



Providing Efficient Feedback

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

I'm Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. And this is the Beyond the Podium Podcast series at the University of Florida. This series focuses on teaching and learning. And we're here with outstanding faculty who share their best tips, tools, and strategies, always with a little humor. In today's episode, we have the privilege of talking with Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren, one of the outstanding professors at the University of Florida, a cape-wearing superhero.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

I am a senior lecturer in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology, which is in the College of Health and Human Performance. I actually was really, really lucky. I did my graduate work here. And the semester that I was to defend my dissertation and graduate, there was an opening in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology-- and so I applied. And so I started my position the semester that I defended, which was hard. So that was a rough semester, but one I'm really, really grateful for because I got to stay in Gainesville.

We've been in Gainesville, my husband and I, for-- gosh-- 14 years now. And we love it. We're going to stay-- like you couldn't drag me away from this place.

Alexandra

Dr. Ahlgren started her faculty position at the University of Florida in a whirlwind semester. She had little time to plan ahead. This was compounded by the fact that she was preparing to defend her dissertation and the normal struggles and obligations of being a parent.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

When you first start developing courses, it takes immeasurably more time than you could ever possibly imagine or have. And so that, combined with trying to finish writing and polishing my dissertation and preparing to defend that, and the anxiety that comes along with that by itself, and then the anxiety of starting a faculty position and developing new courses, and I only had about seven days' notice as to which courses I would be developing-- so I was developing on the fly.

It wasn't like I had weeks in advance to plan out my syllabus and make a really great game plan. It was literally just day by day, OK, I'm going to get you lecture notes tonight, guys, and we're going to talk about this in the morning. So I was lucky, though, my students were really understanding. They were all very accommodating and patient with me, so I appreciated that.

But honestly, just the time element was really difficult to overcome. And with a little child, he wasn't sleeping through the night yet, he was only sleeping maybe for hours at a time at that point. And it was a little rough.

Alexandra

Joslyn has mastered the challenges of an overloaded semester. She's done so gracefully because she knows the value of transparency and communication with her students. This allows them to be flexible and understanding with her, just as she is with them.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

Well, I give them a pretty good heads up. I mean, that's one thing that I'm pretty good about with my students is I'm extremely transparent. I super believe in communication, and to the n-th degree communication. I tell my students I'm communicative because it's just necessary.

And so I told them going in that it was going to be a little bit of a rough semester for me and that I needed them to be OK with that, if at all possible. And I made time for them so I have a lot of office hours. And I do my best to go over what is the expectation for being able to meet with students. And so I think that helps.

But even just being really clear with them from the get-go and transparent-- that I'm going to get you your stuff last minute, I apologize, but I'm letting you know right now that that's how it's going to be-- I think, is really key to students being patient with you.

And I think that the same is true in reverse. If students let me know in advance that they're going to be late to class, I have no problem with that-- or if they need to leave early. I mean, it goes both ways.

Alexandra

This kind of open and transparent communication does not come naturally to everyone. And it certainly doesn't come easily to students, especially since many of them have had challenging experiences with faculty in the past.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

I think a lot of students have experienced bad faculty. I have experienced bad faculty. I think we've probably all had a class with a faculty that we knew didn't really care that much or wasn't particularly good at communication or being transparent and certainly seemed like they had better things to do with their time than be in class with you or meet with you outside of class.

I would like to hope that that's the exception to the rule, but sometimes it doesn't matter. Sometimes that one experience is enough to kind of set students on a sour path and have a negative view of faculty.

But I think that the reverse can be true. I think that if you experience a really good faculty that it can also go, oh, well, maybe that's what faculty are supposed to be like. So I never discount the ability to try and turn that around in a student's mind. And so I really hope that I can do that for some students.

Alexandra

Every one of us as instructors can impact students in this very positive way. Feedback is one of the primary means by which we can communicate with our students, and one of the best ways we can exert influence on them.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

I think feedback is great on all planes, and especially for students. In a learning environment, you're going to make mistakes, you're going to answer questions wrong, you're going to think conceptually about things incorrectly. And you have to identify those inconsistencies or those wrong answers. But just identifying the fact that it's wrong is not enough. That doesn't help you change. And so for me the feedback element is being able to not just identify it, but correct it.

Alexandra

Joslyn points out that feedback is one of our best tools. It's the secret weapon by which we can help our students.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

You know, put somebody back on a path where that is a correct train of thought or that's a better way to approach this problem or how to solve that problem more. This is the right answer

because-- that really is where the educational piece comes in. And it's not just, oh, you're wrong, which is awful. Nobody wants to hear that.

And I think it's discouraging. So when you talk with students and they can't tell you why they got it wrong, that's just unnerving. It's very frustrating. And I feel the same way. If I don't know why-- How can I repair it? How can I do anything about it? Good feedback-- is essential to student learning. Without it, students are left in the dark with only a grade and questions left unanswered.

So for me, feedback is pivotal for education, for learning. And I think the more specific you can be with it, the better.

Alexandra

So knowing this, where do we start? How does feedback really work?

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

First and foremost, do you get why yours is not correct, and the correct answer is. And that then tells me where to start. If they don't understand why, OK, this is a different conversation. If they do understand why this is right this is wrong, then I get to go a different path. And we get to talk about it, flesh it out, and dig into a few more details.

Why do you think you answered this then if you know that's right? Now what didn't land at the exam? Whereas, if you don't know the difference, OK, then let's try to dig in and find out. Did you just not study enough? Did you study not the right way?

Alexandra

Feedback is so much more than giving students the correct answer and marking their mistakes. Joslyn describes good feedback in the following way...

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

So I think feedback should be as immediate as possible. I think that feedback is better processed when it's in close time proximity to when the failure happened.

So exams are a little hard because sometimes I can't release the exam for students to review that same day-- what I would love to. I would love for students to take their exam and then come immediately sit down and let's talk about it.

I also think that feedback should be as gentle as possible. I mean, I think there's value in being very direct. I don't pull too many punches with students. If they need me to tell them something a little stern, I will. But I put Smiley faces at the ends of all my emails.

It doesn't even matter what I'm saying in your email. If I'm telling you how disrespectful you were to me in this email, there will be a Smiley face. But I am a very emotive type of person. I am a happy person. And I like communicating with my students.

And I'm confrontational in the sense that I don't mind discussing this uncomfortable topic with you. But I think there's always going to be a positive thing that comes out of it, and so Smiley face.

Alexandra

Feedback takes time and effort. Knowing your students takes time and effort. Understanding this made me wonder how does Joslyn do it all?

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

So I get up really early. That's answer number 1. I do, I get up at 5:00 AM. And I'm every day considering getting up earlier here just so I can start my day with stuff that I need to get done at my house sooner, and just generally staying organized at as many possible moments as I possibly can.

I live by my planner. We have a very consistent schedule at my home, for all my kids, for myself, for my husband. I live by my planner and I live by my lists. I'm a list-a-holic.

Alexandra

If Joslyn could, I think she might convert her students to all be list-a-holics. But in lieu of that, she focuses on providing a really comprehensive syllabus, one that preemptively answer students' questions. And in the long-run, this saves everyone time.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

I put in hours of time into each of my syllabi. Even if it's the same syllabus I use for the last eight years, I spend a substantial amount of time going line by line through that thing asking myself, if I were a student and I was reading this, could I use this as a resource to answer questions and figure out what the heck is going on with this class. How dependent would I be on this syllabus versus questions that I would ask to an instructor or TA?

And so if I can front load that syllabus with information that will help students stay on track and get what they need, information-wise, that's going to help eliminate questions that I'm going to get during the semester about things that are really not necessary for me. As a teacher, you don't need me to answer questions about what day is the exam. It's in the syllabus. You can go to that, right?

And so I don't get a lot of questions about syllabus things. I tell students day 1, look at your syllabus before you do anything. If you have any questions about anything, even if it's content, go to your syllabus, give it a quick breeze, and if it doesn't answer, then start looking for other avenues for answering questions.

Alexandra

Clear communication with students is vital to Joslyn's courses. In order to do that, Joslyn maximizes her use of Canvas. And she offers us another time-saving tip.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

One more thing-- Is really, really important for my communication with students, especially with regard to time, is I ask students that are in my classes to only communicate with me through Canvas. So I have my UFL email address. And those email addresses, once I have addressed them and sent them, I just delete them. And then they go to my junk box. And when I've got like 3,000, I delete those and they get cleared out. But they never save, I can't archive them in any way.

But if I require my students to contact me through Canvas, I always archive every student email so that, for any reason, if they have a petition, if they have a medical withdrawal petition that they're putting forward, or if they have questions about, remember we talked about or remember you said, I can actually go back and pull out all of my archived conversations with that student and have some kind of a sense of what happened, which is really helpful for students doing petitions. I can go back and specifically say, yes, this student contacted me, she let me know that such and such was going on, she stayed in touch with me, here are all the emails that she has corresponded with me.

So it's really helpful for me on the back-end of the class sometimes to be able to have access to those archived conversations with students. So for me, Canvas is pretty pivotal with regard to communications.

Alexandra

Joslyn always manages to astound me. I'm so impressed, to say the least, with the work that she does with her students. But I also wonder how she manages to balance all this work with her personal life.

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

So I've gotten much better at saying no to things that are just really not 100% necessary. So it used to be when I was early in my faculty that if my door was open, and I like keeping my office door open, that students would come by and they'd say, oh, is this your office. And I used to say, well, no it's not, but come on in, I can help you.

And I'm happy to do that, and I'm still happy to do that. But I have found that that leeched a lot of my valuable time. And it was hard for me to keep doing that. I just couldn't get anything done.

So now I'm a lot better at saying no to students and asking them to go rely on other resources or asking that they respect my personal time so that I can be more effective when I am with them, and so that we can have a more set schedule. As much as I'd like to be available to students, I just can't be at all times. So it's gotten much easier for me to say no.

Alexandra

I would love to know Joslyn's secret. What is that special ingredient that helps her keep her sanity, despite all the craziness of her work?

Dr. Joslyn Ahlgren

But I really try to devote time to things that are super, super, super important. Fundamentally, on a principle basis, I am not letting go of this thing, like my exercise and my personal 15 minutes.

It's not even that much time in the morning, but 15 minutes is enough to satisfy my-- OK, that was my personal time today. And if I do that, it's a little easier to go into my day of chaos and come out on the back side still OK.

Alexandra

Joslyn approaches every aspect of teaching, even the challenging ones, in such a positive manner. I can't help but think that this impacts her students enormously. It really is what I think makes her a teaching superhero.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Beyond the Podium Podcast series. For more tips, tools, strategies, and resources on Teaching at the University of Florida, or to find out more about future episodes, visit the teach.ufl.edu page. And we'll see you next time.