

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] Today on episode number 146 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast I get to settle back a little bit in my chair and listen to James Lang interview Ken Bain about teaching and higher education.

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**Bonni:** [00:00:23] 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 increase our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:51] I'm absolutely thrilled to be welcoming back to the show James Lang and Ken Bain, who have both been on teaching in higher ed previously but are coming back today for a little bit of a different format today.

**Bonni:** [00:01:06] Jim has agreed to interview Ken Bain. They've known each other for decades and worked together on and collaborate on different projects. And I just wanted to change up the format a little bit today and open up a different kind of a dialogue instead of me as the interviewer to people who I respect so highly I'm just excited to be welcoming them back to the show and to get to hear their expertise and talk about their work.

**Bonni:** [00:01:32] Ken Bain is president of the Best Teachers Institute. And Ken has spent much of his academic career at Vanderbilt Northwestern and NYU before becoming Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of History and Urban Education at the University of District Columbia, the National Center for Urban Education, a post he left in July of 2013.

**Bonni:** [00:01:58] Ken was the founding director of four major teaching and learning centers: the Center for teaching excellence at New York University, The Searl center for teaching excellence at Northwestern University, the Center for

teaching at Vanderbilt University, and the research Academy for university learning at Montclair University.

**Bonni:** [00:02:16] And interviewing Ken Baker today as his friend and long time colleague James Lang. James is a Professor of English and the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Massachusetts where he teaches courses in British literature and in creative nonfiction writing.

**Bonni:** [00:02:38] Jim is the author of five books and more than 100 reviews or essays on topics ranging from higher education to British literature. James writes a monthly column for The Chronicle of Higher Education (which as a side note is absolutely amazing and if you haven't read it you definitely need to stop)... Maybe don't stop the recording right now but check it out after you finish listening. It's wonderful... as well as contributing regularly to America and Notre Dame magazine.

**Bonni:** [00:03:06] He edits a series of books on teaching and learning in higher education. He has delivered public lectures on faculty workshops at more than 50 colleges and universities in the United States and abroad.

**Bonni:** [00:03:20] Ken Bain and James Lang Welcome back to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**Ken And Jim:** [00:03:24] Thank you. Thanks. Thank you very much.

**Bonni:** [00:03:29] I cannot tell you how honored I am to have you both back on the show. And I'm so looking forward to just settling back in my chair and listening to two people that I respect so highly. Jim let me just pass the floor over to you and settle in.

**Jim:** [00:03:44] OK great. I thought maybe just sort of giving listeners a little bit of the backstory on how Ken and I started working together. And Ken had been directing the Center for teaching excellence at Northwestern and this was in the late 1990s. I was finishing my Ph.D. up there in the English department and I started working there at the center just on a part time basis.

**Jim:** [00:04:06] And Ken did a really wonderful job of sort of mentoring me into this area of research and thinking about you and learning in higher education and I was just really impressed. Right from the very beginning at the approach that Ken took to helping faculty think about how to improve teaching and

learning in their courses which was to look both at sort of models of excellence amongst teachers that he had studied for a long time.

**Jim:** [00:04:32] But then also to compare that with what was in the literature on learning and look when you look at those two things together came out with some really fascinating findings so when I finished my graduate program and Ken was kind enough to hire me there as the assistant director and I worked at the service center with him for three years and then I took a job as a tenure track professor and I maintained the interest that I had developed with Ken.

**Jim:** [00:05:01] And so ultimately a few years into that regular teaching responsibilities started writing and thinking again about teaching and learning. And so that has kind of kept us connected over the long years and 28 years has been a long time.

**Jim:** [00:05:17] So now we're happy to be able to work together again on projects and you'll hear a little bit more about that at the end of the podcast. And I thought I would start by maybe asking you, Ken, to tell me a little bit about you and I both have a lot of opportunities now to go and you know give lectures and workshops on other campus and get a lot of faculty who are working on their teaching or doing research on teaching and learning and higher education. And I'd like to kind of get a sense from from you what you think are the kind of really positive developments we're seeing.

**Jim:** [00:05:48] What are the what are the new directions that people are moving that seem really interesting and productive possibilities for how we can continue to push ahead in teaching and learning in higher education.

**Ken:** [00:06:00] Well I think there are a number, Jim, that have emerged and the conversations that I've had with with people really around the world but of course primarily focused on the United States.

**Ken:** [00:06:13] And one is that people are paying far more attention to the research on how people learn. And they're beginning to think about creating learning environments rather than just teaching in the old fashioned sense of just delivering lectures.

**Ken:** [00:06:31] So we're seeing people doing some really fascinating things of creating very special kinds of learning environments for people that are more stimulating than perhaps the old fashioned lecture and some of those are efforts that extend outside the classroom so that classes take on big projects of one

kind or another are big questions and out of those questions and projects then everything that would be a part of the traditional learning goals of that course would be incorporated into those projects.

**Ken:** [00:07:09] So in the course of pursuing some larger goal a goal that might be even bigger than the class or even bigger than the discipline itself people are learning calculus or engineering or history or economics or whatever else. And these are very exciting kinds of developments because it creates such a stimulating environment for the students.

**Jim:** [00:07:35] Yeah I think that that for me has been observed as well. And I've been particularly taken actually by sort of community engaged learning which I know I remember you writing about and what the best college teachers do with the fact of the memory access who was having what was that to them. Andrew that was an actual theology. Yeah and I remember reading about that in the book and just thinking wow that is such a fantastic way to get students actively engaged in in the community but also in an in a really important project but also to really deep in their learning. So to me I've become especially interested in community engaged learning community service learning. You seem to be really important and productive possible you know possibilities for students and to get them to understand how they are learning in the courses that they are taking can be relevant can be useful can be inspiring can motivate them. So I've dabbled with this a little bit over the past couple of years and I'm working on a community engaged freshman composition course actually.

**Ken:** [00:08:38] Excellent. Excellent. Right. And I think it does have enormous potential in getting students excited about the discipline.

**Jim:** [00:08:48] Yeah and even getting faculty excited about the disciplines it has the potential to be a rejuvenated approach for our faculty member. So that theme is definitely one to me now I know you've also had an interest in in the past you had an interest in sort of game based approaches that drew on kind of elements of game of occasion or you know getting students involved that you see any do you see that as still sort of being a productive kind of.

**Ken:** [00:09:11] I do yeah I do. And I think it has very similar elements to the community based learning in the sense that in essence what students are doing and those kinds of classes is they're pursuing a goal and the goal is inherently fascinating or interesting to them whether it's playing a game or engaging in some community based project. It's the goal it's the question that's the goal. And tails that becomes so driving for the students I think as I would say to two

faculty members that we have a lot of reason to believe that students are most likely to take a deep approach to their learning and have really deep intentions in their learning when they are trying to answer questions or solve problems. They are the learner. I've come to regard as important intriguing or in some cases just beautiful and I think that game based learning entails all of those elements or at least can and when it does it becomes a very powerful motivator for students and engages them in the discipline on a very deep basis.

**Jim:** [00:10:26] Yeah absolutely. Now one of the things that I know you probably experience as well when you when you work with faculty is you hear some common questions and sort of challenges that faculty describe to you. I know you're of you know there's a small set of questions I know I get almost every time. You know I work with a group of faculty sometimes those kind of can point to things that are kind of bubbling up to the surface and then in higher education or ways in which you know maybe new types of challenges are emerging for us that we want to try to address. Can you think of anything that you know this is something that I almost always hear from faculty as a problem or particular challenge they are facing?

**Ken:** [00:11:05] Now that's a really interesting question and I think it does provide a window into a lot of this going on and in higher education. One question. Let me let me mention really two different questions and they're very different in their nature. One is that faculty will often say I'm having great difficulty in getting students really involved in the course and involved in the discipline that students will sometimes just almost sleepwalk through the course even the best students are going to be focused on the grade rather than on the content and on the on the promises of the course. So that's one type of complaint that I hear.

**Ken:** [00:11:50] And another one that is really quite curious in its nature because it is very different. And that is that faculty will say I don't have enough time in the classroom to quote cover unquote all of the material that I think I need to cover in the course. And I think in reference to that second one and I tied the two together and in a way that I think is really quite important. When faculty are asking that second question I don't have time to cover the material and how do I how do I cover more material. In some ways they're asking the wrong question. Because they should be asking how can I create an environment and an opportunity for students to learn everything that I want them to learn rather than thinking about quote coverage unquote. So that rather than thinking about having to say everything in the class they should be thinking about how do I create those environments where students are most likely to learn and to learn very deeply in and to pursue their learning very deeply.

**Jim:** [00:13:09] You know it reminds me of something. So we were just on my campus having a session yesterday about how do we respond to student writing and one of the things if you look at that research on the kind of effective responses to student writing and this is an area in which I teach I teach writing in literature. And so one of the interesting things that research tells us is that if you sort of cover a student's paper with sort of criticisms and you know Oxx in the margin you know W-K in the margin and correcting all their mistakes and writing lots and lots of feedback that in fact that often doesn't lead to learning that the student the face of that kind of massive wall of criticism will just sort of shut down and say well I didn't do very well in that paper I'll just try more on the next one as opposed to actually sort of pausing and sort of taking that feedback and using it to improve. So one of the things that that research would imply is that it's much better to sort of identify one or two simple things that you can tell the student. This is what I want you to focus on improving for next time and be willing to let. You've got to be willing to let a lot of lot go in there. You know maybe other problems here.

**Jim:** [00:14:22] But if I want to create learning I've got to be willing to let some of that coverage of all those problems go and focus on the one or two things that matters. And I think there's kind of an interesting Caroline here in that when we step away we have to really to kind of step away from thinking. I have to cover everything and I have tried to let that sort of go which is difficult emotionally because we know it's all important and interested in it but if we don't do that again we just sort of throw this wall of stuff at them. I think that often times lead to less learning.

**Ken:** [00:14:54] Oh I think so. And of course you and I know that there's a growing body of evidence that that is the case that people just simply do not learn as much under that circumstance so I often say to people all right teach less better which means that you're going to create a learning environment where people are going to pursue some things very deeply and also to think about.

**Ken:** [00:15:19] And this is a question that I often pose in workshops to think about one of two or three most important threshold concepts that students need to grasp in this particular area. Maybe it's about the writing maybe it's about historical development or scientific thought or whatever the discipline that happens to be maybe it's in mathematics but it's to think about those threshold concepts and to begin with those threshold concepts so that you make sure that students begin to construct those concepts in their own mind

and once they do then a great deal of the material that we want them to quote learn unquote will fall into place because they built a structure in their own mind that allows them to begin to put things together.

**Jim:** [00:16:16] Yeah that's a really really interesting point. That the you know coring things down that kind of two or three key concepts like that first draw can be a really wonderful focusing activity for a fact that number as they're trying to put together a syllabus. But then again I'd also be really helpful for the students to always have those two or three things in view so that everything in the course kind of orients itself around those big things which is something that we really know is a big difference between an expert and a novice learner.

**Jim:** [00:16:46] An expert in a discipline to see how everything in the field is connected and is able to kind of Orient things around our concepts whereas a novice learner which is what a student would be. Oftentimes those facts just you know in isolation from one another and doesn't really see the structures and the connections or know why one concept might be more important than the other. So that size is really trying to kind of boil it down to those two or three concepts seems really crucial to me.

**Ken:** [00:17:16] And it's not an easy thing to do for faculty members I think because we take some of the concepts for granted and being able to step back and articulate those to ourselves can sometimes be an extraordinarily difficult process on the part of faculty members. But I think it it's a valuable step to uncovering some of the difficulties that we think we have with students and love.

**Jim:** [00:17:45] And I frequently will mention this when I'm talking to faculty where faculty members often are sort of like miners down below the surface digging for some valuable or. And the students are up there on the surface sort of wondering what you're doing down there and you have to kind of back up and try and get to that point where you know you can see things from a different perspective. And I just love that. I love that.

**Ken:** [00:18:10] I think it comes out of a very simple but profound process that we've all engaged in. And that is that we are currently interested in certain questions because we were once interested in another question and we were interested in that question because we were interested in still another question and so on and so forth. And what we have to do is to retrace our own intellectual journey to go back to the surface and to begin with those questions that are going to intrigue the students and the students are going to find

fascinating. And then in some sense to help guide them on the journey that will allow them to see the significance the power of the questions that we as advanced learners want to raise for them. And only that they become engaged.

**Jim:** [00:19:03] Yeah that's great. That's a really good way of thinking about it. So one of the things that I often hear from faculty members as well and I hear this from people who work in fact development too is that when when when professors first start sort of trying to make changes to their teaching that you know it doesn't always go as well as they would like at first. It's just like anything you know they need some kind of practice with some time and it might take a semester two or three before putting some of these kinds of changes that we're talking about into practice before they really start to work and before they see the kind of results that that they might have been hoping and expecting to see right away you have you heard that back in the members as well. Do you have any thoughts on that.

**Ken:** [00:19:46] Oh indeed I have. And I also have experience in my own teaching. I remember back 20 30 years ago as I began to explore some of these ideas and approaches that didn't always work out well. First time I tried them and I had to tweak them in some way that would make them work. Well I remember one innovation that I that I implemented must have been around the late 80s and it failed miserably. And I made some very small changes the next year and it was probably the best class I ever taught.

**Ken:** [00:20:22] So I think we have to be patient with the process. And that's one of the reasons why I like your new book jam because on small teaching because I think sometimes what we have to do is to bite this off in smaller chunks and to try out some small things that that are very powerful. And I think that's what your book explores is how that small teaching those small changes can produce some rather significant results.

**Jim:** [00:20:53] Yeah. I mean obviously I agree with that. You know part of the idea of small teaching too as well is that while people can take these small steps. My hope is that when people do take a small step and they see it having a positive impact in their teaching that then they become more open to exploring other areas and kind of trying to start to see their way to those larger goals.

**Jim:** [00:21:14] I mean the other thing I did actually I forgot to mention I forgot to mention at the beginning was you know in terms of kind of our history together



when I became a faculty member after having worked with you at the center and become very familiar with the ideas that you were putting together for the book I kind of wanted after a couple of years to take those ideas and think about you know how did they really play out in practice when I tried to put them into play in my own classes. And that was ultimately what kind of led me to do my own writing about teaching and learning was you know taking these kind of larger frameworks that you had built than that I had really believed and bought into. What did they look like in the ground in the classroom on an everyday level and that that kind of came to fruition actually in small teaching which still works very much under the frames of the kinds of ideas that you have written and talked about but try to think about them in those smaller bite sized chunks.

**Ken:** [00:22:12] And I think that's what we all have to do is to begin begin the process and to begin to think about it and realize that sometimes we may have to make adjustments as we go along and not to give up with one failure or one difficulty with it if it's an extraordinarily challenging enterprise to foster somebody else's learning. And we have to explore it as fully as possible.

**Jim:** [00:22:39] And that's part of what makes it so interesting and you know profession is that there's always new challenges always new things to think about. I was just thinking about this because I was in the second half of the semester in this class but I taught many times I have to do some difficult readings and I've never done anything like this before. But I said you know we're going to I'm going to start giving you guided reading questions which will be posted to the Course management side. I want you to look at the gathering questions before you do your reading. And and those will help you make better sense of what you're going to be reading.

**Jim:** [00:23:13] So I did as I said I announced this I made a big fan for about it this is a new thing we're trying. And the first day they came back I could tell that they thought half of them hadn't bothered to look at the question. So now I get to make sure that everything is right and it's just been you know it's been one of these things it's been like an interesting challenge for me to think about how to do this and that to me is what I am teaching interesting. We have to kind of keep thinking about the particular group of students we have in front of us what's going to help those students and how we can contribute and foster their learning. So when the time of the show when we do recommendations Bonni.

**Bonni:** [00:23:53] Yes this sounds like a good time. Thanks for both of you for that wonderful interview is so fun to hear you. And I was biting my tongue though

when you were talking about small teaching because our university just wrapped up a book group on it and there's so much to say there and it's just it's fun to have little steps.

**Bonni:** [00:24:08] And I think you said before that big teaching is on its way sometime in the future is that still correct some sometime in the future though teaching has kept me busy for not coming as soon as I would like but it will be wonderful.

**Bonni:** [00:24:23] Well I wanted to say for my recommendation first of all last week I did a little bit of a different episode and they shared some of the challenges that we're having with a family member who's experiencing cognitive decline and I really opened up my heart to the podcasting and I blogged about this as well this past week having absolutely no idea how many of you would write to me and actually even a video on Twitter for all the way from the UK how wonderful I sometimes feel like I forget that there's people out there who listen to me. I mean even though it's downloaded by thousands of people it doesn't quite click in my mind just what a wonderful community that we have here.

**Bonni:** [00:25:05] And there are people at my institution who I'm friends with and who also listen to the podcast. So I got notes of encouragement from them of course but I felt just this overwhelming support from this wonderful worldwide community of people who care about teaching and who care about our students so my recommendation this week is just to remember we're never alone in this.

**Bonni:** [00:25:29] And in my particular experience there's a personal issue that's impacting just my my level of worry and stress on a given day. And I know I now know that I'm not alone in that either and I heard from so many of you who have family members that are experiencing cognitive decline and you've had to make some difficult choices and navigate some difficult road.

**Bonni:** [00:25:48] So my recommendation is just for us all to remember we're never alone in this as we do what Ken and Jim have advised and we start to take risks in our teaching and we're going to fail. It's a promise that we all have for you today. But when we fail we're never alone. And there's just so many wonderful people out there who can just come around each other and encourage each other and offer advice. So thanks so much for everybody who wrote in or tweeted or even video was such a kick to me and you really

encouraged me this week. And remember we're never alone in this. I'm going to pass it over now to Jim who's has his recommendation.

**Jim:** [00:26:27] Yeah thanks. The podcast has been a great vehicle for fostering a lot of a sense of community. I will recommend the book that I have in the middle of writing a series of parts for the Chronicle of Higher Education on distraction in the classroom. And the book that I'm focusing on is called The Distracted Mind and brings in a high tech world published by MIT Press. At the end of last year and it's a really wonderful book.

**Jim:** [00:26:51] I think it provides some fantastic information about attention and heart and systems work. It doesn't specifically draw conclusions from that to you know classroom teaching and building learning environment for students. I'm trying to do that in the column but I think the columns would be sort of a richer experience for people if they read the book. And I think it's just a wonderful book for people to read to think about their own experiences with attention and distractions so I really recommend this book very highly called The Distracted Mind.

**Jim:** [00:27:22] And we'll let Ken finish with his recommendation.

**Ken:** [00:27:25] OK I'm I'm going to recommend our Summer Institute that you and I are doing together. Along with some other colleagues of the best teachers institute which is June of the 20th through the 22nd. Now the the Institute actually has filled but we have worked with the hotel where we're holding it to secure all that additional space. And I think we're going to be able to open up 10 or 12 additional slots in the in the program. So if anyone is interested in taking one of those positions go to [www.bestteachersinstitute.org](http://www.bestteachersinstitute.org) And that's June 20th through the 22nd in the New York City area and one of the New Jersey suburbs so we'd like love to have some of the folks who are regular listeners to this podcast to join this community of folks who come together and explore in great depth over three days in June some very profound issues about teaching and learning.

**Bonni:** [00:28:40] Wonderful and the link to the Best Teachers Institute, The Distracted Mind and other resources that we mentioned on the episode will all be available at [teachinginhigher.com/146](http://teachinginhigher.com/146). Thank you so much to Ken Bain and James Lang for joining me today on teaching in higher ed.

**Bonni:** [00:28:58] It's so wonderful having you here.

**Ken And Jim:** [00:29:01] Thanks Bonni. Our pleasure.

**Bonni:** [00:29:03] It's been such an honor to get to talk to Ken Bain and James Lang on today's show and to change the format of the show a little bit I've been thinkin for awhile about what it might look like to have two people interview each other. And for me to sit back a little bit and I'm so happy that the two of them agreed to have this experiment on the new format of episodes be a conversation between the two of them.

**Bonni:** [00:29:28] Thanks to Jim for arranging things with Ken and preparing questions to interview him. It was just wonderful. And thanks to all of you for listening. This is the hundred and forty sixth episode 150 is coming. And if you have any recommendations that's going to be in all recommendations show and people are going to [teachinginhighered.com/contact](http://teachinginhighered.com/contact) and you can actually record yourself right on the Internet with your computer's recording device and you can also if you prefer you could just recorded on your phone or what have you and then send me an e-mail of that.

**Bonni:** [00:30:04] But again it's going to be episode 150 and all recommendations episode and we've already got some recommendations coming in so thanks to those of you who have already phoned or recorded those. And if you haven't done it yet probably want to do it pretty quick in the next few days because I'll be recording soon in early April so thanks again for listening.

**Bonni:** [00:30:23] As always if you want to get the links to all the wonderful resources that Ken and Jim talked about you're going to want to not have to remember to go to [teachinginhighered.com/146](http://teachinginhighered.com/146). If you go to [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe) you can have a single email come into your inbox each week with the show notes and also an article that I write most weeks about either teaching or productivity that comes automatically. But I don't bombard you with a lot and you can do that at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe).

**Bonni:** [00:30:55] Thanks so much for listening and thanks again for all your great messages this week after the episode that aired the prior week with me sharing some of my life stuff that's going on. You really are a wonderful community and I look forward to our future opportunities to connect. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.

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