

Bonni [00:00:00] Today's guest, Dr. McClain Watson advocates for the importance of our students being able to quote convince people in the professional world that they: one, know what they're doing, two, can be trusted, and three, are interesting to be around on today's episode professional online portfolios.

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Bonni [00:00:33] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni [00:01:01] Today I welcome to the show Dr. McClain Watson and I was connected with him because he commented on a blog post that I wrote called Going Public with Our Learning. And in that post I described just how inspired I was by Thia Wolf on Episode 101 as she shared about public sphere pedagogy.

Bonni [00:01:26] And McLean wrote that he was also inspired by the episode and thought really though that it was only the beginning of the conversation. I couldn't have agreed more. And I'm excited that he's here today to talk to us about one of his public facing projects at the University of Texas Dallas and that is professional online portfolios.

Bonni [00:01:49] Let me tell you a little bit about McLean before I welcome him to the show though. He is a director of Business Communication programs for the Naveen Jindal School of Management at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is also a Clinical Associate Professor and has a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in Communication Studies. His dissertation was called Biology Behavior Betterment: Stimulating the Plastic Brain in 2016. The project he's going to be sharing with us today, was selected as one of the AACSB Innovations that Inspire, an initiative to

highlight ways that business schools are changing the face of management education. And in 2015 he won the President's Outstanding Teaching Award at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Bonni [00:02:43] McClain, Welcome to teaching in higher ed.

McClain [00:02:46] Thanks for having me.

Bonni [00:02:47] I was so glad that you commented on that episode and were so positive in terms of being inspired by it but also that it was just the beginning of the conversation that I was excited to get to talk a little bit to you about your project but before we get to that I'm curious I just read your bio I read some about your degrees that you have earned.

Bonni [00:03:05] I read about your positions there your roles at the University of Texas at Dallas. But what is not listed in your bio that something that might be important for us to know about you as a person to kind of around all of that out.

McClain [00:03:18] Well I don't I don't know if he mentioned that but I'm not really a business school person that didn't come through a school like that. I never took a business class. I have went to school for history in rhetoric and communication.

McClain [00:03:33] But then like a lot of humanities PHD graduates after finishing, You know I had a hard time finding full time you know tenure track positions and so did a couple of visiting positions for a couple of years and then moved down to Texas and there was a position open at UT Dallas that was to create a business communication course and it was you know somewhat tangential to my field and obviously not what I went to graduate school to do but it was an interesting opportunity.

McClain [00:04:07] And that was back in '07 and so being kind of a humanities guy in a business school context was you know interesting culturally and kind of from a sociological perspective but I've been there almost nine years now and I'm just really passionate about helping young people to make the most of their education and to help them kind of begin the transition from being a student to being not a student after they graduate.

McClain [00:04:36] And you know a business school is a great place to facilitate that transition. And it's a really great time to be a communication person in a

business school context. That's a little bit about kind of my changing academic perspectives.

Bonni [00:04:53] I did not realize that even though I had read over it. But I think maybe why I didn't realize it so much is because that's very similar to my own way of coming into teaching in a business school. I had initially my undergrad was in social sciences and that kind of went the route of unexpectedly not feeling like I could get my teaching credential for somethings that were going on in my family at the time.

Bonni [00:05:17] And went into working doing computer training right out of teaching and or right out of school initially which was of course quite different than teaching the high school which was kind of my dream at the time to have done so we have more in common than I first realized you had teaching in the business. We're kind of feeling a little bit like an outsider but maybe in a good way.

McClain [00:05:37] Well yeah I think so you know for for me it was in those visiting positions that I mentioned it was it was difficult for me kind of to explain to students in a speech class for example or rhetoric class kind of why this stuff mattered to them and to really you know explain not only why they had to should care about the course.

McClain [00:05:59] But why this should kind of get excited about it you know the argument really from my standpoint was that this was learning these things was going to help you to become kind of a more engaged citizen.

McClain [00:06:11] And I'm sure it was just a failure of imagination on my part but that was really all I had from a rhetorical standpoint in the classroom. And I just had a hard time getting students to buy it. So moving into a business school context you know these students are much more engaged.

McClain [00:06:28] And my kind of the the arguments I could make for why they should care. You know ballooned because it was the context where students you know were in school in order to get satisfying work and were in school because they knew that this stuff mattered and that they were approaching school kind of with that you know some might say transactional perspective but it was really a skill development perspective.

McClain [00:06:56] And I just found a much kind of more fertile ground for arguments for why it mattered because it was their future. You know when their

ability to make their way in the world in a way that was satisfying and enable them to do the things that they wanted it was really nice to be able to make those arguments and to have people actually buy in.

Bonni [00:07:16] Now do you ever find yourself doing the opposite thing now where you're trying to subversively convince them that actually the humanities things that they're studying are gravely important to them and to the future of our society?

McClain [00:07:28] Well it's true yes I sometimes kind of play both play both parts. And you know in a business school we do have kind of one foot in the academy and one foot in the professional world. And so I think that my background kind of is maybe helps me to be someone who can bridge that gap a little bit because I have been kind of in both worlds to some extent.

Bonni [00:07:54] Yeah. So we're going to be talking today primarily about this program you created called The Professional Online Portfolio. But I'd like you to think too before it was there before you created it and what were some of the challenges that you observed at the time that the professional online portfolio ended up addressing.

McClain [00:08:14] Well the challenges were really in trying to find ways to help students make that transition from being a student from caring about things that students care about which are usually kind of doing the least amount of work necessary to get the grade that I want so that I can get a GPA that will impress someone and then they'll give me a job.

McClain [00:08:38] You know that's kind of the student mentality very passive you know kind of tell us what you want Professor you know that sort of thing. How long does this paper have to be. You know this kind of very strategic and student mindset which works you know in school and helps people to become good students and they're all at UT Dallas because they are good students and can play that game really well.

McClain [00:09:02] But you know one of the things we have to kind of help them see is that the things that makes them a really great student can hurt them once they stop being students the habits the attitudes the skills the you know the way of thinking about the world that makes you a good student kind of isn't typically the way of thinking about the world is going to help you once you stop being a student.

McClain [00:09:25] And so that's you know a concern of business communication educators because we are trying to help students to become better professional speakers writers team members collaborators people who can not only kind of get work done for writing and speaking standpoint in a professional environment but also in a more slightly selfish sense kind of create opportunities for themselves.

McClain [00:09:53] And so that transition that gap between being a good student and then all of a sudden when their foot hits the floor on the other side of the graduation stage they aren't students anymore and they're never going to take another scantron test again and they're never going to care about their GPA. No one's ever going to ask them.

McClain [00:10:10] You know it's kind of like the S.A.T. score or the ACT score, I asked them when the last time they thought about what they got. They laugh you know because it's so relevant now to them and I tell them that you know six months after graduation their college GPA is going to be the same thing no one's going to ask them what it was no one's going to care.

McClain [00:10:29] What they're going to care about is three things really. Do people think they know what they're doing? Do people think that they can be trusted? And do people think they're likable or interesting to be around?

McClain [00:10:41] And there's so many things that we do in school to help students but we don't really help them on those dimensions typically. And so you know I was creating a new course an advanced Business Communication Course where we were going to focus on relationship skills misname nonverbal small presentation skills and really was trying to develop a major project for that course that would be unlike something you know something unlike what students had gone before where it wasn't for the class it wasn't for a grade it wasn't for school it was for them.

McClain [00:11:19] And it was public and it was something that they were going to create. They were going to control for better or worse. We'll talk about a little bit later probably. And so we are in an environment now where our students have because of the power project they have a platform for telling their story to the world for featuring academic projects that they're proud of for feature and community work kind of personal interests for telling their story to the world.

McClain [00:11:50] You know everyone is has heard the phrase. You know it's not what you know it's who you know and that's always going to be true to some extent. But what matters kind of more for students now is who knows them.

Bonni [00:12:03] Yeah.

McClain [00:12:04] And we don't really give students a lot of ways to tell their story and to get people to know them. And so the project really didn't solve any problem but it was meant to help push back against the challenges students have because when they graduate no one knows who they are.

McClain [00:12:21] They're strangers they don't have the history no one knows what they can do. No one knows if they care how their resume and cover letter are really you know very effective anymore they're just other ways I guess to share their story with the world.

McClain [00:12:36] And so it just kind of took a lot of boxes for us and the feedback that we've gotten from students and employers and the questions and conversations I've had with colleagues really across the country about this.

McClain [00:12:48] And then I guess verification that it's kind of a no brainer in a way that we give students these tools. That's kind of how it was and that's how the situation has changed.

Bonni [00:12:59] I know you're going to be sharing a lot more of the details around how the students create them and that kind of thing. But I did want to just actually share one of the samples that you sent. And speaking of the samples you sent a lot of them and I'm going to be putting a bunch of them in the show notes and those will be at teachinginhighered.com/105.

Bonni [00:13:18] And you sent over a couple just to kind of I know you posted these in the comments section and that's where I got to first meet Danyal Ahmed and he has and I really encourage people to go look at all of the sites and he's got a great cover page for his his own portfolio. He's got a terrific picture of him wearing a nice suit. I mean he looks polished and professional and he has three areas that he explores and and gives information about his academic performance his professional and his personal.

Bonni [00:13:52] And then he has a video where he introduces himself and while we can't see him I do think it will be just kind of fun to hear a little bit of the kind

of flavor of the both text and also the video that people do so I'm just going to play a little bit of his introduction.

Daniel [00:14:05] *Recording of Danyal Ahmed*

Bonni [00:14:54] Thank you so much for sending that sample over. And is there anything else that you'd like to share about this site particularly that you because I know you shared it as one of the last sort of spotlight ones.

McClain [00:15:04] Yeah I just I love Danyal's site and I used to work through in the class. We really kind of look at it very closely because I think that it's you know it's not perfect obviously but it does so many of the things that a strong POP does. It obviously is well-written.

McClain [00:15:23] The images are kind of fun and show Danyal in an engaged light. He has photos of him doing community work. He has photos of him kind of around campus. I mean we want people looking at the Pops to see a smiling competent person who is engaged and interesting and you know just so many things that Danyal does on his site kind of are meeting that that bar that that high bar that we've set for for the POPs.

Bonni [00:15:59] Talk about you saw engagement in the classroom changing as you started implementing the professional online portfolio well it takes a while every semester.

McClain [00:16:10] You know students are you know and these are students who are maybe two or three semesters from graduation. Most of our students are are working. And you know by this time I asked them on the first day of class you know how long the students and they usually just default to how long they've been at UTD. But I say no how long have you been a student and most of them it's been 15 plus years.

McClain [00:16:35] And you know they're just they're ready you know they're ready to be done with school. They're not engaged. They're not necessarily excited about school anymore. And you know we we talk about that because if you can think about kind of the momentum that's been built up after 15 years you know for most of them being alive is being a student.

McClain [00:16:57] Their whole life schedule you know if you did have in diagram you know those two circles would be basically on top of each other you know like the student but you know they're uneasy because that is coming to an end.

McClain [00:17:14] So we spend a good week or two doing readings talking about that transition because I find it to be an important kind of prerequisite to talking about the POP because I really don't want them to think about it as something for our class. We do it inside of a course but it's not for the class.

McClain [00:17:33] And obviously there is a grade that they get it is a class requirement. But anyway once students find that it's their name it's their picture it's their site. They control it. They make all the decisions about it. It's not a university thing. It's not on university servers. It's something that's completely independent.

McClain [00:17:55] Once they kind of get into it and they know the other people besides me are going to be seeing it then you know they take it seriously and I show them examples of people from the past who have strong POPs who strong Pops that open doors for them whether they're for an internship or a job or was a nice networking kind of conversation point.

McClain [00:18:20] And so sharing kind of those stories talking about the buying of the whole school into the POP project. You know you really kind of create a chorus class and once they hear that you know so many people have done one so many people have been impacted by it.

McClain [00:18:36] After days of school people are talking about it and people are all working on it together every student and this course is doing it. So every semester that's you know seven or eight hundred students doing a pop. You know they just care about it more. You know once they learn that something is for a class and no one else is going to see it no one else is going to care they're not going to push themselves.

McClain [00:18:58] It's not going to be something that they kind of try hard on much less are proud. But once they learn that this is something that they want people to see they want to create a certain image in other people's minds and they can do that in this project through this project. They just care more. And it's not necessarily something that you see in the classroom.

McClain [00:19:19] It's mostly and kind of side conversations and all this hour is some feedback that I give them on their POP as they're working on it. But I have found that you know after years of testing and filling in bubble sheets and caring about grades they're anxious about not caring about that stuff anymore but they're kind of excited once you turn them onto it and remind them that

especially in a business school that business isn't really about formulas and models. You know numbers it's about relationships and human beings.

McClain [00:19:51] And once they kind of remember that or you help them to be reminded of that they get kind of turned on to it and excited and as they look back over their time in school and pick out things that they're proud of and that they want to share you know it can be really empowering for them to be reminded that as a person that's what matters.

McClain [00:20:13] You know their source of value isn't from their GPA or their technical skill necessarily it's from their ability again to know what they're doing to be trusted and to be interesting to be around or likable. And once they kind of get tapped into that the standards for their own performance go way up.

Bonni [00:20:34] What is one of the most common challenges that students have either in producing this work or just a thought and reflection that goes into it.

McClain [00:20:43] Well one of the things I tell them every semester is that you are going to wish that you started on this earlier. In other words you know even despite me saying over and over that I don't want you to think about this like a class project and I do various things throughout the course to kind of give them time in class and out of class to work on those.

McClain [00:21:06] A lot of students do put it off. And so the challenge really is you know that moment of conversion might be six weeks before the thing is due. And it's not hard to make a web site it's not hard to just throw stuff out there and put a few pictures up there. You love yourself.

McClain [00:21:24] It's not hard to do that but the hard part really isn't technical it's not just kind of doing it it's making it as good as it can be and is using the tools and the most kind of thoughtful way. And that just takes time so that time factor is one challenge.

McClain [00:21:41] The other challenges obviously since the students own those. Getting them to update their POPs after they've taken the course is also difficult because again they do oftentimes kind of fall back on that position as well. I did this in a class and so we're not totally successful at getting students to to own their POP after the class was done and to update it and to continue to make it better.

McClain [00:22:09] Most students do it's just. We're still trying to kind of increase our revision rate and get students to continue working on this after they have done with the class.

Bonni [00:22:20] I was mentioning to you before we started recording that on prior episodes one of the similar projects that's come up before is a domain of one's own from the University of Mary Washington and their way of approaching it is a little bit different in that when students first come to the University of Mary Washington they set up the domain and at that time it's under their IT's direction and support.

Bonni [00:22:46] But then with the aim of when they graduate the keys get passed over if you will and then it becomes their entity. And as I have thought about wanting to do something similar in our business department I have always struggled with just this idea of it. It feels nearly impossible to get that many stakeholders that would need to be involved in something like that at this juncture in our. I mean there's just so many ERP systems. So I kind of thought Gosh what a wonderful inspiration. But that's not for us right now.

Bonni [00:23:22] And I see the way that you've approached it as there are some challenges like you said because then there is that potential for procrastination and also maybe not the over years being educated about one's one's public face and a deep kind of reflection that is really important in today's very very hyper social networked world.

Bonni [00:23:48] So anyway I see yours as a way of getting started and then perhaps adding additional hooks and I'm kind of I'm really excited to be talking to you today but I do want to mention about their program just as another way to look and you want to talk about some other tools that your students are using to actually create their portfolios.

McClain [00:24:06] Well the students who use you know as most people know there are a lot of services out there now where you can put together a Web site for free and the tools have gotten more sophisticated over time. But the students use primarily will use Wix.com or weebly.com and these are two of the larger services.

McClain [00:24:25] But we have you know some students who who code their own site. Other students choose other services. They also of course use YouTube to upload a couple of the videos and to embed videos from prior class presentations or community work or you know some of them are musicians or

some of them are marketers and some of them are doing stuff out in the community that's been recorded until though each are some of that stuff.

McClain [00:24:51] But you know I haven't had one student. I mean thousands and thousands of students have done this even since 2013 and students kind of are a little anxious at the beginning because very few of them have ever had a website much less their own website with their name and their pictures and all of that.

McClain [00:25:10] But I haven't had one student who kind of couldn't figure it out. You know the tools are at that point that anybody really can with time to sit down and put something together that and that's you know really fun. You know it's fun to scroll through the templates and it's fun to play with the design and to think about kind of not only what you want to communicate but think about how people use the web and how people will read the web so to speak.

McClain [00:25:38] So from a communication standpoint it's really a great exercise because you're not just thinking about yourself or thinking about people looking at the site. How do I make things simple and how to write clearly signal kind of what they're going to get if they click on this 10. So there's a lot of kind of communication learning and skill development and kind of thought deepening that comes with this this project.

Bonni [00:26:03] Before we move to the recommendations segment of the show... Imagine someone like me who'd like to get started with this but it feels a little too big what could be a first step for us and getting started with a similar project with our students.

McClain [00:26:17] Well I think it's helpful to have a forward thinking Dean someone who is able to kind of see the potential impact. It's also helpful we partnered with our advisory council and we are putting this project together. These are this is kind of our elite kind of community business board folks who come in and kind of tell us how we're doing and what we could be doing better.

McClain [00:26:44] And so that's helpful to get community input. And by and the early stages you also have to have kind of a willingness to understand that not all of the parts are going to be good. You know some of them are going to be kind of unprofessional quote unquote. Some of them are going to be ones that you know you're going to say well gosh this student really spent you know

maybe an hour or two on their POP but here they are saying that they go to our school that they graduated from my program.

McClain [00:27:17] And you know you have to kind of be OK with that. Fortunately we have a dean who was OK with you know a lot of times we get pressure that anything that's going to be public from our students has to be great. You know it has to be something that we're proud of. And you know obviously we're trying to push all the parts to be great and we're helping students to do better in theirs.

McClain [00:27:39] But that kind of I guess understanding that you're going to have varying degrees of quality and the work is kind of important but I think maybe just most important there's a real desire to help students stop thinking about themselves themselves or students and to start thinking about themselves as people who really are going to have to make their own way and tell their own story and own what they've done and be proud of it and frame things that they've done in a way that adds value in the minds of other people because that's really ultimately what the pop is about.

McClain [00:28:15] But I think if we have a team that's interested in that and kind of is kind of willing to maybe not do exams but to do a major project and to do something where you know that's a little bit different a little bit maybe risky so to speak. You know I really encourage people to try it out I mean it will do it in a business school.

McClain [00:28:37] But there's really no reason any college junior senior shouldn't be working on ways to tell their own story. You know we talked a lot about the interview and the resume and the cover letter. But human beings really don't read resumes anymore. You know they're put into computer systems and are sliced and diced for keywords and then once you get to the interview you're once you're already in the room then you know you're 90 percent of the way there is that bass kind of middle ground that we're really focusing on with the pop giving people a way to tell their own story and to tell the world what they're good at and what they care about. And so I think if you have a team that's interested in that I'm excited about that. Then there's really nothing stopping you.

Bonni [00:29:18] This is that point in the show where we eat give some recommendations of things that have had our attention recently. And I'd like to start by recommending a blog post that was written by Betsy Barre who has

been on the show in the past and had such important things to share with us back then on student evaluations and what the research that says about them.

Bonni [00:29:40] And she's done a similar fabulous piece on grading and the title of the blog post is Meaningful, moral and manageable: The grading holy grail and I won't give too much away because I can't do justice to her writing but she starts out just looking at. We usually think of grading for a memoir of a pessimistic look that between it being manageable meaningful and moral that we have to just pick two of those things. It's kind of like that cheap easy fast. I think I'm getting those three right. You have to pick two of the three. Kind of like that. And there is no such thing.

Bonni [00:30:15] You know something that would be all three. And then she ends on a more hopeful note of how we might be able to not just stick to such myopic choices in our grading. And I just really found it useful and I'm going to be going back to it as I think about my grading work flow for the fall I tend to have slightly more students in the fall than I do in the spring.

Bonni [00:30:36] And I just really would like to have more of a positive view and take some of the approaches away that she recommends So that would be my suggestion. And what do you have to recommend to people today.

McClain [00:30:47] I have a couple of recent albums I'm really into music and so can't pass up the chance to recommend one as a new album by a North Texas musician called Daniel Markham the album's called Disintegrator and it's a really great kind of moody guitar based acoustic album with just really great lyrics and harmony.

McClain [00:31:13] And then another is a new album by a band called Rogue Wave which is called Delusions of Grand Fur which is again kind of melodic guitar based music that I just really enjoy reading too. But also I mean it's the kind of music that you can kind of have on while you're doing other things and gives you a jump in your step. But it's also something that you can sit down and scrutinize lyrically and musically and that tends to be the kind of music I really like. So if you like that stuff too then I encourage you seeking these albums out.

Bonni [00:31:49] So this is always a dangerous thing to do. I never I shouldn't say never never say never really work never play something in a class that I haven't looked at first but you know here goes nothing I'm going to see if we can pull up some of their music.

McClain [00:32:06] That does sound like Rogue Wave.

Bonni [00:32:15] Maybe we can combine our two recommendations and when we're grading we can listen to them.

McClain [00:32:20] Yeah grading music.

Bonni [00:32:22] Did you already say that.

McClain [00:32:24] No no it's a great. That would be a great mix tape. You go from like death metal to begin with like that got progressively kind of more intense as you went along and just kind of went insane.

Bonni [00:32:38] Oh it's perfect. Now you are giving me some summer ideas instead of the songs of summer it would be the songs of grading. But we have to read.

McClain [00:32:48] You'd sell literally tons of copies.

Bonni [00:32:54] I love it. Well thank you so much for coming on the show and I think even more than coming on the show it just the fact that you're a part of this community and listening and making comments and contributing and that's people often say you know thanks for all your hard work and talking to me for the show.

Bonni [00:33:09] And I think gosh it's it's energizing to get to talk to people like you who have such a care for really serving our students well and I just appreciate all that you're doing and you being a part of this community and then coming on the show it's just been so fun to talk to you.

McClain [00:33:23] Well thank you for creating that community and for I mean really doing so much hard work. I was going back to the first episode of the podcast and on your site and just I mean just enormous amounts of great content and you just have an ability to pull together people from lots of different fields and it's great to be a contributor now.

Bonni [00:33:46] Thank you so much.

McClain [00:33:47] Thank you.

Bonni [00:33:48] Thanks to everyone for listening to this episode number 105 of Teaching in Higher Ed with Dr. McClain Watson. And if you'd like to check out the show notes especially all of the links to those great sample portfolios you can do that at teachinginhighered.com/105.

Bonni [00:34:06] And if you have yet to subscribe to the weekly e-mail what that does is means you don't have to go to teachinginhighered.com/105 to get those show notes, it'll come right into your inbox just once a week with another article either about teaching or productivity on most weeks and that will save you one less thing to have to remember to do.

Bonni [00:34:25] And as always if you have any feedback about the show I'd love to hear from you about future guest ideas or topics that's actually why I had the conversation today with McClain. You can always do that at teachinginhighered.com/feedback or feel free to connect with me on Twitter @Bonni208. Love getting connected with so many of you on Twitter and getting your ideas there as well.

Bonni [00:34:51] And I always like to ask you to please leave a review on whatever service it is that you use to listen to the show that truly is the best way to keep growing in the community so we can continue to share with each other about ways to be more effective at facilitating learning for our students and also with our own personal productivity. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.

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