

Ep. 69: Mask Up!

Podcast: <https://ProDev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2021/ep069.shtml>

Dreading all of that grading at the end of the semester? Wish you could snap your fingers and make it all go away? Claire and Jim explore how much feedback your students really need after those final exams and projects are turned in. They discuss ways of putting a final flourish on their learning without burying yourself under a mountain of feedback that, let's face it, they may never see.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there I'm Jim.

JEN: And I'm Jen.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching!

[Music playing]

JIM: Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee and joining us today a long-time friend of the show and now the boss of the show Dr. Jennifer Frieberg. She is our current director at the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology. Hi Jen, how are you?

JEN: Great Jim. How are you doing today?

JIM: Good. I gave you kind of the royal roll-out here because you've actually been our director for about a year um and what a year it's been it's been the year of COVID. You've been on the podcast before but welcome to the podcast officially as the person who pays my, signs my paycheck-

JEN: There we go. Well, I might not sign your paycheck, but I approve your time, how's that?

JIM: That works, that works. We should also mention that you are uh you hold the endowed cross chair in the scholarship of teaching and learning, so you're kind of what we're going to talk about today you're approaching this from actually, well, actually three sides; because we're going to talk today about the fall semester coming up and teaching while wearing face coverings while wearing a mask and just remind folks listening what is your actual discipline.

JEN: I come from the discipline of speech language pathology, and on our campus I'd be in the department of communication sciences and disorders; and so, while um I I'm not a practicing speech pathologist anymore I'm, I'm, dangerous enough to be familiar with the research that's out there [JIM LAUGHS] about speech perception and uh you know speech reception and speech comprehension and, and, um you know this how that that might interact with wearing masks while we try and communicate with small or large numbers of students this fall.

JIM: Uh before we get into some of the pronunciation issues or the articulation issues that we may have, can you talk in general what are some of the challenges that students may have in a class even in the best of times in the face-to-face class. as far as hearing and understanding what the instructor is saying?

JEN: Well, I mean, in non-masked times, you know there's, there's, lots of things that can get in the way of understanding messages that go back and forth from speaker to listener you may have ambient noise like a heater or an air conditioning unit or a really loud light fixture the shuffling of feet and desks and electronic sounds that happen and all of those things interrupt the natural flow of, of, how signals pass from, from, individuals who are, are, trying to deliver messages to individuals who are trying to receive messages and you know we, we, make it work we, we, ask for people to repeat things or we turn off the air conditioning or we turn off the lights or we ask people to silence their cell phones whatever it is it gets in the way of communication um you know in traditional non-non-pandemic times we've been able to you know find our workarounds. And I think we're both here to suggest that that going forward into this fall, when we think about teaching with an added layer of complexity in terms of communication that there are similar things we can do to work around some of the barriers we might find while wearing masks as, as, instructors right getting our students to understand what we're trying to discuss with them but also as instructors trying to understand what our students are saying to us from across uh you know large or small classrooms.

JIM: Right and we should also mention that we are in no way suggesting that you should take off your mask if we are required right now to wear our masks um that's the added degree of difficulty that we have but there are some solutions around that currently as we're recording this we will be required to wear masks but we will not have the social distancing restrictions so we are also talking about a classroom that is going to be at full capacity as well which brings more ambient noise so what's the added problem with wearing a mask with actually having our mouths covered.

JEN: Well, there's a couple different things, you know. First of all, we a lot of uh visual uh input when we are listening to someone talk to us so we um we might watch facial expression, we might watch um the shape of someone's mouth as they're speaking, and those things obviously are harder if you have a face covering or a mask on because um you know those avenues of non-verbal understanding are shut down to you and along with that there's been some research that's been done pre-COVID because there hasn't been a lot of mask research done during COVID in college classrooms but in different clinical settings where you have medical students nursing students speech pathology students who wear masks in clinical settings for patient health and hygiene

and have done that for decades that in particular certain sounds are impacted by the use of masks and those are typically um high frequency sounds uh my audiology friends would applaud my use of that phrase but um high frequency sounds like “s” like in Sam or “f” like in fish or “th” like in thank; those sounds um they’re very high pitched and strident and, and, they uh those sounds in particular are impacted when we have a face covering So what uh what are some of the things we can do about this what are some of the things that that instructor someone who’s listening to this maybe they’re getting ready to go into their classroom for the first week what can we do? There are a few things that I can suggest almost always improve speech clarity when you’re wearing a mask. The first one is to speak louder. So, if you have a normal conversational tone that you might use in a classroom setting you might need to take that up a notch. Now, I am a speech pathologist, so I also have to say you want to avoid vocal strain and so you don’t want to be so loud that you cause yourself you know vocal nodules or other kinds of hoarseness or harshness or changes in voice quality, and so, along with the suggestion to speak louder comes the suggestion to use a microphone, if you’re able to, that will allow you to amplify your voice but not strain your voice and so that um can provide extra auditory input for your students that that they might miss out on otherwise.

JIM: And for those teaching at Illinois State University the university has bought a bunch of these cool little personal amplifiers. We’ve been playing with them this week around the hallways here in Williams Hall. We just did a workshop today um and about a different topic and, and some of our colleagues did Dana and Mayuko and they said that they that worked well for them, so I think that’s a great bit of advice. So, we’ll link to the show page and you can go to our main website which is CTLT.illinoisstate.edu and click on that big “Redbirds Keep Teaching” uh area of the homepage and that will get you to how you can secure as an instructor on campus and that includes graduate teaching assistants. We should also add where you can pick up one of those amplifiers. Jen, I wanted to ask you; in terms of amplifying our voice, I it seems to me one of the things we may have to get over is the fact that it is socially unacceptable or socially less acceptable to talk to people sometimes in a really loud voice and so that might be kind of I’m thinking part of the adjustment that we have to do.

JEN: I think you know we all have our default setting of what is what’s the appropriate tone of voice or volume of voice we use if we’re speaking in a group or we’re speaking to one person or we’re speaking in front of a hundred people and you know those kinds of things we’re going to have to modulate a little bit differently this semester or anytime that we’re using face coverings and so um you know I just think that um we all have to be kind to one another and if we can’t hear something it’s okay to say to someone I, I can’t hear you could you say it a little louder could you repeat That; you know, that kind of form of self-advocacy for you but also um peer or, or, person advocacy for the folks that that you’re with is helpful for them to learn the self-modulation that’s a little bit different right now.

JIM: Um yeah, yeah, and I and I think that’s actually a great tip um you know in your first class period this semester your first class meeting or first couple of meetings have that discussion with your students and remind them that it is okay for you to raise your hand say I didn’t quite catch that um you’re not slowing anything down and you’re

probably if you didn't hear it someone else probably didn't hear it as well and and maybe also saying you know it's going to take me a while to get used to this I may ask you to repeat what you said a couple times while we're while we're figuring this whole thing out.

JEN: right and you just hit on one of my other practical suggestions for using uh you know communicating effectively while wearing a mask is that um we need to speak more slowly and repeat important information if, if, there's something that that we really need our students to know it's a test date it's something really critical about a project or a paper or some kind of something that's happening in our class we, we probably should repeat it and not only should we repeat it we probably should communicate it in multiple modalities. It should potentially be in our syllabi or it should be an email or an announcement through ReggieNet it you know if there's really critical information I don't think we can assume that just because students were present when you said it that they got everything that that you needed to convey to them; and so you know making sure that you put in writing the, the, most critical instructions that you have for your students if there's a lecture or a discussion that will be foundational to your course content think about recording a very short video not wearing a face mask and uploading that to ReggieNet um so that students can go back and listen and, and, have an unobstructed view slash um ear to what it is that um you know you're, you're, trying to convey and share and impart to your students.

JIM: Jen, great suggestions. Anything else we need to let people know?

JEN: One thing that's maybe more practical and one thing that's a little bit more just based on what we know about good pedagogy in general, but um one thing uh and I alluded to this earlier in my, my, opening comments but um we need to think about reducing other noise in the classroom so that ambient noise that I mentioned earlier if the lights are loud if there's something that is getting in the way of normal communication then you know how can you work around that what can you shut off what can you discuss with your students about you know not fidgeting not tapping your pen on the desk whatever it is that could get in the way and harm people's um you know reception um around them or you and I think one other thing I don't know when I when I was in the classroom a lot one of my favorite times of class was maybe the five or 10 minutes before class when I would stand or walk around and talk to my students and I noticed gosh this student looks really sad and this student looks euphoric and this students really excited about something and I could kind of do temperature checks with my students and, and, understand where they were in that moment in time and it's going to be more difficult for instructors who like to do those sorts of things to understand um you know those nuanced kinds of um things from their students because face masks will cover expression and uh will uh you know sort of put a roadblock in the way of understanding the, the, barometer reading of the room before class and so um some of my colleagues have gone towards having different types of temperature checks at the beginning of class you know um hey on a on a scale of one to five with one being awful and five being great how are you feeling today? Um you know what are some visual ways that, that students, can share with you um you know where they are um because we know from the last year that teaching with empathy and, and, connecting with our students and engaging with our students is something that's not

only critical but it's something that our students need in order to have success as students at our institution.

JIM: We'll have another episode coming up very shortly in proximity to this one where we talked to some students at the end of the spring semester, and they expressed fears about kind of reentry there's good cause to take their temperature even if that was not a habit that you maybe had when back in normal times if anyone can actually remember what that was like.

JEN: Sure.

JIM: So, uh, one final thing I wanted to ask you about; uh what if you have students who have a hearing impairment of some sort if they're because this this is again another degree of difficulty that they have to deal with.

JEN: Absolutely, that's a great question and, and, one that I would hope that instructors will do their best to try and encourage students to come forward and discuss either with them or with student accessibility and accommodations uh services on campus if, if, we know that our typically hearing people so in the normal range whatever that is right um that people will have some struggles from time to time using face masks in a classroom setting but we do know that people with hearing impairment will probably have more struggles and so you know we want to give those students preferential treatment if they can benefit from that so closer to the folks who are going to be speaking the most in any class session and also there is some um evidence that uh clear face uh clear face masks or, or, face masks that have sort of a clear section over a speaker's mouth can be really influential in helping folks with hearing impairment maximize their comprehension of communication that happens while wearing a mask. Jim, you've been giving advice to course instructors. I know from our discussions that if they are seeking face masks that do have a clear panel that they can contact their chairs and directors and there may be a mechanism on campus to secure those uh particularly for course instructors who are, are, teaching students with hearing impairment.

JIM: Absolutely. And you know again, if anyone has any questions if we don't have the answer, we can always try to help you find out who does, so you can always contact us you know we're happy to do a consultation about this or really any other teaching challenge that anyone may be facing down as we make this kind of bold return to face-to-face teaching after more than a year of being largely remote. Jen, thank you so much.

JEN: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

JIM: That's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Again, find out more about the university's response to COVID 19, the return to campus, and how to get support from the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology, go to CTLT.illinoisstate.edu. For Dr. Jennifer Frieberg, for all my colleagues here at CTLT, until we talk again, Happy Teaching!

