

Ep. 058: Conferencing with Confidence

Podcast: <https://ProDev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2019/ep058.shtml>

Conferences can be an important part of one's growth as a college teacher... or even as a professional developer. Conferences can also be expensive. How do you get the most developmental bang for your buck? In this episode, Claire and Jim brainstorm ways to optimize the conference experience (in Jim's case, it's actually going). Claire shares how she finds her focus at big gatherings. Plus, learn Claire's evil plan to put Jim off his diet on their next trip to Atlanta.

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 today our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi Jim.

JIM: Happy autumn.

CLAIRE: Happy autumn? Well it's feeling a little bit like happy winter but we're, you know, technically were away from that.

JIM: Yeah, we're recording this...

CLAIRE: It's a bit nippy out there.

JIM: We're recording this in early November and it, we had about two or three weeks of autumn, so that was more like did you have a happy autumn, it?

CLAIRE: It was lovely, Jim, while it lasted?

JIM: I loved it one of the trees outside of our new home here at William's Hall. First of all, we have trees outside of our building now.

CLAIRE: Yeah, and we can see them.

JIM: And we can see them. So, I guess it's a ginkgo tree and it does this, but it just lost all its leaves in one day.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Yeah, it's like, it's a scene from one of the movie versions of the Harry Potter books, where the whopping willow just kind of gives up. One reason why I mentioned the season, is that there are a couple of professional development events coming up soon. We have one on our campus that we're planning, our Teaching and Learning Symposium, but you're also going to some conferences both here at ISU and... The Culturally Responsive Campus Community Conference is coming up, but also, you're going to the POD Network for conference. I know. So, I thought maybe we just talk briefly today, how do you prepare, and how do you get the most out of a conference experience, and of course you're talking to ME who's someone who doesn't like to travel.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I would say the first thing is, that you should go...

JIM: Yes.

CLAIRE: It's really hard to get anything out of it when you don't go and you know sometimes they published the proceedings or whatever, but you know there's no substitute for being in the room and you know joining the conversation or even just taking in the conversation while you're there.

JIM: One of my favorite moments was a few years ago when we were planning to go to the pod conference in Montreal and I said, oh gosh, I've never been overseas to a conference and you gave me a look and I believe you said... "well it's more like over lake."

CLAIRE: Not really going over any seas between Illinois and Montreal, but right, you know, a technicality.

JIM: Oh yes, I guess, so yeah.

CLAIRE: You go out more.

JIM: I suppose I do. So, going, you know, commit to going is one thing, and we've we have acquaintances, who not, just me, but we have acquaintances, to waffle the times about whether, they're going to actually end up going to it, or not, or whatever, but let's presume that you do, that you're planning to go and you're all booked and ready to go. Whether you're traveling far, or it's on your own campus, or whatever. What do you do to prepare before you go to an event like this?

CLAIRE: You know, I like to, sort of set some goals for myself in terms of what I'm hoping to get out of the conference, and sometimes that can be as simple as building my network. Sometimes, it's more like there's a topic, or a sort of a burning question. Something that I've been wondering about, that I think I might gain some insights at the conference. So, I kind of try to be aware of what that, what that question is, and following that, once I've sort of established that question. I like, and I don't always do this, but I think I get the most out of the conference when I take the time before the conference, even on the airplane, on the way, or you know, in my hotel room, the night before the first meetings, or whatever. To go through the conference program and identify sessions that will help me answer my question, or learn the thing, that is,

that I'm trying to learn so... and I really like it when the conference has an app. Because, even though, when I first started seeing them. I was like, oh yeah, to do that, but I like it because you can, generally, it has the schedule and then it has my schedule, right, and so you can just click on things in the schedule and it puts them into your schedule, my schedule, and then I have that as a tool. I'm not frantically looking up between every session, you know, I'm not spending the last five minutes of every session looking up to see where I'm going next, and what room it, you know, what room it's in, and...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know what topic. I'm going to be thinking about so that also helps me establish, tell whether I established an agenda that's going to help me answer the question?

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, I can sort of see a theme, you know, running through and it might help me think about questions that I want to ask in particular sessions or if I don't hear something about this in this session I might want to ask about it

JIM: So that kind of answers my next question, which was going to be about. How do you decide what to go to in a conference? I think one of the things I have often found, especially if I'm going, to like, to a national learn, international conference, it's that I get a little frustrated by the amount of choices.

CLAIRE: There are so many choices, there really are, and if you, if you don't go into it with a... and I don't always, but I have a... I feel like I have a better experience if I go into it with a specific line of questioning or something, because that does help me kind of sort through what's out there.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And you know me, I get, I have a tendency to get distracted by shiny objects so it's very easy for me to go through the program and think oh yeah, well so, this year I really want to learn more about meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, and then I say oh look here, here's a session on my discipline.

JIM: Yeah right.

CLAIRE: ...or wow here's one on meditation I've never thought about that. Maybe I should, so anyway, it helps me focus right.

JIM: Well so, I guess you could go to into a conference, and this is how I might have approached, like the teaching professor conference, which I'm honestly booking my hotel room this week so it's...

CLAIRE: That's good for you.

JIM: I'm going to be on the hook for 150-199 bucks or whatever it is, for the first thing.

CLAIRE: See you there.

JIM: So, I'm going.

CLAIRE: You can cancel the hotel room...

JIM: Well I guess that's true, shouldn't tell me that, you know.

CLAIRE: I know.

JIM: I'm looking forward to it and it's going to be in early June I think it's in Atlanta this year and I've been to Atlanta you know. I've done a lot of, I've done a lot of Atlanta in my life, so...

CLAIRE: I know, I happen to know that someone, who will remain nameless, will definitely be organizing a dinner out at Pity Pat's Porch in Atlanta.

JIM: I've never actually gotten to Aunt Pitty Pat's Porch in Atlanta.

CLAIRE: You definitely want to join that outing.

JIM: Yeah, we'll fiddle-dee-dee, yeah.

CLAIRE: Yeah, CTLT or Illinois State University...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: people, will be invited to that.

JIM: And as a side note, we had a large contingent of people there last year.

CLAIRE: We did. We had a huge number like 19 or 20 or something it was a really big number.

JIM: Yeah. I remember that.

CLAIRE: There was a department, that he had used that as kind of a carrot right for their faculty who were participating in a year-long professional growth opportunity.

JIM: Well I'm looking forward to that particular conference because I have never been... I've been thinking about it for a long time and I went to some of the other conferences associated with it over the years and presented at some even but haven't been to that one yet. So much so I'm looking forward to it that I'm even going down, down into the deep south in summer. Having said that, one thing, one approach I might take to that conference is actually my research question, if you will, the way you're kind of talking about it is... what new things do I need to know about? You know, if you don't have a definite line of research like I need to improve my teaching I want a particular way maybe it's more of a fishing expedition.

CLAIRE: You can't do that, absolutely, particularly, if you if you haven't been to a conference before. So, you're not sure exactly what kinds of questions people are going to be

addressing. I think it's a good idea, and this isn't always economically feasible, but, financially feasible, but I think it's a good idea to go to a conference at least once, before you try to propose a session for a conference.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: because that helps you understand what the expectations are, what are the comfort, it's a discourse community.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, you know what are the conversations going on? In this particular parlor bring in Kenneth Burke in, which I don't know why we would, but anyway, all right.

JIM: Why not?

CLAIRE: What are the conversations going on in this parlor and how do you join them?

JIM: Let's talk about different types of conferences because there are small conferences, and then there are massive conferences, and they have different characters, and they have different, a different culture about them, and whatnot. Do you change your approach differently depending on size of the or the locality of the of the conference?

CLAIRE: That's a really good question. Um, yeah, I think, I think I probably do. You know I love a small conference. I love a conference with maybe three to five hundred people that you're sort of seeing the same people in different sessions and you don't have dozens and dozens of options. You know there may be five or six options at a time, or whatever, maybe not even that. I think I tend to do more networking. It's easier for me in, in the conference of that size. I tend to get, I'm overwhelmed, even I'm overwhelmed, by the number of people at a big conference with, you know, more than a thousand, or golly you know National Council of Teachers of English, there were lots of thousands of people, back in the day, so if the heyday of professional development conferences, and I'm, but you're at the same time, you may not be able to identify a strand of sessions that address a specific question. So... but it's, the conference, is probably going to be more focused...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: on a specific topic. So, a...

JIM: smaller conference?

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Yeah, know that that makes sense to me and of all the conference's you've gone to over your career.

CLAIRE: Ever?

JIM: Ever, sure, let's do that. What was the best one and why?

CLAIRE: Oh!

JIM: And I'll grant you is, probably, it may not be a teaching related conference.

CLAIRE: Yes, well most of the kind, of the conferences I've been to, have primarily been teaching related, Although, you know, there's some more research-oriented conferences that I've gone to...Wow...you know, I used to be a regular attendant at the conference of writing program administrators, and I don't know that I could pick out a particular conference, but I loved those conferences. They, you know, they were small, it was an established group. They had a very active Listserv and so I was at the conference I was running into people that I had already been talking to online on the Listserv, or listening to, reading on the Listserv. I was familiar with the research they were doing and the things they were publishing so it just it felt like, it felt like a... well it was, it felt like a small community, and in fact that's what it was it was, a community of people doing the same kind of work, hard work, but, and sometimes thankless work. You know being a director of first year composition pretty much just paints a target on your back.

[Laughing]

JIM: As we've discussed...

CLAIRE: The duck. But those were really rich professional development experiences for me. I think, just an extension of my own interest and being able to talk to a lot of people, but not too many people,

JIM: Right, right. Yeah that...

CLAIRE: That we're doing the same kind of work.

JIM: Right, that's interesting well and it sounds like you know there are a lot of organizations, the larger organizations now, have, whatever, they call them constituency groups, or birds of a feather, affinity group, you know,

CLAIRE: Special interest group. Right? Right.

JIM: Right, yeah so there may be a way to emulate that conference experience in the large and go and seek those out.

CLAIRE: that's actually, that's a great point because I think that's very true. I'm currently, I'm going to the POD conference next week. It's professional organizational developers.

JIM: We should probably explain that.

CLAIRE: Which is people who do our work. Working, supporting faculty, but I'm part of the professional development committee for the podcast.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, the professional development committee for people who do professional development. So how do we grow as educational developers? And we meet monthly via zoom, so that is, you know, that is becoming for me, that kind of small...It's an affinity group, you know, it's a small group of people who I'm starting to recognize by name and by face and we can we can talk about our shared passion for developing, developers

JIM: Right, right. I'm doing, actually, something similar with a group, and it's not through POD, although I have a feeling it's going to end up being very POD related down the road. It's just, a lot of us can't go there this year. A group of folks who do communication work for centers for teaching.

CLAIRE: Yeah and I would think that would be kind of a growing group. I think.

JIM: It is a growing.

CLAIRE: I'm not sure that many centers had communication people until, you know, somewhat recently.

JIM: I think yes, years, I think Dr. Lamonica you were a trendsetter.

CLAIRE: Oh, cutting edge?

JIM: When you put that job ad out. That I filled. But no, and seriously, and it grew out of a couple people asking, "Hey, are there anyone else? We're going to hire a communication person. Does anyone else do this?"

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Yeah, and it's been fascinating, kind of exploring topics with them and whatnot, and we do the meetings occasionally, and have a Google group, and stuff.

CLAIRE: So yeah, sounds good.

JIM: It does sound good.

CLAIRE: Yeah, lots of ways to grow professionally, and you know, and everybody needs to grow professionally. Even people who help other people grow professionally.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: I think that's you know I'm really looking forward to the conference next week. We haven't talked much about the CRCC, the Culturally Responsive Campus Community conference, which is the two days after I get back.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: I leave for POD on Tuesday, I come back from POD on Sunday, and then I have CRCC on Monday and Tuesday, so it's going to be a pretty rigorous set of days.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: But I think that conference is always a joy.

JIM: Sure, and it's one that's really found its place in the last few years. It's a relatively new conference on campus, Yeah.

CLAIRE: It's local.

JIM: And local, and unfortunately, by the time this podcast hits the air the registration will be, probably, be closed. I believe it's actually closing here in the next day, or actually tomorrow. I think it does as we're recording this, but, and it's one that we hear CTLT have supported behind the scenes mainly over the ears with some communication work and what not and so it's been fun watching it grow.

CLAIRE: Yeah, it's growing, and you know you could try walking in but don't tell him I sent you. [Laughing]. It's not like there will be any recorded...

JIM: Evidence of that.

CLAIRE: Right, well... Well as we know from the symposium, you know there's things happen, well it make plans to be in a certain place at a certain time, and then you know things happen, and they can't be there, and sometimes the organizers are able to accommodate a walk-in or two but...

JIM: But, you know what, it's a local event here on campus, and I think if you happen to be in the Bone Student Center on November 18th or 19th then they may be able to accommodate you.

CLAIRE: You could. Nothing would be lost by asking.

JIM: Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching, find out more about our podcast, and send us your tips for how you enjoy and grow at conferences, and professional development events, that you go to. Go to our website <https://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu>. You can find out how to contact us, find out more about our podcast, and more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. For Dr. Claire Lamonica, and for all my colleagues here at CTLT, happy teaching!