

Ep. 054: Claire's Top 5 - Starting Your Semester

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A new semester is close at hand-- get excited and inspired to teach. CTLT Director Dr. Claire Lamonica shares her top five tips for starting your semester off successfully. She and Jim explore advice about your syllabus, classroom space, breaking expectations the first day of class, and much more! Plus, the talk about why it's okay... even important... to take a little "me" time before classes begin.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: and I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

[Music playing]

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 once again today, I'm excited, it's our director Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi Jim.

JIM: We are going to be talking today about our top five, actually, your top five picks,

CLAIRE: Claire's... Claire's top five picks.

JIM: For what?

CLAIRE: For starting off the semester.

JIM: Our pokey little podcast began with a sort of trilogy of episodes. One talking about having the successful first day of class, and then a real belter of a two-parter on constructing your syllabus, and I think they hold up pretty well.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: So, we will link to those into the show notes for today's show, and a lot of the concepts that we're going to be, probably, touching on today we've actually covered in more depth in some previous episodes.

CLAIRE: Right. So, this is going to be a kind of quick and easy, down and dirty something...Five things you can do to get the semester off to a great start.

JIM: Exactly! Just sort of a reminder, these are probably things you've already done at one point or another, or you've at least thought, maybe, you might want to do so... Start with number one.

CLAIRE: Okay, so number one is polish up your syllabi.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: So, I think the main thing to think about here is to look at your syllabi and look at them as if you were a student.

JIM: mm-hmm

CLAIRE: What's the message that these documents are going to send to the students in your class? And, you know, that's not, it's not as easy as it sounds because syllabi in the Academy tend to have sort of a dual role. One of them is curricular and the other one is pedagogical. So, you know, the curricular piece is, "oh, we have to make sure that we have all, you know, all the T's dotted", in that, you know, matches up with our curriculum maps, and everything, and this is going to get our course approved.

JIM: Yeah, I was just about to say you talked before about how we actually end up writing our syllabus, sometimes, for two different audiences. There's the audience that we want it to end up with, being the students, but a lot of times it's first written for our peers who are going to be approving this as part of a curriculum committee or something.

CLAIRE: Right, and that doesn't necessarily work for students.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You really want to look at it, and to the extent that you are able. Make sure that it's a student friendly document.

JIM: Yeah, the only other thing I would add to that, would be, and I don't always do this all the time, but I sometimes... I will have a copy of my syllabus or I'll take notes about how the class is going. So, from dusting off or polishing up, I think is better...

CLAIRE: You might have to update it, probably.

JIM: Yeah, and don't, you know take... Use it as an opportunity to reflect on what... how the last semester went.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: And you may want... That may help you figure out what needs to be buffed and polished a little bit.

CLAIRE: Yeah. So that's number one.

JIM: Number two?

CLAIRE: Number two is set up and published your ReggieNet courses.

JIM: Now we know that a lot of faculty members on campus do that.

CLAIRE: Yep.

JIM: When they do that, though, I think is more of an open question.

CLAIRE: Yes, you know, by the, I'm not sure... When we do our census of published courses, but I think it's probably around, tenth day of class.

JIM: I think so too.

CLAIRE: And we know that as of tenth day of class the vast majority of courses have been published on ReggieNet. Now, that doesn't mean, that they're all published, including the same amount of material or using the same tools, and we wouldn't necessarily want to standardize that...

JIM: mm-hmm

CLAIRE: ...but I would say, challenge yourself each semester to learn about a new tool, and then think deeply about what that tool could add to your class?

JIM: mm-hmm

CLAIRE: How can this make you a more effective teacher? And if it can't, ditch it!

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: But you know, there's a lot of tools in there, and I think sometimes people aren't aware of the tools that are there. And so, I'll hear people saying "Well I have my students do blogs, you know, they use BlogSpot" or, you know, whatever the current sort of blogging software is. Well you know, there's a blog tool in ReggieNet, and well it doesn't make a public blog, and so if you're if your goal is for student to produce a public blog, then yes you probably need to go to Blogspot, or something like that, but I would think carefully about that, and, you know, sort of the ramifications. So, they can keep a blog, or, I usually, when I use that tool, I have them set that up so that it's private, just between me and the student and I have them use that for purposes of journaling.

JIM: mm-hmm.

CLAIRE: So, you know, you can, I would, you know. We don't want anybody to just go in and try to use "all the tools"!

JIM: Right. Yeah, very few people do. We have survey information that shows that there are, there's a certain core of popular tools, and then, but there are also a couple tools like the tests and quizzes tool. So, people may not be giving assessments like that using ReggieNet. They may be still doing it in class. Which is perfectly valid, but that and the and the forums tool are the ones that they say that, they think they may use next semester.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: And we see that message consistently. So, it's the ones that they think, that maybe, they should be using.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: So...

CLAIRE: And now we have a new rubrics tool. So...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: It's not perfect, but it's nice and, you know, well I shouldn't say that, because you know what, I haven't seen it yet, but...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: But my understanding, I'm just so excited that it's there because I use rubrics for my assessments. So, I'm looking forward to exploring that tool myself. That's going to be my challenge to myself this semester.

JIM: Well, and we've talked, in a previous episode with our colleague, Charles about that rubrics tool. So, I would think your initial gut reaction that it's right or that it's nice, I should say, is spot-on. I think it has a lot of utility to it. I think one of the things that we can, really... When we're talking about adopting a new tool for the semester. The other thing, though, is you don't have to go all-in on the new tool. You can use the rubric for one, or two, or three big assignments this semester, and then do your rubrics how you normally did. Otherwise, if you're your students will understand that. Same thing with the tests and quizzes, you don't have to do all of your quizzes in the same place

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: I mean there is something to be said about consistency. don't get me wrong, but as long as you're communicating ahead of time, to your students, how they do things?

CLAIRE: What they expect.

JIM: What they should expect, and what your expectations are. As we've often, we can link to that episode too.

CLAIRE: Long list of linked episodes.

JIM: So, the one other thing I would say from what I have seen, and of course, you know most of what, I'm gathering, that's not done in the official kind of survey, as we put out, is much more powerful. So, I keep an eye on Twitter, and stuff like that, and other social media channels. And I was even talking to a faculty member in a workshop I was facilitating this week and taking an online class this summer, and she, kind of shook her head, and she said you know... I... it's not really my place to say, but for one of my child's classes, that ReggieNet course wasn't made available until the day the course started. And, I see this all the time. As well, on Twitter, right around, before, classes

start, I'm still waiting for them to publish the course. So, we may not realize this, to be fair.

CLAIRE: Raise the bar on expectations.

JIM: We really...

CLAIRE: expecting to see the stuff before the semester starts.

JIM: and I don't know if we're the ones who actually did that here at CTLT.

[laughter]

CLAIRE: No, not us.

JIM: It is not our fault.

CLAIRE: We as faculty, well but and also, I think...

JIM: That's just the world they live in, a digital world they live in. So, I think it... there's actually an advantage, we've talked before about, communicating with our students before the first day of class, but also having that ReggieNet course site available even if everything's not on there. Just explain to them that it's still... I'll be adding the syllabus later this week or, you know, whatever it is, I think having that presence on-line actually is reassuring to a student as they're kind of working through getting into that mental space to start the semester.

CLAIRE: Yeah, they just like to know that, there's something there that you know you're going to use ReggieNet and I never, I never published my complete courses. I mean, I always, you know, my modules, I release one at a time so when you publish they don't see everything. They don't see everything necessary, and it's not always there of course.

JIM: Right, exactly.

CLAIRE: True confessions

JIM: So, we're giving all of this advice in the in the recognition that also the people who are listening to this are very busy people.

CLAIRE: Right, so we should move on.

JIM: Yeah, let's do that.

CLAIRE: So, we should move on to number three, all right so I number three is plan your first day of class know and remember, I'm going to say it. I'm going to say it again even though I've said it, in many times in other podcasts there is no such thing as syllabus day, so I want to talk a little bit about norms. Okay so... because I've just been doing some reading, and I've been reading a book about classroom discussion, and it was written by a sociologist which is really interesting because he, of course, experiences

his teaching through a sociological lens, right, and so he talks a good deal about one of the things that makes it difficult to guard, to get authentic discussions or conversations going in classrooms, is that, we have these established norms there are things that students and faculty expect that a college classroom will look like and generally, the sort of most normal norm the most widespread norm is the professor's going to talk and the students are going to pretend to pay attention. And so, and, you know, and and he talks, he doesn't call it pretending to pay attention, but he talks about the notion of civil attention, which is students put aside their distractions. You know they make fleeting but frequent eye contact with the instructor they nod, they keep something in front of them that appears as if they're taking notes. And maybe they are.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: but that's what, that's what they feel is expected of them. And so, the professor may have different expectations of them. So, I would say that if you are expecting that your class will be anything besides that, if there are, if you are going to disrupt those norms in any way, if you are planning to have student discussions on a regular basis, if you are planning to have students conducting experiments on a regular basis, whatever, disrupt that norm. The first day because the thing you did and this is, this is the sociologists talking, not just Claire, but the thing that you do on the first day will either reinforce or disrupt the norm and that's what they're going to expect for the rest of the semester. So you just make it harder on yourself if you go in the first day and read them the syllabus and then come back the second day and say we're going to have group discussion. Yay!

JIM: So, if I understand...

CLAIRE: They won't believe you.

JIM: Right. So, if on, so let me just make sure I understand what you're saying. If our, our goal should be to defy expectations that first day with these students to an extent.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Because if we wait until the... in other words, the old shampoo commercial is true. In this case, "you never have a second chance to make a first impression" you know, if you don't defy those expectations and model the behavior right away of what you want the learning to be. It's going to be harder to do.

CLAIRE: You're making it harder on yourself. It doesn't mean you can never establish a different norm, but it means that it's going to take longer and it's going to be harder. So, if you come in the first day and get them doing the kind of thing, you know, my old saying has always been, you know, "start as you intend to continue".

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, whatever you, whatever expectations you have for them in a general ways, you should be setting up on the first day.

JIM: You know, I was thinking about something along these lines last night, which is... we've talked before, about some people get really nervous when the teacher...

CLAIRE: Oh yeah.

JIM: The instructor, some people get really nervous, some people are not, and we also talked about, you know, both of us got into teaching originally because we kind of like to be the one in front of the room, right.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: and, but there's this idea that we're trying to read the room. We want to, we want to walk out of that first class bouncing, right.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: and I think one way to, one way to get a good read on those students and see what unique individuals they are, and to not come away feeling like "oh I think they were just a bunch of mannequins sitting there". You have to do something, like you're talking about, and to defy the expectation of, like you said, you're up there, so nervous, really reading your syllabus and they are pretending to pay attention.

CLAIRE: Right. and it doesn't mean there's no way to go, you know, you could you could build some student discussions conversations around the syllabus.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: That you know said, there are people, who are you, that yes successfully, so you know, I'm not saying that you have to abandon still you're going over your syllabus. Even though I may have said that in the past but, I, you know.

JIM: I think I have a recording of it, actually. Yeah.

CLAIRE: Yeah, it's probably recorded somewhere. It's a sound bite,

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: But you I think you want to think carefully about the norms that you're establishing.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: On your first day.

JIM: And I also think that it would be great if you could do something to that is germane to the course to the content of the course.

CLAIRE: Oh, absolutely because I also know, you know, if when I've taught a, one night a week, class and it's been later in the week and people that these students can smell when the icebreakers are coming and they're like "Oh, we've done this four times" so you know,

four times already this week. I have introduced the person next to me four times this week

JIM: right so...

CLAIRE: not that it's a bad thing but I mean it's not it's not bad the first time it happens, but they may...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: ... be different on the first day.

JIM: So, mix it up a little bit. I guess would be the corollary to this it will probably do you some good.

CLAIRE: Yeah, so, anyway, that was number three.

JIM: Yeah. So, number four.

CLAIRE: So, number four is; visit your classrooms. You know, find out what classrooms you've been assigned to. You may be familiar with them and that's fine. I will tell you that some classrooms have been magically updated over the summer.

JIM: This is true.

CLAIRE: Um it's very exciting. Um, and I wish I knew the names and then, the numbers and the building names of those classrooms, but I don't. But you know, it doesn't hurt to just visit your classroom make sure that things are in working order make sure that there aren't broken chairs, still, you know, sort of sitting there waiting for a student. You know. Just kind of take the temperature of the room. Is it a good fit for how you're going to teach, you know what, a couple of years ago when I was teaching a freshman class that had, I think, 25 students in it, 27 something, like that, I went to visit the classroom, and it was just a ginormous classroom...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: With chairs for like 50 or 60 students. And it's like, okay. So, I was really glad I knew that in advance because I got there early the first day and physically roped off some of those chairs and made them unavailable to the students. I was like, except for the one, who tried to climb over my rope, but I told him "get outa there, nice try".

[Laughter]

CLAIRE: Yeah, so anyway, you know, make sure that the classroom is a good fit for what you're what you're planning to do. I would also suggest, and this is a suggestion that makes me kind of sad, but I think nowadays it probably behooves us to take a look at the emergency plan that's posted in the classroom door, and to know where the exits are. To know where you're supposed to go in case of a tornado. What, you know, does your classroom have multiple exits? Does your classroom have glass in the doors? Does your

classroom lock? Do the doors lock? You know, what if there is an active shooter situation? You know what, what's your plan...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: ...for your students in that classroom.

JIM: And it brings the mood down.

CLAIRE: It does

JIM: But it's necessary and it doesn't have to be overly dramatic.

CLAIRE: and you know, its information that you want to have, and...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: the point at which you share that with the students...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: You know, that doesn't have to happen the first day.

JIM: No, I typically don't do it the first day, I mean, okay, well I do it the first week so if I'm teaching a three-hour class on one night, for the week I might actually do it that first day and I will literally start by saying, "all right I'm going to bring the mood down a little bit" and, you know. Last, when I start teaching in a classroom that had these big beautiful glass doors and all that other stuff, you know, on a second floor and no back exit. I said, well, we have some decisions to make and whatnot in the classroom. I'm going to be teaching in, for the fall of 2019, we have windows, we're on the first floor, we have windows, so you know, actually, I have to think about how much, you know, and the doors now lock. I'm over there in the NFL hall so.

Clair: So, it's not, you know, I think in a way, I mean, it may sort of bring the mood down but I think, also, it sends a message to students that you are considering their safety.

JIM: Yes.

CLAIRE: And so, and I think they appreciate that, because they, these students have all spent the majority of their school years in a world where school shootings happen.

JIM: I was going to say that kind of thing happens,

CLAIRE: Yeah, so, they, you know, they, I think, will be reassured to know that you've considered it and, and, that you have a plan so that's and you're willing to share that with them.

JIM: So, one of the only other things, I would add and I don't think this is going to raise the mood a little bit but one thing I found very helpful to do, is to go to the classroom and login to the instructors computer.

CLAIRE: Oh, good thought!

JIM: Because, especially they're all, when we have Windows, well I actually I shouldn't say that there are some classrooms that have Mac's as well. But certainly, on the Windows PCs nowadays, it, when you first log in after a while after there's been a significant update, it kind of does this thing where it starts talking to you, kind of.

CLAIRE: You're updating your personal desktop.

JIM: You may want to take a few minutes yeah you may want to go get a cup of coffee and that way you're not standing there, trying to, you know, wasting class time feeling like you're dying up there waiting for the technology to catch up. So I tend to do that, um, and you may want to also take a look at, you know, don't forget if you're using classroom clickers, you have to request every semester to make sure that the clickers software and hardware is Properly installed in that classroom. So, you can go to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu and we will have a link on our technology support page for clickers. That will send you to the other website on campus and it'll be kind of a seamless experience to get there to where you can fill out that request, so, and...

CLAIRE: and you know if you have if you're teaching in a large classroom and there's a sound system, I would, I would test that out.

JIM: Oh yeah.

CLAIRE: Because you want to make sure that it's working, and you know how to get the most out of it

JIM: and you know what if you're teaching in a classroom whether its large or small but it has a sound system and there's a microphone for the instructor I would encourage you to actually use it. People do not have students do not have to have an accommodation card in order to get something out of having you miked up. I mean, we and we've talked about this before and we've started to really, for our annual teaching and learning symposium, encourage presenters to use the microphone no matter what I guess.

CLAIRE: It just makes it easier for people.

JIM: specially after I hit 45 probably.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I was just going to say as somebody whose ears are aging, um, I have on occasion had to kind of out myself as an emerging senior citizen and by raising my hand and saying could you use the microphone. You know, even though people are like I'm just going to use my teacher voice, so you know that's up to you. It's up to this, you wanna think about the size of the classroom, but also think about, you know, that may be something that your students will something else your students will appreciate you.

JIM: They will appreciate you. You're not showing off when you do that.

CLAIRE: No.

JIM: I think you're being respectful of your students.

CLAIRE: I think so too, and you can explain why you're doing it, you know.

JIM: Number five,

CLAIRE: Number five.

JIM: Take us home Claire.

CLAIRE: Yeah, we're going to, we're going to, and this really is, you know, take it home. I strongly suggest that between now and the first day of class you take a day and you just make it, I call it a me day,

JIM: mm-hmm.

CLAIRE: You take a me day and whatever that means to you, but put work out of your mind. Go get a massage. Go for a hike in a park. Whatever it is that will relax you and improve your internal minds that, you know, your mind set, just make you, send you into the semester feeling good.

JIM: Yeah. and feeling rested and so... um,

CLAIRE: Because it's, you know, it's going to be, it's not a sprint it's a marathon the semester is going to be 15 weeks long.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And at the end of it, there will be a final evaluation period.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, um.

JIM: And then, you know what happens after that, another semester.

CLAIRE: You're right.

JIM: We're really talking about the beginning of the academic year now.

CLAIRE: So, yeah, so you know, so there's a whole year ahead of you, and I would say, go into it feeling kind of refreshed and and strong, and comfortable. And, um, do some yoga, ohm... you know whatever it is.

JIM: Do you really do ohm? I don't do yoga.

CLAIRE: People do, ohm, sometimes. They, you know, well we don't...

JIM: I saw great I saw a great Facebook image, a cartoon on Facebook. Somebody sitting in a field in a lotus position going ohm... A cow turns to the other and says dude that's backwards.

CLAIRE: [laughter] Awesome, I love that. Yeah, well yeah, so I think whatever it is. I mean, Yoga may not be your thing, you know. Taking a hike in a park it's not my thing, but you know it's a lot of people's thing and so figure out what your thing is and just spend a day doing it.

JIM: Claire that sounds great thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you...

JIM: Find out more about our podcast go to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. You'll not only find a link to the podcast on our home page you'll also find a link to ReggieNet support so you can check out some of those tools that you may want to use and all sorts of other things that we do. For Dr. Clare Lamonica and for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology, until we talk again. Happy teaching.