

Alex:

I am sitting here today with Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren who was teacher of the year for the 2015/2016 academic year. Dr. Ahlgren teaches applied physiology and kinesiology and she is here to tell us a little bit about what she does to bring her classroom to life. Can you tell us a little bit about what you teach and your philosophy on teaching?

Joslyn:

So... The two primary courses that I teach are anatomy and physiology. I also teach a fitness assessment and exercise prescription class. Other courses that I teach pretty regularly or off and on include exercise physiology, graduate level fitness assessments. I also now teach two new courses that I have developed in the last year. Functional Musculoskeletal Anatomy which we changed the name to Kinetic Anatomy, but it's basically a kinesiology course heavily emphasizing anatomy, and a teaching experience course for my undergraduate teaching assistants.

My overall teaching philosophy is that students should work very hard for what they're getting. And mostly that's because when they work really hard for it, they actually get to keep the content. When you take classes where you just go in and check your boxes and do what you got to do to spit it on the exam at the end of the term. And there are things at the beginning of the term you don't remember doing. I can look at my transcript as an undergrad and see classes I have no idea that I actually took. I do not remember taking those classes. And it's because I did what a lot of students do, I did what I had to do. I spit it out on the exam and there it went. So I really generate my course and develop them and design them in such a way that students get to keep what they learn in my course so that they can go out and actually use it. I try really hard to make my courses really focused on applying information and transferring information to novel scenarios so that whatever it is you're learning you'll actually be able to do something with it. I don't consider my courses (2:18) to be courses in knowledge dissemination. This is not an information gathering session it's actually learning how to use that information.

(2:28) Students have google, they have every kind of internet resource at their fingertips. They don't need me to feed them information, they need me to show them how to use it. So I really try hard in terms of a teaching philosophy to do that.

Alex:

That reminds me of a quote. "That Education is not about filling buckets but about lighting a fire." I really love that philosophy. I did want to ask you a little bit, I realize the topics that you teach are quite challenging for some and I wondered how you approach those topics that are so challenging and made them understandable for all?

Joslyn:

(3:21) I think I'm just really lucky because the stuff that I teach is super fascinating and I think that most students that come into my classrooms, whether they are online or face-to-face classrooms generally have an appreciation for how interesting it is. And I tell all of my students,

especially in anatomy and physiology courses, that this is probably the best science class they'll ever take because it applies to them it applies to every person they know, their parents, their lovers, their children, everybody. The fact that they get to apply it across the board pretty much means they'll get to keep this information because they use it. I think I just ended up really fortunate in that I get to teach really cool material. But I think also, you know I go to teaching meetings and I hear faculty complaining a lot about how students can't do critical thinking, they're just horrible at critical thinking, but I often don't hear them talking about how to address the issue, and so one of the things that I really focus on in my courses to help students do the critical thinking aspect of these more challenging courses or courses that can be challenging for students. And they're also really high volume courses. We cover a lot of material in anatomy and physiology and I think that makes it a little challenging as well. So I really try to address the deficit in critical thinking and practice it.

(4:49) I tell students in my syllabus and the first day of class, "you are in a sport when you are practicing to excel in that particular sport." If you're playing soccer, you're gonna practice soccer moves you're not gonna go to the basketball court to practice. If you're in a course that requires a lot of critical thinking and transferring of application, that's how you have to study. You can't just make flash cards and turn them over. That's only going to promote memorization, it's really not going to help you learn the information at a higher level. So I try to get students to do that. Which can be hard because it's more time consuming, and it's not straightforward as flipping over flashcards. So I try to encourage, I teach students how to do those types of things, how to snowball their notes in such a way they can accumulate information as they go so they are not just studying all at the last minute.

(5:39) I show them how to use google images and just look things up and take an image that's in their slides, look at a different picture of it on google while you're studying. so you can transfer some of these concepts while you're studying so it's not really adding time to your study, but it's adding an element of layering to your studying that will enhance what it is we're trying to accomplish at the outset. I also really try to get students to engage with one another as well. We talked about this a little bit earlier with foreign language in that it's really important to have an actual, audible, vocal piece to that. And I try to encourage my students in anatomy and physiology especially to do that, because you can say it the right way in your head all day long, but the second it comes out it might not be right. We can do this on paper as well, you're reading over a word like oligodendrocyte, if you look at that word and dread having to say it or pronounce it, you're going to skip over it while you're studying, and then on the exam you're not really going to connect with that word. And so it makes it more challenging for you to really understand what it is if you don't actually face it and say it and try. So engagement with classmates I think is also a really key component to getting over the hurdle of the challenge. And I think that working with groups is really important for students to because they can really help each other. Peer learning is a real thing.

(7:04) I can say it all day long, but your peer can say it two words different and a light bulb goes off. And you get that interaction. You know in your head you might be saying "Yes I

got it I got it I got it” but if you’re saying this out loud and the person sitting next to you goes “Wait, what?!” Then you have to stop, you have to explain it. Maybe it wasn’t right, maybe it was right and they just didn’t understand the way you said it. So it really facilitates deeper learning and the ability to communicate that. Which is one of our course objectives. In all of our courses we have a communications piece. So I think it helps.

Q: How do you teach with such passion?

Joslyn:

(7:42) I’ve been teaching this type of material since 1999/2000 so it’s been a little while, and I feel like every single time I teach the same class, I get something new out of it. Even if it’s one or two little nuggets it’s something that I personally am like “Wow, that’s awesome!” or it’s something that I can now facilitate better teaching with. If that’s something I learn that my students struggle with, now I’m like “yes!” I can now bypass that and teach it a different way, or utilize this other really cool resource that students can now get something out of. For me I think that part of my enthusiasm is the fact that I really enjoy learning it, I like re-learning it. I really really like how appreciative students are. They really see the value in what I’m teaching, and I can see it on their faces. And for my online students when I can’t see it on their faces I can kind of visualize what they might be looking at in my lecture videos for my online courses.

(8:40) When I am doing my lecture videos for my online courses I am literally thinking, you know on the little screen there is this dolphin or gorilla face or something that you talk to instead of a class of students. I’m extroverted so when I am in front of 300 people I feed off of that energy. And if you’re in a camera studio you don’t have that, right. If you’re lecturing to two cute penguins it’s just a different feel. But, I really do still see faces of students going “what!?” Like, I see that! I’ve seen it so many times in a lecture hall that I channel that a little bit when I am doing my lecture videos. And it really is just that cool, and so for me to get to explain it and to visualize students being just like jaw dropped, it’s pretty cool.

Q: Benefits of having teaching assistants.

Joslyn

(9:32) Our undergraduate teaching assistants actually enroll in a course. It’s called teaching experience in APK. And I developed this course about a year ago and the first offering of this course was last year spring 2015, and during that time I generated this course so that any of the instructors in my department can utilize for their specific courses. So the overall generalized course outcomes are generalized across the topic. Being able to present lecture material, being able to meet individually with students, being able to help generate exam questions. Things that any of our TA’s would be expected to do coming out of a teaching experience course. Each individual instructor can make those very specific to their course.

(10:20) For example: my anatomy course, my undergraduate TA's are either lab TA's or Lecture TA's. So in my flipped anatomy class my lecture TA's come to class with me, they help me generate practice problems, they help me develop the class activities and the class discussion prompts that we do in class. So I meet with those students once every week or every two weeks we talk about things we hash through what gonna work what's not going to work, what's going to benefit students, what topics do they really need extra help on, should we draw this in class or should we draw this individually and then come back together. So they give me that kind of feedback from a student perspective that really helps facilitate the learning in that setting.

(11:03) For my lab TA's they attend the lab sections, they assist the graduate TA who's in charge of basically teaching the class. But it's really helpful because there is an extra pair of hands in class now. The other thing that has been really really helpful about having undergraduate TA's in our anatomy labs is that the students now have an extra opportunity to try and verbally communicate some of these things.

(11:26) Students will not come to my office hours to practice for their communication assessment. So, in our class one of our assessments is directly a communication assessment where you have to teach a model. So we check off the box how many you got right, how many you got wrong, what was your face like, you know what was your professional... there's a communication piece to it. And they will not come to my office hours and practice now matter how many times I say "Hey if you want to practice come to my office hours!" They won't do it. But they take advantage of our undergraduate TA's, and those TA's really make themselves available to that kind of sounding board. Which is fantastic because these are excellent students, they made an A in my course, they aced it, they nailed it, they're interested in teaching, and they can give a lot better feedback to these students in a much lower and intimidating type of setting so it's been really beneficial.

(12:20) Certainly we can have more availability on our open study lab times, so if I have more hands on deck i can leave my study lab open for a lot longer which means better accessibility for more students. If I have a student that's willing to stay in my open lab in the evening hours, students who work during the day or have classes during the day can come at a later hour to my open study lab. So it really has increased access to our study lab for a group of students, and having somebody in the study lab, not just having it open while labs are going on. Having a person there who the students can then ask questions of and get reliable answers from.

(12:54) It's also been really helpful to me in terms of generating grading rubrics for some of the assignments that I make. Getting feedback from my undergraduate TA's as to what is really helpful for students, what really matters, how should I grade attendance in a flipped classroom. I had two weeks of discussion with my undergrad TA's in regards to how we should implement the flipped scenario in our class. I Spent an entire semester with my undergrad TA's. We meet weekly all of the undergrad TA's and I. We meet weekly to discuss different topics. So

sometimes we talk about internationalization in classrooms, or students with disabilities, or anything that could possibly involve teaching we talk about. Generating a syllabus, generating affective types of exam questions, fair but challenging. So we have them practice this. It really is a teaching course, it's not just "I need your help in my lab". It really is intended to make them effective teachers, and they get to practice it while they're going which is really fun to do. We all get mad kicks out of it. We all sit around a conference table or an anatomy desk and we just geek out on science stuff. Which is very cool.

(14:12) So for them, for the undergrad TA's who get to participate in this, I feel that they probably get a lot out of it. And they all seem to be enjoying it. They all are going into different places. Some of them want to end up in academia, some of them are pre-health background, they're gonna be doctors or they're going to be nurses, or PT's. But they all resoundingly really like getting a better grasp of the content and they know they're gonna get that through teaching. And they're really working on their presentation and oral communication skills, their interaction skills. I think they're really learning a lot about being a good learner as well

(15:00) I don't think I learned how to learn effectively until I was three years into my undergrad. I would scribble down notes furiously. I would transcribe any course I would go to. Because I thought that's what it would take for me to learn that content. It was not until I was probably a junior or senior undergrad that I kind of like sat back and said "You know what I am smart enough to pay attention in class and not have to transcribe everything, that I could probably remember some of that. I don't actually have to write this down. If I have a question I have a text book, I could go look it up..." I don't have to transcribe every syllable my teacher is saying. So I try to translate that for my students as well. And I talk so fast, like so fast. And when I get more excited it just gets faster. I look out sometimes to my class of 200 students and i'll see them all face down and I'm like "what are you doing! Put your pencils down!" You're not going to be able to write this down fast enough, so just don't try. Stop, listen, it's all on the slide, you don't have to write this down, it's all in this picture. As long as you know what this picture means, you don't have to write any of this. So it's a challenge to try and get them to stop transcribing my class.

Q: Can you give us one golden nugget that will help benefit other teachers?

Joslyn:

(16:24) I don't know if I have one golden nugget, but I think that... Can I give you two? I'm going to give you two. One is that I put my success tips in my syllabus, and I review those with my students on day one. I don't expect students to read my syllabus, I think they should, but i'm intelligent enough to know they don't. But I do go over this with them. So I tell students outright, if you want to be successful in this course and you really want to do your best, here's a list of things that you need to do, and these are things that if students are struggling in my class and they come to my office hours after the first or second exam of not doing so well these are my golden nuggets that I give to them. And I publish those on my syllabus so they can start

doing those on day one. And then when they come to talk to me I will say “Did you go over the success tips? Have you started implementing those things?” Which are very different depending on which course I am teaching. But I publish them in all my syllabi, all my success tips and tips for staying on top of things. If they say yes well let's get more nitty gritty, but if they say no they'll give me an excuse why and I tell them they've got to do that.

(17:35) My second golden nugget is a tangent off of that in that a lot of times they will give me a reason why they didn't want to do that. I'll say to a student who is struggling in physiology “Are you working with a study group? Do you have a group of people that you meet with regularly to go over the critical thinking questions that i've published for you?” They'll reply with how they hate working with groups, and they give me lots of reasons, and i'll say to them there is a reason why I want them to work in a group and so transparency in everything that's in your course I think is very vital for students to buy in. Students really have to when you're teaching a challenging course and/or a voluminous course, buy into whatever it is you're asking them to do. If I asked students to go on their own to look something up, they have to in their head go “is it gonna be worth my time?” and if you're not telling them why you're having them do that, they're not going to buy in well.

(18:30) Some students will just buy in regardless, those are your front row students, you could tell them to go lick a frozen lamp shade and they'll do it because you're the teacher. But there everyone from row 2 and back that are gonna go “that's ridiculous, why would I do that? I'm not doing that.” But if you tell them why, that there's some valuable lesson in that, you might capture a few more of those people, maybe even the majority of those people. So I think it's really key to be very very transparent in why you are having students do certain things. If there's a reason.... I have a class and there's two exams, there's a midterm and there's a final, and I don't typically in most classes have that few exams, but the intention of the course is to train students for certification style exams. So I tell students that from day one, there is a reason why you only have two exams in this class and they are very comprehensive. They are big broad strokes of exam questions because that is what your certification exam is going to look like, and this is how we train for that specifically. And they're fine with it at that point. If I did that in my anatomy class it would not go so well, it's not good for that style of learning. I think really being clear with your students helps them buy in...