

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 189 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Judith Boettcher shares her expertise designing online experiences.

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Bonni: [00:00:21] 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 personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:49] Today as a part of my partnership with ACUE, the Association of College and University Educators, I have the honor of welcoming Dr. Judith Boettcher. She is a nationally known consultant and author in online and distance learning. Over the course of her career, she's been very fortunate to have worked with great faculty at Penn State University, Florida State University, the University of Florida, and Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.

Bonni: [00:01:19] Judith is also the founder and principal of Designing for Learning. She's a frequent keynoter at Teaching and Learning Conferences, conducts faculty workshops on best practices in online learning, consults on program design for online and distance learning, and coach's individual faculty on course design. Judith is the coauthor with Rita-Marie Conrad of the Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and practical Pedagogy Tips published by Jossey-Bass in (2010, 2016) and the Faculty Guide for Moving Teaching and Learning to the Web (1999, 2004) published by the league for innovation. Judith is the author of many seminal features in higher education magazines and journals, Campus Technology, Innovate and EDUCAUSE. Judith, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Judith: [00:02:12] Thank you so much Bonni. It's just such a delight to be here with you.

Bonni: [00:02:16] I know that you've been discussing online teaching best practices not just here on Teaching in Higher Ed this week, but as a part of ACUE's expert dive series and that's the Association of College and University Educators. You created this wonderful post on their CUE blog. And you also are answering questions from the ACUE community in an online video office hour coming up this week. So you have been busy with ACUE stuff and getting the word out about the importance of quality online education.

Judith: [00:02:53] Well I have been busy, Bonni. But it is just such a delight to be able to talk with educators that are really interested in creating quality online learning experiences. It does take extra work and it takes a little set of different skills than what we have been accustomed to using in the classroom. So it's just really nice to be able to be participating in this.

Bonni: [00:03:19] One of the things that you stressed in so much of your work is really a coupling- I guess it's not a coupling if it's three things- a combination of three things and that is just stressing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in online learning. Could you talk a little bit about how you see those three things connecting with each other?

Judith: [00:03:43] Oh, thank you for bringing that up Bonni. I must give credit to the researcher Catherine Hales and she's at UCLA right now as the professor of English. She's written some interesting books about the influence and the connectedness of technology and our humanity. The reason I got really interested in those three characteristics is that folks are really worried about how do you motivate students online? How do you engage students online?

Judith: [00:04:15] And I've found that those three qualities- if we really design courses and experiences with those three qualities in mind that the students natural curiosity and great feeling of what it is to learn something just comes through automatically. So motivation becomes less of an issue.

Judith: [00:04:36] So then you mentioned those three characteristics and let me just mention a little bit about each one of them. Autonomy really means helping students have their own sense of self, that they are individuals with their own interests, their own zones the proximal development when they are ready to learn, their own strengths and their own weaknesses.

Judith: [00:04:59] And so as we build instructional experiences we want to be able to help the students recognize where they are, what they know when

they're starting an experience and then perhaps you know what is the process for them as they go through the learning. Which links right into the feeling of competency. Feeling confident about something is just self affirming. Whenever we learn something new, even as adults, as we solve a technology problem we think "oh yes I get it. I'm so excited."

Judith: [00:05:30] So what we do is we build in those feelings of success as we structure assignments and tasks for the students to make certain those are tasks and assignments at which they can be successful at the same time that they are advancing and growing and developing their skills.

Judith: [00:05:49] And then the third item is quality of relatedness built into that whole goal that we now have, whether you're in a classroom or in online, of really building community. We want our students to really be talking and interacting with each other and not just with the faculty members. One of the other little recommendations is the idea of balancing instruction between the dialogue that students have with resources when they're kind of working on their own.

Judith: [00:06:21] The dialogue that they have with other students and I see this all the time by the way little study groups in Starbucks with students. In fact, I can hardly get into my local Starbucks at 3:30 in the afternoon because the high school students are all there. But that's great because when they work in the study groups, they are actually talking, they're using their voice and with that they are actually learning.

Judith: [00:06:44] So that third characteristic of relatedness means that they are sharing their journey of learning. And they also are able to take the time to talk and express what they know and what they don't know. It's not powerful enough just to think it in our head. Using our voice is a very powerful additional learning tool that we have.

Bonni: [00:07:07] As I'm listening to you, I'm listening to what you're saying, but I'm also listening to what you're not saying. Just think back on my own teaching failures- and I will admit to still struggling with it today. You used the word competence and as you were describing that, you talked about designing experiences. And you talked about this relatedness as creating more of a sense of learners coming together and collaborating with other learners.

Bonni: [00:07:41] But what you didn't say, or at least what I felt like perhaps was intentionally missing was we don't lay everything out perfectly such that there's

never any challenges that these learners encounter on their way toward competence.

Bonni: [00:07:58] And that's sometimes where I will find myself when things start to get messy in a class where I go like "Ah, I need to fix this. I must intervene. I must fix this because this is hard to watch." And yet learning, if we're truly going to get to competence, I've got to step out of the way sometimes. Could you talk a little bit about the importance of encountering challenge? And especially I know one of the things you talk about is the importance of context and some of the knowledge transfer and as that relates to context. I'll just pass it back to you to reflect on some of what I didn't hear you say as you describe these three things coming together.

Judith: [00:08:37] Oh wow. Bonni as you were saying that, my brain went in about five different directions. Let me just share this example following up on your comment about "oh you have to intervene because things are getting really messy."

Bonni: [00:08:53] Yeah.

Judith: [00:08:54] I have four children. They're all within about the same age range. And when they were younger, they wanted to bake a cake or they wanted to bake cookies. And of course you know oh my god, the kitchen would get to be an awful, awful mess.

Judith: [00:09:08] But my only salvation was that I just kind of left them at it. And then I left. I was in the house if they needed me. I mean I let them just go at it. And I think that is something that absolutely helps students learn. One of my other favorite things I like to challenge faculty with actually is we are particularly now in the 21st century you know and we don't have answers for everything.

Judith: [00:09:37] When I was growing up, the instruction was always well let's find out what the teacher knows, let's find the right answer because there seemed to be always a right answer to everything. Where we are today is that we don't have right answers to many things at all. And what we really want to do is structure experiences where we don't have the answers and that students can come up with different solutions. That they have to go through problem solving processes, gather data, research data, come up with possible solutions and ideas, and have them work on coming up with possible recommendations and possible solutions. That energizes people because they do come up with things when they have challenges.

Judith: [00:10:22] Wow, we don't have the answer. I can actually come up with something that hasn't been done before and now that I say all that, I think about Look how many of our 21st century social media tools were built by young people when they were in their 20s because they came up and solved the problems that they saw. And they put the technology and their knowledge together and came up with a solution.

Judith: [00:10:48] So my little mantra to recommend, one recommendation would be to review your courses and see where you can take the answers out and put the challenges in.

Bonni: [00:11:00] That can be a really fearful thing to do because when we think about ourselves as teachers, as providers of knowledge, that can be a pretty jolting thing to say wow that's not my role... If we're exploring things that haven't been- questions that have been asked before and I don't have the answers to them, what then does my role become?

Bonni: [00:11:24] And that can be a really hard shift, especially in terms of one's own ego. I mean having gotten through, many of us either are on our way or have already earned a terminal degree. I mean those those types of environments can often reinforce the exact opposite of helpful characteristics as a teacher, making this kind of evolution of thinking of the role.

Judith: [00:11:51] You know but isn't it exciting. One of the topics I like to talk about is what does it mean to be an expert at something? And we know that some of the research suggests it takes 10,000 hours before you are an expert of anything. And if you go back and look at it the number of hours and years it takes to complete a terminal degree.

Judith: [00:12:10] Guess what. It's probably pretty close to 10 years, right. But isn't it exciting to think about having sharing with our students the areas of our knowledge where we have researched and what we now know that we didn't know before. But at the same time, take a look at our field and our knowledge and our areas and say things that are things we don't know yet. These are the areas of continuing and ongoing research. That can be really exciting.

Bonni: [00:12:43] I also think it's just so powerful to continually put ourselves back in the role of novice. We've had many people on the podcast talk about doing this. I was so pleased to be able to talk to Mike Wesch and one of his things was doing handstands. We've had someone talk about learning how to play piano.

And actually Mike Wesch talked to I think one of his students taught him how to play the violin. It's incredible and I have felt at times just intimidated like yeah looking at my wrists, I don't think it's going to be handstands for me. And I don't think it's going to be the violin.

Bonni: [00:13:16] I started on a recent journey of being a novice with using this cult-ish kitchen gadget called the instant pot which is often abbreviated InstaPot and it is so funny to me just how many parallels are there. Everything from a slight burn because I didn't understand quite when they say steam is going to be released for this thing they really mean it. That's like yeah I wasn't like permanently damaged or hated thing but just experimenting on myself and having the burn error message come on for the first time and then getting introduced to communities online and how much I've been able to learn. But also how much I've just been able to learn through experimentation and failure and I don't give up and I try again. And I have successes and it feels really good to have that success and reach that competence after having struggled and then realized I could work it out myself. I didn't go to an InstaPot class where someone walked me through step by step. It was definitely something that I do think is a be something that will be a part of my life going forward but I just treasure this opportunity of being a novice and that kind of gets addicting as a teacher, if we if we truly take the risks to be vulnerable like that.

Judith: [00:14:31] And isn't it great to share those kinds of feelings about how you are feeling as you're going through the learning experience? You can share those with the students and say that learning is not just a one time thing that we're constantly learning.

Judith: [00:14:50] I've been fortunate enough with in the last 10 years where I haven't been working quite as much as I used to that I've been I have kind of a wannabe. I wanted to watercolor and want to do that. It takes time. And that's something else that, with our students, we can share the fact that I would be further along my path becoming a competent watercolor artist if I invested more time in it because learning does take time.

Judith: [00:15:18] So that's another way of really encouraging our students and reminding our students that when they're taking a course, whether it's online or in the classroom, that investing and scheduling time to do the work is essential to progress.

Bonni: [00:15:36] What can you tell us about the complexity of developing concepts that are more than just words?

Judith: [00:15:43] So yes. The complexity of developing concepts. This question goes back to the days of my dissertation actually when as I was going through my Ph.D. program, I managed to take a series of courses on knowledge and I had my overriding question during that time and has continued throughout my life is how is that to know what does it mean to really know something? How does our brain look? What does our brain look like when we really know something?

Judith: [00:16:21] And some of the research that's been done, this is Nobel prize winning folks have done research on what it takes to grow neurons in little, small celled animals and everything else. And what we do know is that when we know something, we are growing neurons and synapses and linkages in our brain. Our brain, in fact, looks a great deal like a web.

Judith: [00:16:52] And when we think about a concept- I think years ago it was easy to assume that you knew something or knew a concept if you knew the words associated with the concept. But we know now that the concept is much more than just a single word. In fact, a word is simply like the tip of the iceberg. And I'm sorry for mixing my metaphors here.

Judith: [00:17:19] But anyway, keep those two ideas in mind. The word is really just the tip of the iceberg. To really know a concept, you need to have the entire web of knowledge around that word and what all the patterns that it brings in and all the data elements that are required. In fact, another analogy is actually if you think about it, mysteries and detective stories are very popular.

Judith: [00:17:48] And the whole process of a detective, a police procedural has the investigator gathering bits of data. They gather bits of data and they don't have the big picture at all until they gather all these bits and pieces of data. And then they theorize, and they think they have the picture. But all of a sudden they add in about four or five new elements and all of a sudden the entire picture changes. The entire concept of where they're going changes. And it's not until they have all that gathered all the data and all the pieces that's the big picture or the big concept the big solution finally comes into focus.

Bonni: [00:18:28] I remember when my son was about 2 years old or so, I was having a little difficulty getting him into the car to get going and I desperately needed my caffeine fix in the morning. And so I let him know- he wasn't wearing shoes so I said you can go barefoot and then we'll get your shoes on, I said something like that. And at some point on the drive, it wasn't clear to me why,

but he just started completely melting down and it turned out that this concept of going barefoot to me means you don't wear shoes.

Bonni: [00:19:03] And to him it was some amazing wonderland that involved bears and things, like he thought we were going into a place called Bear and I don't know where he thought the feet came into all of this. And it was just you know so disappointing to him. And there can be so many times in the learning process, in both directions, not just "hahaha the student didn't understand this," but we ourselves, as teachers cannot understand things and not realize that we're not understanding it.

Bonni: [00:19:35] What are ways that you think about where these disconnects can emerge and then and then be explored? What are some ideas? Especially when we talked about going online, how do we uncover this? Because we're not even necessarily always doing this in real time.

Judith: [00:19:53] Well with online, there's like three or four different tools that are really just the core ways of communicating and building relationships and getting to know our students. And the discussion forum is just you know a major piece because in the discussion forum is where we really want to, as we are challenging the students to develop concepts conceptual awareness in a in a field with knowledge, that we asked them a couple of things.

Judith: [00:20:24] Number one, it's the very beginning of the concept development. We try and probe and find out what do they think they know? Because sometimes they think they know something about a subject that is totally off base. And so by inquiring early on, what do you think you already know about this? We can identify areas of knowledge where they may be misinterpreting or confusing it with the incoming new information.

Judith: [00:20:52] So initially finding out what is it that they do know? This is obviously very much a first step. And then the second step is once we talk, we often would have a little mini lecture or a mini online lecture content demonstration. And then we follow up and end it an additional task asking the students to use that information in some discussion or read another paper and reflect on it.

Judith: [00:21:19] So we really use the discussion form and the student's words to find out what it is they know. Now that we have the ease of use of audio and video, we can also ask students to either draw something or to, as we are doing now, record some audio thoughts on that. Although it's much easier, in terms of

time, for faculty to read writing rather than to listen to the audio. So I encourage the use of audio when students are working together. But when reporting back to faculty, I do go back to the words because it's because of the time issue. So it's by having the students reflect, write, talk out, and apply that we find out where that where they are and what they're getting.

Bonni: [00:22:09] Yeah. And part of what I'm hearing you describe too is just having there be different ways of conveying my knowledge and having there be different ways of- and sometimes even giving a choice. It could be that you draw something. It could be a record audio. It could be record a video. And though you also describe sort of the realities of- in my experience, if I ask students just go create a video of any length and I don't specify... you know this already Judith, it is actually way harder to create video that is shorter.

Bonni: [00:22:44] And so some of the tools, like one I have shared about on the podcast that I started using is called FlipGrid. There are many tools that are like this but it allows us to set time limits on these quick video recordings that really do end up looking a lot more like a conversation.

Bonni: [00:23:00] And I had so many of the students come back and report to me that at first that felt like an overwhelming limitation. You want me to say this in 60 seconds or two minutes or whatever?? And that really by the time they got through that struggle and they looked back on their learning over the semester, not only had they learned a lot about the content from the course, but they really learned a lot just about conciseness and thinking through the most powerful way to convey their message.

Bonni: [00:23:28] So even though we all have our own human limitations of how much we're able to do, you talked about a shift of getting students doing that with other students, which really helps. But even taking advantage of some of the time limits in the tools can be really helpful even just beyond your own sanity and ability to provide effective feedback.

Judith: [00:23:48] And then of course we have the time the character limit on Twitter that reminds us of the importance of really distilling what we are thinking into the core ideas that we're trying to communicate. Something else that I recommend for the online students is that oftentimes when they think they understand something, the best way to check whether or not you understand something is to teach it to someone else, right.

Judith: [00:24:18] And sometimes another student isn't easily available. I said try your family. It would be great if you've got it as a child or a spouse or someone, it does a number of different things. Number one, taking time to do online learning often takes time away from family and other close relationships. By sharing what you are learning with those other close relationships, it gives you a chance, you the learner, a chance to practice and all to get you all closer together because people understand what it is that you're doing. So it's kind of something we don't often think about, the power it can be of just talking with your spouse and saying this is what I'm learning, and this is what I'm doing, and this is what I'm excited about.

Bonni: [00:25:06] Absolutely. This is the time in this show and we get to give some recommendations. And actually my recommendations parallel so much with many of the things we've already been talking about Judith. The first one I wanted to recommend people may or may not know this I have not to date as of January 23 I have not taken on any paid sponsors for this podcast but I do like to mention tools that I have found to be particularly helpful because people like the practicality of that.

Bonni: [00:25:35] If I wanted to experiment with video, I mentioned FlipGrid earlier in this particular podcast, where might I start? And I of course hear from so many of the listeners who will say "Oh I tried this other one. You should check it out" I always have a overwhelming someday, maybe technology list of cool things I can go explore from so many suggestions of people who listen to the show.

Bonni: [00:25:56] But I wanted to mention one that is a bigger commitment than FlipGrid. FlipGrid is one of those things they have a free tool that gets you pretty far and then a fairly inexpensive paid option, which I did subscribe to. But the one I'm going to talk about here, it actually is coinciding with our learning management system. We use Canvas at our institution. And the company that makes Canvas came out with their own streaming video solution which they call Arc Media.

Bonni: [00:26:28] And it's our first semester using it, we just rolled it out. And so I had my first set of students that I can assign a video to. In this case, it's a wonderful series of videos from a professor at Harvard named Michael Sandel. He made a delightful series of videos of his course there at Harvard which is at least at the time of the recording of these videos was Harvard's most popular course called Justice.

Bonni: [00:26:58] And so I was able to take the videos that they have recorded of his lectures, which are housed on YouTube. But instead of having my students go watch them on YouTube and the trying to navigate YouTube's commenting system and then of course there's a whole bunch of other people involved in the conversation that aren't part of our class. I was able to just take that URL from the YouTube video and put it inside of our learning management system.

Bonni: [00:27:24] And have its own really rich commenting system as you're going along watching the video. He talks about the classic philosophical problem called the trolley problem and do you go and let the trolley go where it might and it ends up killing five people? Or do you take it off to the side and end up killing one person? You know these great mind games we can play in philosophy and the students can comment in real time as they're watching the video.

Bonni: [00:27:51] So I just told them watch it as if he's asking you the question. And then answer back his question in the comments. And it was just so delightful. I got to talk with them a little bit this week about how they experienced that. What did they like about it? And it was just a delight. So I would suggest that if anyone out there is looking at new streaming video options at your institution, I can't say enough good things about it.

Bonni: [00:28:16] And even if that is beyond your decision making capability at your institution, check out something like FlipGrid or another one is VoiceThread. Go out there and start checking out these tools that can help us really transition into what video can do in the lives of our students. So that's my suggestion for today. And Judith, I'm going to pass it over to you now to make your recommendation.

Judith: [00:28:40] Okay well a couple of things I would recommend. One of the challenges with online learners is that they can often get really bogged down and particularly with online courses, rather than having midterms and finals. I like to really design courses around projects. And the projects would have different phases of course so that and stages to help students. But you know it's still a difficult for students that are are so busy with so many things going on to go ahead and sometimes discipline themselves to have the time to really do the work that they need to do. And so there is a business productivity book that I keep recommending as you all may have heard about it and used it already but it's by David Allen in the title of the book is called Getting Things Done.

Judith: [00:29:29] And in fact I was introduced to that book, speaking of learning from others, I was introduced to that book by my oldest daughter. I was explaining and talking with her about a project that I couldn't get myself going on and everything else. And so I was kind of- you know how your mind just goes around in circles and you don't get anywhere. And she finally said 'Mom, stop. What is your next step?'

Bonni: [00:29:56] Yeah.

Judith: [00:29:57] And it turns out that I have applied that advice in any different, in a number of ways. In fact even when I'm writing something, as I was writing my book in fact, when I got to a point where I had to stop before I stopped totally. I wrote to myself my next step when I come back to this is to do the following. And that way with the amount of time that we lose often in transitioning from non-writing tasks to writing tasks, it really helps zero me in right away.

Judith: [00:30:29] And I still do that today with other kinds of projects. If I find myself just running in circles in my brain about how am I going to get something done, that I stop and say OK what is my next step? So one of the challenges and I think one of the skills that are really good to incorporate into our online learning programs are skills in getting work done. And so this is you know a book that I would recommend.

Bonni: [00:30:58] Oh it's such a wonderful book. Well Judith it has been so great to be introduced to you through ACUE for people that haven't been listening for a while. I have a partnership with the Association of College and University Educators that once a month they send me a wonderful guest and of course Judith has lived up to that great reputation.

Bonni: [00:31:19] And so for the unforeseeable future, you'll be getting to hear monthly guests from ACUE and they'll line up with their ACUE's CUE blog, and these online video office hours, and just an opportunity to engage with a guest such as yourself Judith. So I just appreciate your time so much and really treasure your work that you're doing with ACUE.

Judith: [00:31:43] Thank you so much Bonni. It has been a pleasure. I look forward to hearing many more of your podcasts going forward as well.

Bonni: [00:31:51] Thank you.

Bonni: [00:31:52] Thanks to Judith for being a guest on the show and to ACUE for your partnership in making these episodes with such wonderful guests possible. Thanks to all of you for listening. If you would like to receive the links to all the great things that Judith shared and even some of the things that she didn't share but that were a part of us preparing for today's episode, you can go to teachinginhighered.com/189.

Bonni: [00:32:21] You can also subscribe to the weekly update where these show notes and a blog post written by me each week will come into your inbox. You can subscribe at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe. And when you do subscribe, you do receive a e-book a free guide on EdTech tools to use in your own productivity or in your teaching. So I hope you consider subscribing and thanks for listening. See you next time.

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