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Improve Your Teaching via Podcast

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ADVICE

Improve Your Teaching via Podcast

An array of compelling conversations on college teaching are out there, just waiting for you to listen in



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By James M. Lang | SEPTEMBER 08, 2015

At the end of every academic year, my department gathers to celebrate our graduating English majors and everyone is invited to share a favorite poem or passage. One of my colleagues always reads aloud Galway Kinnell's poem "Oatmeal," in which the poet describes how the great authors of the world enrich his breakfast with their

writing.

"Yesterday morning," she recites, "I ate my oatmeal porridge, as he called it with John Keats.

Keats said I was absolutely right to invite him:

"due to its glutinous texture, gluey lumpishness, hint of slime, and unusual willingness to disintegrate, oatmeal should not be eaten alone.

"He said that in his opinion, however, it is perfectly OK to eat it with an imaginary companion, and that he himself had enjoyed memorable porridges with Edmund Spenser and John Milton."

I've been having a similar experience lately, although, instead of the great poets, my companions have been leading thinkers and visionaries on teaching in higher education. Nevertheless, they have been very kind to accompany me as I run my daily errands, do

chores around the house, exercise, and even wait in security lines at the airport.

As I was making pancakes for my twins the other day (I'm not an oatmeal fan), Jose Antonio Bowen, president of Goucher College and author of *Teaching Naked*, spoke to me about why he loves "noisy and messy classrooms." He also reminded me that "the thing that teachers do best in the classroom is to be human beings, and to get to know their students as human beings, and to make that connection between what matters to your students and what matters to you."

While I was running laps around an indoor track on a rainy day, Jesse Stommel, an assistant professor of digital humanities at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and founder and director of the journal *Hybrid Pedagogy*, extolled for me the virtues of Twitter as a "space for improvisation" in student learning. "The constraints of Twitter," he explained, "are also its affordances. Being asked to take an idea and put it in this constrained linguistic space of 140 characters forces us to think about and question and push on our thinking in ways that we wouldn't otherwise do."

And just last month, when I was driving to the airport, Clemson University's Linda B. Nilson, the author of many books on higher education, including the popular *Teaching at Its Best*, made the case that I should consider swapping my traditional grading system for "specifications grading," a topic that was also the subject of a series of blog posts in *The Chronicle* by Robert Talbert.

All of these companions have arrived in my life courtesy of the Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast, a free and fantastic resource for college and university faculty. Curated by Bonni Stachowiak, of Vanguard University, the podcast offers weekly episodes in which Bonni and her guests explore, in her words, "the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning." Some episodes also focus on personal productivity for academics.

The first podcast aired in June of 2014, and as of this writing more than 60 episodes have appeared, with new ones broadcast each Thursday. The ones featuring interviews with Bonni's impressive roster of higher-education experts run around 30 to 40 minutes; those that focus more on personal productivity tend to clock in at shorter lengths, in the 15-to-20-minute range.

When I asked Bonni, an associate professor of business and management, why she had chosen to focus her energies on a podcast, rather than traditional publications, she cited precisely what I have come to appreciate most about it: "Podcasting's greatest asset," she told me in an interview, "is its portability. I can learn from people as I'm commuting to work, doing dishes, or getting ready in the morning."

Her original impetus, though, came from a source close to home. Her husband, Dave Stachowiak, had created a podcast on leadership in 2011, and built up a very strong list of subscribers. "Dave urged me for about a year to start one about teaching in higher ed," she said, in an interview via email. "We couldn't find other higher education podcasts focused on teaching and there seemed to be a gap. Since I started Teaching in Higher Ed, a number of teaching-oriented podcasts have emerged, including Teach Better, Luminaris, and Hybrid Pedagogy. It's been rewarding to see the growth of these kinds of teaching resources."

The quality of Bonni's guests, and the conversations she has with them, has impressed me since I first discovered the podcast last year. I was especially curious to know how she nabbed major educational thinkers and innovators such as Ken Bain, Cathy Davidson, and Steven Brookfield.

As it turns out, all she had to do was ask them — something she felt more emboldened to do after one of her "wish list" guests died before she ever reached out to him.

"I keep a wish list for guests that I used to be more afraid to approach than I am now," she said. "There are two reasons for my change of heart. The first was the unexpected passing of Grant Wiggins (a co-author of the seminal education book *Understanding by Design*). He was on my list of guests I still felt too intimidated to reach out to. ... And the worst thing that could have resulted, I realized later, was him declining the invitation."

Seeking out guests and broadcasting the podcast each week has given Bonni a wide view of teaching and learning in higher education. I asked her whether her first full year of podcasting had suggested to her any broad conclusions or lessons. Her first response clearly stems from the excellent results she has had with her guests and interviews.

"There's a connected, competent community of people out there who are passionate

about teaching and learning," she said. "The collective growth that's happening in teaching and learning in higher education is less about formal, professional development and more about networked learning." Further, that wide network means there are many ways to enter the conversation: "There is room to talk about teaching as both an art and a science."

I see evidence of that every day, especially on my Twitter feed, which features everything from cognitive theorists posting links to new research on learning to disability scholars making arguments about universal design. Although I believe we have much to gain from the ever-growing field of research on how people learn, the messy realm of course design and classroom practice still leaves us plenty of room to argue, negotiate, and collaborate on the enterprise of higher education.

But Bonni's second point resonated with me, especially in the role I play on my own campus of gathering faculty together to talk about teaching and learning issues.

"Empathy and caring," she said, "are a big part of what makes a teacher successful. These qualities don't always come easy to us. Having conversations that assert the importance of not becoming cynical is important."

To that I offer a hearty amen. Put five or 50 teachers together in a room, and you can expect that at some point the conversation will descend, at least temporarily, into complaining about students. I have engaged in that sport plenty of times myself, and suspect that it can serve the helpful function of popping open the steam valve to relieve a little pressure now and again.

But it should never be enough. And too much of it can be toxic. (It can be especially toxic, and damaging to our students, when our complaints are aired publicly or on social media where students can see them.)

What I ultimately seek from conversations with my colleagues is inspiration, good ideas for how become a more effective teacher, and a sense that we share a commitment to helping our students have deep learning experiences. I tend to seek out the professors on my campus with whom I know I can have such conversations, and steer away from the ones who prefer criticizing students over talking good teaching.

If you share that preference, consider sitting down over your oatmeal with Bonni Stachowiak and the guests of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, an excellent (and ongoing) entry into my favorite list of resources for college and university faculty.

James M. Lang is a professor of English at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass., and director of its Center for Teaching Excellence. His most recent book is [Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty](#). Follow him on Twitter at [@LangOnCourse](#).

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