

**[00:00:01] Bonni:** Today on episode number 320 of the *Teaching in Higher Ed* Podcast, Jesse Stommel is back this time to talk about how to be together in learning online.

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**[00:00:13] Production Credit:** Produced by innovate learning, maximizing human potential.

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**[00:00:22] Bonni:** Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak. 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.

I'm grateful to be welcoming back to the show today, Jesse Stommel. He's a digital learning fellow and senior lecturer of digital studies at University of Mary Washington. He's also the co-founder of Digital Pedagogy Lab, which is actually happening if you're listening to this episode when it airs and Hybrid Pedagogy, the journal of critical digital pedagogy. He has a PhD from the University of Colorado Boulder. He is co-author of *An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*, and also has a new book coming out a collection *Critical Digital Pedagogy*.

Jesse Welcome back to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**[00:01:32] Jesse:** It's good to talk to you again, Bonni.

**[00:01:34] Bonni:** Before I titled this episode, which is to say never because I have yet to title this episode [chuckles]. I saw a tweet of yours and I realized, of course, I probably already could have told you this, but that the title for today's episode will not contain the word resilience in it. You have a whole list of words that you would prefer not to hear for some time. Would you mind reading us your list of words?

**[00:02:00] Jesse:** Yes. I've been reading so much over the last few months. I've been on so many different shows like this one and I've been asked questions. I love everyone who's asked me these questions, and I recognize where these words come from, and I recognize where the need to say them comes from. I certainly don't demonize anyone who uses these words. I've heard these words so much that it's forced me to think about what's underlying these words? The words that I put, I said, words I'd prefer never to hear again after the first half of this year.

The word pivot, the word resilience, the word unprecedented, continuity, silver lining, new normal, re-opening, socially distanced hair cut, liability waiver, and Zoom. I'll just take one for example, like the word silver lining. I will say that almost every podcast that I've been on over the last three months has asked me some version of the question, "What's the silver lining in this," or "What's the opportunity?"

My response has been some version of not to push back on the person asking because we feel like we need that. We need some moment of hope. I believe there is actually something different between a silver lining and hope or an opportunity and hope. What this is right now is it's an opportunity for people to die. When people ask that question, I have to be really honest. That's what we're facing. There isn't a silver lining, there isn't an opportunity.

We can still have hope and we can still have as Paulo Freire II, or bell hooks writes, a critical hope. I don't think we can talk about this moment as being an opportunity when you look around and you see people dying, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people dying. This is not a moment of opportunity. That's what I feel beating under the surface of these words is this desire to have something like a new

normal. We don't have a new normal, we have a new catastrophe. We have a new catastrophe each day.

I think it's really important for us to pause as human beings, and look at the words we're using and ask ourselves, "What's actually going on?" We're using these words because we have to grasp at anything that helps us get up every morning. It is important for us to inspect and interrogate the words we're using and the kinds of way that we're thinking about our approach to all of this. It's totally fine. I will not throw anything at you if you use the word resilience in your title for this.

In fact, resilience was one of those words that a bunch of people jumped back when I tweeted this and said, "I've got to ... the word resilience." Resilience is a great word. The issue that I have with it, is that resilience comes from a place of privilege. There are certain people who in a moment like this are poised to be resilient. To imagine that we can valorize our own resilience is to say, I can look at myself and say, "Look at all of the amazingness that I brought into this pandemic, that is allowing me to be resilient within it. It's better for us to look around and say, "Who is struggling and how can we help them?"

**[00:05:06] Bonni:** One of my favorite memoirs is titled, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. She actually teaches theology at Princeton, I believe if memory serves. I'll put a link in the show notes for anyone who's interested. Of course, that's something that people who are of, at least as far as I know, a Christian faith might try to do that. I think the intent, they think is to be kind, but actually what it is to protect one's self from that feeling of discomfort of what it's like to truly meet someone and be fully present for them in their pain.

As I look through this list of words, I see it as words that we use in similar ways to try to protect ourselves from having the real conversation and really naming things. I have a colleague I spoke with yesterday and she had a miserable experience that I won't get too specific about, but having to do with promotion and tenure, et cetera so I don't get too specific here. I have a miserable story that I have not told on the podcast [chuckles] for what might be obvious reasons but was a pretty miserable experience for my own.

This is 10 years ago or more related to promotion and tenure. Someone might say to me, [laughs] "Oh, look at that silver lining that you have from that absolutely horrible experience." I did find it better talking to other people, and having a sense of normalcy to go, "Oh, I didn't have to experience that humiliation of that this is only ever happened to me," and that shame that came from that experience.

The silver lining, I take away to be able to enter into that conversation with her yesterday, but I didn't want to hear about silver lining, and so much of this. I don't know if that resonates with you, Jesse, but in terms of these are so many things where we're trying to say the proper thing. I can't just get raw with you. Like you said, it's just awful. Sometimes we need someone to let us name something, to let us just name it and say, "That is just awful." Like you said, people are dying and people will die [laughs].

**[00:07:13] Jesse:** Yes. The words that I want to hear and it's not because I-- I actually I do study horror film in a past life, so catharsis is something that I find extraordinarily valuable, but that's not what's motivating this. The words I want to hear are struggle and trauma. The reason I want to hear those words is because I want us to be able to name what the experience we're actually having. I want us to be able to recognize and acknowledge that when we are making it through, or surviving, or feeling resilient, there are people around us who aren't.

At those moments, it's not like we need to drag ourselves down, it's that we need to look around and figure out, "Who can I help? With whatever energy I have left, who can I help?"

**[00:08:04] Bonni:** You can be of great help to us today, Jesse because we have some questions for you. I say we, [laughs] I normally don't write questions and I don't have written questions in front of me, but I did pose some topics that I was hoping to talk with you about today. When I say we, I'm referring to people that we both follow on social media that had really encouraged me to ask about these things.

Where I hear faculty really struggling, I see in two areas around place and around time. They both have to do with this just feeling that so many of us love of being

together in community and in a learning community. The two questions that I'll let you go on both of them is, how do we be together?

How do we have maybe not the same but a similar feeling that we can't when we're in person and then also when we're not at the same time? By that, I mean, we're not all showing up on a web conference at three o'clock, some of us might not join in that. Can I ever have that experience of being together in a learning community when I'm both not in the same space and in the same time?

**[00:09:15] Jesse:** I think in the midst of all of this when people have talked about things like continuity, when they've talked about things like let's create an equivalent experience, I almost added the word equivalency to my list. One of the things that has been valorized in that or two of the things have been valorized are the two that you mentioned, which is in-person experiences and synchronous experiences.

Those are phrases also, again, that I considered putting on that list, mostly because I feel they're things we need to interrogate and ask ourselves, "What do we mean by in person? What do we mean by face to face? What do we mean by togetherness? How do we experience that and how do we get a place of feeling that with students and with our colleagues."

I will say that I'm with you right now and I feel togetherness. I feel in-personness, I feel face-to-faceness. It isn't us being in the same room that achieves that, and the wonderful thing right now is neither of us has to wear masks, we are at a distance from one another. We are, in a sense, socially distanced, and yet also together. There are ways of creating learning experiences where you can have that, where you can still have that feeling of being with. I think that that's what we want.

We want that feeling of being with because education, it's a little different-- Learning and education, there's a little bit of a difference between them. I would say ultimately, that learning is something we're all doing all the time constantly, especially my three-year-old. Education is something that we do together. It's a social experience. It's a structure that we build so that we can do learning with

each other and not just teachers with students, but students with students, learners with learners, teachers with students, teachers, with other teachers.

We create education so that we can do this work together. I don't feel like we've lost that and I love being in a room with people. I think that there's something that you have when you're in a room with people, that is important. It's that sense of kind of high resolution, that sense of being able to see the pores in people's skin. Sometimes, I fetishize the pores in people's skins. I'm not sitting and looking at people's skin and looking at their pores.

It's about being able to see the very small and minute things that are happening, the very small non-verbals that are happening. We get some of that across a video medium, but it gets reduced extraordinarily. We have to figure out how we see that, how we pay attention to the small gestures that you make. How do I see your environment and how does your environment influence how I interact with you? It still does, but we have to learn a new language for interacting with one another when we're face-to-face but also at a distance.

You and I have the benefit of only ever having really known each other this way. We've gotten really good at feeling together at a distance, actually a little harder. I have a harder time honestly feeling present with my mother than I do with you because my interaction with my mother has been different. There's something different that I expect from that interaction.

If we talk about time, I think we fetishize this idea of synchronicity, that we would be together at the same time and that it wouldn't be possible to feel community or togetherness, unless we were interacting simultaneous. We all know, well, not necessarily all of us, maybe all of us. We all know that that's not true. There's a sense of simultaneity when we text-message one another, even if the person doesn't write us right back, even if we have to wait minutes before we see.

I remember when I used to write letters to my friends. I used to hand-write, and then I used to type letters and they would take a week to get back to me. There was a simultaneity. There was a sense in which, when I was reading that handwritten

letter, that I was sitting with that person, and in that moment, I was engaging with them.

Sean Michael Morris said an amazing thing in our office hours today. He said, "There's no such thing as asynchronous. Everything is synchronous," because in the moment, you are having a synchronous experience. I'm sitting with those words. I'm hearing that person who wrote me that letter speak to me. I think what we need to do is just recognize that those things don't go away.

It's different and we have to find ways to find them again, with certain people but what I need to do is I need to-- When I'm talking to my mom, I need to think about you Bonni, and think about how I've connected with you and say, "That's what I need to be looking for in her, I need to stop expecting that I'm going to see something else."

**[00:14:07] Bonni:** Our daughter is six years old and I only mentioned that to give anyone listening some context. A lot of times at night, we're snuggling up, and let's just say occasionally I've got the iPad in front of me [chuckles]. She might come in unexpectedly after she finishes brushing your teeth, or whatever. Last night, I had wanted to send a message to a colleague of mine, we're working through a pilot course right now.

I'm actually doing the assignments myself along with the students because it's designed to help us get ready for the fall, so, what better opportunity. I was really happy because I'd been really wrestling with revisiting the learning outcomes, and I just had this breakthrough, but it's something like nine o'clock at night and I don't want to text him. Even though I know that he doesn't go to bed that early, but it's still-- I know the right thing to do here. It's not that pressing and everything, send it over email and he can take a look whenever he wants but it was so funny.

She comes in, she says, "Mommy, who are you talking to?" "It's David." She remembers him because she's met him before. She says, "Okay. Well, you shouldn't send this over email. Email takes too long. You should send him a text message, text messages are a lot faster mommy." I just thought, "She's six," Jesse [chuckles]. She's

six and she already understands these different mediums, and different ways that you could communicate and some of the affordances of it.

I thought, "She is six." Another thing I think about my relationship with you, which has been spanning now over six years, is that I also-- I get to share in your joys, and I get to share in your sorrows as well and recently saw that your sweet cat passed away [chuckles]. Just to see the outpouring of love for you, and what that meant for her daughter. I was thinking about it was possible that was maybe her first time that she had experience of death.

**[00:15:56] Jesse:** Yes, and I'm sure I'm struggling to figure out how to work through it with her. It's complicated because she totally gets it and doesn't get it at the same time, but I'll be honest, I totally get it and don't get it at the same time. It's not something that makes sense and it was sudden. He got sick a couple of days ago and it came a little bit out of nowhere. Here's the thing, I would also say going back to connecting what you're saying, and then this to the idea of synchronicity or simultaneity.

The people who are listening to this podcast are not sitting with us right now. They don't even know that this podcast exists yet and yet, they'll listen to this and they are sitting with us and we are talking to them. I even had a conversation with my husband just before we started recording and I said, "I'm about to go into a recording of a podcast episode, and you don't have to go out of the house. Just be out of the room so that I can focus. It's totally fine if people hear Hazel."

It's interesting, I can hear her-- As you were talking and talking about our cat having recently died and her experience of it. I could hear her calling to me from the other room and maybe that got picked up in the audio but I kind of liked the idea that it would get picked up in the audio because that to me, is synchronicity, that to me a simultaneity. It's the idea that we would be inside of someone else's reality. It doesn't mean that I share everything, it doesn't necessarily mean that the people have access to every part of who I am.



It's about letting people have a glimpse, letting people see a small bit of who we are when we show up for things like this or show up to a classroom. I'll be honest, I didn't mean to tell the entire internet that my cat had died. It's not usually something that I share so in the moment, it usually takes me time to process before I share stuff like that. I'm not someone who gets a running tally on my life but the thing is, we had thought that he was going to survive, and we thought we were bringing him home.

I had told everyone that we were bringing him home and then, he suddenly died. I felt like I had to close the loop for people but that also was part of the sense of simultaneity. I had let people into my life, I had let people into my room, into my house, into what is going on for my daughter. I couldn't just leave them there without closing the loop but I don't necessarily mean that I just want to end it as though it's a story. Without acknowledging their presence and saying, "You're here, I see. You're here now, I already let you in. I can't just send you away."

**[00:18:32] Bonni:** Speaking of words that I'd prefer to never use again, or expressions, but I can't find a better one. I suspect you probably have a better one for me. Lightbulb moments [chuckles], that feeling. In fact, I had someone on, who teaches physics, and he literally has lightbulb moments with his students, where he has some sort of a thingy. That's a technical thing, I think you're following me. Then, if they're all holding hands-

**[00:18:55] Jesse:** My husband is an engineer, so he tells me all the time about thingies.

**[00:19:00] Bonni:** Good, good. Everyone in the class literally holds hands and they literally see the light bulb go on as they're learning how to make a circuit and how circuits work. At any rate, but light bulb moments, we both miss those. I think some of that could be-- Maybe they need to go away but part of it's how we measure success and then, how do people replace that or should they even try to replace that.

**[00:19:27] Jesse:** Well, that's fascinating because when you're in the room with a person, and when you're in the room with a person for a sustained period of time. You start to pay attention to all kinds of small-- Again, non-verbals, small gestures, subtle movements. You see things like epiphanies, and you see them register as a series of things. We know what an epiphany feels like and I actually-- That's the word I like epiphany, lightbulb moment epiphany.

**[00:19:52] Bonni:** I like that much better.

**[00:19:54] Jesse:** I feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck and I pause and stutter and my eyes look off to the side. There's all these subtle things that our bodies might do to register having a real epiphany. When we're in a room with each other, we see such high resolution, that we're paying attention to all of those little details.

There's a way in which one we move online, we feel a sense of loss, especially when we move suddenly online like we did in the spring, this idea of the pivot to remote learning. We feel suddenly a sense of loss because we used to be able to see that, and now we don't know how to see it. The truth is something like an epiphany is really hard to see online because it's so many small variables. How do you add up the small variables of the ones and zeros of interactions by a digital interface to add up to an epiphany?

I guess I would say that the second that we go online, what we immediately have to start doing is marrying our experience to each other. We have to start making our listening visible and start making what might be otherwise invisible visible. We have to stop describing more how we're feeling, what's happening, what's happening in our bodies, what we're seeing, what we're feeling. That's how we bridge that gap between the face-to-face and the online, is we start having to make the invisible visible, make listening visible.

**[00:21:24] Bonni:** That colleague David that I referenced earlier, it's really just a lot of he and I trying to prepare our faculty for the fall. We're getting quite close working through this together. He and I have funny debates about words and phrases too like best practices. I have told him not a big fan and warned him. Then, he tells me,

apparently, I use that phrase. [laughs] I can imagine that if you actually use the word you tell other people not to use, it's probably not-- We have a funny banter.

The word equivalent has come up a lot. I've wondered, "Should I tell David not to use that word anymore?" [laughs] Yet, I've decided that, actually, in our case, I think it might be an okay word. I looked it up because it doesn't mean the same. At least the definition that I saw would be providing the same value. It's really hard to paint this picture. As we're trying to describe that, yes, you may not have the exact identical set of affordances in asynchronous, that what you do provide are other affordances, so they might possibly add up to be similar in value.

For example, if a student were to get COVID and weren't able to engage in whether that's live in-person which some of them really want that experience, or whether that's live on a web conference, then that they could still continue with their education and have that rich feedback from you that maybe-- I don't know, I'd love to hear you talk about equivalent and should you tell David. He listens, so you could just tell him, "David, I need you to stop--"

**[00:23:07] Jesse:** Hi, Dave.

[laughter]

**[00:23:10] Jesse:** Well, interestingly, now that we're talking about words, I heard you use the word live. I've used the word live, and I've used it in the exact same way that you just used it. Immediately, I find myself going, "Gosh, that's an interesting word, to distinguish between live and what? What else is it? Is live an in-person? What's the opposite of live and in-person? Dead and far away? Is that what we're really talking about when we talk about online or we talk about remote?"

Because if we are, that's not a pivot at all. That's not an equivalence at all. It's certainly not an opportunity, it's something else. If I think about the word equivalent, I think that the issue-- I, interestingly, almost put the word equivalent on my list. The reason I didn't is because I think the nuance that we're talking about, it wouldn't really work in a list because it almost needed six tweets to talk about what I think about the word equivalence.

I think that the word equivalence has been used in some really inappropriate ways to describe, basically, the neat and tidy porting of face-to-face learning to online learning. That's just not how that works. My trouble with the word equivalence is that people make it seem easy. My also problem with the word equivalence is I think too often it means saying, too often people just mean saying.

This much more nuanced version of equivalence that you're talking about, immediately I say, "Well, gosh, now I want to the word equivalence a little bit more because if Bonni tells me that's what it actually means, let's reclaim that word and let's actually let it mean what it really means," which is to take something very different and find a way--

The words I tend to use is I tend to use words like translate. Translate has a really complicated set of connotations that I think are really useful. I don't like the word transfer, I don't like the word pivot, I don't like the word move because that's not really what it feels like. The word translate has a much deeper resonance for me that feels more accurate. Which is that these are two spaces, they're two languages, they're two cultures, and more than two.

Ultimately, when you're moving from face-to-face, when you're moving to live, when you're moving from live, when you're moving from on-ground to online, remote, asynchronous, virtual, I think what you're really talking about is you're talking about how to span a difference, and the way to span that difference, and the complexity of spanning that difference, and also what gets lost. The same thing with the word translation. Often, with translation, we're talking about what can't translate.

Those are the things that are really interesting in translation. They are the things when there's a word that does not have a corollary in another language, those are the moments where you pause and you say, "Here's what's most interesting about these languages, is the places where they just diverge and where something becomes impossible to speak."

I think that when we're talking about moving to online, or pivoting to online, or any of these words, that's all we need to talk about. We need to talk about the things that-- you used the word affordances, the affordances that just aren't possible in any other medium.

**[00:26:32] Bonni:** You and I heard from someone named Robyn Schindel. She was someone who posed a question for you on Twitter. I even asked her to expand on it. She started out by saying, "Everything I see from Jesse is so incredibly grounded, I'd love to know how to maintain that." I kept thinking that I just love you, Jesse, and I treasure the way that I've gotten to know you and I've learned so much from you, but I didn't want to take all my stuff and just pack it in her question.

I wanted to know what she meant by that because I already knew what I meant. I asked her to expand, and she did, and I just think her words are so beautiful. She did expand, she says, "Like he's thought through what's right and what's practical, and somehow makes it all come together in something that seems so common sense once he says it, but isn't common at all. This is what I want all leaders to act like." Then, her question to you, and my question to you, "How do we develop that in ourselves?"

**[00:27:37] Jesse:** Honestly, I will tell you that when I saw that on Twitter, I almost wept. I needed it. I needed it when it came for all kinds of reasons. The thing is that in moments when we're struggling, we need to hear that sort of thing. Honestly, how do we build that in ourselves by telling each other things like that? Honestly, the only reason I can keep doing the work that I do is because people who I don't even realize see me do. I feel like she encapsulated something I've tried to do my entire career in a few sentences that I could've never described myself.

She described it so wonderfully that I felt really moved. Interestingly, I felt moved to be even better at those things that she described. Well, I'll say that almost when she first said the thing about grounded, I almost jumped into the conversation, but I just thought, "I'll wait, I'll see where this goes," so I just listened, I just paused. When she said the thing about grounded, I wanted to tell her, "A lot of the time, I'm not grounded. That's something I have to work at every single day."

Then, when she described more specifically, I thought, "Oh, wow." That's why what she just said, that's why when I try hard, sometimes really, really hard to stay grounded, that's why I succeed because of what she has captured there, which is that I just want to see the world as it is. There is so much shit that we have to wade through. Even as I was building up to saying that I thought, "Do I have to have a cuss word right here?" Because I don't cuss a lot, but I thought, "Yes, I do," because, honestly, that's what it is.

There's so much shit that all of us have to wade through on a daily basis, whether it's bureaucracy, whether it's politics, whether it's optics, whatever it is at our institutions, and our jobs, and our lives that feels like it weighs us down, like it's brambled, that we have to push through. Ultimately, what I try and do as much as I possibly can is just see past that and see through that.

The interesting thing is that I think I definitely succeed. I think I am good at that, I think I'm good at seeing what's on the other side of that and then just stating really clearly what it is, but often when I'm stating it, and I'm not stating it for you. I'm not stating it for her. I'm almost stating it just to remind myself that it's there and that I can get to it. Because the truth is I still have to go through that bramble in order to get there myself. Honestly, I get scraped, I get bloodied, I get all of the things. Now I'm getting lost in this metaphor, but you know what I mean.

It's not like I live in some magical reality where it just feels like that all the time. It feels rough and hard and it doesn't feel grounded a lot of the time. It's always a place I'm trying to get to. Just go back to what I said at the start like it's being told things like that, that helped me realize that I can get there, that I can continue to persevere, that I can continue to even continue to help other people get there too. It's just so much thanks to her. It was important.

**[00:30:55] Bonni:** We watched part of Hamilton. I haven't finished it yet, but with the kids and I had read a little bit about, is this okay to have kids watch? I knew that there was some language in there. I talked to them a little bit about language, and then they're hearing language in other places too. I have a TikTok account and

mostly we just browse. They love the animal videos, but you got to be pretty quick with that finger or you're going to have your kids hear some language.

I think I heard somewhere not to tell kids that there's like bad words and good words. What I'm trying to explain is that sometimes words that people would call bad words-- I just want them to be more precise in their language. In fact, when they started watching it, our daughter says, "Oh, I heard the bad word." I said, "What word did you hear?" "Died." Well, died is a bad word, but it's precise.

That's exactly what the person was meaning. They now know the word shit. We talked about what does that literally mean, and then when might that word be appropriate to say, because it really is the precise descriptor? I might have to have them listen to you.

[laughter]

**[00:32:12] Jesse:** To me, it's about when you need both a precision in the point that you're trying to make a sort of rhetorical precision, but when you also needed an emotional precision and you need people to understand, like, this is how it feels for me. A word like brambles, which is another one that I use, that does not capture how that feels to me.

Ultimately some of those words become about how do we capture our feeling in language, and how do we capture the rhetorical point that we're making? Ultimately, I think it's really important for us to be able to convey both to one another.

**[00:32:51] Bonni:** Back to our earlier conversation, some of the words you'd prefer never to hear again after the first half of this year, that they lack preciseness that you just described. This is the point in the show where we each get to share our recommendations. For the first time ever, I'm going to share my recommendation and then ask you some questions about it. Because one of the reasons why I read it is because you had recommended it many, many moons ago.

I'd like to recommend *Teaching to Transgress*. It's been recommended more than anything else ever has been on this show. Many people that I deeply admire have read this book. I have a little bit of a confession. Why am I waiting six years to read this book? Part of it is people recommend books and sometimes I'll pick them up, and I do feel a little bit like my brain's not big enough to prop-- I answer any. I'll go like, "Oh, I'm not smart enough for this book or whatever."

As many people has recommended it, it took me a long time to get here and I found it to be, in case anybody has that feeling about it, she's cited so many places. It might seem like she would be inaccessible, but I found that to be quite the opposite, and it was really funny because one of the things that's come up on the podcast many times is something that I had never heard about before interviewing people.

Sometimes when I'm interviewing people, someone might use a word that I don't understand, and sometimes I really want to ask them about it, "Tell me more about that." One of the words that came up that always has kind of scared me is embodiment. Because when someone would say that, I knew that they were saying something very important and oftentimes very personal, but I didn't like, ... I see body, the word body is in there.

I can follow you and I don't want to take us off on this whole thing, but I have always been curious about that. Lo and behold, she writes about, it's practically an entire chapter in there. She says, "Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present and not the body." I knew right away, she's talking about this thing that I want to know more about, how interesting and she's doing it in a way I can totally understand. Then she goes even deeper.

She says, "When I first became a teacher and needed to use the restroom in the middle of class, I had no clue as to what my elders did in such situations. No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the classroom?" The first things I went to, I thought, "Oh gosh, the colleague who's passed away."



I just remember, she's on chemo and she's still coming in to teach and she's drinking 7 Up and she's so sick and she's having to leave her classroom to vomit in the bathroom. That memory sears in my heart but man, I just thought, "This is the conversation around it." I want to hear from you, Jesse, what's a memory you have in your own teaching of either being asked or being expected to teach as though only your mind was present and not your body.

**[00:36:10] Jesse:** Wow, it's a really good question. Ultimately the answer is going to sidestep your question a little bit, and it's partly to concur with bell hooks, which is to say that every teaching experience I've ever had, I'm asked to teach without my body. I think that that's a particularly an experience that marginalized folks feel every time they walk into a classroom, like they're expected to leave their bodies at the door. They can't possibly, and yet they're simultaneously expected to and so then they're in this weird conundrum.

If I think about how and where that has manifested for me, it's manifested in lots of different places. I bring a queer body into the classroom and that body has an impact on the kinds of experiences that I have in that classroom. Interestingly, it is a bit different to being a queer body into a classroom than it is to bring a black body into a classroom because I can often pass as not queer in a classroom. In some ways my embodiment is somewhat invisible in some cases in certain classrooms.

I will describe an experience that I had of not being able to leave my body at the door and that was when Hazel was born. Hazel was born and that was three, a little over three and a half years ago. Suddenly as a new parent and a new queer parent with a black daughter, my sense of myself in the world and who I was in the world was all of a sudden, extraordinarily visceral to me.

When you go from being someone who-- at least I felt like I could pass as straight in a lot of situations. I'm cis presenting male. People often misrecognized me and my husband as brothers. All of a sudden when you take those two people and you're pushing a black baby in a baby carriage, we didn't pass anymore at all and it was sudden.

All of a sudden, I had an experience of myself as embodied that I might've talked about in a theoretical way previously, but I had a really visceral sense of this body that I was bringing into a classroom. Then you add to that being a new parent and being sleep deprived and being the night dad and being the dad was waking up with the baby and going and then teaching night classes to nontraditional adult students. All of a sudden I had a different relationship to my students.

I had a relationship where I didn't get to decide whether or not I was going to divulge who I was to that group of students. I couldn't not bring that self to the classroom. I couldn't not be fully embodied in that room with students. That was after 18 years of teaching. For 18 years, my embodiment in a classroom was a choice.

I still feel privileged in a lot of ways because two gay men with a baby are charming. At least they're charming in my current cultural situation. That isn't true for all people who bring their bodies into a classroom. Yet what I did recognize is while it was fascinating to see what it's like to not have a choice, but to bring your body into a classroom.

The other thing I'll say is that we can talk about this more, maybe it's a whole other episode. I'm an abuse victim, and so I flinch when people come at me quickly. When I'm watching, I studied horror film. I study documentary film. I have to watch a lot of very visceral things on-screen with students in the room and I have a different reaction than most people do to that stuff on screen.

Probably part of the reason I study that is because I'm an abuse victim, and so working through that and experiencing catharsis alongside other peoples ... important to my healing process. Yet it means that when I'm having that experience with students, I can't not be physically present. When I'm seeing violence on a screen, I'm usually experiencing the violence. That's how it works for me. I feel it in my body when I'm seeing it and so I'm having to process that with students nearby me. That is also something that I bring to the classroom.**[00:40:39]**

Now, if you imagine the intersectional bodies that a lot of people bring, like people of color who have also experienced violence, who have experienced a history of white supremacy in their life, and you imagine the traumatized bodies that they might bring to a classroom, you imagine what it is to teach from that space. Then you add to that, what is it to imagine teaching from that space while denying the body that you have brought into that room, which is what so many of us are asked to do.

That's ultimately like to me, embodiment is when you can't not bring your full body into an environment. When bell hooks writes about it, she's acknowledging that that body is with her, whether she wants it to be or not. She's also talking about bringing your full self to a classroom, which means acknowledging and being honest about that complicated self that you bring to a classroom.

Even that I will be honest is a point of privilege, even that ability to acknowledge it, frankly. It's not something that bell hooks could do throughout her entire career. Certainly not something that I could do throughout my entire career. Let's do a whole other episode, honestly, on embodiment. It's a really rich, hard, important topic.

**[00:42:03] Bonni:** Absolutely, I would absolutely love that. I just had a vision of you and maybe we invite Sean Michael Morrison and I can ask all the-- I've got all my highlights. I'm so ready to do this. Let's absolutely do that. Let's do it. Thank you for sharing that part of your story. You were reminding me a little bit on the episode where I spoke with Jose Belsen. We spoke at the beginning about identity and this iceberg exercise that my son had gone through with his librarian at school.

You're just reminding me of the things that we can see about others' identities. Then underneath that water, all the things that we can't see and to remember that our students are coming into our classes with very rich identities, as you said, intersectional, some that we can visibly see and so many that we can not. Well, this is your turn to give your recommendation.

**[00:42:54] Jesse:** My recommendation is a little-- and I thought about this because I've done this with you several times and often recommending something that I cherish and something I love, but I really felt like it was important to recommend to people, something that I felt was vital that they read right now.

The thing that I'm going to recommend is, I'm going to recommend that for those people who are working at institutions that are reopening in the fall, or that are bringing students back to campus and fall, most of your institutions are currently either composing or have just composed a return to campus plan. What I would encourage folks to do is read every single word of that plan.

The reason I would say is that like I read every single word of the plan for my own institution and it was the sort of thing that I can imagine a lot of people reading four paragraphs of and then just sort of setting it aside. The reason I encourage people to read every word of it is because that is your institution signaling to you and the students, what it values. That is probably one of the most clear declarations that we have right now of who our institutions are, and what they want to be when they grow up, so to speak, and so read the return to campus plan.

It isn't to say, all of them will be hard to read because honestly, so many of these are PR driven, public relations, driven, marketing-driven. Institutions are trying to say, "Hey, look, we're still trying to do good." You have to read them with patience and with understanding, but you also have to read them with an eyebrow raised and recognize that someone wrote those words. Someone at your institution believes those words and those words got signed off on by many people at the institution.

I would say if your institution is not going-- has no reopening plan, if you're fully online for the fall, find another institution's reopening plan, because I feel like these reopening plans are a bellwether for what's currently happening in higher education, and honestly, in K through 12 education. I feel like us getting to know and understand what's going on in these plans helps us understand what the roadmap is for education in the United States and beyond.

**[00:45:17] Bonni:** Jesse, I'm so grateful for you, and I'm grateful for this conversation, and I can't wait for the next one.

**[00:45:23] Jesse:** Thank you so much for having me again.

**[00:45:27] Bonni:** I'm so thankful for this conversation with Jesse Stommel and I hope that you are too. If you'd like to connect with either of us on Twitter, he is over at Twitter at Jessifer, J-E-S-S-I-F-E-R, and I'm over there at B-O-N-N-I208. We'd love to be connected with you and also want to encourage you to go over to the show notes@teachinginhighered.com/320.

There'll be a link to Jesse's new book along with all of his coauthors and that is *Critical Digital Pedagogy*. I have a link to that in the show notes. I hope you'll check that out, and I'm sure we'll all be learning a lot about what's happening at the Digital Pedagogy Lab as well. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll see you next time on *Teaching in Higher Ed*. [music]

[music]

**[00:46:21] [END OF AUDIO]**

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