

Ep. 048: Let It Go!

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Claire is teaching a new graduate course this semester, and she says her fresh approach to it is “life changing.” She’s shifted her methods, so her students replace her at the center of their learning. We’ll discuss what she’s doing in detail and how it can be applied to other classes. Plus, Jim ponders a mystery: Why has this semester seen a jump in absenteeism and late work? All that and more in a podcast which, despite this episode’s title, can’t afford to license *that song* from Disney!

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. And joining me once again today, our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hey, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: How are you?

CLAIRE: I'm great.

JIM: Hey, we're gonna be doing a little, little midterm check in here on our spring courses, because we're both teaching this fun teaching, in addition to all the busyness that we do here at the CTLT.

CLAIRE: Because we didn't have enough to do.

JIM: Well, and it's nice to be able to do something that, not that we don't enjoy our work here.

CLAIRE: Takes it takes me back to my roots.

JIM: Exactly.

CLAIRE: Assume it does the same for you.

JIM: It- well, it...

CLAIRE: You have kind of weird roots, but some of them are teaching well, because you know, you have broadcast routes as well as teaching.

JIM: That's true. And so yeah. And so, and I teach a broadcast performance class, typically. So yeah, I guess-

CLAIRE: Nice fit.

JIM: But, you know, it's nice to having a job to just as a side note, where I can occasionally also use these skills. I don't know if we ever actually talked about the origins of our podcast on the podcast itself. But we used to do a newsletter, which I hated doing.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: And no one read. And no one wrote anything for us.

CLAIRE: That was more of a problem.

JIM: Yeah, more of a problem. No one read it because no one was writing anything for it. And we had such great conversations. And then one day, I'm like, boy, you know, I'm I should record the oh, wait a minute, I have three degrees in mass communication. And a degree, particularly in radio and television production. So, whoops.

CLAIRE: Oh yeah, oops, y'all wait!

JIM: Yeah, there we go. Anyway, but we're talking about teaching today, as usual. And when I when we talked about, hey, what are we gonna do our next episode on, I had suggested we just do a little check in with teaching, and you kind of lit up with that idea, because I think this has been a, you've had some reflection, and, and, and all that and made some changes in your teaching this semester.

CLAIRE: This has been a great semester. Now I have to so I'm going to preface this by saying that I'm teaching this semester, a graduate class from the Department of English. It's part of the department's post baccalaureate certificate in the teaching of writing, which is a graduate certificate. All of my students are practicing classroom teachers in middle school or high school. So, because of that we meet on Saturday mornings, I use a blended format so that we actually only have to meet every other Saturday, which has been, I think, helpful to all of us. And it's just going great.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I, so I have to say I had never taught this class before. So, this was a new prep for me.

JIM: Oh, see, I thought this was the one that you had taught years ago.

CLAIRE: Oh, no, I've always taught the, the rhetoric class in the sequence. And this class is called teaching writing with technology. So, in spite of the fact that I started teaching, writing with technology in like, 1985, right? I was a little bit daunted by the topic, because it's been a decade since I taught a writing class specifically. And I knew that technology had come a long, long, long way-

JIM: A long.

CLAIRE: A long way. So, I'm writing, teaching, writing with technology no longer meant, you know, having students in a computer lab only. So, I appealed to my wonderful friend, mentor colleague, Jim Kalmbach, who is recently retired from the English Department, and who was the last person who taught this class. And he was so generous, he sent me all of his stuff. Um, you know, his syllabus, his book, list his assignments, the whole bit. Now, I have to say, with the rate, the way technology changes, I did change some of the readings, not all of them.

JIM: Well, you know, that's something that probably is another show. That's something that I've encountered, too. When you inherit a course from someone, and you get their syllabus and all of their lesson plans. Someday we're going to do an episode on you know, how do you how do you judiciously go through and-

CLAIRE: We will Yeah, we really did need to do that. Because that's been and let's do it while it's fresh in my mind, because I hadn't done that in a while. And this next week, next week. Next week, folks tune in we'll be talking about when you inherit a course. Yeah, um, because there you know, obviously, no course is a perfect fit for any two people. So, I did have to make some modifications. But the the thing that I didn't modify is the thing that I was most excited about when I when you asked me about this the other day, and that is that Jim's plan for the course is designed for Of course, gave me the courage to let go. And that has been life changing for me. It really has, it's I, especially because I teach this basically as an overload. So, I'm, I try not to take tons of time out of my day job, you know, to do this. I, you know, obviously, I have to take a little bit, but I'm not spending every evening planning.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Because the way the course was designed, the bulk of the responsibility falls on the students, duh, what a concept. So-

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, it's been fabulous. You know, another one of my mentors is, Tim, Fred strum in the music class, and in the music department, and I'm sure I've, I've said this before, but he has this saying that about school shouldn't be a place where students go to watch teachers work hard. And, you know, it's kind of supposed to be the other way around. Yeah, I would say, I'm actually experiencing that this semester, where the students are working hard, and I am sitting and watching and learning, and it was a particularly good fit. Given that I wasn't, you know, sure about my own expertise in this area. I'm allowing myself to draw their expertise, and for them to bring in their questions and their, the answers that they're finding in the readings, and it's great. It's fabulous.

JIM: Well, and you're very passionate about I mean, you when I walked into your office, and we start talking about this before we recorded the show today. I mean, you lit up.

CLAIRE: Yeah

JIM: And I think the exact phrase you used was “let it go”.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: And so, I looked into licensing certain songs from Disney, but but we can't afford.

CLAIRE: I so wanted to sing. But A, I can't sing and B it would have been very expensive if I broke into a few choruses of let it go. You know,

JIM: I'm going back and looking at fair use. Can we even put an image it? No, we're probably not going to be able.

CLAIRE: Oh, darn.

JIM: Oh, darn. So,

CLAIRE: Well, I don't look anything like Elsa, by the way. For those of you who have never seen me

JIM: Neither, neither do I. I'm probably most similar to the snowman body type. But that's a whole ‘nother Olof whole leg something.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Anyway, so to drill down a little deeper, when you're when we're saying let go or let it go. Obviously, in part that is giving up control. Right?

CLAIRE: To a certain extent, not more than I'm well, yes, more than I am- have been comfortable with. But I you know, I still my work was front loaded. You know, I had to, I had to provide the structure provide the assignments, which, which I updated and provide the readings, obviously. But a lot of that was done before I ever started teaching. Yeah.

JIM: Yeah. You know, one thing that I hear from when we go in and do midterm chats, we should play it ring a bell every time.

CLAIRE: Ding ding ding.

JIM: Although I did one this semester, someone said, hey, I heard your podcast, and I was interested. So yeah, so it cool. I like justifying my podcasting existence. So that anyway, so having done some midterm chats, occasionally, I will talk to students who, in classes where the students seem to do a lot of the instruction, where they're doing a lot of the presenting and stuff like that, and it's gotten mixed reviews to be generous. So, what do you do to make sure that when the students are presenting the material to their fellow students, what can we do to make sure that it's an optimum? It's still an optimal

learning experience for everyone else? They're learning from the, from the act of having to create and present, right?

CLAIRE: Well, yeah, except that I would well, so yes, there is a presentational element for this class. So, A I should say that it really helps that these are all experienced teachers. So, they're experienced schoolteachers. They are experienced, basically sick, I think the I think in this class, they teach eighth through 12th grade, there are people pretty much at every level eight through 12. So, they're used to designing engaging learning experiences, because you know, if you got eighth graders and you're not engaging them, so that helps, but they're also not presenting a lot of information. Okay, so the end the information is basically in the readings. They're in the books that we're reading. So, they're doing more legal discussion, they're leading discussions. So, here's what they do. This is really interesting. And this is they each week somebody does a Teaching with Technology Demonstration. And basically, that is a lesson that they might use in their own school with their own students, and they just lead us through it. It's it's, it's a writing lesson that in some way incorporates technology they somebody does. We spend the first hour and they do their lesson and then we have a general conversation about what worked about this lesson, what questions do you have? How would you have to adapt this lesson if you were to take it into your classroom, because obviously, you might have access to different technologies, your students or might be at a different grade level, whatever, then we have two hours that were originally conceived as a discussion. And so, one of the students present. One of the students prepares the discussion questions. And then a focusing activity. So, something that focuses our attention on either sort of the overall takeaway from the reading, or some specific piece of the reading that struck the the person who's designing it is particularly interesting or problematic, or whatever. So now, what the interesting thing that these folks are doing is sometimes interweaving those two. And that was fine. I mean, I'm like, Oh, yeah. Cool. That's, that's actually kind of nice. So, although, if I were doing it again, I would consider having three separate students in charge of the hours the time, right, and having, you know, one, do a teaching with technology demo, one doing the discussion and one doing the focusing activity. But I, you know, I would have to think about that, because they seem to like the way this is going, and they're, they're doing some fun things.

JIM: And how many students are in the it's a small group, it's I have only five.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: It was at one point up to six, but then I sent out the reading list and somebody bailed. Like-

JIM: Well, better than, yeah, better better than-

CLAIRE: So. Yeah. Yeah. So, and it's, you know, it's a graduate class. So yeah, so we have, each student is basically in charge of that, you know, that means that they're covering the bulk of the time. So, we meet together now, once they start on their final projects, and they're not doing as much common reading things, I'll will shake things up a little bit. I

will take one, you know, I'll take at least one of those days. And, you know, I'll do a, I'll do a teaching demo and lead a conversation and blah, blah, blah. So cool.

JIM: Anyway, it's a learning experience for you too then, because you're already talking about how you're going to do next time. Yeah.

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah, that's, well, that's what happens, right? You get you get into you get Partway into it. And you think, oh, okay, this is, I could do this better.

JIM: So, I often fiddle with my course from semester to semester. And and because I'm teaching in a new space, which I think we've talked about before, and a collaboration classroom. I've really restructured some of the some of it, once I get a new textbook, which is probably going to happen for fall. I've been waiting for the publisher to actually get anything I know, I know what I want. I just, I just don't hear you. I'll be restructuring things. But I've actually had a somewhat frustrating spring semester so far. Well-

CLAIRE: Because of the space?

JIM: No, not because of the space, I think, in some ways. Okay, my suspicion is that because the space is less structured in terms of like traditional rigid row seating, everything else. Yeah. And I have become, I think, a lot easier going. And I think this is all a good thing. But I'm having I have I'm having issues now that I've never encountered before with the number of students who aren't turning into assignments, oh, I and big projects and stuff like that.

CLAIRE: Doesn't seem that'd be related to the space, although maybe, maybe the attitude?

JIM: That's what I'm thinking. That's what I'm, that's what I'm wondering. It may also just be this semester. And you know, I, this group of students, this group of students, and I've been reminding myself of what you've often said, on our pokey little podcast here, which is that these we have to realize students are very busy people. But there's so but some of them are so bad at communicating. Everyone are-

CLAIRE: And are supposed to do their coursework.

JIM: And they're supposed to do their coursework. And and it's not just a well, you didn't read the syllabus and all that, you know, although I didn't explain this syllabus ad nauseum. I haven't done that in a long time. So, so I'm in I'm kind of in Detective mode right now trying to see what's going on. I mean, one or two cases, I suspect, you know, and I've gone through channels, and because they've missed a lot of classes, well, this is a one night a week course. It's, again, undergraduates, it's a small class, about 1615. But we meet one night a week on Monday nights for three hours. So, it for some of them, it's a new experience anyway, doing that.

CLAIRE: That's a hard it's a hard format. So many of us teaching that format, but yeah, that's not-

JIM: Yeah. Well on Monday nights and it's winter and you know, the bleak late winter and all that other stuff. Yeah. The the other reason why I'm a little the semester is because last semester, there's always one person who doesn't turn in one of their big projects. Yeah. So as an incentive, last semester, this semester, I put a little thing in the syllabus, and I pointed it out to people that said, Look, you need to if you don't complete the three major projects in the two major exams for this course, then I'm going to lower your grade by by one letter.

CLAIRE: Well, yeah,

JIM: you know, in addition, in addition to all the points, but now I'm in the position of where I'm probably going to actually have to make good on that, I'm probably going to have to deliver on that. Oh, and I don't like that. So, what I'm really leading to is that I may be we'll be doing an episode soon on on grading without points.

CLAIRE: Oh, pointless. Grading is great. Yeah. Yeah.

JIM: So, I'm kind of all over the place with my class this semester. I mean, there have been some really good discussions, and the collaborative part has worked out phenomenally well, it's a little bit different than what you're talking about, certainly, in terms of scale. But in you know, we watch a lot of media, and they do some of that at home. And they bring in, they bring in examples. Well, now, instead of all of us sitting there and watching the same 16 or 17 examples of a talk show or whatever, I can break them in the groups and they, and they can they can do that amongst and then they then they choose which one they're going to display. And we talked, you know, so because this is much about performance, criticism, and analysis and all that as it is actually performing. So, they're aspects of that have been great. But they're just not turning stuff in. And I'm, and I'm scratching my head,

CLAIRE: Have you? Have you asked them?

JIM: I've asked a couple of them. And, and? Well, I've done a lot of I've done a lot of hey, you know, I still haven't found out from you what's going on? And some of them will get back to me, and we'll explain what's going on? Yeah. So, it's just a quantity of that? Well, I'm

CLAIRE: wondering more, this would be a great opportunity for you to perhaps in order to eliminate the, the hypothesis that is connected to the room are to discover maybe that it is I mean, this is a great opportunity, not necessarily for a midterm chat, but for some getting some midterm feedback, rather, through other means, you know, and and maybe even focusing it specifically on the space, you know, what are the ways that this space is helping you learn why are there any ways that this space makes it difficult for you to learn, you know, actually sort of reframing those midterm chat questions and seeing what kind of that might be of interest, you know, to a lot of people because we're, we're talking about moving into more sort of 21st century learning spaces. And obviously, we want to be able to make the most of those, but it doesn't sound to me, like I mean, other than this sort of general UI, maybe more, you know, less kind of rigid structure of the space. And that maybe...

JIM: I think it's an indirect path. I don't think it's I don't think that suddenly their brains turn to Jell-O or they lose, they lose the will to do work. Because it's a more casual seating environment, they have more flexible choices. Not that at all. I think it's probably it affected me. And I'm wondering if somehow, I affected? Yeah, if I affected that. So, I don't know.

CLAIRE: That's a different set of questions. It is a set of questions.

JIM: It is a different set of questions. It's also you know, I It's a fairly relaxed environments, so students have responded to that. I mean, we're not. And, and because it's a more collaborative environment. I don't have to do the whole technology. I don't have to ban a lot of technology. First of all-

CLAIRE: Oh, well, you know, they need it, they need it for what they're doing. Yeah, their technology for what they're doing.

JIM: But also, you know, for the most part, you know, when we're doing group work, they're, they're on task. And so, I'm not concerned that they're sitting there watching a movie or something like that, it's much-

CLAIRE: Much less much, much harder to tune out of a five, five student conversation than it is from, you know, a 20-student conversation with everybody sort of talking together. So yeah, they're probably feel more accountable to their peers.

JIM: So, I'll have to I'll have to keep everyone updated, I guess on Yeah. head scratcher it's uh, and part of it is just it's been a busy spring as well. And... I'm sure my mood is affecting my perceptions of all this and everything else. So

CLAIRE: Well, it'll be interesting to if you teach in that space again, to see I mean, that that's one thing that'll help because you know if it's if it's the class and, and I'm not I'm never a 'blame the students' person. Oh, and I'm not either but I but I do know that classes develop mentalities that are beyond the individual student mentalities. You know, they kind of you get a, you get a bunch of students in the room and they, they meld into some kind of hive mind. And then all of a sudden it, it changes the behavior of the group.

JIM: Now, see you just now now that makes me think I need to also go back and look and see where they're at academically in their careers. Oh, yeah, that too, this could actually just be a massive case of senioritis. They're all seniors. And it's and it's my class that, you know, and I have had to and I'm happy, you know, when students reach out to me, I am more than happy to give them more time to do stuff, right. And so, for example, I think I am my class is the one that people are going to ask for more time when they're feeling-

CLAIRE: Because they know you're open to that

JIM: Because they know I'm open to that. So it may be that that some are just not asking. Yeah, yeah, they're just they're just, they're just expecting. Yeah. Or they're, or they're saying to themselves, well, it's only x member points. This goes back to the whole thing. They're playing that calculus in their head. Yeah, playing the game. Yeah. Well, I can afford to lose X number of points in Jim's class, because I have to get y number of points in Professor Sciences class.

CLAIRE: That's the nice thing about Well, I haven't used points in any of my grading for years and years. But I but you know, especially not in a in a grad class, I would never use points in the class I never have anyway, so well, and they're all pretty, you know, that, that that's another thing I'm doing, you know, they're all pretty laid back about their grades. That you know, they I have so far, I haven't actually given them any, even any letter grades. I'm just providing feed narrative feedback on their work. And they've all been perfectly happy with that. So, it's wiggling me out a little bit. But also, there's nobody who's struggling. I mean, because I'm providing narrative feedback sort of continuously. I'm a little bit able to say, you know, I just was exchanging emails with one of the students this morning about her final project, and, and she'd really kind of gone off what she was initially thinking, you know, and and that was okay, because it's just, I think their proposals for their final projects are due, like in maybe two weeks from now, she's thinking early, but as she was proposing her proposal, I was able to say, Yeah, well, hold on, you know, that's not really gonna fulfill the requirements for this assignment and kind of redirect her and say, Well, you know, you could do this, and that would work right? Or come up with something else? And let me know so

JIM: well, I think I think when we do my let it go episode, it will probably be something more along the lines of how am i How am I? How am I using points in class or something like that? Because that's something that I can't even conceive of not doing? I haven't had I haven't points. I haven't made that, that that cognitive connection yet. I know it can be done. I know there are people who can talk about it. So, we'll talk to those people.

CLAIRE: Yeah, we, you know, we've got we've got lots of faculty on campus who are really interested in that and who are you know, yeah, you know, not using points. They're doing other kinds of things. So, get some of those people in here, we will bring them into one of these microphones.

JIM: Well, until that time, that's about all the time we have. Yeah. So, thanks so much, Claire.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: You can find out more about our podcast by going to our website ctl.illinoisstate.edu. Click on the podcast and link on the main page. For Claire Lamonica, for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.