

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] Engaging difficult students. This is Episode 14 of Teaching in Higher Ed.

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**Bonni:** [00:00:19] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:42] This is Bonni Stachowiak and I am joined once again with Dave Stachowiak.

**Dave:** [00:00:47] I'm glad to be back. Thanks for having me again.

**Bonni:** [00:00:49] Thanks for being here today we are looking at something that I sometimes wish wouldn't just be a fact of teaching and I read that is the difficult students and one of the things I want to start out with is just the danger of us ever referring to anyone as difficult. And what happens when we place labels on people.

**Bonni:** [00:01:10] I'm going to link to a blog post that I wrote some time ago that actually has had probably more traction than any blog that I've written. There was about the dangers in making assumptions about students and I talked about a student who I considered to be I think I referred to him as a jerk in the e-mail or in the blog and just what it ended up to be.

**Bonni:** [00:01:33] And I've talked about it on the show too before I was him just going through a really incredibly difficult time in his life. And not that that necessarily means that we should always be embracing every kind of behavior that we see in the classroom.

**Bonni:** [00:01:46] But just to recognize we never really know what someone else might be going through. And in a classroom dynamic recognizing we really have a lot of power and being careful how we decide to yield that power and what a much more it does find life to be so much richer when I can try to turn down the volume on my tendency to want to label and categorize people and things.

**Dave:** [00:02:12] And I think we should say up front here too that this is the kind of conversation and dynamic that is really different depending on where you teach what level you teach at. Even you and I teach at the same institution. Me part time you full time but you are working a lot of times with incoming freshmen who are traditional age students 18 19 20 years old attending college for the first time.

**Dave:** [00:02:35] That's a really different experience in the classroom as far as handling difficult situations than the students I'm working with who were often 20 25 years into their career and into the second year master's program. And so those people are very different points in their lives at different maturity levels at different ages.

**Dave:** [00:02:53] And I know we both handled those difficult situations very very differently as one would expect.

**Bonni:** [00:03:00] Yeah and just as an example we've talked before about shutting off technology and so I've had I've had times where it's hey we're going to turn off the cell phone just the laptops. And if I do that in a doctoral level class and someone elects not to do that I am just going to ignore it.

**Bonni:** [00:03:21] I'm not going to kick them out of the class. I'm pretty serious about it in the undergrad so I would be very very much up for that not been okay in the undergrad and I'm going to have a confrontation hopefully not in front of all the other students but I won't say it's never happened before to where I said we're going to shut that off.

**Bonni:** [00:03:41] And although I have found over the years that I can still get my messages across without it unnecessarily turning into something that has to be a huge power battle confrontation kind of thing.

**Bonni:** [00:03:53] So I try to really work on having some cheerful language as I assertively say, "Hello Stephen. I just mentioned that we're actually not going to

meet our laptops today," as I've said it already five times and they start to get that.

**Bonni:** [00:04:06] Oh wow. She she actually sees that I am here and it is not going to be acceptable for me to behave in a way that that is different than what she's trying to guide us all throughout different first of them. So I mean it makes me sad that sometimes there are people who teach in higher ed who are just if there were 50 people in the room or zero people in the room it wouldn't really matter.

**Bonni:** [00:04:29] And I suspect they're never going to be listening to this podcast. So I'm probably not speaking to any of you but just that for me that it is important to have some boundaries but those boundaries look different. I will say though that any age can be representative of an age where you got stuck somewhere a long time ago and no one ever did set the boundaries or you never learned some of that.

**Bonni:** [00:04:51] So I've been sort of shocked that, "Wow we're in our 50s and still dealing with some of these issues," is really sort of been an interesting dynamic for me to look at. So we're not wanting to label students today that's that's a big theme of ours and yet I'm about to label some of them talk about some different categories that we might run into.

**Bonni:** [00:05:11] So we love it when we run into students that are really learners and really seekers and are hungry to learn. And one of the things I did want to say about that type of a student if that's the way we are perceiving them is that they need us they need us and so we don't want to have anyone we might perceive as being a difficult student.

**Bonni:** [00:05:35] Take away from our attention and our care for those who really are present. So that's been something that I've struggled with before where I know that something has been a trigger for me maybe a student has a lot of times the students that I've encountered over the years the ones that really are memorable as far as being difficult are not accustomed to having women authority figures in their life.

**Bonni:** [00:06:01] So I mentioned before I teach a private faith-based institution. And so for some of them their moms are more your stereotypical nurturing loving type and it's the patriarch of the family who's more of the power dynamic and they're not accustomed to seeing a woman in a powerful role. That makes me sad. And "Wake up ladies and gentlemen, as you're about to experience one

this semester, like it or not." Actually, one time I had a student who I ended up kicking him out of my class.

**Bonni:** [00:06:36] He was very disrespectful to me and said something about he pays my salary that sort of thing. And we had ended up he got kicked off of the athletic team that he was on. So this one somewhat minor thing I say minor because I mean it was just the one time that we'd had that confrontation but there had been a series of other events that had led up to this being the last straw.

**Bonni:** [00:06:58] And then he ended up getting kicked off the athletic team. And I was so amazed because he came to my office I suspect probably because the coach had told him, "This is one of the many steps you're going to have to take," or whatever but he was so insightful to be able to say you remind me a little bit of my mom.

**Bonni:** [00:07:18] And this experience of me going to college I'm starting to realize has brought out some things about our relationship. I just think, "Wow. You just saved yourself years of therapy. This is incredible." And I thought... Because I mean yes I think he was there because the coach told him to. I mean I get that piece of it I don't but the coach could not have scripted that out. That was from this young man's heart. And it was really pretty pretty neat experience that we had and we didn't have issues after that. I can't always report such happy news.

**Bonni:** [00:07:46] But that was a lot of times like I said the really difficult situations do come from having a woman in a powerful role like a role of a professor that they're either not accustomed to or somehow it's just a trigger for them that it cause sometimes to the young people I work with. They're starting to have a lot of they're getting used to independence.

**Bonni:** [00:08:07] This is the first time in their lives they have been away from parental figures and then that can be so hard and they're not always able to name how hard it is. And then here's this person that is also kind of like an authority figure. Is just it just can be can be difficult. So at any rate we don't want to ignore these learners the seekers at the expense of some of the more difficult students.

**Dave:** [00:08:34] Yeah. Two things I'd say about that is one is if you have a room full learners and seekers that's great. They also expect a lot. So that makes your job challenging. As a as a faculty member in a good ways so that's something

that that will push you though. So that's exciting but it's also challenging. And then to reinforce what you just said.

**Dave:** [00:08:52] It is so easy to start teaching a class to the one "difficult" person and to completely zone out of the 25 people who are really engaged. In fact I mentioned a couple of weeks ago on a show that I bet a deal Carnegie instructor for years.

**Dave:** [00:09:07] This is one of the things we have to teach new instructors in a corporate environment immediately is do not get focused on the one problem person of the class and miss the 25 people who are there listening intently and are teaching the class to one person. And you can't do that.

**Dave:** [00:09:22] And there's except- there's times you need to intervene and you know talk have a conversation with the person in a classroom. But for the most part stay focused on what you're really there to do for the vast majority who are there with you.

**Bonni:** [00:09:34] Another category that might fit some of the students is that they are there because they have to. I mean we don't have to do anything but it's part of their requirements to earn their degree. And one of the things that's been helpful for me over the years I've been teaching Dave is you just sort of helping me.

**Bonni:** [00:09:52] Let's go back and remember what was it like for you as a student taking a class that you had to take for your degree. I think that...

**Dave:** [00:10:00] We have had that conversation a few times you'll come in and you'll be, "Can you believe this student did this on this day?" And I'm like, "Did you ever do something like this?"

**Bonni:** [00:10:08] Why did they do this? And I'm like, cause, I don't know. I'm so hungry to learn now at this point in my life. It's hard to find a subject that I'm not interested in. And but at that age it was pretty much of it was in my major, I was interested in it. And if it wasn't I wasn't. And I just couldn't I couldn't make those those connections.

**Bonni:** [00:10:27] So I think just to have the realistic viewpoint that your class understandably is so important to you. My classes - I think - I'll be driving down the freeway. They did this study on rider truck drivers and they I think it was the

Gallup organization was retained to try to find out what are the best characteristics for truck drivers.

**Bonni:** [00:10:53] So that they could incorporate that into their hiring. And so what they found out was it didn't necessarily have to do with factors like how long they've been driving that those things were not as statistically significant as what they thought about while they were driving down the road driving their trucks.

**Bonni:** [00:11:11] So what do really really good truck drivers think about while they're driving down the road? Driving their truck. It seems so obvious. Yeah that's what makes really good truck drivers is that that's what they're thinking about when they drive down the road.

**Bonni:** [00:11:25] When I drive to work and drive home from work what I'm thinking about it's a such a great percentage of the time is teaching even

**Dave:** [00:11:36] How to have a better class or structure.

**Bonni:** [00:11:38] Yeah I mean even if I'm listening to a podcast I'll be thinking about, "Oh. It's interesting how they're explaining that. I wonder if I could explain... Is there a way I could..." I mean so it's worth thinking about these things all the time.

**Bonni:** [00:11:50] That's not going to be the case in some classes for a pretty decent percentage of the students. And for us to think that our class is going to be as important to them as it is to us is pretty unrealistic expectation for the vast majority of our students. That doesn't mean they're not going to learn a lot.

**Bonni:** [00:12:07] It doesn't mean that they're not going to have something to contribute but it is not going to be as much meaningful to them as it is to you especially if you have such a passion for your vocation which I suspect that you do.

**Dave:** [00:12:18] Yeah and I think that there's there's something to be said for having that passion for what you teach and what you're interested in and also being able to separate that from it being tied to your identity that this that every single person in this room has to be as excited about it as you are.

**Dave:** [00:12:33] And I think that's a really unrealistic expectation to place on an entire room full of people who come from diverse backgrounds and some who are there for this class and some who are here for another reason.

**Dave:** [00:12:43] And if that's your expectation going and you're going to be disappointed and you're not going to engage with those students well so be having some sense of realism about that and then meeting them there and then hopefully being able to engage them as the class goes on.

**Dave:** [00:12:58] I think it's really exciting when someone walks in and they're totally not excited about a class and to buy them what gas actually was pretty good that's for me that's a huge win.

**Bonni:** [00:13:08] One of the things that I wrote about in a recent article was about that first impression the power of first impressions. And Dave you told a story to me which I conveyed in the article but I'd love for you to tell now about your professor in - not your professor - your high school teacher and the candle.

**Dave:** [00:13:26] Oh yeah. My chemistry teacher. I was a sophomore in high school and he started the class and he did this whole like I don't know how long the class was 40 minutes or so and he did this whole thing about how chemistry isn't what you seem and it's all around you and things are always different and it's different than what you think it is.

**Dave:** [00:13:45] And so he finished up with this, lighting a candle and putting it on the desk, and his last story point was tied into that candle somehow I don't remember exactly how but at the end of his lecture. So he picked up the candle. It was lit and he threw it into his mouth and started chewing it. And we're all like silence in the room we are all like, "Did he just do what we think he did?"

**Dave:** [00:14:09] And so he chews this candle and swallows it and then. His final point was: "So, remember: Chemistry isn't always what did you see. What it looks like or what it seems."

**Dave:** [00:14:20] And then walked out. And that was the end of the class. And I remember turning to my friend in the class like this is going to be a really good class and it was. He was that engaging.

**Dave:** [00:14:30] And you know it wasn't he wasn't even always that engaging but because he started that way at the beginning that we always like wow

what does he. What is he going to have going on today? And it was really exciting to learn from. I still remember things from chemistry even though it has nothing to do with my job. Because of that instructor, it started strong.

**Bonni:** [00:14:47] Yeah. So I think that would be a great example of - It really can be possible to take someone who: "Hey, I just took it, because I needed to take the class," and then having perhaps the aspiration of moving them up one level in arbitrary labels that were placed upon them after telling people not to place labels.

**Dave:** [00:15:05] This arbitrary ladder system that we have created.

**Bonni:** [00:15:07] So speaking of ladders we have two more I'm going to group them both together. And that is the people who really don't want to be there. It isn't just that they had to take the class whatever but they really don't want to be there. And so the distinction I want to make here is it's ok I don't love it.

**Bonni:** [00:15:24] Because it makes me sad. As far as because I do have so much passion behind what I do and what I think the power is behind the classes that that really can transform their lives. It's fun to think about that possibility and to get letters from students all those years later about the impact that a class had on them.

**Bonni:** [00:15:42] So I don't love this, but I'm okay if you're there somewhat in your own mind against your own will. I mean I do try to help educate students a little bit about, "We're all making choices." So you don't "have" to be here, but I get it. They're not always able to see that someone is not in their minds forcing them to be there against their will. But where the line for me gets drawn is if they start to take other people down with them.

**Bonni:** [00:16:10] So that's a choice they can make and they have full speaking of gaming independence and that be an important part of their lives as long as you are not going to detract from other people's learning. And so I had a young man some years ago who had decided that he already knew everything there was to know in this one unit class that I was teaching.

**Bonni:** [00:16:33] And then there were a lot of power struggles and we ended up having a one on one conversation and he let me know in no uncertain terms he had nothing to learn from me. He didn't want to be in the class and that sort of thing. And he didn't like that I had been using his name in examples.

**Bonni:** [00:16:48] And I regularly use students names and examples and I will do that sometimes to draw people in who are quieter. Sometimes I'll do it to draw people in who are really engaged and to help them sort of break the wall sometimes people that that come right from high school they're freshmen. There's still this too cool for school - I'm in the cool kids - thing.

**Bonni:** [00:17:11] And that doesn't actually, isn't really a dynamic that I see played out very much in college. But they haven't quite learned the new rules for what what college looks like versus high school and so at any rate this young man I ended up having the one on one conversation with him he did not want me to use his name and he was I mean he was just such an angry young man.

**Bonni:** [00:17:31] And so I said, "All right. I understand that that upsets you and you don't believe you had anything to learn from this class or to learn from me. I will never use your name again in class under one condition. You need to stop talking to the people who are sitting next to you, because they are here to learn."

**Bonni:** [00:17:51] "They do need to learn. They are struggling more than you are." He, by the way, had done OK on the assignments. Sometimes great. Sometimes OK. So it wasn't an issue of him not being able to perform in the class. But there was an individual who sat next to him that was at risk of not passing the class.

**Bonni:** [00:18:06] And was really - even though it was a hundred level class - it was on the less rigorous of the classes that I teach. But he was taking down the guy sitting next to him so I said, "That's got to stop. So that if ever if it ever comes up again then we're going to have to have a different conversation because I refuse to allow you to have someone else not succeed in this class because you've decided that you're not going to get anything out of it."

**Dave:** [00:18:32] I think this brings up I always hesitate to say you have to do something as an instructor or a faculty member in situations. This is one of those times that I think if if someone is detracting from someone else's learning in the classroom or distracting the class as a whole, you have to do something as an instructor, or a faculty member, whatever your role is - to intervene. And the sooner you do the better it is for you for the student for the rest of the class.

**Dave:** [00:19:03] I have made this mistake in the corporate environment, not in higher ed. I haven't run into this as much, thankfully. I get off easy though because I'm in a graduate program so I don't run into this as much as as you would in an undergrad situation.

**Dave:** [00:19:19] But I'll tell you I have missed it in the corporate world where I've let someone take down a class. And I learned a very valuable lesson is as soon as you get the sense even if you don't see it but you get a sense from another student that someone is doing something in the classroom outside the classroom that's keeping people from learning to the class or keeping people from being effective at assignments, you have to address it in some way because if you don't then you have taught that person that they have control about of what everyone else is learning experiences. And that's just not - that's just a non-negotiable in a higher education classroom.

**Bonni:** [00:19:54] One of the dynamics that I find in the master's level and doctoral level is that in the programs you and I teach in a lot, Dave, they're in a cohort model. So that is distinctly different from me to my undergrad classes because they might have never had classes together before. And so what's new for me is also new for them.

**Bonni:** [00:20:15] But what's really interesting is when you teach in a cohort model I find that I really have to shut off my preconceived notions and initial impressions because they turn out to be vastly different. I think that because they all know each other and I mean that's the strength of the cohort model.

**Bonni:** [00:20:35] I think a lot of these programs are so well designed because of that and the relationships that they build and I really think they help with retention and overall with learning. But definitely as the professor in those cases I think we are the outsider so trying to do some things that aren't going to be... I mean for me I'm not going to go around saying tell me your name and what... Because I try to have something a little bit more creative because they all know that about each other already. Is there a way that I can engage with them to start to build my own presence in their learning community that will be something distinct and different for them?

**Bonni:** [00:21:13] And to help me get to know them a little bit. I have not had, as you said, really difficult students in the same way I do in the undergrad. It has been a very different dynamic. What I have found is sometimes a pattern is people that have somewhat of learned helplessness.

**Bonni:** [00:21:30] And that learned helplessness can start to be a little bit contagious. So I teach technology and leadership class so it's, "Oh, I'm not good at technology and this is really hard." And so that then it sorta can start to

spread a little bit if you're not careful about about just thinking about ways of addressing that.

**Dave:** [00:21:50] And I tend to run into less of the difficult conversation or difficult student situation at the graduate level. I tend to run into difficult situations. So someone turns in a paper and there's plagiarism issues.

**Dave:** [00:22:08] In a lot of ways. I think that's actually more difficult at the second year of a master's program where I've read into that multiple times that it is with a freshman intro, you know, whatever class because you it's not right in either situation but you sort of expect that from you know the occasional student in an intro level class because it's their college experience.

**Dave:** [00:22:29] At the second year of a master's program? That's a problem. And it really does blindsides people when I called them out on it and cite them for it. And so that's hard. That's one thing that I think is actually more difficult is some of the situations at the graduate level there's there's a little more of an understanding of like, "OK. Everyone's here and excited we're all going to have good grades coming out of this class.

**Dave:** [00:22:53] You know either we're gonna get an A or B and you know and I think sometimes when you do need to engage in a difficult situation that in so that in some ways at the graduate level is can be a lot harder to engage.

**Bonni:** [00:23:06] So regardless of the level that we're discussing when we have these difficult situations I love that actually how you've shifted the conversation what a much more powerful thing to talk about a difficult situation than a difficult person.

**Bonni:** [00:23:18] Boy, if we can avoid putting people in the bucket of difficult person I think will be a lot more better with our interpersonal skills. Am I going to say that I won't come home, sometime this semester... and...

**Dave:** [00:23:27] You are better than...

**Bonni:** [00:23:29] I Tell you that I've got difficult students. I am sure that I will.

**Dave:** [00:23:32] You are better than me, sister. I definitely think there are some difficult students there...

**Bonni:** [00:23:36] So it's better in all of these cases to address issues one on one whenever we can. Now for me I won't I don't plan this but yes I have had confrontations with students in a group setting. And I don't think that's always been bad. I have actually had students who have thanked me for that.

**Bonni:** [00:23:53] I had one student who told me that they had had situations where someone had taught a class that didn't usually teach that our university and it had gotten so bad the dynamics in the classroom that there were actually five students who would sit in the back row of the class and watch movies.

**Bonni:** [00:24:15] And I mean with the sound on I can't even I can't fathom that this is factually accurate. Other than that the student I knew for years and I don't know why she would lie and make this up. But I mean that's that's pretty darn bad. So there would be situations where that's going to get confronted. It's never happened to me but that's going to get confronted in the group

**Bonni:** [00:24:33] Because this is our group norms that we're trying to set for how we're all going to learn together. But for the very most part when we're talking about an issue with a person that issue should be addressed with that one person not with the dynamics of the classroom because that's actually closely related to the next thing I'd like to talk about - and actually Dave you're really good at this and that's whenever possible helping the other person save face. So that's something that I think you're better than me so perhaps you have some advice on saving face.

**Dave:** [00:25:02] Oh, gosh. I think it comes down to what is the situation. One thing that I try to do is you know particularly with things like maybe we'll do a show of this at some point but a plagiarism issue is I try to when I need to have a difficult conversation with someone is to give them some sort of head's up.

**Dave:** [00:25:23] So send an e-mail in advance of saying, "Hey. I need to talk to you tonight. Here's the topic," you know, before after class and that way you don't get into a situation where you pull someone aside at the break and it's in the classroom or near the classroom and someone is really upset by something and then all of them around all their colleagues especially the cohort

**Dave:** [00:25:41] That gets really I really try to be sensitive to that so if I ever do have to have a difficult conversation then I give that someone that person a heads up say hey you know I need to talk to you about something that's important. It's regard to your assignment or there's a problem here.

**Dave:** [00:25:56] When do you want to connect and if they choose that to be at the break or whatever that's fine that they've made that choice. But I try to figure out a way to help them save face but still at the same time to get whatever message across I need to as a faculty member about the expectations about the assignment or what didn't get mad or something like that.

**Bonni:** [00:26:13] When we have the conversations one on one when we're able to do that is a way of helping them save face in the classroom. Because if it does become about you versus them in the classroom dynamic sometimes the peers are still don't have the quite the maturity yet and they might they might create a situation for yourself where it's a group of students versus you and that that's just not a fun dynamic to be in at all to teach. So I think that that can be really helpful and really working on not making any statements about the person's character or their traits, when you talk with them, but about behaviors.

**Dave:** [00:26:50] Yeah. And I think that you as a one thing you get as a faculty members you get to make some choices about where you have conversations and when. And I can remember one time very like remember very clearly having a student who we had a conversation before class started and and even though I'd given her a heads up wanted to continue that conversation during the class in front of other students.

**Dave:** [00:27:16] And I finally had to just say to her we are not having this conversation now. And it wasn't even that I didn't want to have one I didn't want to take class time for it. I wasn't scared to have that conversation. But I was really she was going to embarrass herself in front of an entire roomful of people about what she did and and it was a plagiarism issue.

**Dave:** [00:27:37] And it was a cohort and she was at the beginning of the program. And I said, "You do not want to have this conversation in front of everyone. We are not having this conversation. We'll have it later." And it was one of the more forceful times I've had to be. But ultimately she thanked me for it, weeks later, when she realized kind of how that would have played out.

**Dave:** [00:27:54] So I think there are times that you can just make a decision that no we're not going to talk about this right now. I want to talk to you about this or to remove yourself or to go to and meet in an office or something like that. That that's one way I've tried to help people save face.

**Bonni:** [00:28:09] And we are now to the point in the show where we do recommendations and for the first time we actually have the same recommendation and that is a book.

**Dave:** [00:28:15] Oh I didn't know we were doing the same one. I love this book. It is a book called Difficult Conversations so related to our topic here today for sure. It is probably the most powerful book I've seen with a really tremendous framework for how to think about engaging in difficult conversations and to think through how you would handle them.

**Dave:** [00:28:39] And I think that if you are going to be a faculty member that makes a real difference in the lives of your students beyond just the knowledge that they acquire from come into your classroom you are going to inevitably need to engage in difficult conversations. And I would say every class to some to some extent. And this book has just been tremendously helpful to me.

**Dave:** [00:29:03] I'm always learning from it. I teach a class with this book. That's one of the core books I teach him in the graduate program. So it is just a fabulous book and one of the pieces of wisdom from this book is that intent does not equal impact. So even though you intend something by engaging someone in conversation it doesn't mean that that's what they're going to receive out of it.

**Dave:** [00:29:24] And they kind of talk through how to handle that and all the dynamics of it which I think is fascinating and it's not a long book it's very accessible. I have found that it has really helped me and it's helped so many people I've worked with over the years.

**Bonni:** [00:29:37] I think it could definitely help the communication be healthier in higher ed as a whole. With our colleagues and sometimes that can be such a difficult environment. And then I know it's made our marriage stronger. So it's a great read for all sorts of reasons. This is great for classes, as you said.

**Bonni:** [00:29:55] Well that is the end of Teaching in Higher Ed this time around. I encourage you to subscribe to the Teaching in Higher Ed update if you haven't already. You'll get a weekly e-mail with a teaching article and the notes from every show that we do. And you also get a free edtech essentials guide.

**Bonni:** [00:30:12] So go to [Teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](https://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe) and you won't have to remember to download the notes with the link to the great book difficult conversations and anything else that we talk about during these

podcasts. And also if you have a question for Teaching in Higher Ed please send those in for an upcoming Q and A show. Thanks so much for listening.

**Bonni:** [00:30:34] And Dave we'll see you again back here soon.

**Dave:** [00:30:36] Sounds great. Thanks for having me. It was fun.

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