

Ep. 067: Civic Engagement in Extraordinary Times

Podcast: <https://ProDev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2020/ep067.shtml>

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.

KATY: Hi I'm Katy,

DANA: I'm Dana.

HARRIET: I'm Harriet.

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 we are coming up on the first of the year which means it is time for the annual University-Wide Teaching and Learning Symposium. So, in what's become a tradition on our pokey little podcast we are going to preview that event today. So, joining me today three special guests first of all Dr. Katy Strzepek is the director for the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning here at ISU. Hi Katy,

KATY: Hi.

JIM: And also joining us from the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, Harriet Steinbach.

HARRIET: Hi.

JIM: Hi there. And making her triumphant return to our pokey little podcast is our Coordinator for Faculty Development and Special Events, Dr. Dana Karraker. Hey Dana.

DANA: Hello.

JIM: We're talking about our symposium, and the theme this year is civic engagement in extraordinary times. So, let me start with you, Dana, can you walk us through a little bit about how we came about with that theme and, and what our goal is with that?

DANA: As you know, we start planning for our symposium usually when the previous year's symposium is wrapping up. So, we knew that we had an election coming up, and we suspected it might be a contentious election, um. So, we were thinking about having civic engagement as the theme, so this was back in January, February. We also knew that Illinois State has been granted the Carnegie Designation for Community Engagement. I don't know if I have that name right, but Katy and Harriet will correct me, um. So, we knew that ISU's has this pretty prestigious designation now which was a lot of work, um, and we thought it would be a good time to discuss what that means for us as an institution. And then the pandemic hit, and then we had the summer of Black Lives Matter, and you know, all of the racial tension and it just seems like the whole... While we had particular intentions for the theme in the beginning, as the year went on um, we recognized that it's a, it's an important conversation to have and, you know, what is the role of institutions of higher education Illinois State University when we're living in these unprecedented times, and what does that mean since it's a Teaching and Learning Symposium? What does that mean for our work with our students?

JIM: So, Katy, can you tell us a little bit more, before we get into the, into the nuts and bolts in the, in the dive deeper into the theme of the symposium. Tell us a little bit more about this designation that Dana was mentioning.

KATY: So, the Carnegie Foundation Elective Community Engagement Classification is something that universities apply to, and it's quite a process. You have to do an institutional-wide survey of community engagement and reach out to community partners. And so, it's a national designation that universities apply for and it's, it's a real honor that we received it, and I want to emphasize that it was a cross institutional process to receive it. And so, it really, I think attests to our, with our, community partners and faculty staff and students to support our core value of civic engagement and community engagement as part of that. And so, we really kind of focused on this idea of mutually beneficial partnerships across the institution and so this, this conference is an important way to support that in terms of thinking about civic engagement. In difficult times and this really is an extraordinary time for so many reasons, but I think it's also a time that we can really take some of the really extraordinary efforts of students to be engaged in extraordinary campus engagement efforts. From our voter education plans um, to other campus activism for Black Lives Matter and other issues like this has both been a terrible time and an exciting time. I mean our students are super engaged I mean our voter turnout nationally and on campus was outstanding, um, and so while I have concerns about the divisions in our country I'm also really excited about the engagement on our campus, and of youth

nationally. So, it's kind of a really exciting time for faculty and staff to think about, um, how we can move forward with this momentum and so I'm really excited about that we are also an American Democracy Project campus and there are a lot of projects, um, within that, um, movement that are working on what can we do past November so there's kind of this idea.

HARRIET: So... um..., I would just add there's 363 campuses in the US that have the Carnegie Designation and, um, I just completely agree with Katy that the receiving this designation wasn't that end point it really was the jumping off point for what comes next for Illinois State, and everything that's happened in the last year really contributes to where, you know, where are we going as an institution.

JIM: And jumping off point is, is a theme that, or an idea that we come back to every year with the symposium. It's in the middle of the academic year but it's at the beginning of the spring semester. Where we can kind of take what has, take what's come before and get re-energized for our teaching, and I think part of that phrase "extraordinary times", uh, means that we need some extraordinary energization, re-energizing, um, as we start teaching for spring. And Dana, we can talk more, a little bit later about, how the symposium is changing in a physical sense, but I want to open it up for all three of you and I want to share with you my perspective as someone who not only works with faculty but also still teaches occasionally on campus. Civic engagement has always been kind of a hard concept for me to wrap my brain around as a teacher, not that I don't understand the importance of it, and I can define it, kind of, but it seems to have so many different facets so, I would, could one of you kind of walk us through the different facets of what, under the umbrella of civic engagement? What that looks like in a classroom, or what that looks like from a student's perspective?

HARRIET: That is um, what you're describing Jim is a very common experience and feeling. You're not unique, it's, it's, like you hear the word civic engagement you're like, yeah, I kind of know what you're talking about. It's you know, I know some things that I think are civic engagement. So, often times folks our, our students in particular um, will think of civic engagement, and they think it's either volunteering, um, so going and helping at the soup kitchen that kind of stuff, or it's like elections. I'm going to coach, and those two things are civic engagement, but there's a lot more in civic engagement than just those two things. So broadly we use a definition oftentimes from Thomas Erlich, and he's one of, really like, the foremost scholars of civic engagement in higher education. That it talks about a commitment to the quality of life in a community um, and so he goes very broad and um, and so for any person student, anyone, you have to think about what's my community and you can define community however you want we tell students all the time your community could be the third floor of Manchester Hall um, and that's fine it could be Normal it could be Naperville it could be the United States it could be the world. Whatever, however, you want to define community and genuinely being committed and being active in that community and always looking for how you can improve the experience of others in that community.

DANA: So, I want to expand on what Harriet said so she defined community as either your you know, the third floor of Manchester all the way to a global community. I also want to add that we can also consider our disciplinary communities, and that's where the idea

of our courses come in. Because another misconception for people who are teaching, probably think that “oh, I have to do this major project with this community partner and my course really isn't about that”, but in order to do these things in your community that Harriet described, you have to have certain knowledge skills and dispositions so your course may fit nicely with just civic learning about your discipline. How do the people in my discipline approach particular issues, or problems and help to solve those problems? Um, so that's how coursework can, can fit into it, it doesn't have to be this big thing with community partners. And each course, I could, I could probably take each course and discuss with a faculty member how civic engagement, civic learning, or development of civic skills can fit into that course.

HARRIET: I agree with Dana, and that oftentimes the misconception among faculty is that civic engagement in a class looks like this huge project with a community partner, and my students are out, maybe every week they're going somewhere, and civic engagement it looks, it just looks like so many different things, and so thinking about course goals, and even the level of the course and the student that you have in the course. What we call civic learning, just introducing, incorporating civic concepts into the already existing material is a great foundation to build for students to start to see their connections, learn about themselves, learn about their community, learn about things they can do, without ever leaving the classroom, and then it kind of goes, it can go from there. And Katy probably can name more examples than I can, but it can look like political um, content in the classroom, it can look like traditional service learning where you're sending your students out, it could be um, project based where your survey community partner, but perhaps it's more like consulting style. Students are applying those, class knowledge perhaps, at that 300 or 400 level to benefit the community, it could be advocacy work. I don't know. Katy, what else would you add?

KATY: I mean, I think you're doing a great job using a model of a wheel from campus compact, and it has a lot of different types of community engagement, civic engagement around the center of the wheel, which centers on equity and anti-racism because we always want to be sure that the work we do has a justice-based framework, and that and partners, in partnership, with the communities that we serve with and alongside. So, I think Harriet covered a lot of the different types of engagement, but I do think it's just great as Dana said to think about the many different types of projects that students can do and still within the zoom environment. I mean students can help a community group that needs a literature review done on a certain topic, and students could be researching the issue, students could do an oral history project, they could advocate for a certain bill that's before congress to do with a certain issue, so, there's so many ways that students can um, can work on their skills and also on their knowledge, and then that often change their, changes their attitude about an issue. Um, and so that's something that we think about, as well.

JIM: So, Katy, we and, we often talk in, in the teaching side of things about creating transformative experiences for our students. As the director of the center can you touch on, you know, we have a lot of core values at ISU and they're all worthy core values, but it always has seemed to me that civic engagement really ties directly into the reason why we have public universities to begin with.

KATY:

So, I think that civic engagement is critical to public higher education because part of what we're trying to do is to create students who believe in this concept of public impact, and public participation in democracy, and so I think in order to create that culture, students have to realize that their voices and their actions really do matter, and they have to see themselves as part of a community in a powerful way. And so, I think we saw that a lot with our students who became involved in the voter education efforts. I mean, I have had a lot of students tell me that initially they weren't sure if their vote really would make a difference and then when they realized that it did, it was it was really transformative for them, but also you know, when they volunteered to help at the polls, or you know, outside of the bone to tell people where to go. I think sometimes people don't think, you know, that hour or two of, you know, serving their community makes a difference, but when they do it, they realize that it does make a difference, and then start to want to continue to do that. And say, I want to volunteer next time, what can I do or what else? How can I share this with my family and my friends and so it becomes this transformative process where they want to keep doing it because they realize that their voice does make a difference? I mean, I think even when they encounter, you know, tension and, you know, still, you know, things after the election weren't quite settled, they were still very engaged. And I think, overwhelmingly, they felt it was a positive experience where they could help engage in a conversation that wasn't like people yelling at each other but, you know, people taking action to say no matter who you are or what you're going to vote for, we are here to be sure that you can vote. You know, and you have that ability to participate in the democratic process, and so I think that's something that we can help change student's minds about, too, because sometimes, when people think of politics, they automatically think of something negative, and so we're trying to transform that by doing things like deliberative dialogues which are discussions about controversial topics, where people have, um, and we, we ask them to share their own views which may differ from each other. But that's okay. That's part of democracy too. We've always had these inherent tensions in a democratic society, so, and a public university is the perfect place to talk about these inherent tensions in a respectful way. Um, and we understand there also is a time for protest, and that's been true throughout our nation's history. We have made some really important strides through people disagreeing in difficult ways with each other, but that, that's really important for our students to see that is part of the public process, and just to be sure that everyone has the chance to share their voice. I mean, that's really important at a public university, too, so that we don't all have to agree with each other, but we want everyone to be able to participate to the fullest extent possible, and that's like teaching and making your class accessible, you know. Zoom is great for that. People who are shyer can sometimes chat in and, you know, we have multiple ways for people to participate.

JIM:

Well, and that sense of participation is something that we also try to bring to our symposium. A lot of the feedback that we get over the years, the positive feedback, people always highlight the fact that it's a chance to talk to colleagues, um, to cross those disciplinary silos, and to exchange ideas. And, and by the way, not everyone always agrees with what everyone else says at the symposium either. So, it is, it is a, it is a, the community kind of in microcosm. Obviously, how it's going to happen in January is going to be different this year because of the pandemic and social distancing restrictions. It's going to be entirely online through Zoom. So Dana, did you want to

talk maybe a little bit about that, and then we probably can talk a little bit about our keynote speakers that we're bringing in, as well.

DANA: Yes, yeah, we're very excited about that so um, we will be using Zoom and um, are more... Well, one of the pluses of this Zoom environment, is that, uh, we could take our money and invite three keynote speakers this year. And we have. We are very excited. We'll talk about them in a bit, but we're very excited about the three people that we've invited to come. In the morning, each one of those keynoters will have a 50-minute session that we'll do in Zoom Webinar which is less interactive but also an opportunity to ask questions. And they'll each give a keynote type address on their various topics which we'll, we'll talk about too, then we'll take a short lunch break, and then um, we will have smaller sessions with, with each of our keynoters. So um, people can choose which one they want to have more conversation with. And these will be more interactive using Zoom Meeting, and then the last part of our day we're having three more sessions which will dive into some more specifics about some of the things we've already talked about. So, course design, deliberative dialogue, and then you know, how to do community engagement in, in our current situation. So, a lot of possibilities have come from this. So...

JIM: Absolutely, and, and uh, why don't we go ahead and, kind of, because we have three keynote speakers, but they're not all going to be talking about the same thing. And I think, that really is reflective on the different aspects of civic engagement that we were talking about at the top. So, do you want to quickly turn us down uh through who we have?

DANA: We have Marshall Welch he is a retired administrator and faculty member and served in several institutions. He is also very involved with campus compact, which Harriet and Katy mentioned earlier. But that's a national coalition of colleges and universities across the country, and they're committed to the public, public purposes of higher education. He's already given us kind of a preview of what he's coming to talk about, but he is going to talk about new challenges mean new opportunities. So, looking at Black Lives Matter, pandemic, the Me-Too movement, all of those are opportunities to give voice to marginalized groups, and then um, what does this mean in our new context? How can we be civically engaged in, in our new context? And then, Elizabeth Bennion is a professor of political science at Indiana University at South Bend. her expertise is on civic education and political engagement, and she's written two books on teaching civic engagement, and that cross-disciplinary approach to it. So, she will talk more specifically about that, you know. What, what does civic loop engagement look like in our courses, and how can the different disciplines approach it in, in particular ways. Our third keynoter is Timothy Eatman. He is the Dean of the Honors Living and Learning Community, and, and Associate Professor of Urban Education at Rutgers. His expertise lies in this public scholarship. He also serves on the AACNU American Association of American Colleges and Universities. He is a faculty member of their High Impact Practices Institute. So, if you look through a lot of CTLT, uh, materials, you know we talk about these high impact practices and civic engagement is one of them. Community engagement is one of them. And so um, he's going to talk more about this public scholarship piece, and the responsibilities of institutions in higher education to the broader community, and you know, what is the relevance of

an institute of higher education in our community. So, and all of, all three of these people, are like, Katy said, the center of that campus compact wheel is, um, social justice and diversity equity and inclusion.

HARRIET: Jim, let me just geek out for a minute,

JIM: Okay.

HARRIET: That um, these people are rock stars in the higher education civic engagement world. I mean we, I am just over the moon, and I'm so excited um, and I, and I hope, I just want to encourage as many faculty as they're able to participate, to come to symposium because we are so lucky to get to share some space and hear from these folks. And I've actually, I've heard um, Marshall and Timothy speak at national conferences, and they're excellent, and I look forward to hearing them again. I mean, they're just um... As you can tell from Dana's description, they all have a different area of expertise, or sort of niche in civic engagement. What I think is reflective of, you know, what a broad concept it is, but I think together it's going to be such an awesome day to get to hear from and learn from them.

JIM: So, I, I'm going to ask you to share some final thoughts, but before we do that, once again, we are doing, Dana, we're doing a symposium preview podcast, and I haven't yet mentioned when the symposium is so it is, it is Wednesday, January 6th. Uh, it'll start what about 8:30 in the morning, I think we're planning at this point. Maybe nine,

DANA: I think we're at nine. Yes, at nine.

JIM: Okay, registration for the event is open now. You can go to CTLT.IllinoisState.edu Symposium. That will take you right to the page, and we have the biographies of our keynote speakers on there already. We'll be getting scheduling, uh, information up there soon. Registration, we're hoping to have uh completed by Friday December 18th. And just like, even though there's no meal being served through Zoom, we haven't figured out that technology yet. We still want you to reserve your seat so we can send you the links and all of the information. Dana.

DANA: And that's particularly important because the people who are registered will receive uh event confirmation email. The day before, a couple days before the event before January 6. So that, that will have links to, the um, the meetings.

JIM: Right, right, and we should also mention the symposium is open to all members of the faculty, staff, graduate students, at Illinois State University. We may have some others joining us as well. So, to kind of wrap it up, to kind of, to kind of tie this all back together, let me ask two questions. And the first one and I'll just open up to any of you, what's one thing that you hope a faculty member, or an instructor will, will take away from this particular event?

DANA: I think; I, I want them to really think about the students who are in their classrooms and think about what they're experiencing now as students at this institution.

HARRIET: I and I think like, kind of going along with what Dana said, I am really interested in making this student centered because the students are why we are here, so I often like to ask students like what does justice look like for you? What is your idea of a beloved or ideal community, and um, so thinking about that, and having faculty and staff just kind of brainstorm? What kind of activities and things that they can do in their classes to give students the civic knowledge and skills that they need to kind of transform those theories about engagement and those ideas about beloved community into practice? Um, so that I, I think that it's just great always for faculty to think of ways to connect with their students in a way that's discipline specific. But also, sometimes in a way that's not. I think sometimes, in this environment, we just need, to um, to elevate connection and start with connection because students enter into civic engagement in different ways. So, we might ask by first asking them, what are you interested in? And then think of ways that we can translate it into our disciplines and into our classes.

JIM: And that that's going to bring me to my second question, but what I'm from, what I'm hearing from you, it, it's that, uh, no one's going to leave this symposium with a fully formed redesigned course, or anything like that. But some ideas to try out and the beginning of something. So, Katy, let me start with you. Where do you see civic engagement going forward or evolving after the symposium throughout the spring and as we get into the summer. You know, hopefully, we're, you know, we're starting to hear news about vaccines, some stabilization on the election front, um, that's kind of starting to gel, and obviously, a couple weeks after a symposium there will be a presidential inauguration. But where do you, where do you see things going forward? What do you, what, what, what's your forecast civic engagement-wise for the next six months?

KATY: Well, I would like to see us not go back to where we were before, in terms of, just as a nation and how divided we have been. And I think, um, some of the things that we've learned from the COVID environment, is about how to better include people but also how to listen to people who had been marginalized. So, what I hope to see moving forward, is kind of this idea that I heard at this American democracy project meeting that I went to recently. This idea of how can we be better together beyond November? And so, how can we kind of carry forward with this model of deliberative dialogue, and this model of talking about difficult issues from multiple perspectives and how can we reinvigorate community engagement, um, to continue our, our goal of this idea of mutually beneficial partnerships? And that does require getting uncomfortable. In fact, I think if you don't get uncomfortable, and I'm paraphrasing a black feminist Barbara Smith who says like, "there's no coalescing without discomfort", like we, we have to kind of go through these listening stages. And so sometimes, creating a new course it is challenging, but it's also invigorating. And yes, we may not make a huge policy change, but we are beginning to teach students those skills. And so, maybe it's going to be the next class that actually makes the change, but it's these, you know, really transformative skills and experiences that I think are exciting. So, I hope that civic engagement, um, continues to open up and blossom in the next six to eight months both online, I mean, I hope we continue some of these online things because that, that allows greater participation for universities that can't send their faculty and students to conferences, better for our environment. So, I hope that, you know, I look forward to the day where we can be together in person, but I also hope we continue some of

these new technologies that allow more people to participate. So, those are some of my hopes. I have many more but that's for the symposium. We can talk more about that then.

JIM: Absolutely. Harriet?

HARRIET: So, I think that, um I, I agree with Katy, and I think we have an opportunity when we're talking about these difficult conversations, is also to continue those political conversations. I think as a center we want to help the campus understand that we don't, we shouldn't just be talking about politics during big elections, and that we have an opportunity to continue to talk about politics and political aspects of courses and disciplines all times of the year, any semester, regardless of there's an election or not. Um, I would also share that there is going to be local elections in Normal, and that's another piece, as we look forward, is that, um, helping students to understand how their voices matter in the local community and, um, in this case, our students are scattered all over. They're not concentrated in Normal in the spring, and so, wanting to emphasize that message of community participation wherever you are, you know, engaging in those local elections, um, whatever community you're currently residing in, um, as another way of practicing those civic skills.

JIM: Dana?

DANA: So, um, one of, we talked about the, the pluses of having a virtual symposium. One of the downsides of this one, is the symposium has traditionally been an opportunity for faculty to share their, their practices and, and wonderful things they're doing in their classrooms. Um, and we've had more faculty and staff present, um, um panels and posters and that thing, but that, this environment wasn't allowing for that to happen. But it's the launching point for continuing um, professional development opportunities, um, to engage with the topic of civic engagement throughout. So um, we will be planning programming um, and the, the Center for Community Engagement Service Learning also has programming too, that will extend um, from the symposium all the way through summertime when we will have our redesign, uh redesign your course for civic engagement plus other things. We have a learning community to continue these conversations. Um, and then the Center has things that will... Events that will stem from this.

JIM: Great. Well Harriet, Katy, Dana, thank you so much.

DANA: Thanks.

KATY: Jim, thank you.

HARRIET: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can learn more about our symposium and sign up by December 18th. Go to CTLT.IllinoisState.edu/symposium. For all of my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, and at the Center for Community Engagement

and Service Learning, we hope to see you January 6th at our symposium. Until then,
Happy Teaching.