: Chuck, are you?

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Oh, Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: Find out much more about midterm chats and about our pokey little podcast, go to our website [CTLT dot Illinois state.edu](http://CTLT.dot.Illinois.state.edu). Click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page and find this week's episode, and also how to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. For Dr. Claire Lamonica, for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.