

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 2, Episode 3: The Syllabus with William Germano and Kit Nicholls

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross ([00:05](#)):

Hello and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's executive director. Let's get started. I'm speaking remotely today with doctors, William Germano and Kit Nicholls. Bill and K it are the authors of Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything.

Catherine Ross ([00:36](#)):

Dr. William Germano is a professor of English at Cooper Union. He received his BA from Columbia and his PhD in English from Indiana University. He has taught at Cooper Union since 2006, and was dean of the faculty of humanities and social sciences from 2006 until 2017. He teaches the freshmen core as well as electives on Shakespeare, opera, the history of the book, an elective on puppets and robots and of course on the literature of the Arctic and Antarctic.

Catherine Ross ([01:11](#)):

For over 20 years, he directed programs in scholarly publishing, first as an editor in chief at Columbia University Press, and then as vice president and publishing director at Routledge. Dr. Kit Nichols is the director of the Center for Writing at Cooper Union. He received a PhD in English at New York University and a BA in creative writing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In addition to Syllabus, his essays have appeared in venues such as European Romantic Review, The Chronicle of Higher Education and Psyche. Welcome to Dead Ideas Podcast, Bill and Kit.

Kit Nicholls ([01:53](#)):

Thank you, we're happy to be here.

Bill Germano ([01:56](#)):

Good morning, Catherine.

Catherine Ross ([01:58](#)):

So let me set the stage a little bit. Despite the title of the book that you both just published, which is titled Syllabus, what you have written is actually quite an extensive reflection on the nature of teaching, learning, community and possibility. In the course of testing and refining our understanding of what a syllabus can be, you write in depth about topics such as power in the classroom, how to create a community of learners, time keeping versus timeliness in teaching, what reading lists signify, reflective teaching, and one of my favorite topics, grading.

Catherine Ross ([02:49](#)):

We can't do justice to all these topics in our 30 minute podcast, so before we dive in and start talking, I just want to tell our listeners to read this book. It's amazing. All right. With that said, we will start now

with some Q&A. So Bill and Kit, could you share with us why this book you have written is necessary and what you hoped would be changed by writing it?

Kit Nicholls ([03:23](#)):

So I think the place to start is just the problem of the syllabus as a really under thought document. Now, by no means is that a blanket statement that nobody has bothered to rethink. Plenty of scholars have been doing amazing work with the syllabus, but there's still kind of a default position on the syllabus that it maybe doesn't matter that much, that it's a kind of proforma set of requirements really that we're not doing for ourselves or for our students, but we're just doing it because we have to.

Kit Nicholls ([03:58](#)):

And so that took us to sort of asking some essential questions about the syllabus. What even is a syllabus, right? I mean, it's easy to fall into the habit of thinking of it as a set of rules and regulations, a list of what we're going to tell people. And that is kind of the historical idea of the syllabus. If you go back to the 19th century, the syllabus really was just this is the knowledge that will be conveyed by the sage, old professor and the students will have to learn whatever the professor tells them to learn.

Kit Nicholls ([04:33](#)):

And that's the syllabus, right? It was just a list of the stuff that you're going to give people. But obviously that began to change especially with civil rights, with affirmative action, with a change in conception of who was going to be teaching and who was going to be learning and then what assumptions might've underlined the past of who was teaching and who was learning, suddenly it became necessary to really rethink the syllabus.

Kit Nicholls ([05:02](#)):

So we thought it was really crucial to just ask some basic questions about what a syllabus is for us now and how it changed over time. And then you ask a more important question, which is what does a syllabus do? We've got that old mantra like read the syllabus, it's on the syllabus, this idea that students never look at it and you start to ask, well, why, why does the syllabus have this status as this radically unread or under read document?

Kit Nicholls ([05:37](#)):

And it seems to me that's partly a function of the fact that we haven't been asking as carefully as we should, what does it do? What is its purpose? What kinds of actions does it initiate in the world? And so as we began to think about those terms, we realized that a syllabus is really only interesting and really only comes into existence in a way when it becomes a spur to work.

Kit Nicholls ([06:02](#)):

So there's what it does, and then that leads you to the question of what a syllabus and who is syllabus is for, is it really for us? We agonize over it for weeks. I'm sure all of your listeners will have had the experience of going through weeks of rereading things saying, "Oh, should it be this text or should it be that text?" Oh, if you're in the sciences maybe you're arguing with yourself whether you want to use this textbook or that textbook.

Kit Nicholls ([06:40](#)):

Those may not always be the most important questions. Really the questions that we centered ourselves on were, well, what does the syllabus ask of students ultimately? Not what does it command them to do, but what does it ask them to do? So if your students aren't reading your syllabus, maybe the syllabus isn't doing the work it needs to. So it felt essential to us to imagine a syllabus that everyone in the classroom would need over the course of a term. Bill, do you want to add to that?

Bill Germano ([07:14](#)):

Yeah. If I can just augment those comments to emphasize that for many of us who teach and for many teachers elsewhere, the syllabus is a requirement that must be satisfied within an institution, that it is written functionally to satisfy accreditation or other means of approving what is happening in a classroom, that is, it's a document written for administrators.

Bill Germano ([07:48](#)):

But if it's going to do any work, if it's going to do any real work in the classroom, it has to be written precisely for the teacher and for the students, and in such a way that the students understand that they are as important to the syllabus as the teacher is. And that gets to the larger question of explaining to students why they are crucial to the class, which sounds maybe like an odd thing to say, of course, they're crucial, they are the class. But getting students involved so that they understand how important they are to the group activity and the group process is one of the principles that drives, at least the way we understand, what a syllabus is capable of doing.

Catherine Ross ([08:37](#)):

So that's all very interesting and I think signifies some truly dead ideas that you have uncovered as you've been working through your thinking about the syllabus, the idea that it's radically unread and yet required, which probably explains why it's radically unread, right? Because as Bill mentioned, it's something that was often written for administrators as opposed to writing it for students and thinking about how we help students see themselves in the classroom as active participants.

Catherine Ross ([09:17](#)):

So a whole lot of stuff you unpacked there with that. Thank you for that. I want to take us a little deeper into some of this thinking. You have a particular quote in your book that is repeated throughout, it's the central theme I think, of the book, and it's clearly something that you feel very strongly about. And that quote is, "A syllabus isn't so much about what you will do, you being the instructor, it's about what your students will do." Do you want to expand on that a little bit? So let me read the quote again, "A syllabus isn't so much about what you will do, it's about what your students will do."

Bill Germano ([10:10](#)):

I think the reason that is, what we think of as the book's mantra is because we want very much to direct teachers' attention to the active participation of their students and to find whatever works for them as the means for engaging their students in a relationship of trust. I was talking with Kit yesterday and with others about the absolutely crucial nature of trust in the classroom.

Bill Germano ([10:49](#)):

If you've gotten your students' trust at the beginning of the course, they will follow where you want to lead. And the trust has to be not simply teacher, student, but student to student, so that you're

developing an environment within the classroom where students will trust a teacher and students will trust one another. If they trust you, if they trust one another, they will take risks. And in those risks, will come the opportunity to learn.

Bill Germano ([11:20](#)):

There's a lot of good feeling about saying that the syllabus responds to students or that students are partly responsible for how a course will flow. But I think one can even take it further, and this is a very fresh anecdote because my last class meeting was this week. But I was teaching for the first time a course on Hamlet, just on Hamlet. And to be clear, none of my students are liberal arts majors, they're all either in engineering, architecture or art.

Bill Germano ([11:55](#)):

So none of them comes with what one might think of as the basic equipment of Shakespeare analysis. But I wanted to do a course just on a single play. I chose Hamlet. We had planned to teach one act a week for a week and then read criticism and do other kinds of things. And it became very, very clear that the students were really interested in other cultural adaptations of the play as well as the philosophical questions the plays lead.

Bill Germano ([12:24](#)):

They were less prepared for and less interested in doing some of the kinds of work that I might be doing teaching a graduate class, say in English literature. And so the class morphed. I'd never taught this course before, it turned into a course not on Hamlet, but a course on thinking with Hamlet. And if I were to teach the class again, I might even have the nerve to call the course Thinking With Hamlet, Reading Shakespeare in the World or something like that.

Bill Germano ([12:53](#)):

And that's directly a function of the way my students changed the course that I was teaching. I didn't lose control of it, but we did this cooperatively. And in retrospect, I'm really happy with the unanticipatable changes that I was able to, shall I say sort of orchestrate. But I didn't run them in any clinical way, the students were really doing the work.

Catherine Ross ([13:22](#)):

That's a really powerful example of a course and teaching being about what the students will do as well as what the instructor is doing, right? Kit, did you want to jump in on this?

Kit Nicholls ([13:36](#)):

Yeah. I mean, Bill and I also have been talking a lot lately about the feeling broadly shared across our students, but also I'd say among the entire US population and probably this is a global issue at this point, that knowledge is increasingly an alienated part of human life, that our relationship to knowledge is distant. And Hamlet's a great example of this, right?

Kit Nicholls ([14:07](#)):

I mean, I think our students feel increasingly distant from Shakespeare. But the way that you bridge that gap is by giving people tools so they can do something because knowledge isn't a set of facts that you... I'm talking about dead ideas here. Knowledge is not a set of facts that you just kind of pour into

somebody's brain, knowledge is... and this is something that we also say in the book and that I think we are drilling more and more into over time, but knowledge only really has meaning in community.

Kit Nicholls ([14:38](#)):

Knowledge only really has meaning in action. And in fact, I'd go as far as to say that many things that we might think are knowledge, they're not even actually knowledge if they're not active socially, by which I mean we've got to have the students working with each other and with us and engaging in a set of practices in relationship to knowledge, and that's where the knowledge is happening. And that I think reduces the alienation and brings them closer to feeling like they've got a grip on what might be difficult texts or difficult methodologies with which at the beginning of the course they're unfamiliar.

Bill Germano ([15:18](#)):

I wanted to jump in here just to say that in these difficult political times, I have frequently been countering expressions along the lines of democracy is not a state, it's an activity. And I'm feeling that there's a resonance here with learning, that knowledge is not a state, knowledge is an activity. And if we can allow students the freedom to embrace that as an idea, we will signal to them that we're not teaching a package of goods that we have to deliver semester after semester to group after group after group.

Bill Germano ([16:04](#)):

I've never taught a class that looked the same when I've taught it a second time or a third time or a fourth time. And that means a lot more work for the teacher, but I think that's unavoidable. When you want to make the students who you are teaching the subject of the course, the material is the essential tool for teaching that subject.

Catherine Ross ([16:30](#)):

I just really love those two statements. Knowledge only has meaning in a community and that knowledge is not a state, it's an activity. I think that is very powerful language and leads into another quote that I wanted to ask you about to unpack a little bit. And I notice the words that are really popping out at me when you talk about this are words like community, social, trust, and this quote, I think speaks to that.

Catherine Ross ([17:12](#)):

This is a quote that's later on in the book. It says, "Let's agree that a syllabus is above all else, a design for student work. Again, it's about what they will do, not so much about what you will do. A steady reform movement has for decades been advocating for a different relationship between faculty and students, one in which nurturing and motivating supplants deciding and condemning."

Catherine Ross ([17:45](#)):

Those are some pretty radical words in higher ed. Can you say more about the relationship of deciding and condemning and the dead ideas that exist about what academic rigor is and how academic rigor often blocks us or at least perceptions of and beliefs about academic rigor can block the adoption of this more nurturing and motivating role for instructors?

Kit Nicholls ([18:18](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I think when we talk about rigor, it tends to be framed in terms of how hard we are on students, right? So the rigor actually is really in the grading, if we're being honest, right? When people talk about rigor, they're really talking about maintaining grading standards or something like that. And there's a place for ensuring that students are attaining a certain level of knowledge.

Kit Nicholls ([18:45](#)):

I mean, we teach at a school where more than half of our students are engineering students. And to use a somewhat antiquated sort of metaphor for this, the train signal has to work every time, right? You can't have a 98% success rate on the train signal, it has to be right a hundred percent of the time. So I want to recognize that there's places where rigor is a sort of non-negotiable quality in higher education.

Kit Nicholls ([19:14](#)):

At the same time though, we're more interested in what rigorous teaching and rigorous learning might look like, which is different from rigor in terms of here is a set body of knowledge and you must attain it, right? For us, rigorous teaching has way more to do with listening to students and paying attention to what they're able to do from week to week and what we want them to be able to do the following week.

Kit Nicholls ([19:41](#)):

And students will only work hard if you have trust with them, that's actually the truth. Or if they are working hard, they're working hard the wrong way without trust. There's a line in the book which is a quote from an old friend I used to teach with at NYU. She said that she had figured out why one of her students, she said, "Now, this is a really talented student, she really ought to be an A student, but she keeps giving me B work. And I figured out why, it's because she keeps trying to get an A."

Kit Nicholls ([20:15](#)):

I know that sounds circular, right? It's like a zen, mondo or koan. But the basic problem is that when we focus on the wrong kind of rigor, students become focused on the grade rather than on the activity and on what they're genuinely going to gain that's going to last beyond the course. And I think that's one of the dangers, right? Rigor almost always takes us to this adjudicating position. And that's not where we want to be and we don't want the students to be thinking of us in those terms. That's not effective.

Catherine Ross ([20:53](#)):

Oh, there's so many questions I want to ask you. Let's move on to thinking about, I always ask people like, what was your aha moment? So I had personally an aha moment about the syllabus I think probably over a decade ago, when I saw a very short little article in the Chronicle of Higher Ed. I think it was called something like, "What Does Your Syllabus Say About You?"

Catherine Ross ([21:21](#)):

And it talked about things like tone and who your audience is and how are people going to envision you? How are potential students going to think about you when they read this document? And that to me was a moment of, "Oh, right. A syllabus shouldn't be something we just write for administrators." But I'm curious to hear what your aha moments were when you realized that the syllabus could be an entry point for tackling so many things that come into play when you think about designing a course, representing it to your students, teaching it.

Catherine Ross ([22:04](#)):

I'm sure you had aha moments in your teaching, but you both talk so much in the book about the importance of collaboration. Perhaps there were also aha moments you had in your conversations with each other, not necessarily in the classroom. So I'd be really grateful if you could share any of that with our listeners.

Kit Nicholls ([22:26](#)):

And I'll start by saying that working on a book together with Bill was like one giant sequence of ahas, that the ahas that you get just when you're having really wonderful conversation with a colleague. And my favorite kind of ahas in conversation with colleagues really are when you get into the nitty gritty of teaching, the kind of hallway conversation that you hear in a department when things are going well, is people talking about what they tried to do in class that day, admitting when they failed, every once in a while having some really amazing success, sharing notes et cetera.

Kit Nicholls ([23:07](#)):

So the first thing to say just is that the things that happen in conversation with a colleague when you're concentrating your minds on your students, that's the best kind of aha. And that does kind of take me to the notion that indeed collaboration itself was one of the first things that we figured out, was that a syllabus is a weird kind of document, right? Because it's not a script that you're just going to read straight through word for word.

Kit Nicholls ([23:38](#)):

It doesn't lay out everything that's going to happen because if it is indeed about what your students will do and if you're not simply a puppet master sort of choreographing every last thing your students will do, well, then it's closer to the score for a jazz tune rather than where you're spelling out every single note. And that sense of the syllabus led us to a whole set of other ideas about how collaboration really works.

Kit Nicholls ([24:08](#)):

It took me into the strange place of reading a whole bunch of sociology and anthropology about jazz actually and how group improvisation functions as a way of really thinking through the beautiful messiness of the classroom. The fact that, for example, students sometimes need to take solos. And part of our job is to make sure that we all know this problem, sometimes the student likes to take solo a little bit too much.

Kit Nicholls ([24:39](#)):

So what do you do to maintain trust even with the student who just wants to be out there with their trumpet day after day after day? So the collaboration aha was a really essential one. You mentioned thinking about the syllabus genuinely as a form of writing. We were thinking about that too, and we're both writing teachers, I run a writing center, and we realized that one of the most under thought areas of the syllabus is actually the syllabus as a thing that you produce through a writing process.

Kit Nicholls ([25:16](#)):

We don't talk much about actually what we writers do, we are all writers when we're writing a syllabus. And that implies that you actually probably need a writing process just like you would if you were

publishing an article in a journal. So what does that tell you? Right? What kind of insights can you gain when you start to think about your process in writing the syllabus, when you think about your audience, as you suggested Catherine? So that's a handful of them. Bill, do you want to talk about what were your ahas actually? I don't think we've had... we haven't really done a post-game on this in this way.

Bill Germano ([25:54](#)):

We haven't. I had been joking during the process of this, that process of writing this book. I've written books before, but I've never written with anyone else, which is fairly typical for people in English lit. I mean, if you work in literature, you feel there's an obligation only to produce something that is your own, which of course is one of the enabling fantasies of scholarship, that what you produce is in some sense yours rather than the property of an us, to which you hope to gain membership in some way.

Bill Germano ([26:33](#)):

But if you're going to collaborate, you've got to collaborate with exactly the right person. And Kit is exactly the right person for me to be collaborating with because we just began talking and we're immediately enmeshed in the big philosophical questions about teaching. Kit and I like to say that teaching is about people doing people things, that's what we teach.

Bill Germano ([27:00](#)):

When I say I teach in the humanities, what does that mean? Oh, I'm the professor of English literature. I really don't teach very much English literature in my college, but what I hope I'm doing is I'm using the skills and experience of having spent a life working in the humanities and social sciences. And as a sidebar, I hate that distinction, but it's institutionally there for us and we have to work around it.

Bill Germano ([27:28](#)):

All of those fields are about humans doing human things. And the classroom is a place for students to see that they are humans doing human things as is the person next to them and people they will never meet and people who died 10,000 years ago and how to bring all that together in a kind of both exhilarating and humbling way. To take the concept of trust and extend it even further is to allow the possibility that people you've never met and will never meet have a right to the lives they live and are legitimate examples of being human, however alien and incomprehensible their lives might be.

Bill Germano ([28:16](#)):

So I think that any form of teaching brings us to that and that there's a freedom in that, a liberation from the idea that there's only one way of living, there's only one right answer. Teaching in the humanities is not about one right answer. It might be about, can you come up with a great question? We talk about Bell Hooks, I think briefly in the book.

Bill Germano ([28:41](#)):

Well, we certainly talk about Bell Hooks when we talk together and her wonderful phrase, "Education is the practice of freedom", has lots of implications for the classroom, even for college freshmen. What kinds of freedoms can we talk about? And I think the connection between freedom and trust and risk is a central diagram of pedagogy, of crafting a syllabus that will be meaningful for a teacher and for students, and we hope for students thinking lines after the course is over

Catherine Ross ([29:21](#)):

Well, that is I think a great segue into one more big question I kind of want to sneak in here. So you talk about a dead idea that students have when they come into classes, probably particularly freshmen, right? Who haven't yet experienced what college is or what university is. And I think this passage you wrote really captures that dead idea.

Catherine Ross ([29:51](#)):

"Because it's so easy for our students to take the class for granted as a form, they will often come to us without an active awareness of their part in making a good class good or a bad class bad. The class just is. And if it's not especially inspiring, then it must be the professor's fault or maybe the fault of the material."

Catherine Ross ([30:20](#)):

And this really speaks to, I think, what you were just talking about, Bill, Bell Hooks' conception of this idea of liberation in the classroom and how we really have to... and the trust, sorry, the trust piece that you talk about. And I know she talks a lot about that as well and the community that you build. So how do you encourage instructors to counter this kind of implicit idea that students have about what classes are?

Kit Nicholls ([30:56](#)):

I mean, I'm totally fascinated by the idea of the classroom and the college course as a received form that was socially constructed. There's no actual reason it has to be what it is, but we got too far to call it a historical accident, but it doesn't have to be that way. But I think, and just getting back to pedagogical first principles, the best way to get students to see that is to try to get them to have that thought for themselves.

Kit Nicholls ([31:28](#)):

So the first thing I would do, and I love to do this early in a semester, is design a set of writing prompts that's appropriate to the moment in class and the particular material that I'm teaching, where I lead the students through some writing, some conversation with each other in order to try to get them to talk with one another about their assumptions about what a class is and where those assumptions might have come from and why those assumptions may be attached to ideas that really aren't as forever and all time as they might seem to be.

Kit Nicholls ([32:06](#)):

If the students can articulate the idea that the classroom is socially constructed, then you can run from there, right? And it always helps of course, if on day one, you show them that the classroom is a space where you work. I think too often professors make the mistake, they show up and day one of class is syllabus day, right? Where you just read through the syllabus. I strongly discourage people from doing that, right?

Kit Nicholls ([32:35](#)):

The best thing to do on the first day is just start working and the work is their work, right? So get them really cool stuff to do on day one and then maybe get into what the class is about. By day two or three, you might then be able to issue a little bit of a shock to the system and take them through those writing

prompts where you try to get them to recognize that they have assumptions about what a class is and how it works.

Kit Nicholls ([33:01](#)):

And then by week four or five you might actually have them start actively doing some work, imagining what they want the class to be, which is part of why it's so essential that you leave some space in your syllabus for change. Because if the students don't have a stake, if it's just on rails and week four leads to week five leads week six, and it sort of doesn't matter what the students are doing, you're just going to keep driving them forward. Then all of that trust that we've been talking about, if you had it, it's going to leave the room and you probably never got it in the first place.

Catherine Ross ([33:35](#)):

I have a hard time picturing this in an engineering context.

Kit Nicholls ([33:42](#)):

Well, what's fascinating Catherine actually is, this isn't engineering, but it's the hard sciences. I was talking with a friend over the course of the semester who was really struggling with Zoom teaching. He's a geologist, but he was teaching one of these courses that students can take to satisfy distribution requirements, right? Which is commonly known as Rocks for Jocks.

Kit Nicholls ([34:09](#)):

And he was struggling because he knew that a quarter of his students were cheating on the quizzes. They were in a discussion in a chat room together and he actually gained access to the chat room and saw it happening. What's interesting is, so he was worried about it, he was trying to figure out what to do. And I live in upstate New York. So we were sitting outside socially distanced around a fire on a cold night in the fall.

Kit Nicholls ([34:37](#)):

And together we imagined a class period where he would take them through a set of questions about why they were taking the course. Okay, it's required, but what could I potentially get out of it? Why was it required in the first place? Have you guys thought about that? Why would the university make me do this? How might the ways of thinking about the natural world that I'm learning to engage in in this course, how might they extend beyond my time in college?

Kit Nicholls ([35:06](#)):

And he came to me afterwards and said that it was the most interesting discussion that they had had all semester and that it really kind of rewired his brain about teaching. So I actually think these ideas, people in the hard sciences and engineering, I think are maybe scared of bringing this kind of stuff into their classroom. It feels unrigorous, it feels too soft, it feels like social work or something. But it's deadly serious because you absolutely need to get your students oriented towards the work in such a way that they have an honest relationship with you and with the work.

Catherine Ross ([35:42](#)):

That is a great example. Thank you so much for sharing that. So let's wrap up with a big question. What have you learned from your students? You've already alluded to some things, but what is maybe something really powerful that you think you've learned from your students?

Kit Nicholls ([36:03](#)):

Bill, do you want to lead off?

Bill Germano ([36:07](#)):

Summary is always difficult, isn't it? I think the thing that I have learned gradually over the last several years of teaching as I've spent more time thinking about how I teach and not simply what I teach is that my students are really my subject, that their engagement is the real metric of the success of my class. And it's not my class, it's not even their class, it's our class and it exists for 15, 16 weeks.

Bill Germano ([36:53](#)):

Absolutely essential, I've learned not to lecture. And I know this is anathema for different institutions in different arrangements, but I teach classes of no more than 20 students. I will not lecture for them. I will give them brief presentations, I will make them do things. I will break them into groups. I will insist that they talk and I will insist that they talk to one another. In Zoom, that's a bit of a challenge, in the physical classroom, it's a little easier. But those are some of the things that they have taught me and that influenced the way I think about what I will do next semester and the semester after that.

Kit Nicholls ([37:41](#)):

I would say that the most important thing I've learned from students over the years is that they can do things I don't know they can do. And that if I don't design a course in such a way that there's space for them to do those things, that I couldn't have anticipated, then I will have failed the students and I will have turned the class into a sort of mirror reflection of myself which is a really boring way to teach.

Kit Nicholls ([38:12](#)):

I spend too much time with... especially right now during the endless pandemic, I spend way too much time with myself. And the last thing I want to do is sort of stare at myself as though I were looking at myself on a Zoom screen for 15 weeks. So every student I've ever worked with who I've taught well has shown me things I could never have known that they would do.

Kit Nicholls ([38:44](#)):

And I'd say the other thing is that one's authority rests, not in one's distance from, or elevation above students, one's authority rests in the trust that one builds with students. And this is a lesson learned from years and years and years of working in writing centers, but then that translates into larger groups in a surprisingly clean and straightforward way.

Kit Nicholls ([39:14](#)):

One has to get to know, to whatever extent possible, everybody in the room. I had a professor in college who though he didn't teach the 3, 400 person lectures on the Bible as literature, Shakespeare, he would run up and down the aisles of the lecture hall, making eye contact with every single student in the room and he would shake the hands of people on the aisles, welcome them to the lecture. He did this every single time.

Kit Nicholls ([39:45](#)):

And I recall, I was generally very good about not skipping class as an undergraduate, but I skipped class one day and the next day he was running up the aisles and he looked me dead in the eye and he said, "Where were you on Tuesday?" So I think... which is to say also, by the way, that one learns something as a student too that translates into being a teacher, that there's a real continuum, this is a thing we stress over and over in the book, you can't separate teaching and learning. In fact, we really need a word that combines the two somehow, because it's a false binary. So another way to answer the question is one learns from one's students by being a student.

Catherine Ross ([40:33](#)):

Those are wise and extraordinarily powerful words. So I'm going to let us close with those words. And thank you both Bill and Kit for taking time to talk with us and for sharing your thoughts, experiences, and your work as teachers. I'm so grateful for this.

Bill Germano ([40:57](#)):

Thanks.

Kit Nicholls ([40:57](#)):

Thank you Catherine.

Catherine Ross ([41:01](#)):

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