

Bonni: [00:00:00] On today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed number 211, Catherine Haras helps us reflect on our teaching.

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Bonni: [00:00:19] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:47] As a part of my ongoing partnership with ACUE, the Association of College and University Educators and their course in effective teaching practices, I was pleased to be introduced to today's guest. Catherine Haras serves as the Senior Director at the Cal State L.A. Center for Effective Teaching and Learning- a position she has held since 2011. She's a member of the university's library faculty. Cat also serves as a Distinguished Teaching and Learning advisor for the American Council on Education providing guidance and leadership on effective teaching projects. Cat, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Catherine: [00:01:32] Thank you. Happy to be here.

Bonni: [00:01:34] It was great to be introduced to you through ACUE. I'm grateful for our partnership where once a month they send me over a wonderful guest and I'm just so glad to be connected with you and to learn a little bit about your work. Cat, what can you tell me about how you first got interested in reflecting even just on your own teaching?

Catherine: [00:01:55] I am a librarian by training. I came to the profession rather late, I had been teaching English composition for a while before I went and took the professional degree. And it was an interesting time because the graphical

interface of the Web had just begun. Google had just gotten started. It was 1998. I found that there was this whole world of thinking about information and thinking about teaching that I had not put together before. And I realized that there was this need for teaching about thinking about where we are when we're in an information landscape that I don't think has been connected. And librarians did teaching, but we didn't do a lot of teaching the way that other faculty taught.

Catherine: [00:02:51] And I just found that I was sort of just natural at being in the classroom and I didn't know why. I liked my students. I didn't think I was an extraordinary teacher by any means. I had role models both in undergrad and in my graduate school experiences to look up to. And, for me, something else was happening. It was this connection, it was just this connectivity. It seemed like a really organic process.

Catherine: [00:03:22] So I just started investigating that more and found that when I was in the classroom there would be compelling moments and there would actually be sometimes dull moments for lack of a better word. And I started wondering why that was, whether that was me, or the material, or the students.

Catherine: [00:03:41] And as I kept going, I realized that this was in fact something that was very authentic because I had to be very honest with myself about what it felt like to be in the classroom and where I was. So it turned out that I started constantly monitoring what I was doing. I tried to remain open. I tried to understand where I was with regard to my students. And once I started doing that I realized the enormous amount of presence and preparation it took to be in the classroom. And that started a journey for me that went to the core of who I think I am professionally, which was to sort of reshape my relationship with myself through teaching.

Bonni: [00:04:27] That is a very hard road to travel because I think sometimes I notice that others, they just feel safer or so it would seem to build up that wall and have there be more distance between them and their students. And we really have to be humble to travel the road that you're describing- at least that's been my experience because we don't get to be the hero in that story and we don't get to be perfect. And we're going to fail pretty regularly. And it isn't really going to be about us as much as we might have told ourselves earlier in our experience. So that's really hard. What do you remember about some of the hardest times for you as you shifted your perspective on what it means to be a teacher?

Catherine: [00:05:10] I remember realizing that I was afraid of my students sometimes afraid to make a mistake, and that when I was afraid, I was harder on my students. It became more hierarchical and learning to relax around them- and it wasn't a function of being prepared, I always felt well prepared. It was about letting go. And once I realized that, I had as much to learn from them as they have for me, then I felt this sort of qualitative improvement in my ability to be open and present them.

Catherine: [00:05:46] And I think being mindful of who we are when we're in the classroom, we have professional guises and sometimes we think we're the same in the classroom and we're really not. We can sort of have a different identity once we go into the classroom. So that was interesting just thinking about who I was inside the classroom and who I was outside the classroom.

Catherine: [00:06:10] Once I understood that I was sort of dissident about being there and that I could talk faster, I could exert more authority, I started letting that go and just asking more questions and talking less. And I found that my students were more open and honest. So it was a two way street. And that to me became the basis of the formative assessment, the formative work that I started doing with students where questioning became really really important.

Catherine: [00:06:48] So it's funny, sometimes there are presenting issues, certainly if you work in a reference desk at a library, a patron will come up and ask you a question. The question they'll ask you is not... So, for instance, somebody will come up and they'll say, "Where are the copy machines?" But they're really asking, "I want to find where the serials are so that I can make photocopies" and you have to sort of ask the question to drill down to the answer.

Catherine: [00:07:15] So I found a similar dynamic in the classroom where the presenting issue was some students are having difficulty writing about about this topic. And then I realize well no, students were having difficulty reading about this topic. And then I realized students were having trouble asking questions about their own reading. And so this metacognition, where I spend a lot of time now in my teaching, getting people to authentically psych themselves within the work just became a preoccupation for me.

Catherine: [00:07:47] And I found that teaching students to ask good questions meant that I was actually teaching myself to be a better teacher by also asking good questions of them.

Bonni: [00:07:59] I have found drastic differences in both- -you describe sort of you can have the same class even within the same semester two different sections of it and they can have entirely different personalities and entirely different reactions to what's happening in that space. But I even have found just differences when teaching people who are at different stages of their life and how difficult it is, or easy it is, to let go of what they think it means to be a teacher.

Bonni: [00:08:27] Could you reflect a little bit just about how not only were you and are you continually changing what it means to be a teacher for you. But also your students response to that because it's I think surprising to people sometimes that they're not going to just "go wow this is amazing, keep it going." What's been your experience with your students sort of transforming what they think it means to be taught to learn to have a teacher, the role of that person in the room?

Catherine: [00:08:55] Yeah it's so interesting. I think that teaching is really about- it's not often about the things we think it's about. So we think sometimes it's about methodology. So am I flipping a class? Is this course online or are there blended components? I think that much more important are the ways that teachers make themselves available.

Catherine: [00:09:21] So, are their success criteria clear? Is there an appropriate degree of feedback and challenge? What is the quality of interactions like among the students and then between the students and you? I think when we believe that our role is to evaluate their learning or our impact on their learning, when we work together think about what quality means in the classroom, when we're really explicit with students. More and more I think I must be getting simpler in my old age, I think it's about- when we think about telling students what success looks like to very clear well-organized materials, a student centered syllabus, a prompt that actually makes sense. That's something else.

Catherine: [00:10:15] Thinking back the questions that we ask are often not really the question that we're asking. And students have to sort of ask for clarification so I think having organized, very clear prompts, being very explicit in the directions that we give to students, I think these things get at deeper learning in the way that some of the other methodologies that are maybe more sophisticated like team based learning etc. get to.

Catherine: [00:10:45] So I think actually the practice of teaching- there's a pretty simple hallmark of good, critical teaching, expectations, feedback, formative evaluations, our own teaching efficacy. These all matter.

Bonni: [00:11:04] I love what you said about tests. I think it's just so critical. One of the things I have done over many, many years now is have my husband take the tests that I give pretty regularly. And he's got lots of business experience, but his undergrad was in business administration and then as we went onto our master's and doctoral degrees they were both in organizational leadership. So he never took, for example, a lot of marketing classes and so that's kind of a good thing to say "would someone with just general business experience know this?" because I try to test for the long game, not something that they're going to forget an hour after they take the test, but really it's not that they should know.

Bonni: [00:11:44] And it's always so fun to get texts or e-mails from students when they're out there in the workplace and just "oh someone talked about the four P's," that's a marketing thing, "and I knew what it was and I could remember it all the way from three years ago when I took that class in my sophomore year!" It was really, really rewarding to see that but also I've had some students who their perfectionist tendencies come out when they take tests so even if they missed one on the test, they want to come in and talk to me in the office.

Bonni: [00:12:11] And some people would see that as disrespectful and I find it great fun, you know of course let's debate this, it's just fun to talk to intelligent people and they help me make my tests even better. And I love also working with students who are struggling, we can learn so much from not having a test be something that we wrote 10 years ago and we keep giving the same tests. I just don't think that's fair to our students. And I really think that that's a vital thing that you talked about.

Catherine: [00:12:39] That's right.

Bonni: [00:12:40] Talk about how you recommend getting started thinking about our teaching. If we want to get better at our teaching, where do we begin?

Catherine: [00:12:53] I think we begin with who we are. I think you can be an incredibly good teacher and be introverted. I think you can be who you are and still be very effective in the classroom. I don't think you need to be charismatic or funny, necessarily. One thing that helped me- I'm dyslexic and one thing that helped me as I realized I saw the world in images and metaphors.

And I think I think I did this because I was trying to access something that I couldn't easily process.

Catherine: [00:13:27] And I realized actually that the metaphor became a very handy way to access my instincts and I could convert that metaphor to a practical structure in the class. For instance, if someone is just getting started, I think it's helpful to think about the discipline, and think about the course, and think about what that course might look like to a novice. Because we're the experts and students are the novices and we need to connect that experience for them in some way.

Catherine: [00:13:59] There's an interesting schema by this fellow named Noel Burch where he talks about this idea of when you're beginning, you are unskilled and you are incompetent. And that goes through a continuum where at the other end you are unskilled and you're competent. And that seems counterintuitive because it seems like you would be aware of your competence, but you've actually internalized all those dynamics. There's a certain amount of automaticity as an expert.

Catherine: [00:14:32] And so I think to slow it down, that sweet spot is where we become aware of our competence. And that means we have to represent that for our students. So using metaphors, using analogies, representing our course content in a surprising way to see where students are and help them make those connections. That's just something that was very intuitive for me, I stumbled upon. It's nothing anybody taught me. I think it was actually a response to something in myself which was my inability to read words sometimes that were transposed etc. I just started realising that images mattered very deeply to me and that I could use those in the classroom.

Catherine: [00:15:21] So I think accessing some of those deeply buried beliefs that we might have about ourselves, about our students, about who we are, about our discipline and what that is. And I think we do that through the work of reflection. So I keep thinking about who we are- taking time to think about who we are every once in a while and realising that this is a practice and that a practice takes practice. That's the advice that I would give to someone who's beginning, that really anybody who's interested, if you look at some of the literature on self-regulation and self-regulating learning, the expert learner is intrinsically motivated in whatever, it could be anything, it could be flower arranging or electrical engineering. They're just interested in getting better, and they set goals for themselves to get better, and they monitor themselves, and they practice.

Catherine: [00:16:20] And I think all of those conditions are true for getting better at teaching. We have to think about it as something that is iterative and that will form and reform over time, that changes with ages as we move through our professional careers as the with the arc. And to keep it fresh, just to step back every once in a while and think about why we're doing what we're doing.

Bonni: [00:16:48] You recommended to bring these elements of surprise into our classrooms. And that is such important advice. And, in fact, it's so important, I've given it before. One of the things I've noticed though when I give it is that people then say, "How do I do that? I don't know how to be surprising I don't know how to do that." And, in fact, I've had on my little task list- and I don't keep track of a lot of blog topics there but it's just been haunting me for more than a year now: "Write a blog post about how to be surprising."

Bonni: [00:17:23] I don't know that I necessarily always have good advice that might be universal. I don't know if you have any ideas for people on how to exercise that part of one's brain. Because you mentioned earlier where if it's our area of expertise, we might long ago have no longer been surprised by it, I can't see that part of our discipline.

Catherine: [00:17:46] So interesting. So people learn through emotions. People learn when they're surprised. Surprised is novel. I think there's several ways you can think about surprise. One is to start with students misconceptions, because everybody has that prior knowledge coming into a classroom. Whether it's right or wrong, many students think they know what your course is about, especially if you have the required course for a GE course or something they think they know something about, they hook that prior knowledge into their perceptions about this course, for better or worse.

Catherine: [00:18:24] So I feel that if you know what their misconceptions are, you can really use those to great effect. So the surprise might simply look like and it's something almost reputational in the classroom, where you allow the misconception to surface and then you sort of pop it like a balloon. So you have to find a way firstly to understand what their prior knowledge is, what their misconceptions are. You can do that by giving them one minute papers, by giving them a Knowledge Survey where you ask students to grade their ability to answer a question. And students will actually surprise you by being fairly honest. You can take that information back and when you're introducing a topic try to relate it to something else that they understand.

Catherine: [00:19:19] Again, there's this idea of analogy. Analogies get at underlying structures and they reveal things that are hidden or things that are deeply buried. So, for instance, this notion of force in physics. You can use a baseball or soccer ball but you have to know what sports students play to do that first right. You wouldn't use a tennis or a golf ball if your students don't know what that is to begin with. But if they play a lot of soccer, now you've got an analogy that you can use to swing in.

Catherine: [00:20:08] But I think it's looking for those analogies that are really distant from each other. And telling a story, and telling a story that seems like it's a fairy tale but it actually ends up being about tax law at the end. Being playful with your material so that students think they're coming in for one thing, but then you do something funny like you tell a joke.

Catherine: [00:20:30] Or you find a song that is a pop song, it could be a rap song, but it really connects with your material. Playing music as they come into the room that they recognise or understand that somehow has a relationship with their material. These are all ways of surprising. Novelty enhances memory.

Bonni: [00:20:55] Yeah I can definitely see that. You're reminding me of Sarah's book about emotion *The Spark of Learning* because she talks a lot about how those things, emotion and also novelty, brings greater retention as well.

Catherine: [00:21:25] Yeah if we experience a novel situation, we we tend to store it in long term memory. So I think surprise is actually critically important. It's not threatening, which is important as well, which is why humour can also work so well in the classroom. But I like this idea of it connecting obvious things with less obvious things so that people have a structure. People need to make things meaningful, they need to make course material meaningful for themselves for a lasting learning.

Bonni: [00:21:56] Before we get to the recommendations portion of the podcast, would you spend a few minutes giving guidance around the very painful times when whether it's we got the course evaluations back and they were not what we had hoped, they don't represent our mission, our teaching philosophy or we experimented with something and it was just an abysmal failure. Talk a little bit about the role of reflection during these very dark days of our teaching.

Catherine: [00:22:22] So reflexion surfaces kind of hidden structures and I enjoy the idea of it because reflection in itself a surprise. I think we've all had times

when we reflected on something and we thought "wow where did that come from?".

Bonni: [00:22:39] Yeah.

Catherine: [00:22:40] I surprised myself by reflecting on something that happened to me, that I thought I understood, but the prompt might have been such that it took me in a different direction. So when things don't go well in the classroom, one thing to do is really solicit feedback from students. You don't have to do it in the class, but you can have your students who will come visit or students who are closer to and ask them what they thought and they'll tell you. I think asking yourself a series of questions about where you were in the material, what you were expecting your students to do and what might have fallen short in between the two of them.

Catherine: [00:23:28] I also think that there's a caveat here which is students of goodwill, they know when you're trying your best. And they know when you've created something that is integrity for them and sometimes that looks really messy. So I'm not to judgemental. We have lots of times where faculty will come to the teaching and learning center, where we work, and say to us I tried this, I tried something like a fishbowl and it didn't work. And they'll take that tentative step and then they experience some small setback and they'll stop. And I always say "well don't stop because that's not the active practice practice means you keep going you have to do it again. You don't know until you've tried." And they'll find that there's a refining that happens. They'll go back and try it again.

Catherine: [00:24:23] Also students are not great judges of their own learning. And that's the second caveat. Sometimes they will resist active learning. They will resist thinking about their own learning in different ways for different reasons. And I think our job is to bring them along. There are many reasons why something doesn't quite work. I don't know that I see "failure" as abject failure, but more a series of missteps that could really be addressed to feedback loops or simply reflecting on what we're doing and thinking about how we might to change something the next time around.

Bonni: [00:25:07] One of the things I'm hearing you start to peel back on a bit is having more than one source of feedback. And so the course evaluations can be tremendously valuable and then sometimes they cannot be in that we need to have other means for determining whether or not we met our goals.

Catherine: [00:25:26] Right. So one thing that I really like is not to wait until the [course evaluation] is distributed the end of the term. I think midcourse evaluations are much more likely to give you honest feedback. And I always like to stop or pause the course by weeks- we're on semester system- so by week seven/eight of the term asking students where are you? What has been challenging? What have you enjoyed? What has been less enjoyable? And again I think they will let you know. Students really appreciate being checked in with. And I think it's up to us to control that experience, again they're novices and we're representing the course, we're really representing the discipline, we're representing the content to them. All of these things take a little extra time.

Catherine: [00:26:23] So if I stopped to ask for feedback from my students, I know that that's going to cut into course time. But I also know that you have to be where learners are. And it's better to be where they are so they're coming along with you than to leave them behind so that you can feel good that you've covered the material. So I think again this idea this notion of presence and checking in and asking for feedback.

Catherine: [00:26:52] And this can be a very discreet activity such as handing out index cards at the end of an especially challenging lecture or session and just asking them to tell you something that they learned or something that they are still confused by. And if you have 60 students you won't get 60 different answers. You'll get maybe five or six themes and then you can go back and address those with students. So being in the moment and addressing issues as they come up is safer and more productive than waiting until a course evaluation.

Bonni: [00:27:32] I've also heard people talk about even spreading out that feedback loop even more regular than that and including I believe it was Steven Brookfield who gave this example but I think he was talking about someone else's work where people would draw almost like a line of one's heartbeat you know with the strong ups and strong downs and to map out- we've been together for 50 minutes just as an example. And I want you to draw on this index card the times when you felt really particularly engaged and what you remember was happening. And the times and you felt particularly disengaged and what was happening.

Bonni: [00:28:10] And back to your stressing the importance of having surprise in our classroom, imagine that analogy you used that short video clip that surprising element, uncovering those misconceptions, we would hopefully see a

correlation then that there were lots of upticks on their drawings and an example of what was happening during that time.

Bonni: [00:28:31] I told this story before on the podcast but I just have to say it one more time. My husband talked about being in high school and his chemistry teacher having a lit candle on the first day of class and actually picking up the candle and putting it in his mouth and chewing it and swallowing it. I mean talk about the ultimate surprise.

Bonni: [00:28:51] And he said even though the guy wasn't super charismatic, the classes were not all anywhere near that entertaining, but just because the element of surprise their curiosity was heightened for the rest of the class that they had with this man. So I think- and not that we all are going to be eating candles but just thinking about those things. And then of course as you said before, when my emotions get heightened, I'm going to be learning more from your class. That is just wonderful advice. So thank you so much for all of these great things to think about.

Bonni: [00:29:23] This is the time in the show where we get to shift over and each give our recommendations. I wanted to recommend a book that I so enjoyed reading. And just important ongoing conversation about race and diversity. The book is called I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness by Austin Channing Brown.

Bonni: [00:29:44] And because my words won't be anywhere as good as the description I'm actually just going to read from the description of the book: "Austin Channing Brown's first encounter with a racialized America came at age 7 when she discovered her parents named her Austin to deceive future employers into thinking she was a white man. Growing up in majority white schools, organizations, and churches, Austin writes 'I had to learn what it means to love blackness,' a journey that led to a lifetime spent navigating America's racial divide as a writer, speaker, and expert who helps organizations practice genuine inclusion."

Bonni: [00:30:25] It is an incredibly powerful book as she talks about navigating her primarily white workplaces, churches that were primarily white, and then even then going and attending predominantly black churches and what that was like for her and just all that sense of identity. She writes in a very raw way. She can be funny, she can be absolutely in our faces in a wonderful way. It is read- I've read in like two or three days. I highly recommend that one if that

sounds like a book that listeners might enjoy discovering and I get to pass it over to you Cat now for your recommendation.

Catherine: [00:31:01] Well, mine is actually a work of fiction and I hope that's OK.

Bonni: [00:31:07] Of course. Yeah, absolutely.

Catherine: [00:31:08] It's an old book and it was a big hit at the time, it was published in 1908. So it's called *The Old Wives Tale*. It's written by a man named Arnold Bennett. It's a story of two sisters in the middle part of the 19th century. They work in their father's drapery shop. So this is very working class and these are two sisters Sophie and Constance Baines. And it's really about the story of their lives. And in a way it seems like the most ordinary of lives.

Catherine: [00:31:46] The one sister, Sofia, elopes to Paris with some traveling salesman because she doesn't want to spend her life in a stuffy shop. But the sister Constance stays and Sophia ends up seeing revolution in Paris. And yet what is so interesting about that the two of them is that they end up having rather the same life. And, for me, what's powerful about this is it's very ordinary people who are caught up in just extraordinarily political times that they can't understand, things that are beyond their control that they can't escape.

Catherine: [00:32:27] So why am I bringing up this book? I think a lot about teaching. I think a lot about the sort of tenderness that we need to have for our students in their lives and that teaching and learning is a series of tiny, intimate details that comprise together what it means to be human. So there is something enduring about reading about people with unremarkable destinies that is actually uplifting at the same time and a reminder that every life is impossible and every life is a sort of infinite surprise.

Bonni: [00:33:06] What a beautiful description of the book. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. I'm excited to have it on the website. It shows up now in two places, it will show up on the show notes page at teachinginhighered.com/211. But also, we have a whole page just dedicated to all these recommendations and it came out just exactly like I had hoped where you can go to teachinginhighered.com/recommendations and people can just click on books and find out what books people recommended or music or movies and that's really fun to have another way of browsing all these great recommendations. So thank you for contributing to that ongoing database, a little collection of treasures.

Catherine: [00:33:43] You're welcome.

Bonni: [00:33:44] Well I want to thank you so much for joining me on the episode and allowing ACUE to introduce us to each other. It has been an absolute delight getting to talk about just the gift that it is to teach and learn and be reflective teachers. Thank you so much, Cat.

Catherine: [00:33:58] Thank you for having me.

Bonni: [00:34:02] What a joy it was today to get to have this conversation with Catherine Haras. Thank you so much Cat for all the wisdom that you shared with us about reflecting on our teaching today. If you'd like to see the show notes for today's episode and the links to some of the things we talked about that will be at teachinginhighered.com/211.

Bonni: [00:34:22] Thanks also to ACUE for introducing me to Cat and the regular conversations we get to have about so many wonderful people doing work in teaching and learning in higher education. Very appreciate your partnership.

Bonni: [00:34:38] Thanks to all of you for listening. If you have not left a review for the podcast on whatever service it is you use to listen, this is my plea to ask you to do that because it's one of the ways to help people discover the show. It also helps us to have them realize there's a podcast app on their phone and help them subscribe. Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.

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