Ep. 088: Beware “Best Practices”

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We've all heard the phrase "best practices" in regards to teaching... but how, exactly, do we define what "best" means? In this episode, Dr. Jen Friberg, the Center's director of scholarly teaching, joins Jim Gee to unpack that phrase and unearth its potential pitfalls. Instead, they explore concepts behind Evidence-Based Pedagogy, one dimension of the Framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence. Jen highlights recent projects by faculty at Illlinois State which shed light on teaching, student learning, and the student experience. And they discuss how small applications of evidence can make significant changes in our teaching and students' learning without demanding a huge amount of our already precious time.

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'm Jim Gee. Joining me today, Dr. Jennifer Friberg, our director of scholarly teaching. Hi, Jen.

JEN: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Jen is also the cross endowed chair in the scholarship of teaching and learning, which we always want to mention, but it's gonna be particularly germane, I think, to the topic that we're talking about today. So, Jen, I want to start out with a question here. We didn't rehearse. I feel like a magician. We didn't rehearse this ahead of time.

JEN: All right.

JIM: I teach. My students don't complain. They seem to get it. So, I'm a good teacher right?

JEN: I'm sure you are. I think good teaching is a great way to describe that because - my predecessor, as the cross chair, Kathleen McKinney, the first Cross Endowed Chair, wrote extensively in the sort of infancy of the scholarship of teaching and learning about something she called the teaching continuum. And it starts with good teaching. And that's just this idea that we're all well intentioned professionals. And we walk into our teaching and learning contexts, hoping to do the best that we can. Maybe we're leaning on things that we've observed or talked about with others in the past. Maybe we've gotten feedback from students that has helped us adjust how we engage in the practice of teaching. But we're largely driven by, as good teachers, our own instinct and our knowledge of the content that we're teaching. And there's nothing in the world wrong with that. But it is instinctual. And it is grounded mostly in personal preference or personal philosophy, to support teaching.

JIM: Or personal comfort, maybe?

JEN: Oh, sure, absolutely.

JIM: You know, we're comfortable doing certain things in teaching. And sometimes, as we will discuss, there are ways -healthy ways to challenge that idea.

JEN: Sure, sure. And good teaching is just one part of that continuum that Kathleen talked about, because you can't have a continuum with only one point, right. So, if good teaching is, is sort of a foundational kind of concept, from there, we start thinking about scholarly teaching. And that is when good teachers go to the evidence in their discipline, or across disciplines about teaching and learning, and they apply different kinds of practices as teachers that are evidence informed. So, people have studied the effectiveness of doing x. And if it's been found to help students, well, then we can use those as scholars of teaching and integrate that into some aspect of our course designer delivering.

JIM: So, I think it's important at this point to point out that you don't have to have a PhD in education in order to be a scholarly teacher.

JEN: Absolutely not.

JIM: We're talking about engaging with content that through, you know, our professional development programming here but also on their own, people can connect with, and I would dare say, many teachers are doing a little bit of using this evidence-based pedagogy already.

JEN: Sure.

JIM: They may not have ever looked at the background research or made a conscious decision to use it because it's evidence based.

JEN: Right. And there's different kinds of evidence, you know, there's something that Randy Bass calls pedagogical content knowledge, and that's evidence or knowledge about how to teach in your discipline. So, if you're a biologist, how do you best teach using evidence informed practices in the lab? How do you as a historian, help your students look at primary sources and read through the lens of someone who's thoughtful about historical precedent? And then there are just -there are things that we do across disciplines that we know evidence would support and all of this is scholarly teaching, it's just through different perspecticals.

JIM: Is perspecticals a word?

JEN: It's a word.

JIM: Is it a word?

JEN: No. I think it's a me word.

JIM: Okay. I like that. I like that. That's cool. So, let's get to the other side of the continuum then, which is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which is kind of taking a further step.

JEN: It's where you actually engage as a scholar collecting evidence from your own classrooms or learning context to understand what's happening with your students around something that you're doing with them, whether it's how you are trying to teach content, how you're interacting with them, and building climate and culture in your classroom, how you're reflecting, how you're providing feedback, but you actively study those practices and the learning outcomes or the impacts to the students. And through being a scholar of teaching and learning you can refine your practices and inform improvements hopefully and how you go about teaching your class the next time or interacting with your students in the future. So, I guess I try and get away from the producer-consumer comparison, but you really could use it here and say scholarly teachers are the consumers of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and scholars of teaching and learning are the producers of the evidence that scholarly teachers then apply.

JIM: Sure. And you know, we've never talked about it in this context but when we've talked about SoTL, in the past, I've always been left with a feeling that I think is incorrect that you have to go all in to SoTL. But I'm suspecting now that that may not be the case that you could identify one very narrowly focused aspect, right?

JEN: Oh, absolutely.

JIM: Of teaching. So, you don't have to - I mean, this isn't earning a degree in SoTL in order to teach or anything like that. It is something very usable, right?

JEN: Absolutely. And so we talk in the world of SoTL about different levels of SoTL and most Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is done at what we'd call the micro level, the individual classroom level. It's meant to be where we do the most impactful kinds of SoTL so that we can solve our problems and address things that we want to know more about.

JIM: So, all of this is being we're discussing in the context of this thing called the framework for Inclusive teaching excellence. We had an episode where we kind of talked about one of the dimensions of this we call it FITE for short, F-I-T-E, classroom climate and culture, what we're talking about today is really another dimension - evidence based pedagogy. You want to kind of summarize that? I mean, we've already kind of talked about it to an extent, but can you summarize it, and I'm very interested to know what the difference is between evidence-based pedagogy and the term that we no longer really use, at least we try not to in professional development, which is best practices.

JEN: Sure. So, just in case folks aren't familiar with the FITE, it is what we would consider to be sort of the roadmap for how we want folks to think about teaching and learning on our campus. It's based on data that was collected on our own institution - at our own institution, reading lots and lots of research focused on teaching and learning and sort of integrating all of that together to say, we know that these are impactful, important types of areas of focus in teaching and learning. And it all viewed through the lens of equity, diversity, inclusion and access, which you know, if you read through the framework you really can see integrated throughout. But to answer your question about evidence informed pedagogy and best practice: well... so the phrase best

practice is used a lot to convey what they, whoever they is, think are the best ways to do something. Best practices aren't always tied to evidence. And sometimes people will just say, well, it's just a best practice. It could be an evidence informed pedagogy, but best, when we say best practice, we're assigning value almost and saying, if there's a best practice, there might be a worst practice. And there might just be a good enough practice, but it's effective. So, I think it's difficult to use the phrase and have it be specific and meaningful, and really reflect on practices that we engage in as teachers that have tied to scholarship and evidence.

JIM: I think that - I think that makes a lot of sense. And contrast that with what we were talking about a moment ago with good teaching, also a value statement to an extent. But I think as you framed it good teaching is more of a generous term, it's talking about the intention of teaching, whereas best practice is actually a limiting term. And we have found over the years, I remember being part of different conversations here at the Center, also working on conferences across the state where we would be doing calls for proposals. And we consciously moved away from best practices, because it was not just limiting, but it was also in some ways discriminating against certain populations or whatever because best usually meant established.

JEN: That's so true. And Nancy Chick and Sophia Abbot and some other SoTL scholars have done some really interesting work about who we privilege when we call something best in the scholarship of teaching and learning in particular, and who are we citing as having the evidence that is the best? And how do we consider a more fulsome way of looking across the board at evidence and thinking about who's voices represented and in what best is. But evidence based pedagogy evidence informed pedagogy, I think is sort of the more recent term of art around this. But that idea isn't valued in saying this is the best evidence or this is the worst evidence, we're saying there's evidence to support these practices. And our scholarly teachers have an array of different options that are evidence informed, that they can apply in their classrooms and have some measure of confidence that it will positively impact students in some way.

JIM: And again, it could be evidence informed for a particular outcome in a particular context. It's germane to the - to the learning outcomes of that particular class, for example. So, we want to get into some examples of what people are doing in terms of kind of moving from good teaching to scholarly teaching. But I want to, I want to ask you, just so I understand it. And I'm not looking for praise, necessarily. But, you know, years and years ago, when I would teach, I would always, whenever I taught, I always had like a rating checklist or something like that. I had a little bit, "okay, did they do this, this and this" but coming to work here at the center about, Gosh, I think nine - more than nine years ago now - and I've learned a lot on the job that has helped me be a better teacher, I think I've learned stuff teaching that helped me be better at my job here at the center, but that's besides the point. What I'm getting at is: that checklist transformed into an actual rubric. Because I found that what the checklist was just doing - it was literally just a checklist and then when I put it into a grid format, I realized after a semester or two, oh, you know, I keep giving the same - I have too much wiggle room here, I have a range and I don't have- so then I learned about criteria and standards. And I forced myself to pick a hard number when you know, and I share it with the students ahead of time, because then it becomes a pedagogical tool

from the outset, not just a feedback, which is important, but also a formative tool at the beginning. I may not be using formative properly in that context, but you get the idea. Supportive. So, is that an example of transitioning a little bit from well intentioned teaching to...?

JEN: Supportive. Absolutely, I would say that that would be. And I think, you know, we refine what we do over time based on our own reflections, and our interactions with our students and our peers, right? As instructors, and we might say, oh, gosh, you know, so and so, who's teaching a different section of this class is doing this slightly differently in the students seem to really find that helpful. Or I am talking to somebody because we share similar content in our classes, but we approach it really differently. And so I think those conversations are really important in helping- or those reflections, if it's just within your own head of saying this is working, but it's not working quite well enough. And so you work your way towards more scholarly approaches to refine something that you started out from good intentions.

JIM: So, you have some examples from campus-

JEN: Yes, I do.

JIM: -of scholarly teaching and action. Why don't you tell us about it.

JEN: So, I will talk first about my own home discipline of communication sciences and disorders. I mentioned the phrase pedagogical content knowledge a little bit earlier. And so this example comes- it's very discipline specific. And what I'm going to share is really specific to clinical disciplines. So, could apply to nursing or social work or dietetics. But this one in particular, comes from CSD. I have colleagues who are working with adult clients. So, a lot of times patients who have had strokes or traumatic brain injuries, and they have started using clinical simulations in a simulation lab. So, it's sort of like those books that our generation might remember. The choose your own adventure, you know, if you make this decision, go to this-

JIM: Go to page 86. Right.

JEN: Right. And so students are working through clinical cases through those kinds of simulations, where they make a decision, and they find out the impact of that decision. And oops, maybe they need to go back and do something different. And there's a wide body of evidence that has been published in clinical disciplines about how positively students perceive their experiences through simulations, because they're not hurting anyone. They get to practice clinically. But they also get formative feedback along the way from the simulation experience, and a post-experience debrief that helps them make sense of any mistakes they made, allows them to talk about reasons why they will do something differently in the future. And, you know, it's become a mainstay in how my colleagues in CSD interact with their students. So, that's one example. Another, actually has to do with providing feedback to students. And this comes from the Department of math. And I believe it's Jeff Barrett over in math ed, who uses this with his students, but when he is assessing students mathematical knowledge, this is scary for some students, right? And they they make errors sometimes. And rather than just marking those errors as incorrect, he works with the students to have them

explain how they got to that place, and work through the process of solving those problems so that he can figure out where the mistakes are happening and how the students approach the work. And so he's able to kind of get a just-in-time glance at how students are thinking about math so that he can intervene and change the course towards a correct answer rather than an incorrect answer. And that kind of metacognitive process is really, really powerful for students and allows them to approach not solving individual problems but solving problems. They have a whole script in their head: "this is how I approach a problem that looks like this."

JIM: Yeah, that sounds wonderful. It's almost - it's a form of formative assessment. It's almost like formative investigation. I feel like wearing mirrored sunglasses. It's like, Formative Investigation: this fall on CBS. Yeah. Okay. No, that sounds exciting. And again, these are- the two examples you brought up are fairly discipline specific sure in their construction right now. But they could be adapted for other uses.

JEN: I can talk about a paper that I just read from another scholar, Terrell Strayhorn. I happen to be scrolling through Twitter and came across a publication that just, sort of, launched in a journal that he put together, looking at what are the influences, positive or negative, from parents of Latino students. And how to parent-child interactions support or hinder student success in college. And I found that fascinating, because we are happily, increasingly diverse in our student body on campus, and understanding the lived experiences of our students, you know, the things that influence how they do outside of our classrooms are tremendously important. And so that's a piece of scholarship that has- it's not tied to a discipline, it's tied to, gosh, if all of us knew that relationships with fathers are complicated, or that parents provide this type of support, and it ends up really motivating students. I mean, that's something all of us can benefit from. So, that would be knowledge from evidence that would help inform, maybe, interactions we'd have one-on-one with our students.

JIM: What you're describing, on the surface, sounds like an awful lot of work. And I know how busy our faculty are, how busy our instructors are. So, it would be wonderful to think that we all had the time to- I don't want to say indulge, but I don't know another word -to indulge our curiosity, and do an exploration of the research. But facing facts that most people probably don't have that inclination or that time, what can they do in order to bring that scholarly teaching perspective to their their instructional life?

JEN: Good question. So, I want to revisit the continuum here for a minute. None of us is fixed on the continuum all the time. So, I'd say, probably the majority of the time, we're all good teachers. Then going back to that well intentioned place. And where we can we're able to apply evidence to help our practice and support our students. I think we flex back and forth along that continuum, and some people never are SoTL scholars, and that's okay. They're not doing the SoTL. They're using the SoTL. And that's okay. But to your point, how do you put something else on your already full plate? There are places on campus that are tremendous resources for folks who are looking for this kind of support. Our center, obviously. You know, we have a mission here that everything we talk about, and all of our programs are tied specifically to evidence. So, anything that that is part of our content across our different offerings in the fall, spring or summer, that's all going to be tied to evidence and we try and

explicitly mention where that evidence is coming from, you know, as part of our programs. And so certainly, we've got those formal programs that folks can register for, but we do consultations all the time, where individual course instructors come and talk to us and say, "I just- I really feel like I'm having this roadblock here." And we have strategies and suggestions, and we're happy to have those conversations, to share some of those evidence informed strategies that might help solve some critical issues.

JIM: And I think evidence informed, or evidence-based pedagogy can also make teaching a little easier for us too. It is so much better. I feel so much more competent as a teacher. And it is, frankly, easier for me. Once I developed a really good robust rubric for certain exercises to do that. So, it's not just you have to have an egregious problem that you're trying to solve. There is not a thorny problem or a real tangled thing. You may just be looking for improvement in some other aspect. But I think your point about our consultations are well taken, and we don't we don't talk about that as much. We're trying to make more of a conscious effort to do that. Now that we've reorganized our center a little bit because I don't know if it's a majority, but an awful lot of our contact with faculty, as you said, is in the form of consultations. And so at the end of this episode, we'll talk a little bit more about how people can connect with us on a one-on-one basis.

JEN: Well, I do want to say we're not the only center that supports evidence informed pedagogy or evidence-based pedagogy. You've got the Center for Civic Engagement, which we know is an evidence-based way of connecting the community and social justice to our students in our curricula. We've got the Office of Student Research. We know, you know, the more students are exposed to and engaged in research, the better they become in terms of critical thinking and just being able to see different perspectives and understand scientific processes. And so Gina Hunter heads that unit and has lots of strategies, even in large section, large enrollment classes of how you can infuse research into what you do as a course instructor. We also have the Honors Program, which Linda Clemens is directing currently. And you know, she works really hard to put together different sections of course experiences for students in that program that are all tied to evidence-based pedagogy. So, we are certainly not the only place that can serve as a resource for this. And I think that just speaks to the integrated nature of thinking about evidence-based pedagogy on our campus, and others.

JIM: Yeah, and I would say integrated being kind of the new word that we're using to describe our center. You know, we can also just be a good place to start. If you come here, that doesn't mean you have to stay here. We can direct you to these other programs. You know, we've had a long relationship with the Center for Civic Engagement since its inception, and do a lot of programming with them, you know, wholesale, and with those other units as well. Well, that all sounds great, Jen, thank you so much.

JEN: Thanks, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more about the framework for inclusive teaching excellence and scholarly teaching. In fact, if you go to our website Pro Dev, that's prodev.illinoisstate.edu, you'll see links on the

homepage now, including one for FITE and one for scholarly teaching that will give you the full slate of services that we offer. So, for Dr. Jennifer Friberg, for all my colleagues here at the center, until we talk again, happy teaching!