



TEACHING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Episode 16

The Most Contentious Subject in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning with Dr. Jessamyn Neuhaus

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STEVEN ROBINOW: This is Teaching for Student Success. I'm Steven Robinow. In this episode, I continue my discussion with Dr. Jessamyn Neuhaus, author of *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers*, published in 2019 by West Virginia University Press. Listen in for a discussion of what Jessamyn labels as the most contentious subject in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Enjoy.

Well, where should we go from here? Should we talk a little bit about—we could talk a lot about practice, but really I think we should spend time on reflection.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: OK, yeah.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Because I think reflection is—reflection is a biggie, being sort of metacognitive and thinking about what you're doing, and being aware of what you're doing or thinking about it. So let's talk a little bit about reflection.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Sure. Yeah. Well, again, more good news for nerdy introverts, because reflection really is just a lot of mulling over things [LAUGHS] and thinking about what worked and what didn't and what might be changed. I guess the emphasis is on productive reflection, always including in reflection the things that are working and that are going well.

And that doesn't mean put on rose-colored glasses and ignore big problems, but making sure that we're also paying attention to the things that are working well and the things that you're doing right as an educator. Like, when you get an email from a student saying, I really liked that assignment—or this is my favorite one—that documentary we watched in class, I made my roommate watch it or I made my mom watch it because it was so interesting, that's a huge win for me.

So when I get an email like that, not just saying, oh, that's nice, and then going on to the next thing, print it out and put it in a folder that you can go back and look at on the most miserable days, because those are coming too.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Those are coming too. And use those miserable days not as moments to spiral down, as you said, but to reflect and improve. In this section on reflection, you also talk about gratitude.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Oh, yeah. Yep. Gratitude. And I know that has a sort of new-agey, woo-woo sound to some people. Maybe not so much anymore. And again, it's not about an overly simplistic, oh, you just have to practice gratitude, and then magically all the headaches and problems of teaching disappear.

No, that's not it. But adding regular reflection from *Gratitude in Education*, a book by Kerry Howells, she argues for seeing education through the gift paradigm, not the transactional paradigm. A gift paradigm where she argues that education by its nature always includes gifts, and that recognizing those can improve our teaching because it helps us see the things that are going well, including what we are doing well.

The example I use in the book is being the gift of student attention or engagement, and that that is something—yes, of course they should just be engaged in class. That's just a requirement for good learning.

But you know what else? It's also a gift. It's also a gift to me. And when I say thank you for that—because Kerry Howells says gratitude is a practice. It's not just an emotion or, oh, I feel happy. It's not reciprocal like your parents forcing you to say thank you for a gift you didn't like when you were little. [LAUGHS] But it's an action.

So saying thank you for that fantastic question. That gives me a chance to clarify that issue that I did not very clearly convey a minute ago, or I did not actually give you clear directions in the syllabus like I thought I did. So thank you for that great question. And it really can change—not change. It's an important addition to teaching and learning.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Yeah. And I think that's a nice section. And it's just about two pages where you talk about gratitude, but it's a very nice section on gratitude and thinking about how that changes your own perspective of the moment. So you don't get mired up in the negative, but you don't dismiss the negative. You're aware of it.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: That's right.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Even if it's a student bringing to you something that you did poorly. It's like, oh. But you can still be thankful that the student brought that to you so that it gives you the opportunity to then improve it.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Yeah. And to pay attention to what's going on. So I would say a gratitude practice is actually key to seeing the whole entire picture. And if you are in the habit of noticing also the things that are going well, that can actually maybe help you see more clearly when something goes awry if you have been able to cultivate gratitude for students' regular contributions, for example.

Like, really noticing that the student, they're very quiet, but during discussion, oh my gosh, they're taking good notes. And when they do speak, they ask an incredibly good question that moves the discussion forward.

Then look, like, the middle of the semester, they're freaking out about their midterm. And they come to you and they're angry and they're upset. But you can see the whole picture there because you've had this practice of recognizing and acknowledging the other things that are going on as well.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Nice. In this section also, this section on reflection, the first half is all about student evaluations of teaching.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Oh, god.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Oh, god is right.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Here we go. [LAUGHS]

STEVEN ROBINOW: Now is when you hang up on me and just say, Steve, I don't even want to talk about this. My wife heard a lot about my thoughts on this section.

[LAUGHTER]

And she didn't want to hear any of it. You talk a lot about student evaluations of teaching. It's a long section. As associate dean, I read hundreds of SETs—no. I read SETs for hundreds of faculty every year, thousands of SETs.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Oh, yeah. So thousands. Yeah.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Thousands of—yeah. So my takeaway from that is that we need to do something different. I'm not saying that student input isn't valuable, but students have no—in my opinion, they're not knowledgeable about what good teaching is.

So asking them to evaluate—and asking them to evaluate teaching, that's not their job. That's not why they're there. They shouldn't be—their input is valuable, but we're doing it incorrectly. So we're collecting bad data. We're collecting not useful data. There's no control for these data.

As you point out, it is biased in so many ways. You and I, we go and do the same thing. I'm going to get better evaluations than you because I'm male, right?

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: That's true.

STEVEN ROBINOW: That's it.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: That's right. Yeah.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And let me say, the administrators that I know are aware of this. And I don't think anybody's really defending them, although when I once tried to make a change and do something different, let me tell you how quickly the union jumped.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Yeah. Well, yeah. Actually, it is the most contentious subject in the scholarship of teaching and learning and in people's lived experiences.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Just for emphasis, let's listen to that one more time.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Actually, it is the most contentious subject in the scholarship of teaching and learning. You make a good point there. It could be that there's increasing knowledge about some of the problems with student evaluation of teaching. And to be clear, we're talking about one very specific type. We're talking about anonymous, end-of-the-semester, one-time student evaluations of teaching.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I am shaking my head yes. [LAUGHS] Yes, absolutely.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: It could be that there's an increasing awareness about the problems with that type of evaluation, but they're so entrenched. They're so entrenched. And I know—yes, I know from personal experience that people can say, I know there's problems with student evaluations of teaching, and yet still give them disproportionate power over employment decisions. It's highly problematic, but it's very much entrenched in academia.

I would like to see massive changes around that. But in the meantime, like I say in the chapter, there actually are a few specific things. And the first like you're sort of suggesting is instructors should get feedback from their students the whole entire class, crafted by themselves that includes what is going right and what is going well and when things could be adjusted, giving plenty of time and space to be able to do so.

Anybody listening who's grappling with this problem—and there's a university form. It was written a billion years ago by a clueless committee. And you're administering at the end to people who are utterly fried and miserable and going to lash out. OK, you have to do that, though. It's whatever. For the end of the semester, the university demands it.

Counteract that with getting a ton of feedback from students the whole semester, cultivating a culture of constructive, productive feedback. You ask students, what is constructive feedback, and they will come up with some great examples. You keep talking about that all semester. When you give them feedback, they give you feedback. Hopefully by the end of the class if you've tried to cultivate a culture of constructive feedback, those final forms may be more productive.

But I agree with you and say in the book, this should never have disproportionate impact over people's employment decisions. And it should never just be at the end of the semester because everybody is miserable and just wants to be done. It's not useful, informed feedback on teaching that we can get from students, but not that way.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Yeah. When I was at the University of Hawaii—I'm going to give a shout-out to Kathie Kane who ran the Center for Teaching and Learning there. And she was wonderful.

She and her center, they would do mid-semester evaluations where they'd sit in class and they'd see what I'm doing, but then they'd also meet with my students outside and talk to them. And having the conversation, I mean, I think faculty should reach out to their Centers for Teaching and Learning and ask them if they'll start to do some of these things, both classroom observations as well as making opportunities to almost do a focus group. Meet with your students and talk to them.

If you've got teaching laboratories, boy, it's all set up for having somebody to come in and talk to them for an hour. Those for me as an instructor were the most useful evaluations I ever got. And those were useful for my dossiers, right? For tenure and promotion. If the SETs were a problem, you have better evidence for what's going on.

And if your Center for Teaching and Learning won't do it, at Plattsburgh, I know who I'd go to to talk to about doing that for me. You and I would be fast friends, and I'd ask you to come in.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Yep. A trusted colleague.

STEVEN ROBINOW: A trusted colleague and a knowledgeable colleague who knows something about modern pedagogical practices and what a good classroom looks like. Those are things faculty can do.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Yeah. Yeah. And at the very, very least, midsemester feedback.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Absolutely.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Those end-of-the-semester ones, if they are mandated—most places they are—don't read them the first week [LAUGHS] afterwards. Give yourself a little space and time. Ideally, do it with somebody you really trust who can sort through and remove the outlying comments. The vast majority might be just fine, but there will be an outlying comment that's made on purpose to hurt you.

And like you were just mentioning, that happens disproportionately shaped by gender and racial biases. There's no reason that your eyes should rest on a comment that was crafted just to be demeaning and hurtful.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I agree.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: So ideally—but when I mention this, it sounds sort of shocking. Have someone else read my evaluations with me? Like, oh my god. That's so revealing. But if you have a really trusted colleague and you trust their pedagogical approach, to not have to read a comment that serves no purpose except to try to humiliate you—unthinking or not. I'm not even—I don't know what the intention is. That's not the point.

But the comment is hurtful and demeaning, racist, sexist. It shouldn't even be in your head, right, because the anecdote that I start that chapter with, every single person I know who teaches can tell you word for word the worst, most hurtful, painful comments that serve no purpose, that in no way were to help you improve, but they're scorched into your brain forever.

STEVEN ROBINOW: They're anonymous comments made on an electronic social media that are not monitored in any way. Yeah. When the teaching center did these in-person discussions with the students, one of the great things about those discussions, first of all, it's a discussion, so people have to say things in front of other students. And that moderates right off what people are going to say.

But you still get the extremes. You still get the I hate it when the professor starts by reviewing what we did last lecture. They're just wasting my time.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: [LAUGHS]

STEVEN ROBINOW: But what's interesting is then somebody else gets up and says, well, I actually like it when they do that, because it helps me remember where we were and bring back.

And that does a couple things. One of the important things it does is then the student who hates it is like, oh, well, it's good for you? Well, I guess if it's good for you, it's not so bad. I guess it's OK.

And it helps moderate a lot of the feelings in the classroom. And what they end up focusing on in those sorts of discussions—I think this is what everybody should be doing is having these discussions. Through these discussions you get to the middle ground, which is, what's really going on? What is the faculty doing that works? What is the faculty doing that is not helping your learning? What helps your learning? What doesn't help your learning?

And you really end up focused on that point, and you get away from these personal attacks. You get away from the extremes and you get to the midpoint.

And people will say, well, it costs too much money. But I'm telling you, look at how much money they're wasting on these SETs. If you take that money and hire a couple of—oh my goodness.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: I would even say further, having those kinds of truly productive and constructive formative feedback discussions can empower students because you can add to that conversation, it's not just about the powerful professor and what the professor does or doesn't do.

What are we doing as a class? How are you helping other people in this class, other students in this class succeed? What are you doing to help yourself succeed? What are you doing that's not really working? What could you do better for the rest of the semester? That midsemester conversation should never just be about what I, Professor Neuhaus, have been doing. That should be included.

But also, what are you doing? What are we doing collectively? That empowers students to work towards seeing their learning as something—it doesn't happen to them. They have to do it.

And having conversations about what's working in class and not working in class should always include everybody. Everybody's responsibility, everybody's agency, everybody's ideas and power in the classroom should be part of that conversation.

Reinforcing student passivity is the last thing we want to do. At least with my student population, they really need a lot of support and encouragement to see themselves as academic actors, as having agency in their own education, not passively sitting through a class and getting their degree just because they sat there quietly. No. You have to actively engage.

And so talking about feedback and reflection not as just something I'm grading you, the professor—and vice versa. I'm not just handing down your grade, but we are going to talk together about what's working, what could change. What could I adjust? What could you adjust? What could we adjust? Yeah. Midterms, big shout-out. Midterm course reflection.

STEVEN ROBINOW: There we go. Jessamyn, I think this is a great moment to end our conversation today.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: OK.

STEVEN ROBINOW: But this is not going to be our last conversation, because there's many other things we're going to need to talk about that I look forward to. I want to thank you so much for spending time with me today discussing *Geeky Pedagogy* and your students.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: It was my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Oh, this was great. This has been really a fascinating discussion. I want to shout out I'd say to our listeners, for more information about Jessamyn Neuhaus, her research, her favorite books and papers, we'll post it on our website, teachingforstudentsuccess.org. But what we're really going to post is a link to her amazing website. Jessamyn has an amazing website—

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Thank you.

STEVEN ROBINOW: —geekypedagogy.com. It's a fantastic website. And really, all I'm going to put is a link to that because there's no point in reproducing everything.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Oh, thank you so much. And find me on Twitter @geekypedagogy.

STEVEN ROBINOW: OK. And we'll put a link for that as well on Twitter.

JESSAMYN NEUHAUS: Yes. [LAUGHS]

STEVEN ROBINOW: Let me comment about Jessamyn's book. *Geeky Pedagogy* is a short, concise, easy-to-read book. It's 150 pages. It's a really pretty straightforward read, and you can read it in sections. You don't have to go in order. But I think there's a lot of great things to think about to apply to your teaching to help improve your effectiveness as an instructor and hopefully improve your student success.

Thank you for spending time with us today. I hope you found this discussion interesting and helpful. Please share our podcast and website with your friends.

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[MUSIC: JULIUS H]