

Episode 2 Transcript

Cherie:

Welcome to Teaching Takes. I'm Cherie van Putten, an instructional designer here at Binghamton University's Center for Learning and Teaching. What does it take to be a great instructor? Our guests will give you their take.

I have a returning guest to discuss part two of the course observation program here at Binghamton University. Steve Lisman is a distinguished teaching professor emeritus of psychology here at Binghamton University, and he's also a fellow here at the Center for Learning and Teaching.

So glad to have you back, Steve.

Steve:

Well, thank you, Cherie. In the last meeting that we had, I explained the whole nature of the endeavor and how it started. That is how I began to get involved with doing course observations and providing feedback to faculty.

When I tell people about what I do, it's funny how interested they get in what the common problems are that I address. What do I see that needs to be improved, and what do faculty specifically ask me to help them with? So I wanted to share with you what those are.

Let me let me share with you first the actual questions that I get from faculty. These would be the questions that I'm asked when I'm meeting in their office to review what's going to happen when I unobtrusively take a seat somewhere in the class. And by the way, that's one of the first questions that people ask.

How do you want me to introduce you to students that you that you have some way of addressing all the funny looks you get, etc., etc.? And so let me say right off the bat that it turns out that most students don't pay any attention to my presence at all.

Cherie: I've done a couple, of course observations and it's like, Yeah, pretty much the same thing.

Steve:

Yeah, you don't look like the other students, but they could care less. They're there for other reasons. And to inspect what you're wearing or how old you are. So yeah, that that's usually a non-issue. Some faculty truly have introduced me, especially in the very small classes of like 15 people or. But. But like I said, it doesn't matter if they don't.

So. So I'll sit there and say, well, what would you like me to observe? Besides what my own intuition tells me might be helpful to you? And the questions I get include the following. And these. I'll start with the most frequent words. How do I get my students more engaged? How do I get them to participate? On that same topic, how do I draw out shy students? Students that I know are aware of the material but don't want to speak.

Another one is So do you think my lecture is actually coherent? Is it integrated? Does it flow well? How's the pace of my lecture? Do I talk too fast? How can I improve my style of interacting with other students?

And then some of them get fairly personal. Like, is my style too sarcastic or cutting? I know I have an edge that my friends enjoy, but I'm not sure if students do. Am I too quick to respond negatively to student errors? Am I appropriately empathic to the needs of the students? Or am I in contrast, am I overly sensitive to students expressed feelings? Then of course, we have things that address the logistics and flow of a lecture, like do I have a good balance between slides and lecturing my slides well integrated into and compatible with the lecture?

Are my lectures structured so that I actually fosters student discussion?

I thought an interesting one was when somebody said to me, I think my lectures are pretty good, but are they sufficiently challenging to the students?

English is not my first language. So am I being clearly understood? Am I speaking clearly?

Then we get into things like the flipped classroom and the whole idea in current instructional or pedagogical practice about let them read the lecture or the material and come in and and teach each other and and flip the idea of you lecturing and then listening. Have them talk. The number of questions I get are, how am I doing with this? This is the classroom too chaotic? Is this being done effectively? How are my explanations of complex topics? I'm pretty good on the easy stuff, but what about the complex topics?

I thought this was an interesting distinction. One person asked me, which is students complain that while I seem to be accessible to them so they can come and talk to me, I don't seem to be very approachable, so I'm there. They can get to me, but I don't make them feel like I want them to. So I thought that was a subtle kind of an issue.

One person asked I digress too much. You know, a lot of faculty find that their students say they're funny or they're enjoyable. But is that because they're digressing onto topics about their personal life and telling jokes? How can I improve staying on course and not digressing?

Of course. Look, this is 2022 and in our current political climate, a common question is, given the controversial nature of the topics for my class, is my coverage reasonably objective? Is it scholarly? Is it global? Or am I presenting to one sided a view of things?

So these are these are the the range of questions that I get some time, I'm told, at the beginning. Gee, maybe your report could be useful as part of my personal teaching portfolio. Now, that's something I address straight out and say, that's up to you. You have to understand that. I'm going to tell you what I see. I'll be blunt and I'll be thoughtful and I'll try to be helpful. But that's not a part of what I'm thinking when I'm observing. I'm not thinking about how I can help your personnel report. I'm thinking about only how I can help you **and** your teach. Right? So that may be disappointing to some people, but I think it's an important distinction.

So those are the questions I get.

The other aspect of what I said I would try to talk about are the most frequent things that I see that warrant attention. **And** of course they're going to overlap a little bit with that, but they're also going to include some minutia, things that seem like there are small points, but that I find truly make a difference.

Let me let me give you one example of something that seems small, but that makes a big difference. I find it too many people **stand** like a statue. **And** when I teach **and** I tell them, you got to move around.

Cherie: Yeah, we tell them to work the room.

Steve:

Yeah, yeah. **And** that's for some faculty. That turns out to be scary for a few reasons. **And** again, some of them seem mostly logistical. For example. Well, suppose you have your notes on a lectern. How do you move around? Well, with a little practice, you hold your notes in your **hand and** you move around.

It's interesting how many classrooms are set up or built in a way that discourage faculty from moving around. And you have to actually work at it to figure out how to get among the students. One of the questions I get is, what's the big deal? Why, why? Why would I move around? Well, there are several reasons. You know, like, for example, proximity to students makes them feel closer to you both emotionally and intellectually, which contributes to their motivation. In addition, it holds their attention. They get so bored staring at somebody's standing still.

Yeah. And it creates. Creates a more personal connection, especially when you're near a student. And then you use that moment to interact with them, to ask them a question or their opinion. And you're standing right there. Even a shy student is more likely to want to interact with you when you're here. So when I talk about minutia, they might include things like moving around, might include things like repeating any question that a student asks.

So try to imagine that you're in the 10th or 15th row of a large lecture hall that holds 300 people. And somebody in the second row asks a question and the instructor answers it. Nobody behind the third row knows what the question was exactly. And so I'm calling it minutia, but I'm also saying these things make the difference in the flow of a class and in the sharing of information, which is exactly what you're trying to do.

Cherie: It's like making a classroom, a community.

Steve:

A great way of putting it. And what kind of community basically shuts off two thirds of its members from an interaction. So, sure, I and it's the acoustics in most of the large lecture halls don't allow you to hear a question from somebody in front of you. So. So that's again, that's very important.

The other benefit to repeating a question is many students questions wind up. Not accurately capturing what they're puzzled about. If they're all their students, they're not they're not the professors. So they'll ask a question. And if you repeat it, you're saying to them what you heard the question to be. And guess what? Many times the student will say, no, no, that's not exactly right, and it will give them a chance to further clarify the material with you. So that's another reason. Another common issue for a lot of people has to do with their slides.

Let's face it, there's hardly anybody who doesn't use PowerPoint or slide presentations. There are ways to do that that can enhance your teaching. I encourage faculty to animate slides. Well, let me take a moment to say something about it. In the old days, meaning when I was a student and there was no such thing as PowerPoint, faculty went to a blackboard with chalk. They wrote things, explained it, then they wrote a second thing, explained it, and so on and so on. Think of the difference between learning each concept put on the board before you go to the next concept versus seeing in front of you a board full of information all at once.

Cherie: The other thing is, is when you were only writing on the board, you were deciding what your main points were. .And a lot of times when you put these big busy slides on, it has a detriment to the students and they have trouble finding out what the main points are.

Steve:

How could they possibly know what the main points are when you have what you're referring to accurately such a busy slide. So I encourage faculty to try as frequently as they can to see which of their slides could be animated. So it's more like writing on the blackboard one point at a time before moving on to the next one.

Cherie: And also we can work with faculty too that have questions about that here at the CLT. because when we do our slides, we try to make our slides sort of minimalistic. We try not to overload them and overwhelm them and watch the colors that you use. And don't use little mouse print. That's really hard to read from the back of the classroom.

Steve:

So yeah, these think these things seem relative to the large conceptual picture like minutia, but they're the difference between why students just turn off and talk to the material and oh, of course we know no matter how much we try, we know that students will try to copy all the material and everything.

Cherie: And if you give them just a few points, they're going to have to listen to you and write down what you're saying. Like they're going to have to take the main point.

Steve:

Well, in fact, what will encourage that very that very point that you're making is if you don't have your slide, contain all the information that you want to convey. So I encourage faculty to kind of make their slides elliptical in a way so that the material in the slide leads into the main point you're making, which you speak to them, expand on, elaborate on, so they have to listen with and interact with you rather than sit there and copy every point on the slide.

So, you know, repeating questions, moving around, animating slides. Oh, my God. On that same point, please don't read your slides to the students, you know, so, so many faculty now, you know, I don't have to write out my lecture. I wrote it on my slides and then I put it up there and I read to them that's that's a deadening, deadening.

Now, here's something that faculty think is almost impossible. Once you get past a classroom of 20, I tell them, try to learn some students names, for crying out loud. How do you do that? Well, of course, we now have all of our students faces and names available to us on the screen, on our computer. So what do you do about that? Well, I encourage faculty to get to class a few minutes early, get themselves set up to teach, and then just to walk among the students and say, as I used to do, let's see if I can learn four names this morning. You know, by the end of a whole semester of learning three or four names a day before you know it, you actually have a connection with students are certainly they feel that way.

My goodness think about being in a 300 person lecture hall and knowing that the faculty teaching knows your name and could even call on you by name, you're suddenly not a faceless, nameless individual anymore. But why is that important? Once again, it has to do with motivation. The connection with the faculty member and the. Actually what some students have said on student feedback, the sense that you care, you care enough to know a name. And in a large lecture hall class, you'd be surprised to learn 30 or 40 names by the end of the year. Students are stunned and think, you know everybody's name. You don't you're not going to learn 300 names. But it makes a big difference when they see your effort.

Another common error that I see, it's not so much an error like I speak hesitatingly, the faculty when I give them this feedback, because we all have our own style and personality. But I really encourage humor. Everybody has their own quirky or weird sense of humor, I think.

Cherie: No, I think you're right.

Steve: Yeah. It's okay to show that.

Cherie: And I think students like to get to know a professor like on more of just a professorial level. They want to know that side of them a little.

Steve:

Yeah. And besides, humor or humor breaks the boredom of material, and it also engages them because think of what humor is. Humor consists of surprises and contradictions. And that that alerts you to how to think about the material in a different way. It could be humor, of course, about material or how it relates to something that they hadn't thought about relating it to before. That gives them a funny perspective on it. I encourage faculty to think about why they love what they love about their material.

I remember once having a discussion with someone in chemistry and saying, I have a chemistry professor friend who tells me he thinks what he teaches is actually elegant and beautiful. That's how he thinks about chemical structures. And I remember saying to this faculty member, Do you feel that way? Do you feel your material is beautiful? And she said, yes. And then I smiled and I said, Do you

think there's a way you could convey that to your students? Because that passion means so much, right?

Cherie: I think the students really pick up on if you're interested in the subject and you're passionate about it. I think they are, too. And they want to know what it is about.

Steve:

Exactly. Exactly. Students coming in and thinking, oh, my goodness, here's some boring subject. Wait a minute. This person is passionate about this. Am I missing something here? And sure, that curiosity is stoked.

I also think that faculty miss many, many opportunities to personalize the material they're talking about, meaning to link it to current events or events in the lives of the students they're teaching. I mean, I have actually seen faculty teach biology of health in ways that make it seem as if none of the students actually have parents or relatives who are suffering from the problems that they're talking about. There are so many ways to make the material relate to something that was in the newspaper the day before or that everybody's struggling with because it's part of a developmental lifecycle issue.

So I, I really think that when you do that, you take the material out of the textbook and you make it real to the students. They want to know about this because they feel like they're actually learning about themselves, not some abstract material. So these are the most these are the most common things that I find faculty could attend to to really enhance their classes. And I must say to you that I also know this from the feedback that I've gotten from people who have implemented my ideas.

Some of the feedback was that the impact on their classrooms were immediate, that they that they immediately noticed. One of the most common things that I've tried to help faculty with is their fear of calling on students. I mean, if you just ask who knows the answer to the question, it doesn't take long to find that there's the same for students in the first few rows that are raising their hand all the time. It seems pretty straightforward to think, Well, let me call on some other issues, but you may be surprised or maybe not that many faculty are afraid to do that. They're afraid of freezing students off being on the spot or embarrassing them.

Cherie: And how do you first of all, there's two components to that. That's one of how you deal with wrong answers. And then the second one is, how do you take the pressure off of the students who normally don't answer to get them to answer more?

Steve:

See, I think what you're asking about is probably one of the most important issues in teaching classes. I think that the term for it is cold calling, right. And by that, I don't mean somebody calling you on your phone to sell you a stock, but it's exactly the same name for both of the cold calling. There are a few suggestions I make. Number one is on the handout that I have of tips. I actually have a link to a series of videos of a Harvard Law School professor and how he teaches his law school class. So it breaks it down into little five, ten minute segments and one of which is on cold calling. And you see how he does it. And he does it in a way that is exactly what I advise people to do.

Number one, make up your mind before you even start. You will never humiliate students. You will always find a way to validate that.

Cherie: That's my that was my first point is I want to make sure we get that out there is how do you how do you respond to that wrong answer.

Steve:

The way you respond to the wrong answer is to realize ahead of time that any wrong answer you get, especially in a large class, is probably the same answer that many, many people would have given. And there's a reason for that. It has to do with the way your question is phrased. It has to do with the type of issue you're addressing or the likelihood of how people in general think. So there's a type of validity to that answer, even if it's incorrect. There's a sensible reason that you got it. Acknowledge that. So one of the things that I do when I get a wrong answer is to say, you know, that's very interesting. Most people would answer it exactly that way, even though it's wrong. You can think about why it makes sense, so let's consider why it makes sense to answer it that way.

So I validated. Or I'll say, Here's another thing I could do. I don't say it's wrong. I might say, Who agrees with this and who doesn't? Let's talk about your reasons. So we might bat around several different answers. And these are ways to acknowledge that your thinking is just that it's your thinking, and there are reasons for how you think. So let's acknowledge that. Let's not. Let's not go. Nope, that's wrong. Who has the right answer? You know. And that way you, you. You help students recognize that even a wrong answer can have a hugely educative function. Right, because of how many other people are thinking exactly that way.

One of the ways I learn this is in doing research. I my research is with human subjects as a psychologist. And sometimes we use deception and see if you deceive people. Does that mean that they answered the things in the experiment the way they did because they were stupid enough to be deceived? Or does it mean that once you ran it the way you set up your deception, you would find out how most people think under those circumstances? And that's what we would tell our subjects. No, that wasn't what we were actually doing. But that's exactly what most people think. And for a good reason.

So I when I started helping people cold call that was one of the things that had an immediate impact on the class. And the class learns to trust you. Very, very important. If they don't feel that you're trustworthy, why would they take a chance on what you're going to do in that moment of an incorrect answer?

Cherie: That's a really easy way to break trust, to humiliate someone in front of their peers.

Steve:

The last the last thing that I do is, well, not the last, but one of the other minutia have to do with things like starting and finishing on time. I mean, if you're somebody who who will run over your time so that you can finish your point, your students are going to they're going to really be angry. They're really pressed for time.

Cherie: Right, because you're pushing them into how long it's going to take them to do what they need to do before their next class, either run across campus or.

Steve:

Exactly. So, I mean, I've seen too many people with classroom management issues running in their class over time or not even knowing how to start a class other than to be shouting at them. Okay, shut up. Let's get started. And waiting for people to quiet down.

Cherie: Well, you have an interesting way of starting your drugs and society classes that were the class was.

Steve:

Yeah, it was drugs and behavior. And what I what I would do is I would tell them that. The beginning of each class I when they file in, I will be playing a song that relates to drugs and they often were from the twenties or thirties. They could be forties songs. The students never heard of it. I can also include some current songs, and then I told them When the music stops, that's when the lecture starts. And they are. That's their cue. So it took very little effort to get this communicated clearly and for them to follow through on it. There were one or two occasions in the course of the semester I reminded them about it gently and clearly and otherwise. Everything ran very smoothly. I took a maybe another 60 to 90 seconds to tell them something about the origin of the song. Are they are the composer or the singer? And then we got into into the class. So having a clear cue is whether it's a song or something else.

Yeah, I think it's important. It's something that says, okay, we all recognize this is the moment the lecture starts and and classroom management, I think has a lot to do with our sense that it's your course you're in control and that, you know, their behavior is expected to fall in a professional, appropriate classroom manner.

I think the last thing or one of the last things that I encourage faculty to do are to use some of the resources that we have with at the Center for Learning and Teaching, where there's a wonderful archive of material, including some of the very clever presentations that have been held about good ideas, great ideas for teaching. The acronym is a GIFTS and they're wonderful. They're contributions by faculty.

Cherie: Yes, we try to do those at the end of every fall semester and you archive them.

Steve:

So they're there and they they are just very helpful.

And the other thing I do is to encourage people to watch others. Everybody knows somebody and their department has a great reputation as a as a teacher. Why not say, can I can I come to your class and just just watch for one or two sessions? And we frankly, we we really don't have a lot of time in our lives to do that. Right. One or two would be very helpful.

And one of my dream projects for the year ahead would be to create a video file so that you don't have to go to somebody's class. But you can watch some of the people on our campus who are so wonderful that you can watch the video of them teaching, but from the comfort of your office desk.

Cherie: Yeah, that would be great. Yeah. The other thing, though, that I want to mention here is you need to be yourself when you teach too. So if there's a great lecture that you go and you see how they do it, it might not necessarily be something that fits with your personality. You do have to be true to who you are.

Steve:

When I talk with faculty, as I said, about humor and their own style, I, I probe about that. Tell me about your style. Do you like to joke? Do you go to the movies? What do you find is pleasurable? And then I try to help them find their style in a way that allows them to be, as you said, who they are rather than some representation of what they think they stage on the stage as opposed to exactly I mean,

Cherie: this is a large part of your life. So you you want to be able to be authentic in that space.

Steve:

Good, good. Exactly. Right.

So those are some of the things that I wind up talking most often with faculty about or we're trying to flesh out with my observations of their class. All the things I just told you about. I actually link to specific moments in their class. So my suggestions are not only general like I shared with you, but but specific to the class I observed to the idea of making these suggestions goes goes to the very concrete matter of at this point in the lecture or when you said this to show them how to do those things.

Cherie: Okay. Well, thank you for coming again. We always appreciate and I'm sure everyone will learn a little bit from what we have to offer them here today.

Steve: I hope so. And I hope that if nothing else, people would be encouraged to call the center if this inspires them and to request a classroom observation and feedback. And I'll I'll do my best to, to schedule one.

Cherie: Great. And we'll also put some handouts and things in with the podcast. Just so that that will be available to them as well.

Steve: Very good.

Cherie: Okay. Thanks a lot.

Steve: Thanks for having me Cherie.

Cherie: Thank you for joining us on Teaching Takes. See you next time.