

Ep. 079: Classroom Climate and Culture

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2022/ep079.shtml>

We plunge into a new academic year, taking a deep dive through classroom climate and culture, one of the dimensions which makes up the Framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence. A positive classroom culture isn't only about fostering respect in students for their peers' ideas-- it's about creating a balance of expectations and interactions which allows the instructor to apply their pedagogy in rewarding ways for both their students and themselves.

Jen and Jim explore these ideas in the context of both long-term, thoughtful approaches to our development as teachers (e.g., "How do I develop a truly useful, impactful teaching philosophy?") and through a more pragmatic lens which acknowledges the tyranny of the calendar (e.g., "Holy crap! The semester starts on Monday!").

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

JEN: And I'm Jen.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Integrated Professional Development here at Illinois State University. I am Jim Gee. Hey, look, it's Dr. Jennifer Friberg. Hi, Jen.

JEN: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Longtime fans of the podcast and of our center, I'm assuming that at least a couple of them out there.

JEN: One or two, maybe.

JIM: We've been, we've only been doing this show for like five or six years. Anyway, we'll note that Dr. Jennifer Friberg. Jen is the Endowed Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. So, she holds that position. But also, for the past couple of years, you were our Interim Director for what we were before we transformed into this beautiful butterfly that, oh, sorry, I'm reading papers. This beautiful butterfly that is now the Center for Integrated Professional Development. And you're now our Director of Scholarly Teaching that I get all that right.

JEN: I think so.

JIM: That's a lot.

JEN: Yes, it is. It all does fit on one business card.

JIM: I know. I know. I fit it there.

JEN: That's right.

JIM: Well, it's a new academic year is starting. Here we are again. And we've done episodes before you and I have talked about this. Claire Lamonica and I did several episodes when we first started our little pokey little experiment in podcasting here about how to start your semester. But you know, it never hurts to kind of revisit that. And I think we have a new, dare I say framework.

JEN: I think so.

JIM: Which we can use to talk about that. And actually, it's not that new either. But we're going to take a new look at it. But first of all, let me just get your initial thoughts about starting the semester, this year in 2022.

JEN: It hasn't been the same for a long time. And, and so you know, we came back last year, in face-to-face format. But still, there was some, some online, there was still some hesitancy, there are still some hybrid, I think what we're going to see this fall is a real return to a robust face to face learning and teaching environment here at Illinois State and across the institution. And certainly, we've got some wonderful online programs. But I think what I hear from, from folks is just a real excitement to be back in front of their students to be working with their students in their classrooms, and to be able to maybe even make it back out into the community to do some teaching and learning or engage with people outside of the institution as, as more opportunities for engaging in this 2020 context. I don't like the phrase post pandemic. But in this context, you know, we're a couple years out from where we started. And using what we know about mitigation strategies and keeping folks safe, how can we come back to our robust face to face kind of experiences and I just I sensed a lot of excitement around that.

JIM: Instructor still have the option of course of teaching, while wearing a mask. The episode we did this time last year was all about how to teach with...

JEN: With a mask.

JIM: With a mask on and using a personal amplifier and all of that. And if folks are going to still plan to do that, we will link to that episode for the show page for this episode. But I am looking forward to seeing students' complete faces in class. And I mean, that happened last spring towards the middle of the spring semester, I think the mask mandate was lifted on our campus. But sure, I'm interested to start that from the get-go.

JEN: There's so much about building relationships with students and communicating just as human beings that includes nonverbals, including facial expressions, and that's been one of the hardest things to, to account for with, with the mask wearing and you know, is she smiling? Is she cringing? You know, what are they thinking

JIM: Or when we're zooming when we're using Zoom? That's that is something that's part of that mediated environment it causes. We wanted to talk today a little bit about building that culture in our class, and we're going to kind of do that through again, we're gonna drop that word framework through, through the Framework for Inclusive

Teaching Excellence. Which tell it tell us about what that is. We've talked about it briefly on the show before, but shall we really dive into its history?

JEN: Yeah, well, let me first define something called a signature pedagogy. This is something that came out of Randy Bass's work a while back and others have picked up on through the years. But a signature pedagogy is usually associated or affiliated with a discipline. So, this is how you teach students in nursing. This is how you teach students in Rhetoric and English this is how you teach students in STEM fields. And really, a signature pedagogy talks about the things very specific to a discipline that are really important to teaching successfully and engaging with your students successfully so that they hopefully emerge on the other side of their, their programs of study as competent professionals who can think and do and act like they need to to do the jobs that they're training to do are engaged in the work they hope to be a part of. And so, several years ago, Nancy Chick, who now is at Rollins College started to do some work around an institutional signature pedagogy. So, moving away from the discipline, and thinking more about the institutional context to say, how do we need to teach our students here at Illinois State, for instance, because they're not the same as students everywhere else. They're uniquely Redbirds, right. Here they are, and how can we best support their needs and teach from an evidence informed, inclusive, equitable kind of standpoint. And so that's really what the Framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence, which I'm going to say we call the FITE, because it's a lot shorter to say.

JIM: Yes.

JEN: So, that's sort of where the FITE came from.

JIM: No, no aggression, implied.

JEN: Right.

JIM: It is just happens to be what the acronym is. And you know, we are a college campus. And we like our acronyms. So,

JEN: This is true. And so this, this framework started with the work of Yojanna Cuenca-Carlino, when she was still in the the Provost Office, as she was really trying to build out a vision for what professional development needed to look like on campus. And folks who are familiar with the former CTLT. And now our Center, you know, can see that there's been an evolution to moving away from shorter experiences in professional development to longer deeper dives that include application and possibly study and trying to really wrap our minds around being as thoughtful and scholarly in how we approach this work as we possibly can be. And so when we can turn to this FITE, and Yojanna's early work that continued for several years to really build out an idea of okay, what is the extent literature out there? Tell us about what good teaching is, what's the evidence, tell us about how we engage our students and how we support them and how they are maximized as learners in our in our teaching contexts? And then collect data from our own students? What what do you need that you aren't getting? What do you need that you are getting? That's really great and helpful? And how can we then parlay that into a survey for faculty to gather the same information from them and put it all together and say, here is a snapshot of right now at this

institution, what we need to be successful as teachers and learners. And so we have this framework that really lays out a beautiful roadmap for six different dimensions that we know from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and our own work here on campus are really critical to the mission of what we're trying to accomplish here at this university. So, these are tied to our strategic plan. They're, they're really, you know, anchored in good, scholarly, mindful kinds of practices, that if we look at as an institution and say, Yeah, this is our institutional pedagogy, I think we can make a huge difference with our students. And so, the six different dimensions of the FITE would include the Science of Learning. So, talking a little bit about the neurobiology that's behind the brain-based learning, the Impact of Course Design, which of course, you know, how we design our courses, and how we make sure that we're consistent and transparent for our students, and Evidence Based Pedagogy, looking at what we know works, Feedback and Assessment. So, how can we give the most meaningful kinds of feedback to our students and help them use assessment as an opportunity to learn rather than as just a grade? That doesn't mean anything? And data informed reflection? How can we collect information or data about our own teaching to inform changes in our future practice. But then, at the beginning of the semester, this particular dimension, the sixth one is, I think, the most critical and it's about Classroom Climate and Culture, right? So, this particular dimension really looks at how do we set up our entire learning environment to be equitable, inclusive, to be accessible to our students to be a welcoming place. So, our students feel like they can approach us as instructors, they can be engaged as learners and co-create some of their experiences as learners.

JIM: So, we've talked a lot about in past episodes about creating a community of learners, which is and that also speak to a specific method, you know, there are specific things that can be done, maybe we'll touch on some of those. I do like the idea that classroom, climate and culture is born somewhat out of a communication issue, or of communication, good, best practices, evidence-based practices.

JEN: Sure.

JIM: Which you know, is what I'm all about. So, the idea that it is, you know, we talk in communication about the transactional model of communication, the idea that no communication between two people takes place completely in a vacuum, even if you are trying very hard not to react, that in itself is feedback to the message, playing into that strength when you're when you're talking to your students. And, you know, being able to read the room a little bit, either literally or metaphorically, I think goes a long way towards making it that welcoming environment.

JEN: Absolutely. I've done a lot of thinking about classroom climate and culture because I think it's just to me as an individual instructor, something that I feel is critical to how I operate, how I envision my engagement with my students in the content and how we, we bring everything together to me I need to, to build a particular kind of climate so that I feel like the interactions are balanced between the students and myself and that I can learn from them and they can learn from me and they can learn from one another. It's it's to me So, that is probably the most critical element in how I go about putting a classroom experience or course-based experience for my students together.

JIM: So, I like that as a definition for climate climate being, you know, what does it feel like when you're in the room? Okay. But help us parse a little bit more break down a little bit more what we mean by a classroom culture? Is it simply an amalgam of all of the co-cultures that everyone is bringing into the room? Or is it something else is it? What is the function of it?

JEN: Well, and, and is it co-created? I've used that word a couple different times so far, but it is important to think about I think, the opening salvo in thinking about classroom climate and culture comes from the instructor him her their self, thinking about how does their personal philosophy about teaching intersect with climate or I'm sorry, intersect with content for the course as well as the number of students in the course the level of students in the course what that instructor knows about good pedagogy for different groups of students at different points in their their academic careers. And so, I actually have been doing a lot of reading about teaching philosophies lately. And one of the books that I picked up at the start of the pandemic was one that was just then published in 2020, by Kevin M. Gannon, who is a great thinker about teaching and learning. If you want a really good Twitter profile to follow, it's his, he goes by the tattooed professor and has some really great stuff that he puts up a lot. But this book is called Radical hope, a teaching manifesto. And I remember sitting in my front yard, during a lunch break, when we were all working from home in March and April and May of 2020, reading this book, and I don't think radical hope was what we were feeling at that moment in time. And so, I read the book, and I thought, This is good stuff. But I'm not in the headspace to really take this good stuff in right now. And so, I revisited this book, and in some travels this summer, and really have a completely different philosophy about teaching philosophies now, because of reading this book. And I just want to share with you some of the things that he says when he talks about his philosophy of teaching. And he talks about his, his philosophy is centered on a pedagogy of radical hope, saying that pedagogy is political. Our pedagogy is a declaration of what we think that matters. It's a living description of how we think good teaching and learning should occur and of the moral imperative to create the type of inclusive and equitable learning spaces in which our students become critically conscious, and actively engaged in their own education. I thought, what a fantastic way of thinking about who we are as teachers, and then we have to think about how do we make that happen? And, you know, he suggests that maybe we go about thinking about teaching as life affirming, or centered on student agency, or inclusive or equitable or about our practice. But I also think it's about taking that core philosophy that that piece that I read a moment ago, and saying, Okay, now, how do I make this intention into actualization?

JIM: Right. Yeah.

JEN: Through how I choose to set up learning experiences for my students, I want to assess their learning how I want to interact with them, because otherwise, it's just words on paper. So, how do you make it real? And to me, it's that that process of actualization that builds the culture of a class.

JIM: And I think that's I think that's so interesting, because I have often had conversations with folks talking about how teaching philosophies, the first, first time you write out a

teaching philosophy, it's very cover lettery is very, almost superficial. This is this seems like it's really taking it from a standpoint of okay, what do I do with this? You know, as as this is this is a framework or tool a direction? What do I do with it?

JEN: Well, part of the reason I've been thinking about these teaching philosophies has to do with the OUTA awards that we have here on campus, the Outstanding University Teaching Awards, and we realigned those awards with the framework, right, the one that we were just talking about, to say, you know, everyone who applies for one of these awards is certainly an excellent teacher. But how does how you visualize your teaching philosophy and how you actualize that show, your excellence. And that's been a really interesting transition in the OUTA portfolio process is having conversations with individual nominees about, well, this is what I think and here's what I do.

JIM: Yeah.

JEN: And seeing that sometimes there's connections and sometimes there isn't, and looking at the opportunity there is to really reflect critically on what do I think, why do I think it and how does that translate into how I practice and I think that connection is magical, when you can make it happen, because it just it's that aha moment in teaching where you say, oh my gosh, this is how I lay out the groundwork to be really successful and to to individualize my practice. I don't want your teaching philosophy to look like mine.

JIM: Right.

JEN: You know, you are your own individual person. You bring that to your classroom teaching, and I hope to do the same, obviously, within similar parameters of these are things we know but this is how we, as individual human beings make that meaningful to our students.

JIM: So, this is an exciting it's motivating line of thought I don't think anyone's going to do rework their teaching philosophy between when this episode drops in the and the next Monday when. So, the question then becomes, it sounds like this is something that you work on this semester. What, what are some of the practical things that you would suggest that we could do to get this started? In terms of building a classroom climate change and a culture that you're looking for in your classroom. What are really quickly just what are some of the things? Couple things? Yeah.

JEN: So, I'll talk to you about two specific resources that are easily accessible and would not take much work to integrate into what we're doing already. But that might actually subsume a few of these different dimensions of FITE simultaneously. The first is something called the T(i)LT framework, which stands for transparency and learning and teaching. And I believe it originally came from Colorado State University, but I will make sure that's accurate and give you a corrected note if we need to, for the, this podcast. But the TLT framework is it's basically a template for being transparent with your students around what they're doing and why they're doing it. And so, it could just be Hey, Jim, I want you to write a reflective paper about the three things we read for class and the class discussion. Can you please put that together? And, and tell me how

it relates to you as an emerging professional? And that's, that's a decent direction. But it doesn't tell you why you're doing any of that.

JIM: Exactly.

JEN: And so the TLT framework really focuses on three different things really, the why am I needing to do this. So, it's sort of the the heads up to why it's important. It's not just something that students can blow off. It's important for this reason, what is the specific task that students are being asked to do so step by step directions or instructions about what students need to do to be successful with the assignment or the task? And how we'll doing this activity helped me understand the course content better. And I think that part's a little flexible, it can be how can it connect with other courses and their content? How can it help me be a more evolved pre-professional, and whatever it is that I'm studying, but connect it to something because a lot of times, it's that connection that we know, but the students don't. So, making that transparent through the TLT with students is really great. But the last part of the framework is, what are the criteria that I'll be, you know, graded, or evaluated by and, and oftentimes, we say, oh, it's worth 40 points, but we don't say how those points will be allocated. And so, we miss out on allowing students to think about, okay, here are the six things I need to make sure in this. And here's how I can balance that. And here's because the rubric or the outline, or the whatever of the assessment scheme really can help.

JIM: And I think that last part about what are the points mean, students make decisions on how much effort they put into an assignment, or if they even do it at all, based on this very superficial value of points. And they may, I think, this is a wonderful way to reinforce to them that you will get something that there is value beyond using points. And I've somewhat I still use points in my, in my classes, I know there are many folks on our campus who have tried in various ways to move beyond points, various different methods that are out there. But still, you know, at the end of the day, you have to you have to come up with a standard for the course and a grade and passing and all that other stuff. But I think that's a great way. I'm excited about that. That's a great way to get beyond just the this is only a 40-point assignment, I'm going to work on my 60 point assignment. And students know that points are not equal across courses.

JEN: Right.

JIM: But as we've said, previously, on this podcast, the students are very busy people.

JEN: They are.

JIM: They are they're much busier than when I was an undergraduate or even as a graduate student. And you know, I'm actually, I'm going to be teaching a freshman speech course again, this fall I'm excited about. It's been a couple of years. I think they're going to be really different people that I met two or three years ago. And last time it did, I think things have just changed so much.

JEN: And that's not even people talk a lot about generational differences and learners. That's I mean, that's, that's a nanosecond of a generation just a couple of years, but experientially, they're completely different human beings because of what they've lived through.

JIM: Yeah, absolutely. So, that was the TLT model.

JEN: And then, I do have to give a shout out to the K. Patricia Cross Academy. It is a repository of wonderful resources that are all evidence based. They come they've come from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. There's high impact practices that would suggest that these are really when done well effective ways of integrating different approaches to teaching into your classroom context. And I chose three to briefly talk about but each one of the resources on the website, which I'm sure will be linked below, it will have downloadable worksheets and templates and handouts to help you plan how to use these in your own classrooms. And they're really easy ways to think about setting up a culture and a climate in your class that's inclusive for, for students, maybe in slightly different ways. So, the first thing I want to talk about is the use of something called guided notes. And these are instructor prepared notes, they can be as easy as fill in the blank, they can be reflective questions, they can be given ahead of time, they can be given before a lecture. But it serves as an outline of what you think is important that your students take out of a lecture because God knows we don't want them to write down every word we say and memorize them. I, well, that could be flattering to some, it's not actually helpful in learning.

JIM: And I also know that something similar is done with for textbook readings for chapter assignments and stuff like that. Some of the, you know, modern, I guess, I don't know if that's the right word, the electronic textbook I'm going to be using for that speech class has, you know, those formative assessments built into them as well.

JEN: And I've used guided notes in the past by having them be the first thing we do in class for the first 10 minutes. They're questions about integrating different parts of readings and notes. And I have my students, discuss them in small groups, and then guess what they're willing to talk in the full group, because they've had some validation from their peers, they have questions, they have ideas. And so guided notes can be used in the moment as you're teaching, but they also can be used as a preparatory set for things that are coming that that students might need a little practice with, before taking it to the big stage, so to speak. So, there's that. There's also digital stories, I think, increasingly, students are looking to use different kinds of media's to share what they've learned and in different ways. And so, using storyboards or other kinds of, of digital means Adobe Spark, or some of the things that are offered through Adobe can be really meaningful to allow students who really are into those kinds of visual representations to show that they've learned something in a way that we as instructors might not have thought about in the past. And so I've been doing a lot of reading about visual methods of teaching and visual representations of learning and digital stories keep coming up as something that can be really meaningful to a lot of different students.

JIM: Okay, so I'm going to put the one footnote on this, when we're talking about visual ways of talking of students expressing themselves. We're not talking about the long debunked concept of visual learners versus of learning styles.

JEN: No, no, no, no, no.

JIM: No last anyone thinks that we're now we're now talking that that's not the case.

JEN: Nope. We're talking about harnessing interest of students to use technologies in ways that we haven't all the time in all of our classes. And so, you know, maybe, maybe there's an option for students to engage in that kind of work. And the other thing I'll throw out there as the jigsaw, the good old jigsaw, it's a great discussion strategy, you have six students who get to be experts on one topic. And there's a variety of these groups around your class, and then you break them up and one expert about each topic comes together and helps teach the others it's a really nice way to kind of diversify how we do small group discussion or large group discussion in a class and, and helps the students be interactive, as opposed to more passive as listeners and learners. And so, you know, that K. Patricia Cross Academy site has dozens of ideas that are quick and easy, that can be integrated to build that classroom, climate and culture, and start off your fall semester successfully, with hopefully engaged students who are interested in your content. And you.

JIM: So, one other thing, just really quickly to mention about the framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence, I think that, you know, we've, we've used it very much as a way to categorize events and services that we offer. And that's certainly one way for folks to engage with it. But I do think that you can, you can go to our website, we'll have it linked to the show page, you'll, you'll see it prominently on our redesign homepage, as well. It's a great graphic that our colleague, Kim Brucker, created a few years ago for us, and a visual representation of it. And you know, just read through those. And as you're kind of putting together your syllabus and everything else, I think it's actually just a great way to kind of get into a nice mental space. And you don't have to hit all of these, because they all feed into the same idea of, of creating an inclusive learning environment.

JEN: Yeah.

JIM: And then you might be able to set some priorities on your own professional development down the road. If you think that maybe you haven't done a lot of data informed reflection, then that would be one. And you can contact us and we would be happy to consult with you.

JEN: Yeah, absolutely. And I do want to make one point that this framework is very, what do I want to say? I want to say it's very forward facing, it's not something that a lot of institutions have done.

JIM: Right.

JEN: The work that we did to create this framework, and I mentioned Johanna, started it Yojanna Cuenca-Carlino. Others have been a part of it. Most of us in the Center have

been a part of it. But we will be publishing this in a peer reviewed journal called the International Journal for Academic Development. It was just accepted, because it is an example of what a data informed approach to creating an institutional signature pedagogy could look like. And secondary to that. Many of us in the center have been accepted to present about this at the POD Network Conference coming up in the fall, which is probably the primary professional developers conference in in North America. So, it will be great to be a part of that and share this work there. So, it's not just an ISU sort of initiative. It's something that's gaining momentum and is kind of an example for other institutions, which is a wonderful thing.

JIM: Jen, thank you so much.

JEN: 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 everything we talked about today and there was a lot of it. The framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence, just go to our website, our new URL, ProDev, that's P R O D E V dot IllinoisState.edu. For Dr. Jennifer Friberg. For all of my colleagues here at the Center for Integrated Professional Development, until we talk again, happy teaching.