

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 222 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Ian Wolf shares his reflections after listening to every single episode of Teaching in Higher Ed.

Production Credit: [00:00:16] Produced by Innovate Learning, maximizing human potential.

Bonni: [00:00:25] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:53] There are not very many people who have listened to every single episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. However, today's guest has. It is Ian Wolf. He's an Assistant Professor of English, Co-Director of the Quality Enhancement Plan at Louisburg College, which he'll share more about what Louisburg College is about if you want to know more about that later in the episode. He is a member of the first cohort of Louisburg's faculty learning community, led by Dr. Todd Zakrajsek. He's fanatical about science fiction, British literature, and good teaching. Ian, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Ian: [00:01:36] Hi. Great to be here.

Bonni: [00:01:38] It is fun to get to talk to you, finally, because we have been on a similar journey, you and I. You are one of the few, the rare people who has listened to every single episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. And why don't we start at the beginning, tell me a little bit, how did you first hear about the podcast?

Ian: [00:02:00] Well I was part of this faculty learning community led by the great Todd Zakrajsek, who has been on your show a couple of times. And one of my peers in that group had said "hey, you're thinking of doing some gamification and I heard this great episode about reacting to the past. I have no recollection

now of what number that is. It's been a while." And I went back and I pulled it up. And this was before I had ever been on Twitter. I had no earthly clue how podcasts really worked. And I listened to it and I thought this was really good. So I just scrolled all the way down to the bottom and started from scratch, started from the very first episode.

Bonni: [00:02:43] So that episode that you're referring to would be episode 21. And that was with Mark Carnes. He is a Professor of History at Barnard College and really was one of the first founders of this whole idea of reacting to the past. And in case people haven't listened to all 200 and something episodes, that is a game that they play in history courses where instead of reading about the history, people actually react and respond to history and take on more of a role play and they take on some kind of a role in that time period. And there's not just one game, there's tons of different kinds of games now that have been written in this same format. Some people have taught it in my university and speak so highly of it. I kind of want to see it in person, even though I've heard a lot about it from the podcast.

Ian: [00:03:31] Yeah, me too. It sounds fascinating. I don't know if I've got the gumption to get it rolling just yet.

Bonni: [00:03:38] So you heard about the podcast and do you remember when you listened the first time, was it listening actually on a podcast app on your phone? Or were you listening over the web?

Ian: [00:03:49] I poked around and I found that Google's play music could play podcasts. And I listened to that first episode and I immediately subscribed to the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast. And I set it to alert me whenever a new episode came up. And I scrolled all the way down to the bottom and started with episode number one right after that.

Bonni: [00:04:14] Oh my gosh. Somebody told me that when they first started listening, they thought it was always just my husband and I. Because the first five episodes were just us. That's what they tell you when you start a podcast to kind of have a few episodes queued up before you actually go for this. So yeah, the first five or six are Dave and I talking. And then it gets some different characters coming into the mix.

Bonni: [00:04:36] So I know that there's so much we both have in common these shared conversations. And we both have in common that they've really shaped our teaching. And it's so hard to pick favorites or that kind of thing. So I'm gonna

ask the impossible task, which is to reflect on some of the episodes that have really stood out to you, particularly if they've changed the way that you teach.

Bonni: [00:05:03] I know one of them was Linda Nilsen talking about specifications grading, sometimes called specs grading. So could you talk a little bit about what specs grading is and kind of how you have taken that in and started to integrate that into your teaching?

Ian: [00:05:20] Oh well I can't say that I've started integrating it into my teaching YET. The plan is to really put it into practice here in this upcoming fall semester. But I've started working on building some rubrics and whatnot there.

Ian: [00:05:36] What it is is simply eliminating this concept of partial credit. And you either meet a high standard or you do not. As a student, you accomplish very particular expectations or beyond. Or you go back to the drawing board and you try one more time, you try it again. And I find that very powerful.

Ian: [00:06:01] My first degree was in teaching high school. And one of the major components of that was teaching writing. Out here in North Carolina, at that time, we had the 10th grade writing test. The 10th grade North Carolina writing test was a bit of a kind of a drill and kill. Everybody- we spent days, weeks preparing for this test with students, training them on how to read the prompts and how to construct a quintessential five paragraph paper. And then they took the test and that was it. And I always that very troubling as an educator because one and done doesn't really give you an opportunity to get feedback, reflect on your process, apply some of that feedback and grow.

Ian: [00:06:49] And so Dr. Nilsen's whole thing about "yes, you tell them you didn't do it. You didn't do it the way I wanted it to be done. So you don't get any credit for it. But you can try again. And now that I've given you this feedback, now you know where to put in some of those energies."

Ian: [00:07:06] I also really appreciated this idea- and this is something that I got from my dad actually who was an investigator for social services for decades- was simply that everybody needs to know what your expectations are. And with specifications grading, you have to make your expectations abundantly clear because nobody can meet an imaginary expectation. So that is something that I found very important that I had always recognized as important, but Dr Nilsen's structure gave me some very specific ways to put it into action, reflect upon what I have in place and move it into something that could change the way I teach.

Ian: [00:07:50] Also always lamented this idea of grading papers because it would take me hours upon hours upon hours. And her system strikes me as far more efficient with the time.

Bonni: [00:08:01] When Cathy Davidson was on the show the second time to talk about her book, *The New Education*, she spoke of the history of grade's coming from the meat industry and how many in the meat industry would criticize that the way they graded the meats, it was not finite or precise enough for even meat. Were trying to take learning and our disciplines and trying to apply that same methodology that isn't even precise enough for, again, grading meat.

Bonni: [00:08:35] And this really strikes me as something I've been very impacted by Linda's episode as well. Although, I have not implemented specifications grading in my courses either. But it's interesting how you can take these ideas in. I think it's really helpful for us to wrestle with them, but we can't go and run every single idea that we hear about on these episodes or read on people's blogs. But I like the way that they're helping us to just think more critically about our own teaching.

Bonni: [00:09:06] I had someone recently asked me how do you do that? How do you take the ideas from the show and-? Well, most of them I don't. How could you? Right? I remember Linda warning me, and Robert Talbert is another person who uses specifications in his teaching, he's been on the show many times before. And it's one of those systems where if you're truly going to do it- I mean I suppose you could do it for one assignment, but you wouldn't really actually be then doing it because it's one of those where actually the entire class is wrapped around this way of thinking about our grading.

Bonni: [00:09:40] The other thing that struck me as you were talking is this constant tension that's really healthy of hearing new ideas that then challenge our thinking about our teaching, our own teaching philosophy. And then where they don't map. Do we need to change how we think about our teaching? In this case, do we need to change how we think about grading? And so much of grading is just like this game. The game to get to the A. And you don't want to work too hard, because you don't want to go past the A. You want to just meet it well enough or whatever.

Bonni: [00:10:13] When I say game by the way, it's a game that we designed. I'm not making fun of students, I'm making fun of us, right. Because we create this sort of transactional way. And my understanding is one of the things that

specifications grading does is reduce some of that sense of the game. And like you said, it's so much more than about feedback, opportunities to- and Ken Bain talked about this too when he was on the show, he talks about in his books- opportunities to fail, try again, and get feedback and that continuous loop that can be growing our skills and our knowledge.

Bonni: [00:10:46] I know this also tied for you in with a recent episode from Asao Inoue about The Vehicle of Learning is Labor. That really struck you a lot too. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Ian: [00:10:58] Absolutely. One of the primary responsibilities that I have at Louisburg College is teaching the foundational writing class, writing and inquiry. We're a small institution, so I teach a lot of different things. But the things that come across in that course carry over to everything else that I teach and that is writing is really, really hard. And to do it well requires an insane amount of energy and effort, when you look at it across the spectrum of the timeframe of an entire semester.

Ian: [00:11:33] The kind of time that you would devote to writing alone, it just boggles the mind in some cases. And there's no easy way to be good at it other than to simply do it. And this is something that I hadn't phrased it so effectively, but I was sort of scraping at the bottom of the same hill this idea that you just you've got to work hard. There's no simple work around it. And the only promise that I can give you is that I am here to help. And I will help. But as students, you've got to do the work. I can't provide feedback unless you take some risks and try some new things and maybe fail a little bit, which is one of the reasons why Dr. Nilsen's idea of resubmission is very powerful because it kind of lowers the stakes of failure a little bit.

Bonni: [00:12:26] This fall, I'll be teaching for the third time a class, it's an elective class in our management courses. It is Personal Leadership and Productivity. And one of the things I have them do is from David Allen's book called Getting Things Done. And it is the weekly review. I've talked about the weekly review on this show before. In fact, I'll put a link to that episode if anyone wants to learn a little bit more about the weekly review.

Bonni: [00:12:51] But I've never met a student who's ever done a weekly review before. They may have done some version of it, maybe they look at their calendar as it's coming up. But not the kind of practice as he describes it. And for most of them, the last time I taught it, the first couple times they did it, they didn't like it. They didn't see value in it. They kind of felt like it was a little bit of a

waste of time because they were unaccustomed to doing that kind of reflection. And also, it was just a series of steps. They had just designed it. And they're trying it out. And it was really fun and rewarding to see Week 3, Week 4, Week 5, how their reflections on the experience began to change because they started to see the fruits of their labor and they started to see the value of doing that. And I don't teach writing, but I would imagine with writing that there would be some similar parallels where at first my focusing on the labor aspects of my grading might feel rote or forced or "I don't want to do this," but starting to see more of the benefits as we go deeper in that learning. I imagine that there are some similarities there.

Ian: [00:14:04] Absolutely. Absolutely. We always argue that writing is a recursive process. It loops back upon itself and you're only done when the deadline comes. It's never going to be perfect. You can only get it as good as you can before somebody says "all right - give it."

Bonni: [00:14:23] We're recording this episode very early because we've got the new start of a school year, I think for both of us coming up here. And so it was nice to get to put some episodes in the queue. Normally I don't make any time based comments in the episode, but in this particular case I'm going to break that rule because this morning the episode with Peter Felten aired. Peter Felten spoke about both the research and then his associated practices having to do with engaging our students.

Bonni: [00:14:53] And I know that even though this one just aired this morning, it really really struck you as connected with your work in your teaching and then also more broadly at Louisburg College. So could you speak a little bit about how you're thinking about engaging students in your own teaching, but also more broadly at your institution?

Ian: [00:15:12] Yeah. Louisburg College is a very small, private two year residential institution. So there aren't a lot of us out there. And we have, at most, at any given point, 40 full time faculty. And we usually are 600 700 students. So engagement is really important for us because the campus climate, the campus culture is one that demands focus. It demands interest and engagement from faculty as well as students because anybody who is sort of not as engaged is noticeable. You don't have those students who can sort of sit in the back of a very large lecture hall and watch movies on their laptop. They can't hide in our average class size of about 14.

Ian: [00:16:13] And so that is really hard. Engagement is very hard for a lot of faculty who have never been trained in pedagogy. Or in this case, andragogy, which is another distinction that I got from this podcast. This idea that how we interact with our students, how we put learning as the focus as opposed to the teaching the focus, how we treat our students, all of these things factor into how much we enjoy our jobs as educators and how much our students are able to glean from our courses.

Ian: [00:16:53] And so when we went through our quality enhancement plan back when our accreditation was coming through, we decided that engaged teaching and engaged learning were linked. So there's a logo for Louisburg colleges QEP which is lemnos gate, the infinity symbol. And they feed into each other. And so professor Felten's discussion about how some of the structures for how to engage students, some of the things that need to be in place if you even hope to create some sort of reproducible engagement was very helpful, especially with my position at Louisburg College being kind of a co director of the QEP and working to get faculty to adopt some of these strategies and really guide them in that process.

Ian: [00:17:48] His episode is one that I'm definitely going to be sharing with my peers to just let them see that, you're not alone. It's a really hard thing. And here's some ways that we can help each other.

Bonni: [00:18:03] One of the things that's harder to talk about is those areas where we've been able to find some successes or been able to incorporate. Is there anything that comes to mind for you where you, through listening to all these different people from such different disciplines and different kinds of institutions, where you're really still wrestling and you feel like it might represent for you an area of opportunity for you in your teaching where you're going "ah, I got to do this better. I got to keep exploring this and keep wrestling with this area?"

Ian: [00:18:35] You had a statement very early on Bonni about just being nice. You go through all those personal inventories whether it be Myers Briggs or true colors or what have you. And my usual results are ones of a little bit more analytical, more distant. And so it has taken me some time to sort of come to this realization that shock of all shocks, my wife was right maybe 10 years ago when she said "one of the single most important things faculty can do is build relationships with their students," and at the time brand spanking new teachers. No, it's all about how you express the information. How you get them to engage with the works.

Ian: [00:19:21] No, she was right. Being nice is really important. It's not something that I came to naturally, but that is something that I will say I started. Sort of a general philosophy that I was really concentrating on developing this past semester that I think ramified, it sort of echoed through my classes in a capacity that even when students failed my courses, they didn't give me dirty looks in the hall anymore, which again being so small it's kind of hard to hide from professors you didn't do well in. And vice versa, it's hard to hide from students that didn't do well in your courses.

Ian: [00:20:01] So maintaining a positive relationship with these students was really important to me. I was kind of struggling with how you go about that. And I think just this idea of acknowledging that their lives are incredibly complicated, more so than mine was when I was a student, more so than I can imagine they are. And so just giving the benefit of the doubt when things kind of go sideways.

Ian: [00:20:34] It's hard. It's very hard for me. If an assignment doesn't get turned in on time, well you miss the deadline and that's very unfortunate. But having some systems in place that allow for allow for something like that is definitely something I think I can be better at and something that I am making great panes to improve on.

Bonni: [00:21:00] If I would have tried to predict that that would be a theme early on, I never could have done it. I remember Jesse Stommel was on one of the episodes, I think before Episode 20, I don't remember exactly which one but I'll look it up and put it in the show notes.

Bonni: [00:21:14] But it was about to do with Twitter. And if I were to go back and measure I think at least 20-30 percent of that episode is about kindness. And then it also got echoed with an episode with Kevin Gannon another person who came on to talk about respecting our students. And of course, respect and kindness are very closely tied with one another. And I was just going back probably two or three weeks ago and looking at an old syllabus. And reading the language, I thought "I sound like a jerk. I toally sound like a jerk." Like who wants to take a class- And it's, I mean, we do need to be as you said earlier, Ian, we need to be clear about our expectations. But we don't need to do it in such a punitive, negative way.

Bonni: [00:22:02] Our syllabus could be an invitation. It could be about possibility. It could be about curiosity. And too many times, in my instance, as I look back, I've allowed myself to be influenced by we've got to lay down all the rules, and

we've got to make sure that if something comes up in the middle of the semester that we have the legal document to back us up for why X or Y happened.

Bonni: [00:22:26] I think like I don't want to be super legalistic person. I do want to be a person whose expectations are clear, and transparent, and relevant, and meaningful. But I don't want to be a jerk. And I don't want to be legalistic. And for me, I think as long as I've been writing syllabi, I really think that I still have some work to do there to create more of that invitation and sense of curiosity.

Bonni: [00:22:51] Ideally, it might be one of the first things that students read and even if they don't necessarily read the syllabus first- in our learning management system, the actual document of the syllabus can become less important. I can put a little intro video up there. I like to do those class, it's like a movie trailer but instead it is a class trailer. And I posted a little note about some that I built on just doing a little simple Apple templates that were inside of the one that comes with a Mac, the movie editing software. And there is the equivalent for that on Windows. You are just inviting them to an experience to be engaged, to have their experience that they're bringing, their learning into the classroom really matter in their context. That's really fun to hear you reflect a little bit on that.

Bonni: [00:23:33] Is there any other episodes or any other learnings that you want to mention before we go on to the recommendation segment?

Ian: [00:23:40] I had forgotten until you started talking about teaching with Twitter and Kevin Gannon's piece. Both of those men I now follow on Twitter as well. Professor Gannon's concept of "punching up," I really liked. Don't blame the students when things go wrong. If there's something wrong with the system, work to change the system. And encourage students to do the same.

Ian: [00:24:01] And then this this idea of you can be in support of the students and you can be nice to the students while also being very angry when things don't go right. And I don't know if Jesse Stommel would appreciate me referring to anger as an emotion there, but his responses to when some of these articles that have come out. And so I'm following him on Twitter as well now. And some of his statements when people come out and blame millennials for when things go wrong. He's angry about it. But he's angry about it in support of the students. And sort of keeping them in the forefront is definitely something that has carried through for me as a theme through listening to the entire collection of Teaching in Higher Ed. And yes, absolutely. Long story short, I think it's an excellent thing that carries forward as well.

Bonni: [00:24:55] Yeah your use of anger there. It feels like righteous anger. Not self-righteous, but actually righteous anger that that is well placed when we don't serve our students as well as we could.

Ian: [00:25:08] And also your statement about the syllabus. It's funny that you mention that because I am finishing up, I'm in the last chapter of the Excellent Teachers Series, Designing a Motivational Syllabus by Christine Harrington and Melissa Thomas. I don't know if you've seen those, but I think in the introduction she talks about a great deal of what you just said about the syllabus can very often come across as a legal document that's not very supportive of the students, not very motivational. It comes across like a contract. And it's really more about making your expectations clear. So I find that very apropos. I'm almost done with that book right now.

Bonni: [00:25:47] I'm so glad that you mentioned it because I have not heard of it. And I think I'm going to have to be putting that on my Amazon wish list when were done with this conversation. It sounds like one that would really be useful to me because that is what I would want to do. I want it to be motivational.

Bonni: [00:26:02] Well this is the point in the show where we get to give our recommendations. And my recommendation today has to do with music. And it is a artist who I was not familiar with, and then all of a sudden from various things from my late night show which I always forget the name of that I was watching and then also Dave Pell- Dave Pell is a news curator and he has a daily email called Next Draft. I'll put a link in the show notes so people can find it. But anyway, he also mentioned this artist. It's Brandi Carlile.

Bonni: [00:26:38] Maybe many of you have heard of her, but she was new to me. What I love about the video that I'll link to in the show notes is that it's not just her, but that she's actually taking on a mentoring role because she found this young man who's such a gifted musician in his own right and has him come and perform with her on the song called The Joke and I'll just play a little bit of it as a little bit of a teaser and then encourage everyone to go click the link that I'll have in the recommendations part of the show.

The Joke: [00:27:48] "The Joke, Brandi Carlile and Benicio Bryant plays*.

Bonni: [00:27:48] So who we were hearing there in that clip was actually not Brandi Carlile, that was Benicio Bryant. And she invited him to perform with her on Late Night with Seth Meyers. And oh my gosh, what a beautiful duet. It's

actually a song that tells two different stories of two different people and oh, just absolutely gorgeous lyrics. So meaningful. And he's such a brilliant singer and so is she, so I recommend people go listen to The Joke with Brandi Carlile with Benicio Bryant. And they're performing in this particular clip on Late Night with Seth Meyers.

Bonni: [00:28:27] And I also wanted to mention that on another episode, number 167 with Maria Erb and Ben Khan, they both talked about a service called Genius, or a website called Genius. And in that particular context, it was one of their professors who teaches religion talking about the connection between lyrics from Kendrick Lamar and I believe it was some of the Psalms and helping their students to draw from music that's very familiar to them to scripture that may or may not be as familiar to them and just bringing in those connections. And so in this case, I did find the lyrics so powerful to the song The Joke that I just played a small clip of. And it was so fun to be able to go on Genius to read a little bit more about the story behind the song.

Bonni: [00:29:23] And I just loved that I can do that and I love that. Thanks to Maria and Ben I actually know what Genius is now. And if I have songs I want to learn a little bit more about that that's one of the possible ways I could find them. So that was really fun and thanks to both of them for introducing me to that site.

Bonni: [00:29:37] And Ian, I'm going to pass it over to you now for your recommendations.

Ian: [00:29:40] I actually have three because I'm a glutton. I would like to begin with my own music recommendation. And this was a bit of soul searching for me because you, on several episodes ago, I believe it was frictionless systems, you took a Twitter recommendation that I provided for the band Delta Rae.

Bonni: [00:29:58] So good.

Ian: [00:30:00] They've got a new album coming out relatively soon. I'm really excited about it. But in the meantime, before that album comes out, I have been listening to the Fast Romantics and they have the single Julia, which is just a total ear worm. You will be humming it for days. It's sort of Elvis Costello-y. I love it. The whole album is great. The second song on the album is called This is Why We Fight. And my son, who's 3, loves it. As soon as we're in the car, he starts shouting "play the Why We Fight Song! Play the Why We Fight Song!" So if you need something just catchy then definitely check Fast Romantics.

Ian: [00:30:41] The second one is born out of a little bit of bitterness. And that is to recommend Brenau University. I know next to nothing about them except that their academic leadership is amazing. They have Jim Eck and Emily Zank, who recently used to work for Louisburg College and were some of the best people for me to work for and with. And I am incredibly bitter that they are no longer with us, but I wish them all the best. And I know they're going to be awesome wherever they go. But if you have the opportunity to work there and with them, you're in for a treat.

Bonni: [00:31:18] I have people that too that you've worked with and you're like "it will never be the same," it's so sad when they go.

Ian: [00:31:23] I know. It really won't. But the third one is sort of a general philosophy of life. And that is to get a librarian in your life. My wife is a librarian. You don't actually have to marry the librarian that you want. I did. It works for me. But, it has made my life so wonderful to simply say "hey I wonder what this thing is." And because she's a librarian, she cannot help but find the answer.

Ian: [00:31:54] But on top of that, she's a brilliant educator. And it has been my experience that most librarians can find you anything that you are after, least of all good teaching strategies, especially the academic ones. They know how to support students because they've been supporting students for years. And so having a librarian in your life, having somebody who is adapt at finding information, analyzing and interpreting information, and helping you determine what's best for your students is just a wonderful thing. Having a partner in that creative process is absolutely wonderful. I'm also a partner- I do a lot of stuff with the librarians that Louisburg College. I am co-faculty sponsor for the game club with the library in their, Ms Mikos. We Have a lot of fun there. So yeah, just any librarian will do.

Bonni: [00:32:55] Librarians are amazing. And recently on Twitter- I don't know if this originated on Twitter, but there was someone who said that we should just get rid of all libraries and then just replace them with Amazon. And oh did the bristles go up on Twitter. And all of librarians plus people who love librarians, which is most of us, just came out fighting for librarians. Are you kidding me? And I think the consensus was yeah, you shouldn't have made that suggestion and librarians are amazing and so are libraries.

Ian: [00:33:31] Well and the misconception that all a librarian does is check books in and out is incredibly frustrating. I mean that's like saying all teachers do

are put checks or minuses on papers. It's a very small piece of the work that they do. And I think I recently saw something along the lines of the rate at which information is growing- I don't remember the the number, but it's just this astronomical growth where it used to take something like 10 years for information to double. And now it's it's doubling in like seconds. And with all of that stuff out there, why wouldn't you want somebody who's really good at finding what you need out of all of the meretricious crap that's out there?

Bonni: [00:34:21] Absolutely. Well Ian Wolf, it has been so fun having you on the show. I'm so honored that you would have taken all that time to go through every single episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm so glad to be in community with you, not just because of music recommendations, although that is a bonus, but also I really believe the work that we are doing is in solidarity with each other. I'm just glad to be in this good work with you just of just constantly wrestling and to become better at what we do.

Ian: [00:34:50] It has been my absolute pleasure. Thank you.

Bonni: [00:34:55] Thanks once again to Ian Wolf for joining me on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. If you'd like to look at the show notes for this episode, you can go to teachinginhighered.com/222.

Bonni: [00:35:10] And if you want to not have to remember every time to go look up at the show notes and get the links to the music we recommended, the Genius website with the lyrics information, the music that Ian recommended, all of the importance of getting a library in your life, you can subscribe to the weekly email. That will mean that you'll get an email just one time a week in your inbox with the show notes and also an article accompanying it about either teaching or productivity. Thanks so much for listening. We've got some great guests coming up and I'll look forward to seeing you next time.

Teaching in Higher Ed transcripts are created using a combination of an automated transcription service and human beings. This text likely will not represent the precise, word-for-word conversation that was had. The accuracy of the transcripts will vary. The authoritative record of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcasts is contained in the audio file.