Professors Talk Pedagogy

Featuring Helen Harris

Episode 1

Podcast transcription

Christopher Richmann: Welcome to professors talk pedagogy, a podcast from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richmann.

Professors Talk Pedagogy presents discussions with great professors about pedagogy, curriculum and learning in order to propel the virtuous cycle of teaching. As we frankly and critically investigate our teaching, we open new lines of inquiry. We engage in conversation with colleagues and we attune to students' experiences. All of which not only improves our teaching, but enriches and motivates ongoing investigation. And so the cycle continues.

Today our guest is Dr. Helen Harris, Associate Professor in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, and an experienced online instructor. Dr. Harris is the former chair of Baylor's Teaching and Learning and Technology Committee, a 2011 recipient of failures Outstanding Faculty Award, and a 2012-13 Baylor Faculty Fellow. A year-long fellowship centered on exploration and experimentation in teaching practice in a cohort with other recognized outstanding teachers. Dr. Harris also teaches the Higher Educational Teaching and Learning in Social Work Teaching Practicum for graduate students. We are delighted to have her on the show to discuss community in online learning.

CR: You want to just get us up to speed on briefly how long you've been at Baylor, in what capacity, and then also what your experience with online teaching is?

Helen Harris: Sure. Happy to do that. So, I'm, I'm older than dirt and have been at Baylor now 23 years. I came after about a 25-year clinical practice as a social worker, even came to direct field programming and teach and since then have turned myself into a researcher teacher; so, been here a long time. My favorite thing to do is teach. I absolutely love students and time with students and the opportunity to see students grow and have "aha" moments and launch their own careers. The online environment is, is one that I, that I've grown increasingly to appreciate for its diversity and its opportunity, and the opportunities that students have to have access to what we have to provide at Baylor because of the online environment. I've been teaching a couple of online PHD courses for the last, I don't know, six or nine years, teaching how to teach online and teaching a teaching practicum. And then I've had some opportunity to teach some practice course material online, do a lot of "to-you" videos around grief and loss and mourning and mourning theory, trauma, loss and

mourning and some of those courses as well. So, kind of an array of online experiences with undergrads, grads, and PhD students.

CR: When you first started teaching online, was there anything in particular that you found really challenging or just surprising that you had no idea you ought to have prepared for something like this?

HH: Yeah, well, I think always there's the management of the technology. Technology is wonderful when it works and very challenging when it doesn't. And particularly if it doesn't for a particular student who's trying to get in, keeps getting kicked off, or whatever, to try and manage helping that student while we keep going with class, I think, I think that can be a challenge, whether sometimes now you wouldn't think that that impacts online, but it does, it affects broad band width and receptivity and all those things. I think the other thing is I was concerned about being able to connect with students online. There's a, there's a different milieu and environment when you're in physical space with people. But I think there are really approaches and ways to manage that and to, to connect with students. And I think it's really on us to figure those out and teach other about that and to do that, to do that important work. Because without a connection with the students, I think it can be really boring for students and I think we miss out on the interaction with the students that makes teaching so rich.

CR: Yeah, the way that I see that talked about from experienced teachers and in the literature too is there's so much community that happens sort of automatically—maybe it's not the right word—but you know, we sort of take for granted in the face-to-face setting that there's going to be all those affordances for speaking with students before and after class and running into them and answering questions when, when they arise. And all those things have to be intentionally made part of the online course. None of that happens just by, just by happenstance—like it seems to a little bit more in face-to-face.

HH: Now I think I think you're exactly right. I do think that when one thing I've changed since my beginning time teaching online is that I schedule my online course, my time, to begin earlier than when the when that start of the class is, and I intentionally stay later. I want to be in this environment just as I would be in a physical classroom early, as students pop in or pop on early, or stay late to ask a question or whatever. I think that's really important to do. The additional challenges of privacy and confidentiality are, are a little more challenging where students in a classroom will step back because they know another student is talking to you; when we're online like this, we can't do that.

CR: Yeah.

HH: But we can say, hey, you know, I'm going to be having virtual office hours this evening from six to ten. Do you want to schedule a period of time during that time for us to chat? And I, I think you're right, that intentionality is the answer.

CR: Yeah. I was thinking when you mentioned that about technology too, that that's, that's something that, for those who are switching or doing more online teaching now because of the pandemic, that's a paradigm shift. I recently looked at a faculty member's—I'll keep it anonymous— a faculty member's syllabus who is asking for some, some just kind of a review, because it's the first time he had taught online. And he had a line in there about, you know, "I'm happy to help you with the course related content questions; if you have tech questions, here's the Help Desk." And he just put in just put it in like that. And I tried to just gently nudge him towards, you know, students are going to, our students want to be able to come to you. And so, when you were teaching online, I think we do have a certain responsibility to be, you know, we're not going to be the gurus and all the technology, but at least a first stop and a helpful, you know, I think helps with that too. Because if students have had other questions in a face-to-face class, they'd come to you first too.

HH: Well that's, that's right. And Helpdesk has hours that might not cover those evening classes are some of the non-traditional times that we're meeting with students online. And I think, I think it makes sense for us to be accessible in a whole different way.

CR: Yeah, yeah. So, when you're actually doing, doing the teaching--whether that's synchronous or asynchronous--what are you, what are you intentionally doing to model the community that you hope to be forming?

HH: Now, that's a great question. I personally prefer at least 50% synchronous time with students. Now that might be with the whole class or it might be synchronous time with smaller groups of students, but times when we're actually looking at each other and in real time interacting. But I think, I think some of the methods for connecting with students work asynchronously as well. And I think for me that starts with, first of all, thinking through carefully. It's a skill that I call "tuning in." Thinking about the course, how it fits with the student's educational plan. What courses have come before? What courses build on this course? What's the material that they particularly need? For example, social work students are doing a practice course with me. What do they really need in order to be successful in their internships? So, so tuning into the course content and the course delivery methods to facilitate the students being able to build knowledge and connect, connect with, with that information. But beyond, beyond the sort of technical and content pieces. There's, there's uh-- you know, the importance of preparatory empathy, not just connecting with students to material, but connecting with students *personally*. And thinking about what circumstances are going on for them. If I'm teaching a course that primarily is people who are full-time in practice, and so they take

their coursework in the evenings, and they've got families and there are lots of things going on in the world that are disruptive and concerning at a particular time; or they're in a state where a hurricane is threatening or, you know, there's been terrible weather, you know, the days just before the course— I want to, I want to use some preparatory empathy to think about what that might mean for students, what challenges they might be dealing with and then not, not change the requirements of a course, but be sensitive to how I connect with what the students are experiencing and what's reasonable for them to do and be able to adjust the course to, to help manage those, those circumstances. Not just *for* them, but particularly *with* them.

CR: Yeah.

HH: Yeah. And I think I also want to think about each time I meet with students in class, whether it synchronous or asynchronous, if I'm not meeting with them, but I'm setting up some kind of assignment that that they're going to do asynchronously and then report on, that, that I have been thoughtful about beginnings, and middles, and endings. So, what's the purpose and point of the assignment? What are the objectives that we're hoping to accomplish? How does that, how does that get started? What am I hoping that they'll learn and develop? And then in terms of endings, what can they summarize and apply at the, at the end of that assignment or that class session? So how do we then wrap it up at the end in a way that ties of bow on it helps them connect it to what happens next?

CR: Yeah. Do you feel that you have any trouble communicating your personality through online learning and how do you work around that, or work through that?

HH: That's such a great question. You know I have a reputation on-campus for residential courses of having a candy basket, which I take to three-hour afternoon classes, because my experience is that about an hour after an afternoon class start, students are starting to have their blood sugar drop. And so, I put apples and oranges on one side of the basket and chocolate, chocolate and Skittles or something on the other side of the basket and trying out some snacks for them. Well you can't do that?

CR: Yeah.

HH: Online. Right. But I can be sensitive to the same kinds of issues online and provide breaks, suggests to people whether it's okay for them to eat during class online, how distracting that might be. Contract with the class for what works for the class. And so to be thoughtful about the same

kinds of issues that come up in residential courses, even if I don't take exactly the same approach in helping to manage those,

CR: right. That's good. Yeah.

HH: Yeah. I'm sorry, I interrupted you. I've got a PhD course, and I used to on the last day of class, make brownies for classes and we can't do that online store. I remember saying well, you know, normally if we were in physical space together, I'd be serving you brownies, these Homemade Harris Brownies. But let me encourage you all to make your own. You know, it's not the same. I did email—no, I didn't email—I snail mailed brownies to every student in one class one semester, and I discovered that that was a terrible idea.

CR: Not in the Texas heat, right.

HH: Well the brownies in Texas got there and two days, but the brownies in California and New York City took six weeks for them to get there. I think they were bricks.

CR: *laughter* Right. Yeah. Yeah. But that's the kind of thing I was thinking about, the same thing today. Well I've got a little candy jar on my desk and when students come to office hours, you know, but we're not going to have that that kind of interaction with them. So maybe you, maybe you send them a little care package or something like that at midterms. Like, like your, your brownies. That's a good idea. As long as they're close enough; you know and chocolate melts in Texas, and you have to be careful of that too.

HH: That's exactly right.

CR: Well, when it comes to the learning activities that you, that you establish for your courses—how do you see those working into the community aspect of your online courses?

HH: Yeah. I mean, I've had to be more creative about that. And I, and I think also it's, it's made me interact more with colleagues who have been teaching online, not just at Baylor but across the country to say, "how are you handling this particular method of teaching?" So, in clinical practice, having therapy sessions and practice sessions and practicing skills is really important. How do you do that with two people interacting across corners of the screen? Well, it really doesn't work. So, but, but I discovered that I can set up other rooms and I can set up other times where there's a

threesome of students—so a client, an interviewer practitioner and an observer—and then, and then me, and then I can chat with the person who's doing the therapy and send them chat notes—"Be sure and ask this," or "I'm noticing this." And they look at the chat notes and then they kind of have a prompt for what skill they might use next or what, you know, what they might try instead. And in those, and those things work. Is it exactly like if we were in the classroom together? No, but we're in the classroom together, we're just in a different space. And, and I think, I think the more we learn about what works—partly I hope as, as faculty, as teachers and researchers that we'll think more about the practice of pedagogy and the evaluation of the practices of pedagogy. So what are objectives? How will we measure whether and to what extent we've met them? And then let's do that work intentionally. And I think that's how we get better. And that's how we're able to communicate with one another. Here's some things that, that worked in this way, here's some challenges around that, and, you know, you might get some publications that come out of that as well.

CR: Yeah, we are all learning a lot and we should be sharing what we're learning with each other.

HH: Exactly

CR: When we were when we were talking last week, I remember you saying something about sort of the end of the, end of the course, kind of collaborative work. Can tell us a little bit about that?

HH: Yeah, I, you know, I think endings, I mentioned before beginnings, middles and endings are really important. Endings of courses really matter--how we terminate, the importance of summarizing the learning we've done together, generalizing that learning to other settings, and then identifying what students next steps are in learning and applying the knowledge that they've gained or the experiences that they've gained--really matter. And then terminating with one another--a way to say to other students in the class, "this is what I've learned from you; this is what maybe my, my hopes for you are as you move forward"--and having good closure, particularly in social work courses really, really makes a lot of sense. So, some of the things that I've done in residential classes don't work, don't work online. So, I need to be creative and think about what will, what will work online to be able to replicate the experience. And I think that means starting with what's, what's the objective, what's my point in closure, and then how can I do that given the tools that I have available to me here? And my experience is, it works; that students are able, whether we're using a discussion board where they interact with one another, or whether they're identifying—now I'm thinking about an undergraduate course where I had students identify a color that seemed representative of each of the other people, the 12-15 people in a classroom, and why they chose that color for that person. And what they ended up doing was identifying strengths that were associated with that, with each person in a classroom. That, that they operationalized by, by saying, well, this, this person is true blue, they are really gung-ho for growth, so green for growth or, or whatever. And those are kind of sort of trite expressions. They were much more creative and had much more depth

than that. But, but it's I think it's on me to provide for them the venue and the opportunity to do that work rather than saying, "oh, it's just too hard, so I'm not going to do it."

CR: That's good. That's good. And I like that, that you are, on one hand, you're thinking about how might I translate the things that I do in face-to-face into the online realm. But also realizing there's not, there's not usually a one-to-one. There's got to be actually some translation there. And maybe you, you can't do something that, that you used to do in a face-to-face course. On the other hand, I like that you're, that you're also thinking through how it's related to my discipline. You're thinking about your, your *specific* learning objectives and how those tie into the, to the group building that you do too.

HH: I think also one thing I, I started this adventure thinking, "There's so much we're going to lose by not being in physical space together. How do I kind of make up for that?" What I've discovered is, there are also things you gain that were never possible or, or I would never have thought about in the residential environments. So for, for example, trauma loss in mourning course--one of the things we do is make a funeral home visit during the course as, as a group. And that's a, it's a powerful experience. But when I ask students who are online to each take a virtual tour of different funeral home or a different cemetery, and then come together and talk about that, then actually, you know, you have people that talk about their, their family cemetery and people who talk about the community cemetery and people would talk about the Jewish cemetery or the east Waco cemetery; and, and it's a much richer conversation. I could have thought about that in, in the residential classroom setting, but I, but I didn't. And so, this has also been an opportunity for me to think more broadly and think bigger.

CR: Yeah, that's good. Well, I can't let you go without asking you about T-Shirt day. You mentioned t-shirt day when we talked last time.

HH:. Yeah. I mean, sometimes it's important to try and figure out fun things too. Particularly when things are kind of lagging in the course a little bit or toward the end of a course, and people are tired. So, I had a course recently where I invited everybody for the last day of class to wear one of their favorite t-shirts with some favorite message on it. And so, then they would stand up and show their T-shirt and talk a little bit about it. I have a colleague who had special hat day, and you know, some people were like a cap or a Stetson, or several of the ladies in the class were like big church Sunday hats.

CR: Yeah.

HH: And it just something that helps show people's personality and a chance to interact in a little different way with one another. If you can connect it to course content, that's even better, but everything doesn't have to connect.

CR: Yeah, I think what you're getting that there is, at least in part, self-expression. You know, when, when we're, when we're in a traditional classroom, physically, physically sharing the space, each of us, we have our own set of tools that we use to sort of tell the world here I am, you know, the way we walk, the way we talk, the clothes that we wear. And a lot of that is either muted or maybe just nonexistent, unless you do some intentional work with that and give the students the sort of permission to do that.

HH: Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, being intentional about speaking what the unwritten rules are, you know, "is it okay if, you know--I mean, I don't have small children at home anymore, but part of my life teaching, I had small children at home. If my child were to come in and want to ask me a question because they're on their way to bed and I'm teaching, still teaching at 8:30 at night or whatever--Is that OK? Or if my dog barks or if my cat meows or whatever. And you know, there needs to be, there need to be ways that students can say, "This is who I am," and be heard and seen. And I don't think those need to detract from the purpose, the academic purpose of a, of the course. But I think they can actually enhance the interaction that potentiates people's engagement with the academic purpose of the course.

CR: Yeah, that's fantastic. Well, anything that you might want to add that we didn't get a chance to touch on here?

HH: No, I just I really appreciate the work the ATL is doing to provide resources for folks. And I would encourage everybody to consider what's possible rather than be focused on what's not. Because this is a great adventure.

CR: Well said; and a good way to wrap it up too. Alright, thank you.

Our thanks again to Dr. Helen Harris for speaking with us today. If you'd like more perspectives and tips about forming community and online classes, the ATL has produced a video on this topic featuring Dr. Harris's social work colleagues, as well as a teaching guide on socialization in online learning. Both of which you'll find in today's show notes. That's our show. Join us next time for Professors Talk Pedagogy.