

[00:00:00] Bonni Stachowiak: On today's episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed* number 286, I welcome Jessamyn Neuhaus to speak about her new book, *Geeky Pedagogy*.

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[00:00:11] Announcer: Produced by Innovate Learning. Maximizing human potential.

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[00:00:19] Bonni: Hello and welcome to this episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of 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 am welcoming today Jessamyn Neuhaus. She's a professor of US history and popular culture at SUNY Plattsburgh and recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

As the teaching fellow at Plattsburgh Center for Teaching Excellence for several years, she did all kinds of things. She facilitated professional development opportunities, individual consultations, class visits, online resources, was just a tremendous asset and still is a tremendous asset to that institution. Jessamyn has also published a few books that just sound really fascinating to me. In addition to the one we'll be talking about today, she has two monographs, *Manly Meals* and *Mom's Home Cooking* cookbooks, and *Gender in Modern America* and *Housework and Housewives in American Advertising: Married to the Pop*.

Jessamyn has also published in pedagogical, historical, and cultural studies research in numerous anthologies and journals. If you'd like to learn more about her bio, please visit teachinginhighered.com/286. For now, let me welcome Jessamyn to the show. Jessamyn welcome to *Teaching in Higher Ed*.

[00:01:58] Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

[00:02:01] Bonni: In the beginning of your book, you tackle something that comes up quite a bit. That's all the way back on page one, "Just because you know a lot about

something doesn't mean you know how to teach it." This showed up in an anonymous course evaluation for you back in the '90s.

[00:02:17] Jessamyn: Yes, my very, very first class. I think it might be the very first student evaluation I ever read.

[00:02:25] Bonni: What did that feel like at the time?

[00:02:28] Jessamyn: I put it out of my head as quickly as possible, as many people do when faced with their student course evaluations. In the beginning of my teaching career, I tried to ignore what information I was receiving. As I described in the book, and I think as probably most of your listeners know, there's a lot of things that student evaluations can't tell us and a lot of ways they can be flawed, especially depending on how a university implements them, especially for employment decisions. There is some things that student evaluations could tell us. That particular one was telling me something important that I needed to hear. [chuckles]

[00:03:11] Bonni: Yes. We really have, many of us, these misperceptions about what teaching is going to be like. Then you get there and it's not at all like you thought, or only parts of it are like we thought. You have a wonderful quote from David Sedaris I'd love to have you read, because I think it just [chuckles] speaks to so many of us. What we thought it would be like when we first get up there in front of that group of students and they're just going to be bursting. Would you share the Sedaris quote and all of us will nod our heads with you in concert.

[00:03:39] Jessamyn: Yes. David Sedaris on what he imagined teaching was going to be like, and then what it actually was like when he was in the classroom. I guess I've been thinking that without provocation, my students would talk, offering their thoughts and opinions on the issues of the day. I'd imagine myself sitting on the edge of the desk, overlooking a forest of raised hands. The students would simultaneously shout to be heard, and I'd pound on something in order to silence them.

"Whoa, people," I'd yell. "Calm down, you'll all get your turn. One at a time, one at a time." The error of my thinking yawned before me. A terrible silence overtook the room. Seeing no other option, I instructed my students to pull out their notebooks and write a brief essay related to the theme of profound disappointment. [chuckles]

[00:04:32] Bonni: He's just priceless. He captures it so well. I'm thinking to Stephen Brookfield has said this many times on the podcast and also shared about it so much in his writings. He cautions us against holding up as idols. I'm not sure if he uses the word idols, but that's what I'm thinking of in this case, or maybe heroes is a better word. People who win teaching awards. You happen to have won a teaching

award, but I have a sense that you wouldn't classify yourself as a stereotypical teaching award winner.

There's this myth that you talk about with teachers being born that way, the charisma, instead of being made. You strike me as someone who's been made and continues to be made into an excellent teacher.

[00:05:13] Jessamyn: Yes, that myth of the super teacher, that's the term I use in the book, the super teacher, is so persistent. It's so prevalent, especially in popular culture. Bonni, think of the last time you saw a college professor on a TV show or on a movie, and I bet you anything it was a guy standing in front of a room of utterly wrapped students. He's lecturing without notes, he doesn't need any notes, and the students are hanging on his every word and they're magically learning with no effort, with no struggle whatsoever.

That image, like Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, that image really interferes with students and professors with our teaching and our learning, because that's just not realistic. That's not how it is for most of us. We have to learn how to be effective teachers and we keep learning how to be effective teachers throughout our whole career. I do deliberately avoid words like excellent teacher, "master teacher, even good teacher. I know why people use those terms, but I think it can undermine our self-efficacy, our belief that we can do this. That's why I emphasize effective teaching.

[00:06:38] Bonni: This transitions us nicely into your emphasis on awareness. You don't let us take the easy road here, [chuckles] we really have to both know our students and know ourselves. Could you talk a bit about that, importance of the awareness?

[00:06:53] Jessamyn: Sure. The very first section in the first chapter of awareness was really important to me. It's titled *Identity is Important*. Our individual embodied identity matters to teaching and learning because it matters as human beings. Who we are, speaking poise, our ethnicity, our race, our gender expression, all these things go into how students perceive us and vice versa. We bring in all our unconscious biases into the classroom because we're human beings and we're interacting with other human beings.

I think there's a lot of otherwise really excellent scholarship of teaching and learning and advice about teaching that otherwise is really great, but doesn't fully take into account how our individual teaching context can really impact how we might utilize a specific teaching technique or how our students perceive us. What I have to do as a white middle-age cisgendered woman is not quite the same thing as what my white male colleagues have to do, what faculty of color have to do in the classroom

to achieve all the things that effective teachers need to achieve. That's the first thing to be aware of.

The other sections in that chapter, learning is hard, know our students, know ourselves, could really be boiled down into just being curious and studying, which we nerds are really good at, studying and increasing our knowledge about what is actually happening. Teaching the students you have, not the students you wish you had. Understanding yourself, what makes you tired, what pushes your buttons. Knowing how learning is a hard, often emotionally fraught, process.

There's lots of great science out there about the brain and learning. It's good to know and to try to keep up with, but it boils down to [chuckles] learning's really hard to do. Learning how to do something new is hard. It's important for us to be aware of that since what we're teaching is something we know really, really well. It's easy to forget how hard it can be for normal, non-nerdy people to learn how to do.

[00:09:39] Bonni: You have many things to share with us about the importance of preparation, although you also couch that with the-- I don't know if you directly say it. You know how you can't always tell where you read something [chuckles] from, or you're reading multiple things, but just-- I see this tension in my own work between those who really want to overprepare, and it's too much, but they've prepared the wrong ways, thinking they need the perfect script for everything and not really being equipped for what's right there in the moment and what's present.

There's so much here. You have wonderful things around the sense of resistance. I'm going to focus a little bit toward the latter part of this section. That would be around us just not taking things personally. You give an example of a student sleeping in class, that that's not about me, that's not about you, [chuckles] that's really about the student. Then also I would love to hear you share a little bit about this question that we get asked that we can sometimes find offence with. That's a student not coming to class and then asking if they missed anything, or asking something [chuckles] that's on the syllabus, and you're like, "It's on the syllabus." Would you talk about that?

[00:10:48] Jessamyn: Yes. What I would emphasize this chapter on preparation that I'm adding to the conversation out there is not so much preparation in terms of specific assignments and syllabi, although those are important too, but speaking to my fellow introverts and geeks and nerds, preparing for the social interaction part of teaching. Teaching and learning is a social interaction. It's not a cocktail party or a keg party, but it is a social interaction between human beings. For brainiacs who really, really like the studying and the writing and the analyzing part of our job, we tend to underprepare for the social interaction part of our job.

The catchphrase I use is, "Putting on your professor pants." Whatever you need to do to prepare yourself to consciously undertake the social interaction aspect of effective teaching. Things like demonstrating immediacy, building rapport, demonstrating enthusiasm for class content and for student learning. Those are all things that may not come as easily to someone like me who's very, very introverted and my natural inclination is to try to not interact with people. I need to very consciously prepare for interacting with students.

The two examples you mentioned, trying not to take things personally, I think this has a lot to do with as intellectuals-- This is changing. A lot of graduate programs are increasingly paying attention to pedagogy, but still many of us are sent out into the fray with only our graduate school training, which is all about the intellect and proving how smart you can be. They can make us, I think, overly defensive talking with students, dealing with students. I want to be clear, though, I get that students can be frustrating, that those interactions can be frustrating.

Some really great scholars of teaching and learning are really focused on care for students and I totally get that, but I also get that it can be frustrating to hear a question that you fully answered on the syllabus. What I'm recommending is that if we prepare with our professor pants, and for the social interaction part, keeping in mind that effective teaching is going to require building rapport with students, a question like that instead of feeling defensive, we can think to ourselves, "Okay, here's a chance for me to interact in a positive way with students."

Now, I don't know for extroverts, if that sounds like, "Why would you have to prepare for that? Can't you just do it?" But for me as an introvert, as someone who doesn't always pick up social cues, preparing more intentionally for interactions, like a student falling asleep in class, or asking did they miss anything, preparing for it helps me respond in a more productive way.

[00:14:43] Bonni: It's interesting to me because we often think of it as-- I'll use the syllabus as an example, the syllabus question of, "Don't they know how much time I put into that? Don't they know how important it is?" It's like, if we can flip that and think of it from the other person's perspective, "Don't they know how much I'm struggling? Don't they know-- I don't even think I belong here. Don't they know I just failed this class last semester and I'm taking it with you because you didn't already know me, so I don't have to be embarrassed that I failed the last time?"

There's so much that we don't know and there's so much that they don't know, but can we flip it a little bit and just assume good intent on the other person's part? [chuckles] Or at least don't assume any intent, just take it for what it is and use it as an opportunity to be kind, and then to redirect them to supportive resources that will

help them thrive in the class and hopefully even beyond, because we might be teaching them that professors are people who care about them, who are helpful, and who have spent a lot of time putting together things like syllabi and things like that. Absolutely.

This actually gets us to our next part, which is the importance of reflection. The only reason I've gotten a little bit better at the thing [chuckles] of handling the sleeping-- Actually, the sleeping doesn't happen often to me, but the syllabus question. Occasionally it'll happen, but it's this reflection and how important this process is. You quote Stephen Brookfield here. He points out that skilled teachers who facilitate learning can expect some hostility, at least in some of their students. One of the aspects of reflection that you talk about is the importance of gratitude. Would you share about what you recommend in terms of gratitude?

[00:16:24] Jessamyn: Well, sure. Again, I want to caution here. I know some of my academic colleagues will think this sounds like new-agey unintellectual exercises. Reflection is an intellectual exercise. The addition of a gratitude practice is no way to suggest that you put on rose-colored glasses, or that it's just a matter of positive thinking. The inequality and despair at teaching realities, that's Roxanna Harlow's term for the fact that depending on your individual teaching context, what you have to do to be an effective teacher might be more challenging or difficult. You'll meet more student resistance, especially around issues of embodied identity.

That's all just a preface to make sure listeners know that I'm not suggesting, "Just put on your happy face and everything's going to be fine." A gratitude practice just means paying attention and acknowledging when things go right, when things go well. A lot of times, because of how teaching and learning works, that includes no strings attached gifts that we get from students, sometimes from colleagues, I know there's a lot of dysfunction in academia, but it can happen from colleagues, from staff. I'll give you a good example, something that just happened to me.

A colleague of mine here, on my campus, who was in a pretty draining, and exhausting, and unfulfilling teaching context. I think she tweeted a student took her out for breakfast. Met her during the homecoming weekend and wanted to buy her coffee, and eggs, and toast, because she really appreciated what she had learned in that person's class. I said to her, "You should make a note of that in your gratitude journal," which I know sounds flaky, but it's just a record of things that have gone right. It's so easy to get sucked into the negative.

Just this week, out of almost a hundred students, I have one student who's managing to-- I would know that I am allowing to basically suck all the joy [chuckles] out of teaching, "One student." It's that negativity bias. Your brain is attuned to the things

that make you upset, that are most frustrating. A gratitude practice helps balance the scale. When I start to let myself get distracted by that one negative-- To be clear, it's a negative, and hostile, and uncivil encounter with a student.

I have to more deliberately pay attention to the many, many students who are interacting with me in a very positive way, who are learning. Who are showing me that they're learning, who I've been helping them be successful. It's really just paying attention to the whole picture, seeing everything that's going on, and it will always include something you can express some gratitude about and feel grateful for.

[00:20:18] Bonni: The poet Ross Gay, I read a book of his essays recently called *The Book of Delights*. What you described is so similar to what he did there. He's a African American man, he doesn't walk around like, [chuckles] "Life is great, everything's perfect." He has definitely seen the lens through a person of color who's experienced racism and all manner of things, but it's a discipline though to not let it all suck all of the joy out of our lives. I think we can see it as, you mentioned touchy-feely, but we also could see it as the hardest work you could do is to squeeze every little bit of joy.

Then in times when it's not joyful-- I find it sometimes you were almost describing where if you can get even a little bit of distance from yourself and sometimes even just laugh at yourself and go "Wow, look at me, letting this one person [laughs] really consume a lot of my time and energy. Isn't this a funny thing that you haven't learned better?" My voice in my own head, not your head, but yes, it's really a challenge. I think that's a wonderful discipline and really hard work to those who have spent the time doing that practice.

[00:21:30] Jessamyn: It's very rewarding, and it also builds your teaching self-efficacy. I think there's a lot of perfectionists in academia. It's really easy to focus on the ways that something you're doing as a teacher is falling short. We all need to pay close attention to the things that we're doing right, that are going well, that we should remember to do next semester. If gratitude journal sounds just too flaky, keep a copy of the syllabus and just make a few little notes to yourself on it as the semester goes along, including what a great discussion about this article, students really improved from this assignment to the next. It helps us. It's not just like a personal self-enrichment, it helps us teach more effectively too.

[00:22:27] Bonni: Before we get to the recommendations segment, I don't want us to close this conversation without talking about practice. I'm going to quote you here, here's the best [chuckles] and worst news about effective teaching that you will ever hear. No matter who you are or what you teach, you can get better with practice. Nothing will improve our teaching and increase our students' learning more than

doing it year after year, term after term, class after class, day after day. Talk about that good news and bad news.

[00:23:00] Jessamyn: It's great news because it means we can always keep learning and keep improving, keep doing things better, no matter where we started from as educators. The bad news is that that takes time, and I'll just say frankly, it takes job security. When you've got employment decisions hanging over your head, it's a lot harder to chalk something up to, "I made this big mistake, but it's a learning experience. Haha, I'll apply it next semester."

If you are not tenured, if you're in a contingent employment situation, if you're in a particularly negative individual teaching context, it can be a lot harder to accrue that practice that it takes. I should say too, it's practice with support, with reflection, with continued pedagogical development. We all know a professor who's taught for a long, long time and hasn't gotten much more effective. They haven't been supported or they've resisted professional development. So, good news and bad news. [chuckles]

[00:24:32] Bonni: Absolutely. As you said earlier, teaching is hard, and we don't want to practice the same year over and over again, we want every year to be getting a little closer, but then also I'm very cognizant of your sensitivity around calling teaching excellence. You really stress more effectiveness, and I think that's a good pursuit for us all and can help us keep us away from trying to win those charismatic awards and trying to be the life of the party [chuckles] and instead using our strengths.

[00:25:01] Jessamyn: I want a teaching award for opening my door when office hours start, [chuckles] and not hiding in the bathroom when a student is coming, and chit-chatting pleasantly with students before and after class. That is not easy. Where's my award for that?

[00:25:20] Bonni: Yes. Before we get to the recommendation segment of today's episode, I just want to thank today's sponsor and that is TextExpander. TextExpander is an easy to use tool that allows you to type in what they call snippets, and that's just a few keystrokes, you set up whatever it is you want, like little abbreviations almost, and those little snippets expand to either difficult texts for you to remember. For example, I never remember my work phone number, or long paragraphs of things.

If you were writing a letter of recommendation for your students and wanted to have it pop up and say, what's the date, what's the name, who is it addressed to, et cetera, et cetera. It's a wonderful way to really live up to the spirit of the productivity aspect to teaching in higher ed, so we can save a little bit of time on some of the work that doesn't require those deeper connections or deeper thinking in order to free up time

to be more present for our students and other people that are special to us in our lives.

TextExpander is one of the first tools I ever install on a new computer. I consider it an essential part of my work. It's available on Mac, it's available on Windows and on iOS devices. All of your little TextExpander snippets, those little abbreviations, they sync across all of those devices. It's an essential tool for me, I hope you'll give it a try, there's a link in the show notes that'll take you over to find out more about TextExpander. Let them know you heard about them from *Teaching in Higher Ed*, there's also a special where you can get a discount on your first year. Thanks to TextExpander for sponsoring today's episode.

All right, this is the time in the show when we each get to give recommendations. My first one comes, I found out about it actually from Lee Skallerup Bessette. She had posted about Gary Larson bringing back *The Far Side*. This is probably very much of an age thing, because *The Far Side* has been away for a while. For those of you who may not fit in the demographic that will know what *The Far Side* is or was-- For those who may not be familiar with *The Far Side*, it's a single-panel comic, and I'm reading from Wikipedia here, created by Gary Larson, which ran from January 1st, 1980, to January 1st, 1995.

Its surrealistic humor is often based on uncomfortable social situations, improbable events and an anthropomorphic view of the world, logical fallacies, impending bizarre disasters, often twisted references to proverbs or the search for the meaning of life. Lee posted and it's coming back. They haven't shared much yet, but I am just excited for that humor to come back. Thinking about how that might translate today, I'm just fascinated and I can't wait to see what he comes up with.

Especially I'm also interested just as a person who spends some portion of my time on the internet, how he will adapt to the internet age, because I saw something on the internet Wayback Machine about him. He was writing letters like, "Please don't post my comics online." Of course, I understand that from an author's point of view, but it'll just be interesting to see what changes and what doesn't about his approach.

Then I have a couple of things to recommend that are related to one another, and they both are applications that have to do with helping us focus better. It's interesting because sometimes I focus too well, so I look down at my Apple watch and I've been sitting for four hours and not moving. [chuckles] That's not good. I actually have a big capacity, but what will sometimes happen is I'll get a little bit in a pattern of leaving my email open. I'm working on something that should be focused work, but that's just one window away. I don't leave the notifications on, but it's one click away, I'll just go check and see what's happening.

They've done all different studies on the amount of time that waste then for us to redirect our focus back to something like writing a book or writing a column in my case. This is not good. I started experimenting with these applications. I'm going to recommend two, because one is for Mac and one is for PC. One's called Focus, the other is called Freedom. They essentially do the same thing. They'll block specific applications. In my case, I don't want to see email and I can say for how long. Is this a one-hour focus? By the way, I'd suggest if it's one hour, then get up and do a 10-minute walk after that and really get the oxygen going and get your blood pumping again.

Then come back and you're going to get through your email a lot faster, and you'll be able to be a little bit more focused on it then. Focus application that will block applications, and then also will block specific websites. It's not going to let me go over to Twitter, just to randomly [chuckles] go and see what's happening. That can be my reward once I'm finished with the column that I'm writing or the grading that I am doing. Those are my recommendations. Jessamyn, I'll pass it over to you now.

[00:30:05] Jessamyn Neuhas: Okay. I have two TV shows and two books.

[00:30:09] Bonni: Wonderful.

[00:30:11] Jessamyn: I'll start with the teaching books. I'm going to recommend Laura Harrison's *Teaching Struggling Students*. I think she speaks especially well to the same readers who would appreciate some of my work. A lot of what she said really resonated with me as someone who was highly successful in school, but how that didn't really help me build a lot of empathy or understanding for what it's like to truly struggle. She reflects on her experiences in an ESL class where she did not do very well at the beginning, and the emotions around that, and the intellectual processes. She gives a lot of practical advice then for how we can translate that into helping our struggling students. I'd recommend that highly to anybody teaching.

I'm also going to recommend a book specifically for the faculty developers out there, the educational consultants. Some of them might be familiar with it. It's a book by Rob Fitzpatrick and Devin Hunt called *How to Design and Teach Educational Workshops That Work Every Time*. It has a lot of very, very practical advice. Actually, you can tell they started their careers in higher education because a lot of their recommendations are based on very sound pedagogical best practices. I'd highly recommend it to anybody who's putting together any kind of workshop.

The two TV shows, one of them, unfortunately, there's only one season. It was canceled on Netflix. It's called *Tuca & Bertie*. It's an animated show by the creators of *BoJack Horseman*. It's very weird and it's very cool. It's feminist in the best possible ways. *Tuca & Bertie*, highly recommend. Finally, I have to give a shout out to *Star Trek*.

Star Trek Discovery, so worth the CBS app, so worth that purchase. Especially I want to encourage people who maybe aren't huge *Star Trek* fans and want to ease in, you could start with the second season, actually. I loved both seasons, but the second season really hit its stride. It has a wonderfully diverse cast. It's *Star Trek*, so you know it's good.

[laughter]

[00:32:55] Bonni: That is wonderful. I'm assuming 2017. I'm finding the right one on Internet Movie--

[00:32:59] Jessamyn: *Star Trek Discovery*. The second season should be 2018.

[00:33:07] Bonni: I think they've got them both up here. I'm looking on the Internet Movie Database.

[00:33:08] Jessamyn: *Star Trek Discovery*, yes. That's probably the first season. Both are fantastic, and the lead actress is amazing, but the second season especially.

[00:33:20] Bonni: Well, Jessamyn, it's been so wonderful getting to read your book, and then now getting to talk to you in person, and see different slices of it, and hear your voice. I'm just so glad for your time and to be connected with you. I feel like we're working in solidarity in two different parts of the country, but still working together to really affect our students.

[00:33:37] Jessamyn: Thank you for having me.

[music]

[00:33:41] Bonni: What an invigorating conversation with Jessamyn Neuhas. Thank you so much for joining me on today's episode and for giving me even more of a look inside of *Geeky Pedagogy* after having read it myself. What a pleasure to have a conversation with you. Thanks to all of you for listening to today's episode. If you'd like to check out the show notes, please go over to teachinginhigher.edu/286. If you've been listening for a while and enjoying the podcast, I hope that you will recommend it to others, you'll send a link to one of your favorite episodes over to some colleagues, or even consider reading or reviewing it on whatever service it is you use to listen to the show.

Thanks so much for listening and we'll see you next time on *Teaching In Higher Ed*.

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[00:34:37] [END OF AUDIO]

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