

Ep. 065: Divisive Discourse

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Tackling tough social issues is often a minefield in which few instructors wish to tread... and for good reason. From political polarization to the isolation of the global pandemic, a multitude of forces are shaping, and sometimes stifling, our ability to have deep, important conversations in our classes. But it can be done and done successfully.

We talk with Dr. Joseph Zompetti from the School of Communication, who shares ideas about how to structure classroom conversations, face-to-face or virtually, to navigate through divisive discourses. Joe and Jim examine some basic ground rules which can help students engage with controversial ideas and provide a sense of camaraderie with the mutual goal of sharing different perspectives. They explore the idea of classrooms as simulation spaces, where it's okay to examine the real world without succumbing to the weight of real-world ideology. Joe also shares how he transformed his course on political rhetoric through two divisive presidential elections and what teaching practices he's embraced during the shift to fully online instruction.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

JOE: and, I'm Joe.

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 and joining me today Dr. Joseph Zompetti a Professor in the School of Communication. Hi Joe.

JOE: Hi, how are you doing Jim?

JIM: I'm hanging in there. How are you?

JOE: I'm doing well.

JIM: So, a little context. As we're talking today, we want to talk today about having conversations in class and our theme is kind of divisive discourse, and it is just a little context we're recording this a couple weeks after the presidential election. Let me let me start out really quickly Joe and ask you what have you been experiencing in class this semester as far as conversations with students?

JOE: You know, actually, I think the conversations this semester have been really, really, uh productive and uh friendly and uh there's I think a clear contrast actually from this uh fall semester during a presidential election as compared to the 2016 presidential election. I'm not really quite sure why the differences uh exist, but this this semester has been been pretty good. Now I think that there are some folks that perhaps for some people feel maybe a little silenced which is something that I really worked for toward eliminating, or at least reducing that kind of discomfort. But, uh, and so, I fear

that, that might be a possibility but I think overall the, the tenor has been much more positive this this semester than four years ago.

JIM: When you're talking about making kind of a welcoming environment where students are encouraged to participate because I've, you know, again full disclosure, I've taken some of your classes, you were the chair for my, uh thesis committee, um, so I'm, I'm familiar with how you've conducted classes. Granted that was like a decade ago, right um, and we've all grown as teachers, but what do you do to make that welcoming environment because I know that having discourse in your courses is so important to how you're trying to get students to learn?

JOE: Yeah, absolutely. Well, it's difficult I would say there is a particular challenge in, uh, during the time of COVID because everything is online. What I normally try to do is fit in a physical face-to-face space. Have everyone sit in a circle, uh, and, you know, it creates a more intimate environment, and, and I sit with the students. So, I, I try to eliminate, as much as possible, the sort of the physical uh representation of a hierarchy, or, you know, somebody that's lurking over them, or hovering over them. Uh, and instead, I try to try to make it as equitable or, you know, as, as level of a hierarchy, sort of, as possible. So, that everyone feels like they have the same sort of input. So that's number one, um and, and so, I, as best I can, you know, I try to emulate that online as well. But, uh what, what I can do that's easily translatable to an online environment is to say some things at the beginning of the semester, and then act upon them. So, it's not like I, you know, I'm just talking out of one side of my mouth, and then, you know, being this uh, you know, draconian professor uh, on the, on the other hand. So, what I try to do is, I try to say look, "uh pretend that we're all in this together, that we're all a bunch of friends and we're sitting around chatting about politics, and, uh, and it's okay to have disagreements." You have disagreements with your friends, but at the end of the day you're still friends. And so, uh, that's what I, that, that's the sort of the number one premise that I have when I try to create a climate that's conducive to this sort of talking, in my, in my classes. And, and so, then what I have to do is I have to, I have to be genuine about that. I have to follow through, I have to, I have to let them have a voice, uh, in the class. So, you know, I have to shut up and sit back and let them talk. Um, one thing that I've been doing, since you, since you've had class with me is I, in the syllabus, I have some parameters that I try to establish, you know, fair talk, you know, that sort of thing, and then of course in my book that I wrote for the class which is also called divisive discourse it lays out some, some ground rules too. But uh, what I've been doing recently is asking the students to come up with their own ground rules. Uh that way they have some skin in the game. They have dictated what they think is fair, what they think is equitable, what they think is out of bounds, and so, then when something does get out of bounds it's a lot easier for me to kind of reign it in because they're the ones who've established it. So, uh, and, and it just makes sense, you know, I again, if I'm going to be sincere about trying to be inclusive, and try to give everyone a voice then I shouldn't be the only one establishing rules and enforcing those rules. So uh, I think if everybody has a say and everybody gets, has an idea of, what the semester is going to be like, you know, what, what sort of things are we going to be talking about, and, you know, how are we going to approach them, and I think that, uh, that alleviates some of the anxiety right off the bat. And, and then at first, I think a lot of students are still a little intimidated. Many

students don't like to participate in general, much less in that class about politics, but once we get into the swing of things we get in our own little rhythm and the students get to know each other a little bit better, and they realize that the other person is not the enemy that there's a human being just like they are and everyone comes at this from different experiences and that diversity of experiences is actually something that we can learn from even if, again, we, we disagree at the end of the day, then it's positive. I think all around and, you know, and it's okay sometimes is just sit there and shut up and listen. Uh, even if you disagree with someone because it gives you a completely different perspective uh and that's something that that we can all appreciate even if we even if we don't agree.

JIM: What are some of the techniques that you use to prepare them to talk in class because I remember, for example, um we used to prepare uh questions about the readings, and that was an expectation that you'd said. What are some of the expectations that you set so they have something to talk about naturally when they come into class?

JOE: Yeah, that's a good question. Uh, we still do that. Um, I'll talk a little bit about that in a second, but uh, what we try to do is, uh the, at the very beginning of the semester, again it's all about sort of creating a climate and then building on that. It's sort of a scaffolding kind of approach, and so, in the very beginning it's, it's really about creating a climate or an atmosphere of comfort that we're all in this together. We're going to embark on this journey together, we're going to learn together, and uh, and as a result, we all have a part to play. And so, that means we have to participate, and I try to explain or not necessarily explain, but I try to impress upon them the importance of democracy. A lot of students try to figure me out, you know, am I conservative, am I liberal, whatever, and when they ask me, sometimes they'll ask me, and my answer is well I'm, I'm, I'm pro-democracy and that means that we have to appreciate and include and respect the differences of opinions that exist. Once the I think that we lay that groundwork that democracy is, is, the goal here. That also includes, of course, the responsibility as well as the, the, the duty and the honor of participating because, you know, we, we are blessed with the democracy and we should, we should cherish that. And uh, and so, you know, we talk about. Well, what would it be like to not have a democracy, what would it be like to not have the ability to jump on Instagram, and, and, and voice your inputs on, you know, on what your friends are talking about, or so forth. Um, because that could, that could, happen because that it does happen in other countries. So once we lay that groundwork, we try to, I try to, create this, this genuine atmosphere where everyone feels like they, they have a voice, that they can participate, and, again, that may take a little bit of time for some students. But we inch along, and we get there. And uh, the first, uh, few weeks I'd say well maybe the first two or three weeks we talk mostly about theoretical things. So, what does it mean to, to, say that politics in the United States is polarized? What does it mean to say that someone's a communist or a fascist? What does it mean to say that, uh, you know, people are, uh, you know, a Liberal, or people are pro-life, for pro-choice? And so, we, you know, we lay out all that and, um and, then we talk about what it's, uh, what are some of the rhetorical strategies that people use to divide up, to divide Americans in political discourse. And so, we, we look at the, you know, the, the people the political pundits the politicians the, you know, the folks that uh have a megaphone, really yeah, you know, and, and, uh, they're the ones that tend to use these kinds of techniques

that since most of us have never had a class on how to have a conversation much less a political conversation. A lot of Americans mimic that behavior and so, if we can identify that behavior then my, at least, my hypothesis is if we can identify it then we can avoid it. And so, that's what we do that's how we start off the class, and then so now with the everybody is, sort of, on the same page. After about week three about, you know, you don't, you stick to the issues, you don't call people names. Uh, you know, you try not to create an us versus them and you know, those sorts of things and then when we get into the readings about actual controversial issues which is what we do. We'll talk about everything from health care, gun control, religion, um, race in America, you know, all the, all the hot topics, um, and so the students will do those readings and I ask them to think about those readings critically before they come to class. And they, they, have to write what I call critical observations so that they have really kind of thought those ideas through a little bit, and they, uh, and has also as a result not only have they thought through those readings, but they will always have something to say, uh, so there's no excuse to not participate in my class as long as they've done the readings.

JIM: So, listening to you talk about this I'm imagining that for the spring semester a lot of our colleagues on campus who aren't teaching political communication classes are still looking to have more of that interaction that you're talking about in their own courses. And it seems to me the message I'm kind of getting from what you just said is that it isn't, it's something that builds over time that we shouldn't expect on day one. There's no set list of things that you can do on day one, to "boom" create a community instantly, and have productive, uh, and engaging conversations with students. It's something that requires a little bit of work. I can imagine that students who don't know you very well when you say I'm pro-democracy some of them are probably like well that's a dodge. Right? That's what you would say, right, until they see you, you know, as you pointed out, you, you walk the talk, um, and, and give them an agency in the class, and everything else. So, uh one final little thing before we get into some actual steps that I know you've kind of outlined, about, about how these discussions work in the context of your course. What are some little things that you have done for this class that you think would work for other courses that you teach? That, that may not necessarily be as much about the divisiveness of in political communication and whatnot. Um, a basic writer class, or, or even if you're doing a graduate seminar, on research or anything like that. What are there, are there any little techniques that you think are good for all time zones that you teach in?

JOE: Yes. Uh, yeah, I think, I think, so, um if I can, if I understand your question correctly, let me sort of back up a bit maybe this maybe this will answer the question. Uh, hopefully, it will. So, one of the, one of the reasons why I think I developed this course back in, I think it was around 2014, uh, was not only because I saw this divisive discourses toxicity, you know, in our everyday conversations, uh, because that certainly was the case. I mean, we was, that was pretty evident and it's only, I think, gotten worse, but part of my teaching philosophy ever since graduate school ever since, you know, my very first job has really, always been trying to create an atmosphere where students feel empowered, that they're not just objects where we deposit, you know, information into them and then ask them to regurgitate on a multiple-choice test, or something. That's never been my style, and I've never pre... I never appreciated that as

a student and I never really, I never really, saw the value of it when I was a student, and so, I, I've always really tried to, uh, to emphasize the students experiences as they enter the classroom and meet them sort of where they are based upon those experiences, and then, build on that, and, and in my experience, I've always found that, that is, that is a very strong way to facilitate learning. Uh it's, it's highly organic, it's highly experiential. Uh, it actually runs against what a lot of the studies say. Because I... It's very difficult to apply a rubric to that kind of a situation. It's very difficult to develop lesson plans ahead of time, uh, and so I know that a lot of my peers and colleagues and even folks at CTLT, uh, may you know, may kind of scratch their head a little bit at my approach. But that's okay, um, one of the things that I I've also sort of had to wrestle with is that, um, while I think that my approach works well uh, if, if another, uh, professor enjoys, uh, I don't know, providing power points and has a bunch of rubrics and lots of multiple choice tests and so forth, well that's fine too. In fact, I think it's probably good that our students are exposed to a diversity of different types of teaching methodologies so um early on, you know, I sort of, I was on this, I guess, this uh, I don't know, this high horse thinking that I, I, had all the answers, but, but I don't and, and, and, I think that, uh, actually, um, even though something doesn't work for me, or I may disagree with a particular type of uh teaching philosophy, um, at the end of the day, I think it's really important for our students to be exposed to all of those approaches. Uh because, quite frankly they they're going to have to be flexible when, when, they go out into the work world. Right? So in any case, uh, that was sort of my thinking though early on, was that, this I, I, sort of have the, the, silver bullet here you know. I've got the, I've got the, the magic touch on, on, how, how, to reach students, and what I what I realized, was that it just works for me it may not work for other, other, folks and I still had a lot of learning to do of course. But as I've come along, you know, through the years, it hasn't always worked. There have been a couple of occasions when I've had students that I don't know how to, how to, say this kind of politely but anyway they, they, cross the, the, boundaries, and uh, you know, and we had some issues, but um, that probably is natural as well. And I learned, from those moments and I think that the other students that experienced that with me learned from those moments. And I think that's all you can really ask of a teacher, and all you can ask of students. Right? Is to try to create that as a learning moment as best as possible, but in any case, I, I've always felt strongly that students need a little bit of a push, they need some tough love, they need the opportunity, and the availability to, to, be able to express themselves. And they need some space and a little bit of help occasionally, to kind of put the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together, you know,. And, and so, that's what I, that's the kind of the environment I try to provide as opposed to, you know, the heavy wielding kind of instruction. And uh, and so, uh, as a result of that kind of a teaching philosophy, I then come to this, this, situation where I notice that not just, uh, sort of the general American um, millennials of, you know, sort of, you know, this vitriol that, that was existing in back in 2014 and even, well even before that, but that's when I sort of had this epiphany. And then I realized, well, our students are, are mimicking this too. It was pretty evident that we had conservative students who felt uncomfortable on campus and we had some liberal students who felt uncomfortable because other folks were, you know, saying things that you know, they shouldn't be saying. And, you know, and we had, we had, uh, and it was very incredibly complex. It still is, but I felt like, well in our small world here in the school of calm, maybe there's something I can do about this, and so, I developed this class based upon

those kinds of principles of organic experiential learning. And uh, and as we've just described it, it's kind of evolved from there. And I think that, uh, as a result uh, the st..., the class has not only improved but I think the students are learning a lot more as well.

JIM: Uh, we've done some episodes in the past and CTLT has some resources on dealing with, I think, what some people call hot moments in class. So we'll link to those on the show page for, for, this episode. The other thing, though, is well, let me be frank, give yourself some credit. I mean yes you may not use rubrics but rubrics are a form of feedback ultimately and you are in my opinion one of the, uh, one of the most and I mean this in a good way intense graders of written work. You give a lot of feedback on written work and I'm not just talking about the master's thesis or something like that. I'm talking about every day, you know, short writings that you, you, have your students do in class. So I think students getting that sort of feedback and also, the feedback, they, that you have within a structure you've built that they get from each other. I think that's a, that goes a long way towards supporting what you're talking about, about, this particular style that you've developed. Students, you know, and in a way it's great because you're getting them away from being focused on that letter grade or that point value which is a whole other podcast. But, but, but, um, you know, I, I've been, I, I continue to work on that. Even in something like, uh, Com 110 or the broadcast performance course I teach it's doing the work, it's the learning and having the discussion that is where the learning takes place. The greatest certification later.

JOE: Yeah, well, and unfortunately, uh, it doesn't matter how many times I say that, though there are some students that still don't believe me, so right, and it's the world we all grew up in. Right?

JIM: Yeah, right.

JOE: Right. So, they'll drop the class before, of course, they get to the end where they, actually, get to see the fruits of their labor. But for those students who stick with it, I think you're right, at least I hope, you know, most of them they ultimately get it.

JIM: So, we, we, were talking a little bit before we started recording about how there really is no prescription that you can give for other instructors. You have to just be aware and, and, you've used the word organic it develops organically. But you did before we, actually, uh, got together on zoom today, you did kind of come out with a, a, brief little list of, of, how a discussion goes in your course, and I think that's something that a lot of instructors regardless of what their teaching can, can, hang their head on. So, so, could you go over that a little bit, and, and, we can talk about that.

JOE: Sure, sure, well in my book, I have I list 20 things. But, uh, for today, I, I picked the 10, uh, that I think are probably the best, uh, of the 20. And, and, again, these are, these are, sort of modular. Right. So, you can use these depending on the situation, um, but these are just sort of kind of guidelines, if you will, about how to engage in a conversation with someone for whom you might disagree. And it doesn't have to be about politics it could be about religion it could be about you know, Cubs versus the Cardinals. I mean, really, I mean it doesn't really matter. Any kind of tension or, you

know, or acrimonious kind of environment. These are, um, should be helpful again. These are not panaceas, they're not going to solve every problem, but if you kind of keep these in mind, I think that they can go a long way toward improving our conversation. And, again, remember we, we, most of us anyway, never had a class on how to have a conversation and we certainly have never had a class on how to have a political conversation. So, our, our, role models, the people that we mimic, are actually bad role models, for the most part, because we're looking at those people that are, for the most part, the ones that are dividing America. So, we really have to unlearn some really bad habits. So, the very first thing that I tell students is that we have to listen. And we have to actively listen and that means that we have to, that, that does that doesn't mean, you know, as someone else is talking you pick up your phone and you check your, you know, your text messages or anything. I know listening means you're intent on and you have a purpose of actually listening to what the other person has to say, like, that you actually care about what they are saying, uh, and that you process what they're saying as opposed to just tuning them out and letting them have some space. It's actual, um, a participatory activity not just a passive thing. And related to that, is number two, and that is to think before responding. I think before responding. When I was a little kid, I was a real talkative person. I'm sure you can't imagine this, but I just love to get in there and talk and talk and talk and talk and my dad would always kind of scold me, and would say, you know, son you gotta think before you talk, you gotta think before you talk, and it wasn't until actually, you know, much later in my in my early adult years that, that, started making sense to me um. Yeah, me too.

JIM: Me too.

JOE: Because you know, if you just come right out and interject whatever's on your mind you can get into trouble right yeah as a side note

JIM: I now have a rule that I will read an email I will mark it as unread close it go walk away come back and then I'll respond to it so it works not just in conversations in real time.

JOE: That's right, that's right, and that's, that's, a practice I need to start doing for sure. Uh, but yeah, you know, most of us are like this, right you know, something triggers something inside of us and we feel this impulse and we want we, want to, express ourselves, that's natural, uh, but we have to sort of pump the brakes and process and think, uh, about, well, what are their implications or ramifications if I say xyz? Z/Right? And, and I think that if we do that, that can help, um, help reduce a lot of the tension.

JIM: And is that a role that you find yourself playing when you're, when you're, fostering a discussion in class? Are you the one that you have to say. "Hey wait a minute, let's think about that for a moment".

JOE: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And how do you do that? I mean is there a, without making it sound like

JIM: someone said something necessarily wrong it's just something that's we need to process?

JOE: Right. Well, that's exactly what happens when, something I don't know, it's kind of hard to describe, but you know, when, you're a teacher and you hear someone say something you've got this you've got like four or five hairs that immediately go up in the back of your neck. Right? Uh, well when that happens, that's like a trigger for me to say, "oops okay we need to, we need to, take a little pause here. And so, what I try to do is I try to immediately think of questions about whatever was just said. So, you know, why did you say that? Uh, why do you, why do you think some people believe that or what makes you think that some people would, you know, get to that point or whatever, you know, those kinds of questions. To unpack it, right, to, to, you know, tease it out a little bit. Um, to not place a value on it to not immediately come out and be judgmental about it, but rather, let's try to understand, and um, and, and again, trying to making a learning moment as opposed to a scolding kind of a moment. So that was number two number. Three, is uh, think of the other person as someone who is special or at least not the enemy. Right, I mean it's really kind of hard sometimes to love somebody who you really don't like, and I think that's also a natural human condition. But um, I think that we can look at other people and say "all right, you know, they're, they're not out of, they're really not out to get me", you know, maybe they're misguided. Maybe they've, you know, grown up a certain way, or maybe they're influenced by some things. But, you know, left to their own devices, they're not, they're not out to get me. Right? They're not the enemy, and in fact, I think in our environment, uh, it should, I would hope, that, that really wouldn't happen. I mean I would hope that most folks would say "all right, well you know, you know, you like the Cubs and I like the Cardinals, but, you know, we can still go out, and, you don't, get a beer or something right". Um and, and, and, that's really what this is all about, and so, if, if we can create kind of a, if we can try to remind students, that our classes are more like simulations of the real world and that, uh, and that this is practice for the real, real thing, then I, I think, that, that, also kind of, uh, changes their perspectives a little bit because I think, a lot of times, if you, if you go into the class and you automatically think like, "well this is the real world then there's a lot more at stake". But you know, let's back it up a little bit. Right, I mean, we're in here to learn and to appreciate one another and appreciate other ideas so it's yes it is the real world but this is really uh just a rehearsal.

JIM: That's, that, isn't a fascinating way of putting it. I mean, I've, I've certainly had, you know, when I'm explaining assignments to students, and again, like, I always go back to Com 110 because that's what I'm teaching this semester which is the basic public speaking course which is a very regimented course. There are 80 sections of it, and when they want to give an impassioned first informative speech about x y or z, I say "that's fine, but the real goal is to learn how to do the speech". The topic, I encourage you to do a topic that you're familiar with, don't, don't, we'll have the opportunity to go explore and, and gain new knowledge about a new topic that you then, um, present to the class. But, right now, we're, we're simulating an informative speech in order to learn how to do an informative speech. So, so, that idea of class, in general though extrapolating that as, as, kind of simulation for a greater purpose. I think that's I'm stealing that line. I'm going to be, I'm going to be saying that 8 a.m. on Wednesday

JOE: Okay, okay, well you know, it's kind of late in the game this semester but you know, hopefully, it'll work for you, yeah, um, yeah, and, and I should also say that, uh, all of

these ideas are are not necessarily my own. You know, these are, this is, a compilation of things that I've, I've gathered over, over years, and from different sources. So, um, I just want to make sure that, you know, it's this isn't, all the credit, is not, uh, uh, should not go to me. All right, it should go to other folks. But in any case, uh, number four is, um, remember, that we can always learn from others even if we disagree with them. And this is a tough one. But it really is true. Uh, I mean, if you, I mean, I there, there are some folks in the political scene, uh, that I, I just can't stand. And I, and of course, I'm not going to tell you who. Those are because I try to be balanced, but um, but I still listen to them anyway even though they really anger me, and that's because every now and then, they'll say something that, you know, I mean on this, I may not agree with it but it causes me to think. Or they'll use a particular technique that I hadn't thought of before. I'm like "oh, wow, that was that was pretty clever". Yeah, you know, those kinds of things and again, this actually comes from my dad. When, when, I was a kid, he used to say "that even a stopped clock is right twice a day". That means that even if there's somebody out here you disagree with it doesn't mean that they're wrong 100% of the time. Every now and then they'll get something right. Yeah? And we should pick up on that.

JIM: You know, I, I remember an exercise that we did in one of your classes, and I talked to, uh, uh, Dr. Bill Anderson, over in Family and Consumer Sciences, has done something similar. We talked about that on a previous episode. Where you would have a, a, small issue I'll call it a small issue. Maybe there are no small issues, but it was one that was easily researchable. And you would have us, we would pair up, and on, uh, on one week, we would take one position on it and then on the other week we would, we would, switch and take the opposite position, and it was a real good. You know, as my, as my grandmother used to tell me never judge a person until you walked a mile in their shoes. Um, and it was a really good way of appreciating the fact that there are there are multiple perspectives in almost everything.

JOE: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, and if you do that sort of exercise. Uh, which, you're right, one of my, well actually, this class that we're talking about here this divisive discourse class. What I'll, what I'll have the students do is they'll research, uh, a liberal, that uh, that is, uh, what we would consider toxic, uh, and then they'd have to write about the rhetorical strategies that the liberal uses, and then a few weeks later, then they have to switch, and they have to find a conservative that is toxic. So, if the student is uh predisposed to a liberal ideology, well they have to critique a liberal. You know, which forces them, you know, gives them some cognitive dissonance. Right? Forces them to to reconcile some of their, their, opinions. And then, uh, if somebody's a conservative, right, they'd have to do the same thing. And then, you know, of course, both, uh, you have to switch so it not only, uh, I think creates a situation where you look at the other side and possibly the other side gives you something to offer but it also forces you to critique your own ideology. to see if you really have thought things through the way you should

JIM: And, I think, that leads nicely into number five which as a former as a recovering journalist, I also appreciate but, but, go ahead.

JOE: Sure, yes, number five is well informed. Uh, and that doesn't just mean you know, everything there is to know. Uh, that from your own political perspective, it means, diversify your news sources. Uh, one of the problems that, as you know, uh that we are experiencing today, uh, is the self-selection, the self-exposure, that people have, uh of news sources which creates echo chambers. And on one hand there's nothing wrong with that, I mean in fact it's great you know, we have, we have, all these choices, we have you know, and we get to choose the things that we like. That's wonderful, but the other, on the other hand, if we're making really important decisions about democracy, then all of a sudden, if we are narrowing uh our exposure to just one particular ideology or one news source, then we're really missing out on a lot of other perspectives. And, and, what if our, what if our, perspective is incorrect or it doesn't have all the facts or, um, is really inflammatory. Right. You know, all these kinds of questions I think then, um, emerge that we have to, we have to, wrestle with.

JIM: And I think encouraging our students to do that is important for them, uh, not just in a political context but I mean whatever, whatever, the classes that they're taking if they're having a discussion about something in biology or if they're having you know, chemistry or cyber security anything like that they, they, need to have that worldly perspective to apply the knowledge that they're learning in their classes, and, in order to do that, they have to have a broad swath of knowledge to, to, sample. So, yeah.

JOE: Yeah, that's right, that's right, well and, and, we also know that, yeah, you know, like, let's say you know if you, if you, enjoy watching MSNBC, MSNBC covers certain things, whereas if you switch to Fox you might see, well, oh Fox is covering a story that MSNBC isn't even covering. So, it isn't always a question of political ideology, sometimes, it's just merely a question of what a particular news source deems salient. And as a result, you could be missing out on, on, quite a bit. Great, all right, so then number six is to challenge ourselves to see the world from someone else's perspective. Uh, and here I want to give a plug to the psychology department. They have an ongoing series um based on empathy and, uh, really kind of interesting stuff and lots of different perspectives on, on, what it means to be empathetic, or how to perhaps use empathy in the classroom or in your research and those kinds of things. And, and this is really what this principle is getting at, right, is, is, to say, uh, is, and of course, we can't, we're never really going to be the other person. But again, if we think of the classroom environment as a simulation, well then let's take it one step further. What if we were someone else? What do we think the world would look like? What, what, kind of experiences do you think we would have? And of course, it's not going to be the exact same thing, but it, at least, causes our mind to shift gears a bit. Uh to, to, to, realize that, you know, what the world does not revolve around me, and and other people have problems too. And, you know, what sometimes those problems are a lot worse than the problems I experience, you know, and, and, so on and so forth. And so, if we can really kind of uh see the world in, from, um, from that kind of vantage point, then I think we will be a little less judgmental, perhaps uh, when we're engaged in these conversations. And number seven is, uh, and this is a lot like, uh, one of the early ones but is to choose our words carefully. This kind of goes along the lines of think before you speak but to choose our words carefully. And this, but one thing I would add that's different than thinking before speaking, is that choosing our words carefully means that we have to have some competence in our vocabulary and you know, we

have to know what some words mean, and we have to know which words are sort of off limits. Um, which are more appropriate or less appropriate things of that nature.

JIM: Connotation versus denotation of words and I think also, you know, having talked about empathy when we choose our words carefully it has to be within the context of the person who's going to be hearing what we're going to say. And hopefully you have come to know them or you are empathetic to their situation. And so I think being careful about your words falls, and falls, into that as well. Right?

JOE: Absolutely, absolutely, and as, and as, teachers this can be another one of those moments that were positive learning moments. Where if, uh if, you don't know what words to say well then ask, "let's have a conversation about that". Right? You know, and, and uh you know, I'm frequently learning things, you know, my students, you know, they, they have a whole new vocabulary that didn't exist when I was their age, and so, you know, they say things that I have no idea what those words mean. And uh, sometimes we need to unpack those. So, uh okay number eight then is, uh, to avoid the blame game. Avoid the blame game, and instead let's focus on solutions. This one's hard. This one's really hard, because, uh, just about everywhere you go conversations quickly, uh, devolve into, uh well, you did this, you did that, or so, and so said this, so-and-so said that, and uh it's really easy to fall into this trap, in part because I think that when people feel harmed or if they have a grievance, then they want some sort of recompense and they want someone to kind of pay for it. And, you know, and that is kind of what the larger American culture uh tells us, uh, is what is fair and just.

JIM: And, and we're all about winners and losers.

JOE: Exactly. Yes it is you know, right and there is this competition element as well and so uh unfortunately though I don't think that works well when we're having conversations over controversial things and because once you start getting into the blame game then it's a lot harder to do these other principles it's a lot harder to have empathy for someone else if you see them as being the culprit right for example and uh and so as as hard as it is I think we really need to try to avoid the blame game at all costs uh knowing of course that we're going to slip up you know, we you know, this is not very easy to do um but still we need to try our best number nine uh so we're almost done remember that discussions are not competitive games so this is what you're just mentioning that you know, our larger uh culture tends to stress competition um but when we engage in these conversations we should remind ourselves that they are not debates uh that we don't have to win an argument uh yeah and instead we should probably rethink them entirely so instead of seeing these as these competitive games or exercises or things that we should really win we should instead say okay well what is it instead of winning here uh what is it that I can learn you know, it yes I have my opinions I'm a very opinionated person but when I have conversations with folks I sometimes I you know, I have to turn that knob off in my brain and say look I this isn't about me convincing them one way or the other this is really an opportunity for me to learn from them because I know that one conversation is not going to change their mind anyway

JIM: right Z if we if we approach these conversations with a competitive mindset we are always going to fail we will never win those competitions because one single conversation is never going to change someone's mind if you are in it for a change if you are really engaged in these conversations to persuade people then that is a long process you know, it rarely happens overnight and it almost never happens in a single conversation so instead let's look at it from a different per you know, different angle and instead of trying to win these as debates let's try to learn from each other instead and and I think that's where having learning goals for individual class sessions I think can be very helpful if the if that can help you and you don't have to have them written down necessarily but even just expressing the students okay we're going to talk about this subject today and what we're going to define as a win for lack of a better term or you know, you'll come out of here with a better sense of whatever and you know, if if they can honestly say to themselves that yes we've done that then then I think that that's what I think that helps out a lot as far as kind of defusing that sort of we must someone some we have to have winners and conversely we have to have losers or correspondingly we have to have losers

JOE: right yeah right yeah and, and, and like I said not only are you not going to persuade people but having that kind of a framework in place where you have winners and losers uh and my mind automatically dooms the experience you know, it's a recipe for disaster because you know, as a teacher you don't want to you don't want to set you don't want to start with the premise that half your class are going to be losers right that doesn't make any sense

JIM: Right.

JOE: So, we have to completely reevaluate I think um our approach to those kind of conversations and then finally if all else fails if you forget all these other things if you forget the theory and all that other stuff, there's one simple thing that you can always remember and that is the golden rule. You don't treat others as you would hope that they would treat you and, you know, that's as simple as, as, as, as it needs to be, you know, and, and I think this you know you asked me earlier what kind of cuts across different uh classes and different subject areas well here you go I mean this is the basic thing but we often forget it right you know, we some maybe it is our competition culture you know, we want to feel like we're the winner or the strong one or maybe it's yeah I mean I don't know maybe it's something else toxic masculinity or something like that you know

JIM: Right.

JOE: Whatever, whatever the issue is, uh, we need to at times I think rewire our brains and and relearn things or unlearn things and then learn better things and the simple golden rule is such an easy thing that we can we can insert into our daily lives. We just have to remember it you know, and, and remember those moments when you were involved in a conversation, somebody hurt your feelings or somebody called you a name or somebody made you feel so small that you felt like you didn't have anything important to say or you didn't have a voice or that you felt like you were a loser, and you just needed to give up or that maybe you needed to drop the class because you weren't

smart enough. You know, all of us have experienced those moments but how many times do we look back on those moments to guide our future learning and, and I don't think that we do enough of that. And so you know, I often try to look at my, at my, students and, and whether they're conservatives, liberals, somewhere in between, uh, a political doesn't really matter to me. Um, and I try to I try to look at them and I try to think well you know, I I went through a similar experience, you know, a different kind of class, different era in time different issue, but I remember what it felt like when someone said something like that to me. So...

JIM: And I think, and I think, yeah and I think the golden rule requires a certain amount of imagination especially for those of us who may, you know, now we can bring in, uh, the concept of privilege some of us the, the slights that we felt or whatever are nowhere near on the level that others have felt as well. And so it does require in some ways this idea of the golden rule or just, you know, treat others as you would like to be treated requires all of the previous things that we've been talking about today it's just kind of a way of operationalizing it. Uh, without consciously thinking about it if you can at least at least do that so I think that's great.

JOE: Right, absolutely, well and that's the thing, right, so, you know, yeah I'm pretty I'm I'm very privileged um and I know that but that's the thing right so there were moments in my life when, you know, in terms of education, you know, in classes and stuff that I didn't feel very good about myself. So, if I felt that way just imagine what it might be like for someone else who has a lot less privilege, right?

JIM: Right. Right.

JOE: So,

JIM: exactly that's the, that's the, the framework I think that we need to approach this with. That's great. Again, I don't, I don't pretend to have all the answers. This is, this is a work in progress as I said it started in about 2014 so about six years in the making and I'm still learning every semester is different and I think that we have as instructors as as teachers we have to be mindful of being flexible of being adaptive and not going into a situation with hard and fast rules because these hard and fast rules are not always going to work. And there's always more to learn that's great and speaking of being adaptive one final question before I let you go. What, is there anything that you have learned this fall and I'm thinking especially in the context of online teaching and how we had to pivot to online, some of us very quickly. Is, are, there any little tips or tricks or little things that you definitely want to do or you definitely don't want to do when you're contemplating your spring courses?

JOE: That's a yeah, that's a tough question and, um, and I'm still processing one of the things I try to do, don't always do it very well, but one of the things I try to do is after every semester really try to critically reflect on how the semester. Just uh, just occurred and what, what things I can tweak to make it better. And so, you're right, this semester has been completely different. It's been frustrating at times but one of the, I guess, one of the things, one of the good takeaways is just last year when we were having face-to-face classes, one of the things I I introduced is because I was tired I was

tired of students not coming to my office hours. And, and I was tired of not having that kind of connectivity with them to say, you know, look “I'm not some evil you know, professor, I really am here to help you I really do care so come to my office hours, you know, so I can help you”. Well I didn't really know what else to do because I felt like I was just straining my voice every semester you know, and students really weren't really weren't picking up on it. So, one of the things I did last year was I instituted a kind of mandatory, you know, you come to my office hours at least once I'll give you some points you know and the session was really just to get to kind of know each other. Kind of thing, you know, what are your expectations, how can I help you get there? You know, those kinds of questions well then connect happens. And I can't have students come to my office anymore, right. One of the things that I did was I, uh, I said okay well uh let's meet individually. We'll have our own little zoom meetings which was a scheduling nightmare. There's probably an easier way of doing it I'm just not very tech savvy. Uh and um and I would say probably about 96 of the students actually did it with me so I think that's pretty good. I, I think that it went really well. Not as good probably as the face-to-face meetings, but I think that if I hadn't had those individual meetings those one-on-ones with students this semester, I think many of them would not be as engaged in the class. I think, um, I certainly wouldn't have known them as well as I do and I think it was just really important, um, even, you know, in this, in this sort of what I call COVID world or zoom world where we are struggling uh and yearning to have connectivity uh even though it's not the same thing. Having these one-on-one meetings I think goes a long way, uh to supplementing that, you know, kind of fulfilling that and, uh, I, I think that they definitely helped and so yeah I need to figure out a better way of scheduling them. Um and it took a lot of time, you know, it's you know about a half hour per student um that took a lot of time for there was about three or four weeks there where it seemed like all I was doing was having these zoom meetings. But, um, I think overall they were definitely worth it. So that would be my I guess my main takeaway this semester what I did that I think helped and I would suggest maybe others uh think about it and obviously wouldn't work if you know in large lecture classes probably, but if you have smaller classes, it's something to consider

JIM: Great Joe. Thank you so much.

JOE: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching you can find out more about our podcast go to CTLT.illinoisstate.edu for Dr. Joseph Zompetti for all my colleagues at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, happy teaching.