

Bonni Stachowiak: Today on episode number 440 of the Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast, Rethinking Office Hours.

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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 being more effective at 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.

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The year was 1991. I was failing in macroeconomics. I had a roommate at the time who not only wasn't failing macroeconomics, she had earned an A in it. We sat down and she tutored me, but she also told me I was going to need to go see the professor who was teaching the class, Dr. Booth. I was terrified. I hadn't ever been to see a professor during their office hours, and I would continue this trend all the way through until my graduation.

Dr. Booth was very intimidating to me. He would lock the classroom door such that it would prevent anyone from arriving late. This wasn't an issue for me, the arriving late part, but the passing macroeconomics class was definitely a challenge for me, and it didn't seem to make a lot of sense to me why I ought to go speak to this terribly intimidating man, but I took her advice. I didn't want to fail macroeconomics.

The irony isn't lost on me that I'm about to share some advice after finishing the story about how to get students to come to our office hours when I only ever made this one attempt. Although this attempt, as you'll hear, well, it did live up to its intimidation, revealed something about my father that I won't ever forget. I still remember the stern look on Dr. Booth's face. His eyes were crinkled up. His disappointment in me seemed so evident. "What did you say your last name was again?"

After I shared with him my last name, he got up from his desk without any explanation and told me to follow him. He went to this large dusty file cabinet in a back tucked away hallway and removed some kind of a notebook from the drawers and he sort of dusted off the dust from it and returned to his office and sat back down. He sighed deeply. He asked what my dad's name was and I couldn't figure out why on earth he would be asking about my dad. He also asked if my dad had gone to the same school I had attended, he had done that. The professor then slowly shared that my dad had been his student, and in fact had even been selected as the business student of the year in the late 1960s.

I was very glad to know that about my dad. My dad does still to this day doesn't reveal a lot about himself so this was a little memory that I otherwise might not have ever surfaced about my dad. I don't remember getting any new insights about economics during my visit. I don't mean to throw a shade on Dr. Booth, who [chuckles] isn't here to defend himself, but I just remember the intimidation was really hard to get past. Then the vulnerability involved in learning something about my dad that I didn't know.

I did end up passing the class, in case you're interested, and decided that it was only in such a desperate time I would ever visit a professor during their office hours. It didn't really occur to me at the time that it was part of their job. I seemed to sort of think like that would be invasive of me to think that they were supposed to spend time outside of their job with me. Again, I just didn't have any sense of what professors did.

I'd like to share some ideas that I have about how we might rethink office hours, and I'm going to share about some inspiration I drew from someone online that has a magnificent tradition with office hours, and that's how we'll spend our time together today.

The first category of ideas that I'd like to share with you is what I call setting the stage. None of these approaches require getting permission from anyone to try them out. It's just how do we set a stage for a welcome, for acceptance, for the invitation such that office hours can be.

First off, I suggest that we be welcoming. I've got this wonderful colleague, Roger Heuser, he's a professor of leadership studies at Vanguard University where I work, and he regularly invites people to join him in his office for tea. He's done this with me before. He's got a box of all these different types of teas from around the world and a set of fancy tea cups. I know that they're fancy because they look fancy, but they also have the cup and the saucer, and that's what makes me think that they must be fancy.

The whole experience of getting to join him for tea in the past made it feel like our conversation was the most important things to him in those moments as colleagues. I also know he does this, of course, for students as well. There were no incoming text messages that interrupted what either of us had to say. I remember feeling so welcomed and affirmed as a colleague.

The ideas that I'm sharing with you today come out of a column that I wrote back in late 2019, of course, before COVID. As I recall [chuckles] the suggestion about being welcoming, at the time, I had planned on getting some tea cups and tea. Let's just say that sharing tea indoors hasn't really been a thing for me, but I do still plan on getting myself some fancy tea cups and being able to share these experience with students.

Another big aspect of being welcoming is to show transparency. There's a transparency in learning and teaching, abbreviated TILT. The TILT project encourages us to help students understand how they learn and to pull back the veil on the teaching and learning process. This model advocates using a three-part approach to transparency.

Each assignment should have a clear purpose, a description of the task and associated criteria for how the learning will be graded. We should bring that same emphasis on transparency into office hours, being clear with students about the purpose for office hours in the syllabus. Each time an invitation is extended to join you in your office hours, establish a clear and easy signup process and communicate what students can expect when they decide to take advantage of office hours with you.

Structure time for scaffolding. Consider encouraging students to use office hours as a time to scaffold assignments. Just as scaffolding is used in the physical construction of things, as in to hold a structure up as it's being built, the office hours can be a place for students to bring in their work for input before it's complete. For instance, if you've assigned a paper, you could invite students to come into your office with an idea and a brief outline so you could talk through it together.

Some professors require this as a component of an assignment, although I'd caution against too much coercion or too high stakes of a situation because what you're trying to do is give the perception that office hours are inherently valuable. I do also understand the benefits of a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, so you'll need to do what works for you in your context and with your unique style and approaches.

Another aspect you could do is to invite groups. It can be helpful to welcome groups of students into office hours. This often results in students feeling less

fearful when they're in the room with others they perceive to be in similar situations. If your students might be struggling in your class, it could be helpful to realize that there's others having challenges learning the material.

I'd now like to share some of the bigger ideas you might take the next step in terms of office hours. One is to go virtual. I don't mean simply only doing Zoom, although that to me seems reading this in 2019, reading a headline of going virtual as a bigger idea made me chuckle a little bit, but hold on, hold on. We could do it on Zoom, but we also could even-

I had a chance to get to interview Dr. Jiang, he's Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering at San Francisco State University in 2019. He has a robot in his class that people can schedule and they can actually drive the robot. It's one of those that has an iPad that moves around with it so the student can actually navigate the robot around his office and make simulated eye contact and get to engage in a creative and fun way. That would certainly be one really inspiring way of engaging with students.

It can also be helpful to remove ourselves from the office part of office hours altogether.

Viji Sathy who's been on the show a number of times, she is at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. She talks a lot about how to be inclusive with office hours by using different formats, times, and locations. I'll put a link in the show notes to a part of her website where she talks about the different formats and what she includes in her syllabus.

I like to do the movement part of things so I will regularly invite students to go for a walk. We're fortunate enough to be near Back Bay at Newport Beach and how wonderful it is to get out and go for a walk and talk together. I think overall, as we consider the different ways of approaching office hours, to me a lot of it is about authenticity. What is going to be something that will be a draw, an invitation, something that feels welcoming and intriguing, perhaps and beneficial, a place of belonging? If you're about tea, how wonderful for you, if you're about walks, if you're about groups, what is it that might invite students?

Some of my colleagues at Vanguard University will have a mini food pantry, it's the best way I can describe it here but we have a resource on our campus called the Living Well Community Resource Center where students and faculty and staff can come to pick up, it used to be non-perishable food, but now it's perishable food. We have got a freezer and a refrigerator in there as well and some other items they can pick up, but some of our faculty will create their own little mini pantry and then include QR codes or flyers for people to make them more aware of that resource should they need it. If you're all about the tea, or if

you're all about going for a walk, what is it that authentically you can be doing in order to be more welcoming in your office hours?

Before I get to the recommendations segment, I wanted to thank today's sponsor, and that is TextExpander. TextExpander has been the longest-running sponsor on Teaching in Higher Ed and it also has been a very long-running productivity tool for me. With TextExpander, you can create what they call snippets, and these are just a few memorable characters that you get to set up that will expand, hence the word TextExpander, out to something longer or something difficult to remember.

I have used TextExpander to simulate inline text when the email client I was using didn't have that as an option and changes the color of the text and indents it and does all the things that normal email clients do, although I should say, other email clients do. I use it every time for the show notes so I can type in T-I-H-E-S-N, as in Teaching in Higher Ed

show notes. As soon as I do that, it expands and says, "What episode number is it? Who is the guest? What's the description?" All the metadata that I need to provide to our podcast host in order to get that information to all of the different services that are out there.

TextExpander is such an integral part of my productivity. I love how it's so easy to use and easy to get started, but it's one of those tools that if you walk alongside it for years, it's going to continue to give to you because there's a whole community around it, lots of ways to engage and find out other ways of using the service. Thanks once again to TextExpander for sponsoring today's episode, and if you'd like to take advantage of a special discount and a trial as well to Teaching in Higher Ed listeners, you can head on over to TextExpander.com/podcast. You can find out about the offer, a little bit more about TextExpander, and please just let them know that you heard about TextExpander from Teaching in Higher Ed. Thanks once again to TextExpander for sponsoring today's episode.

This is the time in the show where I get to share recommendations, and I'd like to talk about a new office hour tradition that I just learned about. It's from Dr. Frank Leon Roberts. Frank is an English professor at Amherst College, he's also the co-founder of the National Black Justice Coalition and Executive Director of the Baldwin Hansberry Project. I'm reading from a tweet here that I'll be putting in the recommendations for today, "My rule, any student who comes to my office hours can keep any book on my shelf that they like. All they need to do is ask. I had a professor who used to do this back in college, and I've always remembered how special it made the student-teacher relationship. Let's continue this tradition."

I encourage you to go have a look in on the recommendations and click through to the link. You can see all of the bookshelves, he's got a gorgeous office. At present, I'm recording this in the late October of 2022 and he even has a bale of hay in there with some pumpkins on it. It's just delightful. So you can go look at all of the marvelous books that he has primarily face out in his office, and he is got a few different views of his office that you can check out.

Back to what I was talking about in the episode, I hope we'll all be rethinking our office hours and how do we take our sense of identity and then, therefore, create more of a sense of welcome. By the way, not only do I recommend that you check out his tweets specifically, but all of the replies are so generous and so many people are affirming the work that he does, and it's very cute that-- Sorry, that's not a very sophisticated [chuckles] word to describe it, but a number of very well known people on Twitter with hundreds of thousands of followers comment on his tweet and it's just so marvelous to see his response to them, he's just so generous back to them. He seems surprised and delighted that they had seen his tweet and thought to comment. It's really fun just to see that happening.

As of today, by the way, October 27th, when I'm recording, the tweet where he includes the photos of his office setup and describes the tradition of giving away books has almost 20,000 likes so you can see people really got a lot out of this.

I also want to recommend that we give to his wishlist. There's a wishlist that he's created where you can order books that he could then include to give away to students that he titles, Making Black Books Available to Curious College Students: A Radical Wishlist. If you are so inclined, I recommend that we go to his wishlist and make even more of these books available to his students.

I plan on giving this away for a family member who loves books, who has a birthday coming up and this seems to me she's already got plenty of books. My brother recently visited. I think books-- Having enough books is not enough problem for her so she will just, I'm sure, be delighted that her birthday present could be getting books out to other people who would really appreciate having them. So what a fun twist on office hours, I so appreciate knowing about Dr. Frank Leon Roberts's tradition and look forward to continuing to make traditions of my own.

As I close the episode today, I just wanted to share that office hours, I think there's been a lot of conversations on Twitter and in other places about what do we call these things and knowing that sometimes office hours can seem unusual and not something very inviting and too formal and not very descriptive. I think also sometimes we're doing office hours even when we don't call them office hours so I'm fortunate in that I teach a class, right now, I'm teaching a class that

is a high flex class, and by high flex, our definition is that two of three modalities get addressed so they can have asynchronous attendance options that they go through, or they can come to a Zoom class for a synchronous class.

I don't have an in-person component, but I have been on campus while doing the Zoom more often and there's just this collection of just a handful of students who would really prefer to come to my office so it's become like a hangout there. We're together during the Zoom session, and then once the class is over, a lot of times they'll hang out until their night class, which starts at 6:30, and it's just become really a fun time. The other day they were getting ready to register for classes for next semester, and so they were talking to each other while I was filling in the attendance for those who had been in the Zoom and in person.

That day I wasn't really paying attention, but just a fun hangout place and it just made me realize that what really matters is the authenticity, vulnerability of people getting to come to a space together. That there's enough safety for us to show up in the fullness of who we are and it's been fun that it's just turned into us time and a space to hang out before the next class.

This last week they brought ice cream cones. They had fell in some a bargain where they were just going to buy some for them and yes, I was so privileged to also be included on their ice cream list, but they realized that if they spent two more dollars, they could get four box, some really great deal, and they ended up walking over to the library and giving some away and walking over all the floors of the building where I teach and where my office is, it was just such a fun, delightful thing.

However you decide to do office hours, I hope that you're able to really make those authentic connections with students and in the case of the recommendation about Dr. Frank Leon Roberts, remember he started that tradition because a professor did that for him, so what a wonderful thing. Even the one time I went to office hours in college with Dr. Booth, that while intimidating it still stays with me all this time. I didn't fail that class and I also got to learn something about my dad that I didn't otherwise know.

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Thanks so much for tuning in to today's episode. Today's episode was produced by me, Bonni Stachowiak. It was edited by the ever-talented Andrew Kroeger, Sierra Smith does the podcast production, and we're so grateful for that and thankful to you for listening. If you have yet to sign up for the weekly updates, you can get all the show notes and the links and all that good stuff once a week in your inbox along with some other resources that don't show up on the show.

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