

Ep. 062: Civic Engagement in Extraordinary Times

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Communication is key to coping with the extraordinary challenges to learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. That's the number one conclusion we came to in this special edition of our podcast. We sat down with three faculty members to discuss their approaches to teaching this fall, with a special emphasis on supporting students' attendance and helping them to keep learning, even when the novel coronavirus has other plans. We discuss how to set expectations with students, how to encourage them to ask for help, and how to make ourselves available, whether we're teaching synchronously, asynchronously, or somewhere in between.

Special thanks to our panel: Dr. Gina Hunter, Dr. Abby Stone, and Tina McGuire shared their unique perspectives from a variety of teaching situations. We talk a lot about civic engagement as a core value at Illinois State University. But what does it look like when practiced in our courses? We explore that question in this episode, a preview of the 2021 University-Wide Teaching & Learning Symposium, Civic Engagement in Extraordinary Times. Dr. Katy Strzepek and Harriet Steinbach from the Center for Civic Engagement join Dr. Dana Karraker and Jim Gee from CTLT for an in-depth look at the ties between public higher education and engendering a life-long sense of civic learning in students. The group highlights ways, both big and small, to incorporate civic engagement in classes. They also examine the lessons learned from a semester of teaching and activism during a tumultuous election season, the national spotlight on social justice, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, they preview the three "rock stars of civic engagement" who will keynote the January 6, 2021 Symposium.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm 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 three members of the ISU faculty. We're here today to talk about student attendance and student absences in the time of COVID19. First off, Dr. Gina Hunter is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Hi Gina.

GINA: Hi, how are you?

JIM: I'm doing great. Also, joining us today Dr. Abby Stone who also teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Hi Abby.

ABBY: Hi Jim.

JIM: and Tina McGuire is an instructor in the School of Communication and The School of Teaching and Learning. Hi Tina.

TINA: Hi Jim.

JIM: Well welcome to all of you. Thank you for doing this. Um, just to provide a little context. We're doing this by zoom, also, uh, it is the first week of September, so classes have been going on for a couple weeks now. A few of us were talking before we started recording, and we're starting to get those notices from the Dean of Students Office about students who are not able to attend at least face-to-face classes. So, I'm just going to throw this out to any of you, and just jump in before we get in depth into student absences, and attendance and supporting students. What are you hearing? What are you seeing from your students, and what has your experience been like so far this semester?

ABBY: I think things are more unpredictable than student... for students, then they have been in the past. Um, I've had, you know, some of these notices from the Dean of Students about quarantines and stuff like that, but most of those students have followed up saying I'm okay I can still keep up with the work, um, because my courses are online. But the big thing is students who think they have time to do work, at, do schoolwork after they get off of work from their jobs, and somebody doesn't show up to work so they are asked to do an extra shift, and suddenly it's midnight and they don't... The deadline is passed so I've gotten several of those requests from students saying I thought I had this time, and I don't, and it was out of my control. So, I'm just trying to be flexible about that.

JIM: Gina how about you? What have you experienced so far?

GINA: So far, I have a relatively small class with only 16 students, and so far, so good. Um, I have had students who've been delayed turning in first assignments, and, you know, for various reasons. And, you know, it's not that much different than a regular year, but I think that as we go on it might get more complicated.

JIM: And Tina, you and I were talking before we started recording and we actually teach sec..., different sections of the same course COM 110 so... and you had mentioned that you've actually, had really good attendance so far.

TINA: Yeah, my sections are meeting synchronously and I've had probably the best attendance in my five years teaching college, um, and when students have been absent they are doing a really good job of emailing me before or right after class and just saying, "Hey I forgot, or I slept in", or whatever the excuse is and they're, they're, on top of it. And, I think, it's because a lot of them are freshmen, and they had that in the spring they were finishing up their high school work, and they kind of got into that routine. So, I think that's what's helping with the COM 110 classes.

JIM: And those classes are, are small they're usually limited to what 23 I think.

TINA: Yeah, I have 19 and 20.

JIM: Right, right, so for, for, uh, for Abby and Gina what, what kind of courses are you teaching this semester? Are you doing large lecture courses, or how is that working for you?

ABBY: So, I'm teaching two classes I have a graduate upper level undergraduate seminar on plagues and pandemics, and that's going really well with attendance they're coming they're engaged they're talking it's, it's great it's a new prep, so, it's a lot of work but, but that's going really, really, well, and then I have my gen-ed class on the other end of the spectrum, which is a 200 person, uh, section of human origins and I'm doing that mostly asynchronously, with once a week synchronous discussion sections that they have to do a couple of semester, and that's trickier. There's more, more students in there and it's mostly issues with... As much as I try to communicate things clearly the message gets lost, occasionally, so, that's the major issue so far, and there are some students not knowing how to navigate the course.

JIM: Okay, Gina how about you?

GINA: I'm teaching an upper-level combined graduate undergraduate seminar in ethnographic research methods, and so, this is normally um a very hands-on course. It still will be as much as possible this semester, but students do have a lot of group work normally. They're out after the beginning of the semester where we have more... kind of history and research ethics and other topics that we cover then the rest of the semester is pretty much students going out and collecting data for a particular research project that they do throughout the semester. And so, I'm teaching it synchronously for the, you know, right now, and attendance has been pretty good, and the students seem very engaged and interested. And frankly, I thought they'd be more daunted by the prospect of doing research, um, during these times but they are not so far, you know, they are. It has been a bit difficult for me to re-envision the class, and to think about how we can do the research aspects, um, in an online environment.

JIM: So, when you're talking about revision the class obviously, we've all had to do a little bit of that in some form this in preparation for this semester. Spring was not as good practice for us because it was such a sudden thing and having to leave campus in the middle of the semester. One of the things we have to, we've had to re-envision is how to work with students through absences maybe changing some of our expectations. In terms of their attendance and whatnot. Um, Tina, let me start with you. What, what changes did you make kind of going forward? Uh, you talked a little bit about students appear to be communicating with you, uh, rather well. What changes did you do you, uh, versus a normal semester if we can remember what a normal semester is?

TINA: Yeah, well um one of my policies has always been, even in a normal semester, is that the student needs to communicate to me when, and if they're going to be absent. So, I left that in there. And one thing I changed, or kind of modified was, the student then needs to also communicate to me when they can complete the assignment. So, they're actually making a plan for when they can get the assignment in. So, my students had a paper due yesterday, and two students have already emailed me and let me know "Tina it's going to be late can I get it to you by Friday", and that's the perfect email for the perfect message I've gotten from students and it puts a little bit of ownness on them it keeps them organized keeps me organized so just as long as they are active in the class and letting me know what's going on. That's been a big help so far of course we're only what two weeks in. But, uh, putting a lot of ownness on the student to make that plan to get the work complete.

JIM: And it sounds like you, you, communicated those expectations ahead of time.

TINA: Yeah on my syllabus I have a little policy and then on the first uh meeting via zoom I went through it, and so far, so good. Knock on wood.

JIM: Gina?

GINA: Yes, I've really emphasized just like Tina communication I think that that is really key, and so, I've encouraged students, um, at every class session, uh, just repeated that they should communicate with me any difficulties they're having with the course, with materials online, with, um, you know with completing assignments, if they're going to be absent, with anything, just I keep telling them be sure to let me know. And I've also said you know if you don't hear back from me within 24 hours email again. Because, I could have missed it for some reason. So, I think communication is really key.

JIM: I, I think that's an, a great point to highlight, uh, telling students how long they should expect it to take for you to communicate with them, and that's something that I didn't do the beginning of the semester and I meant to. And I had to go back and do that because students may either be expecting an instant response or they maybe they may have very low expectations. And so, it's important that that you kind of address those. Abby?

ABBY: Yeah, so I uh also follow up with what Tina and Gina have been saying about communication, communicating with the students clearly on my end and expecting communication from them on their end. I put a section in my syllabus for both my courses called succeeding in this class. Where I basically say I want you to do well in this class but I can't help you unless you come to me, and I, I basically say I know this semester is going to throw challenges at us that we haven't had before and things are going to get difficult for many of us. So, just come to me and we will work through it and I also put in there that, you know, I have two young kids and um I am feeling some strain too and I know that they are going through similar situations so I try to let them know that, you know, I, I am also having difficulty um, with some of this, um, to try to you know bridge that gap. The teacher student gap there.

JIM: And you had said that you, you know, you have a large lecture course in addition to some smaller courses, so I'd be curious to know, how has the communication gone in one versus the other? In other words, because it's a largely asynchronous course, are you finding it a little more difficult, or students are having a little bit more difficulty communicating with you?

ABBY: Depends on the student. I've had a lot of students who are really understanding. The way I put it together they're on top of the forum posts that I have created they're on top of watching the videos and turning in the various things, and other ones who are just like, you know, two weeks in, "oh, where are the weekly modules? I don't, I don't know what, what those are". Which is, you know, a little frustrating because I try to communicate these things in many, many, ways and it's all these communications that in a normal semester you can do in 30 seconds at the end or the beginning of class, and suddenly it's these 10 email chains that you still are not quite sure whether the student understands so I've been trying to rely on my Ts, um, a little bit more than

usual for, for doing some of that although students tend to come to me first. There's a lot of emails, and for the, the big class I do worry that some students are, are falling through. So, uh you know at the end of this week once we're three weeks in I'll do kind of an assessment of how what everybody's turned in and I'll um email out to all of those who are having issues, and just check in with them make sure they understand what's going on.

JIM: So, it sounds like email is kind of your primary channel of communication, is that, is that right, Abby?

ABBY: For that class, I, you know, I, I put out videos every week, um, including, like, an intro to the week. One that's less formal that's just like this is what's going on this week this is what you need to do. Um, I have my office hours during class time, um, because it's an asynchronous format, um, and then we also have these discussion sections so those are times for them to meet with me sort of face to face, um, but not all of them take advantage of that.

JIM: Cool, so, for Tina and Gina how, are... What's, what's your preferred method of communication, with students? What have you told students? How do you expect to communicate with them in terms of channel of communication?

TINA: Email works the best I've also and some instructors kind of frown upon this. I do provide my cell phone number if a student needs to text me, they can't make it in, and that hasn't happened as much this semester as it did in the spring. I had some students who were essential workers who just needed a quick text and it worked. But email has been the, the best way to get in touch with me.

GINA: For me too. I put that in my syllabus this is the best way to contact me and, and again my time frame. And I have found that it has worked well. So far, um, having students respond and they have been very responsive. They've probably been more responsive this semester than they have in the past, and that could just be because a lot of it's online. I find that if I email a student a question, I get a response from them within the same 24 hours... That I say that I would respond, so that's a plus, in this the responses are coming quicker.

JIM: I had another thought because we've all mentioned our syllabi. Do you have any sense as to whether or not students have been more likely to actually, read the darn thing? this semester because of all of the extraordinary things that we're dealing with?

TINA: Um, yes and no. I have a syllabus quiz that I have my students complete that ask specific questions about what's the best way to contact Tina? Oh, her email and so then they know that I have directed students back to the syllabus. Maybe not as many times as I have. If we've been meeting face-to-face. But, yes and no, it's kind of weird.

GINA: I'm trying to get used to a lot of new tools, um, on the... I did a lot of the DIY, and also, and, and other organized sessions through CTLT over the summer. And so, I'm using a, a, a template format um, to deliver my, uh, the asynchronous parts of my synchronous class. And I'm thinking of it as a flipped classroom where I provide a lot of the materials and then we use class time for most, for discussion which is more or less how a

seminar goes in any case. Um, but I'm finding that, you know, um, having all the links and having, basically, everything that's in the syllabus repeated in my lessons place pages and the resources tab and that you know, it's a lot of, uh, there's a lot of redundancy there but, hopefully, students then find the information wherever they look.

JIM: So, uh, Gina you had mentioned earlier about teaching one course where getting students engaged in research is one of the goals, kind of, kind of building off on that. For all of you, and just feel free to jump in. What is the aspect of the courses that you're teaching, or what are some of the aspects of the courses that you are teaching that you are most concerned about students completing, if they are out of the game for a couple weeks?

TINA: For me, it is absolutely the group work aspect of it. Um, I really, normally, my students spend quite a bit of time outside of class, um, doing group work and I know that that's going to be very challenging. When everyone is on zoom and I..., or maybe, actually, it's not. I don't, I mean... I, I think in some ways the semester is going better than I than I had feared. And hopefully, it'll be the same going forward, but normally students are out on the quad or in the campus. Of doing observations, they are talking to people shadowing people, interviewing doing documentary photography. Um, all of those are a bit more limited or they're just going to take a different form this semester. You know, one of the changes I'm making to help students is to provide more in time class time, so our already, because I know that students maybe don't have a lot of time outside of the time set aside for our class to work together. So, I've actually scheduled in more time for them to do their group work in breakout rooms within zoom. Where I can be there to also jump in and help. So, I scheduled a little bit more of that time than I normally do.

ABBY: So, with my big gen-ed class I'm not as concerned because a lot of it can be done asynchronously and there's not a lot of group work in it. Um, there's various things that they can work through, and I can modify those deadlines. Um, I am a little worried that if somebody, um, is unable to come to my seminar that they'll miss out on the vast majority of the content of the class. Because that class we read things and we talk about them, and then they move on to their own projects. So, um, if they're, they're sick enough that they're not able to, to join us via zoom, we're going to have to figure out an alternate way, and I've, you know, kind of been thinking about this and the students every week post or every day post um kind of a discussion question based on the readings in a forum. And so, maybe if a student is absent and unable to come to class, I'll have them do a kind of discussion of, of those discussion questions that they can submit to me, but it won't be the same. So, if that is an issue, that I am hoping, I won't have to confront the semester, um, but it is a likely thing to happen.

GINA: I'm also recording all of our discussion sec, sessions. All of our courses and posting that and I'm going to encourage the students when they have meetings if a student is absent to maybe share the recording or at least the notes with the absent student, and yeah, working around student absences within the group work context is a challenge and I'm not quite sure how that will go, but I'm encouraging, you know, the students usually share email and, you know, work together on a google doc or other document

and... So hopefully, they'll be able to share those resources and network amongst themselves even if one person is absent.

JIM: So, Tina and Abby are you recording any of your sessions and making them available to students?

TINA: Yes, all of my zoom meetings class meetings are recorded, and I share them either on ReggieNet or I share them on the OneDrive. I have a little channel, and I've made lots of videos of myself. More than I ever thought I would ever make. So, all the resources are there and available for students if they are absent and they are in groups as well, and so, I'm hoping that they'll network with their groups, um, as they're working through not only the group speech with com110, but then beyond. Um, if they have questions and they have that contact information for other students, as well.

ABBY: I haven't been recording um, for my, my seminar because everybody's been there every time. And so, I haven't seen the need to it, but if, if I do run into a situation where a student's not able to come, uh, I will start recording there. And then, for my, my gen ed class, I record lots of videos. That's how I deliver the lecture in, you know, six eight micro videos, um, each day, and so there's, there's not really a need for me to record that, and then the discussion sections that I do every Thursday. They only have to come to three of them over the course of the semester. So, I think that, um, it should be fine for a student to figure out a time, um, to come even if they're out for a few weeks because of illness. So, I haven't been recording those.

JIM: Well, great perspectives on recording, and, and for our colleagues who may be listening to this, and they are not sure they haven't, they haven't done it yet. But they may see the need to do that, they can go to our website at CTLT.IllinoisState.edu and you click on the, the top banner which is RedBirds keep teaching, which is kind of how the University has, uh, branded for lack of a better term. This initiative to, to transition to online teaching and there is some advice there about, um, language that you can provide to your students to kind of set the framework for how you're going to use those recordings. How you may expect them to use those recordings when they have access to them. And also, how to comply with FERPA and all those other important things. So, what's your biggest concern looking through the fog of what may or may not happen over the remaining, uh, 13 weeks of the semester? What, what are your biggest concerns about, you know, in general and about student attendance in particular? What are you kind of dreading, I guess, is what I'm asking?

TINA: I'm dreading a student getting too far behind they can't get caught up, um, we've talked about they're probably going to be more on extensions, but, um...

JIM: Incompletes?

TINA: Incompletes. Yes, that's it, there'll be more incompletes in this fall, and so, I'm kind of looking to that but I am hoping that they'll be able to stay on track, but that's my biggest concern. is that a student will fall too far behind that'll be tough to catch them up.

- ABBY: I agree with that. That's a concern as well, which is why I'm going try to be really on top of with my 200 person class, checking in every two or three weeks on who's missing assignments and getting in touch with them either myself or, um, asking the TAs to just, to try to prevent that from happening as much as possible. I hate failing students and I don't want that to happen because somebody falls through the cracks this semester.
- GINA: I'm concerned, um, as Tina and Abby mentioned about, you know, students falling too far behind. I'm hoping that I've been emphasizing to students that research requires lots of different kinds of skills, and I'm hoping that by putting them into groups and having them really draw on each other's strengths, that where one person may be absent and miss things that, that, they can then make it up with another kind of strength and at another point in the project. And so, I'm kind of trying to prepare them in, in a sense for dealing with those. You know, group work makes a lot of students nervous, by, by virtue of their grade, and, and just their work productivity being, um, kind of contingent on another people's performance. And that is heightened in this current context. So, I'm trying to allay those fears by, you know, breaking down the assignments even more so than usual, to let them turn in individualized work, but as well, as contributing to a group project. And then thinking, about how to draw on each other's strengths, and what is possible. You know, so kind of focusing even as Tina said at the beginning, you know, put the onus on them what can you do? Um, what you know what is a good time frame for you, and trying to work with them in that way.
- JIM: And I think work with them is the key. Isn't it because we want we're partners with them, and they're learning it's not we're not just pouring stuff into their heads shaking it a little bit and seeing what comes out? They, they have to... We both have to collaborate on this in order to make it work. And it's okay to have that discussion, uh and whatnot. I found that when I teach Com 110 especially those Tina you were talking about those, those first semester freshmen, who just got out of high school. I, I, don't want to, I don't try to be, I don't try to be so informal that it makes them uncomfortable. But there is, and we're just now kind of moving past this sort of uh deferential barrier that they have. And of course, it's a different circumstance for me being a middle-aged white male, and, and there, there are all sorts of other implications that we could we could talk about there. That it's okay for them to ask for more help and it's okay for them to have a question, and it's okay for them to be wrong once in a while, and they're not necessarily penalized about that. So, one other thing that you had mentioned Tina earlier was that you're starting clinicals in your teaching and learning class. Tell, tell us about that and how does that fit into your plans to cope with absences?
- TINA: Well the clinical experience in the class I teach is paired up with U-High so, uh, the students will go over to U-High, three days a week and work with a class in there and then eventually they will teach. this semester it's all online and so the students, my students, will be kind of zooming into the, uh, classrooms and working with those clinical instructors and advisors. So far, they are starting today with their clinical experience, so we'll see how it goes. But it's up to the students to schedule their clinicals with their CT, and so, what I'm hoping is that the students will continue their communication with me as they are with their CT, and if they are absent or can't make

a meeting, that there is an alternative for them. I'm predicting, I'll have a little bit more of a hand in the clinical experience than I have in the past. Usually, I would just let the students go to U-High and do their thing and then I would get their grade later. I think now the students are going to come to me for help and I'm going to be in more contact with the CTs over at U-High which I'm actually kind of looking forward to. But again, I'm just hoping that they continue, the students continue their communication with their CT as they have been with me.

JIM: And, and again, it comes back to communication kind of being key to things. Abby, I think you had also mentioned that you um you're trying something with forums, or, or frequently asked questions, I guess? Yeah, so, I created based on the advice of some other faculty members during one of these summer institute things. Um, a frequently asked question forum. So, a thread in the forums for students to post questions, um, and, and get answers from me, um, or the TAs or each other theoretically, um, and that's just to cut down on the repeated questions because, you, you know, when there's an assignment due or an essay coming up, you get the same kinds of questions a lot, um, and so, it's getting, going slowly. I'm hoping that once we get to the first exam, and then the first essay in a couple weeks that maybe students will start using those more. My hope is that, that'll help cut down on some of the email because the email volume in my 200-person class is high. It's an experiment in progress, still, I would say I'm not sure how well it's going to work.

JIM: Well, I don't know a better way to sum up what this semester is other than to call it an experiment in progress, uh, honestly. So, Tina, Abby, Gina, thank you so much for joining me today. That's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about working with students through absences. Go to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu, click on the RedBirds keep teaching link, and you will find a link on that page to a large amount of work that's been put together by colleagues from across campus with advice on this topic. For my guests and for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.