

Bonus! Episode 3: Extended Interview with John Dunne

Season 1, Episode 3

The L&S Exchange Podcast

Erika Schock: [00:00:00] Welcome to a special bonus episode of the L&S Exchange, a podcast about teaching and learning within the College of Letters and Science at UW-Madison. We are excited to share with you our in-depth conversation about student flourishing featuring Professor John Dunne, the distinguished Professor of Contemplative Humanities in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures.

During this episode, professor Dunne sits down with Exchange Producer David Macasaet to discuss a range of topics related to student flourishing, including the popular Art and Science of Human Flourishing course at UW-Madison, the Healthy Minds Program, and teaching strategies that draw upon meditative practice. We were thrilled to gather so much insightful information on this subject, and we're excited to share it with our listeners.

David Macasaet: Could you tell us about the origin story of that course and how it has made an impact as far as you know?

John Dunne: So, in some ways I think this, the Art and Science of Human Flourishing goes back to a conversation that happened between my colleague at the Center for Healthy Minds, the director and founder Richie Davidson, the neuroscientist, and another colleague and friend at the University of Virginia, David Germano, who runs the Contemplative Science Center there, and they had a conversation, I think back in 2015, where they were really concerned about the mental health issues they were seeing among undergraduates in particular. Also graduate students actually, but especially among undergraduates and we've seen the data continue since that time.

Already starting around 2008, we see a trend toward increased anxiety and depression, maybe especially anxiety. Actually kind of skyrocketing. And those increases have just continued. This is all pre-pandemic. It's actually gotten maybe a tiny bit better even post-pandemic or, you know, we're really still in the

pandemic, but we're not at the crisis level.

So, but it's still, we're still seeing increases. And these are really dramatic increases in anxiety and depression and other mental health issues among our undergraduates, to the point where campuses just can't keep up, they can't hire enough therapists or others who can support students.

And students are sometimes really in crisis actually. When, fortunately, here at UW-Madison, I know that we have very good services for crises, but of course, you don't want students to get to the point of a crisis. So what we want is something that enables students to manage those issues and to actually live well and for that to be part of their education.

So another feature of that conversation with Richie and David and an aspect of our work in this area is actually the notion that education is not just about learning stuff or more precisely, it's not just about acquiring facts or even acquiring technical skill. It's also, in a way, the education of the person.

You know, in French, when you say *éduquer*, it doesn't just mean that someone has taken a bunch of classes. It also means that they are, in a sense, someone who's a well developed person, a person who is developing throughout their lifetime in ways that are enhancing their virtues, that are enhancing their capacity to live well.

So from that conversation then emerged what we call the Student Flourishing Initiative, which involved collaborators at University of Virginia, Penn State University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, specifically at the Center for Healthy Minds. And we'd brought together a team of about 20, more than 20 actually, content designers and content creators and curriculum designers to create this course that we ended up calling the Art and Science of Human Flourishing. But the basic idea of the course was to actually not just address sort of the mental health crisis. So it's not meant to be simply, you know, in some fashion, a mental health intervention, but also to raise other concerns like around that notion of being educated not just in the mind, but also in the heart, not just in the intellect, but in some sense in the spirit.

And also, a sense that there's a kind of fragmentation of the experience, the educational experience at the university level, where the humanities and STEM

courses can really seem to be completely unrelated to each other. So another goal of this course was to bring that sense of integration so that students can also sort of integrate that within their own experience.

And a big part of that actually also is our notion that part of the mental health crisis we see, and part of the difficulties that students face, is a sense in which their lives are kind of fragmentary, can be very fragmentary on campus. And there can be a sense of not really belonging. And this has led then to this emphasis on belonging and something that we're gonna be really doing more and more on, especially with my colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds,

What we developed at the center—my colleague Cort Dahl, working with Richie and other people, developed this model of wellbeing that is the basis for our Healthy Minds program. And I'll say a little bit more about that later, but basically, we have these kind of four pillars of wellbeing: awareness, connection, insight, and purpose.

And the course is actually designed around those pillars, but we start with sort of the foundations. And some of the foundations, like a simple foundation is, well, what do we mean by this word flourishing? And we chose that word because it is—unlike wellbeing, which sometimes can sound a little bit like we're talking about something that's about health or that's kind of medicalized, we wanted to choose something that in some ways would feel a little unfamiliar to people, but that would also connect very directly to philosophy and work in the humanities. And when we talk about flourishing with students, we give various examples. We like to use a work by Cahn and Vitrano that is about the questions around flourishing.

And it gives these two examples of two people. One of them is a professor who plays the cello and has published several books and has a family and kids and is well liked in the community. And then another example is a sort of surfer. You know, I think of the dude from the Big Lebowski who's a nice guy, also well liked in the community, but has never really had a long-term relationship.

He is very generous, inherited money. He is very generous and he's living a good life and has lots of friends. They say, each of them—at the end of the paragraph, as they describe these two individuals—they say, well, you know, both of them expect to continue to flourish. And of course the question is, well, what is that

flourishing?

Totally different examples. And part of our point then when we raise that is, don't think that we're gonna tell you what flourishing is. We're gonna ask you to examine for yourself what flourishing is, we say to the students. We are gonna present some of what we think are the key ingredients for flourishing that we think really apply across many different contexts, many different kinds of cultures, many different kinds of perspectives.

We're not gonna say that one has to be—that there's a sort of mainstream version and a peripheral version, like a center lands and a borderlands. We're gonna acknowledge that there are these kinds of differences, and that's a very important aspect of understanding how flourishing works, that we can find ourselves located socially, not in the center lands, or actually have a kind of intersectional identity where parts of our identity are sort of mainstream, parts of our identity are even excluded or minoritized. So we ask, we try to make it complicated actually, but we do ask them to come up with, by the end of the semester, a sense of what their own account of flourishing is, drawing on the various ingredients that we go through. After we lay out the sort of foundations, that foundational question of what flourishing is, we then go through awareness, connection, insight, and purpose. What we also call in the course integration, like taking what we've learned and bringing it into the community. We go through that with the various ingredients and ask them to come up with their own account of flourishing.

Part of what they're learning is that flourishing is a process. It's not a sort of endpoint. Wellbeing is not just a thing, you know, like you reach a certain point on a scale and now you're in a state of wellbeing, but rather actually flourishing can also be happening in the middle of a great challenge.

So, you know that idea, as you said, the sort of w curve you're going up and down. There are gonna be fluctuations. That doesn't mean when I'm at the bottom that I'm not flourishing. It's how I work with that, what I learn from that, how I spring back or spring forward. And actually we even stress the idea beyond resilience, which you could say is, you know, if we think of resilience is how quickly do I kind of come back to baseline? How quickly do I recover from a challenge? You can also talk about anti-fragility, which is where a system doesn't just come back to its baseline, so to speak, but actually improves, learns from,

you know, the system learns from the challenge and gets better. And we really emphasize that for students that failure, outright failure, can still be a component of flourishing. And that's something that's really quite surprising for many students who come in here and really think they have to get all straight A's, and that it's all about that kind of success and that if they fail, that that means they're just failures, then there's nothing more to be said about it.

David Macasaet: Thinking about the student experience, especially as incoming traditional-age freshmen, I guess I'm wondering what have you noticed about students coming into the course and their preconceived ideas about what they're getting into and what they hope to achieve as they begin to grapple with these new ideas?

John Dunne: One of the things I think that the freshman we work with at least—and this is probably generalizable across the whole class—is first of all, a sense of being dislocated. Even if they've only moved, you know, 20 minutes, that this is a completely new context, many of them. And we ask them. They engage in reflective journaling as part of the course.

And we ask that to be, you know, experiential, to really touch on what's actually happening in their lives. And many of them report that this is the first time they're living alone. This is the first time, you know, they have to do their laundry, they really have to take care of their own meals, you know, eating properly or whatever, sleeping and so on.

That they're suddenly in a sense becoming adults, but it's quite quick. It's a very fast transition for most of them. For that reason—and also, usually this means that they are leaving an environment in which they had friends, they had family, they had a sense of being embedded socially in some kind of community for most of them. So when they come to campus, even if they're just, again, moving not so far away, suddenly they're on their own. So one of the main features of this experience is a sense of kind of increased responsibility. I've gotta take care of myself and a sense that no one else is gonna take care of me.

So that sense of kind of social isolation, I think we see quite a lot among our students. That they are all—or at least most of them—are feeling, in a sense, a bit socially dislocated and as if they don't belong, right? And of course for some students it's much easier because of their identities, because of their social

location, it can be much easier for them to generate a sense of belonging on campus relatively quickly. For other students, it can be much more difficult. For minoritized students, students who don't see themselves in a sense as fitting into a community, who don't see their own community on campus, it can be much more difficult, of course. But all of the students, to a certain extent—and this is why teaching in an inclusive way is really important—all of the students are, in some sense, not included quite yet in a community when they come to campus, or nearly all of them. And they're experiencing this kind of social dislocation. So part of what I think is key for those students is for them to recognize, first of all, that everyone's in the same boat.

And one of the main themes for us in this course is actually that we try to develop a sense in which—and we rely here on sort of evolutionary accounts including cultural evolution, like the work of Joe Heinrich and so on—to talk about the notion that humans have evolved as cooperators, and that the only way humans survive, leave alone thrive or flourish, is together. We can't do it on our own. We may have fantasies about being able to go off in the wilderness and, you know, survive on our own, but it's unlikely that we are gonna do that without buying some boots somewhere or whatever it might be. And we didn't make those boots so we didn't make that warm parka, whatever it is. We rely on other humans in order for ourselves to survive. And that emphasis, that they're all in the same boat, first of all, and also that what it means to be human in part is to be a cooperator, those two things together actually start to develop for the students a sense of community that I think is a very important aspect of inclusive teaching in general. Especially for freshmen, like first semester freshmen, being able to give them a sense that they're all in the same boat on the one hand, and on the other hand, as humans, they're looking for other humans to team up with, so to speak. And for them to be really sensitive to how those processes work, how are they gonna make those connections? What are the downsides of teaming up? You know, in-group out-group distinctions. Those are all kinds of things we talk about in the course.

David Macasaet: It's fascinating to think about the difference that that can make. Having that context and support, even though it's framed in this very specific way, helps build that sense of responsibility but also connectedness. And I'm wondering if you have some sense of what the course has accomplished in its place here at UW-Madison and elsewhere.

John Dunne: I'm happy to say that we actually have been able to do some pretty effective research on the course. We started really right from the beginning, so we first taught the course in 2017. Had about a year and a half or so period of initial design. We constantly revise, actually every year, the course to some extent. But starting in 2017, we also conducted research on the course at all three campuses—that is to say UVA, Penn State, and UW-Madison—and we've found that our first empirical paper has come out fairly recently.

Matt Hirshberg, who was a researcher at the Center for Healthy Minds, a scientist at the Center for Healthy Healthy Minds, is the lead author of that paper. So one kind of effect we see is actually a kind of enhancement. They self-report increased capacities for attention. They self-report an increased sense of overall wellbeing, an increased sense of self-compassion. They also report an increased capacity for dealing with stress. They feel more resilient. But on the other hand, interestingly, some of the effects we see is not enhancement. It's more like a kind of inoculation. What the course seems to be doing for these freshmen, compared to a control group, is that they are not experiencing some of the downsides of that first semester freshman year that the control group experiences. So they don't experience significant increases in anxiety and depression that we do see in the control group. They maintain their sense of social connectivity and social relationships. One of my favorite measures is actually compassion for roommates. And at the beginning of the semester we see that everyone sort of loves their roommate, right? Hey, for the most part. Like, you know, hey, yes, sure, of course I feel compassion for my roommate.

And then by the end of the semester, our control group on that measure has gone down significantly. You know, like, oh, I can't stand my roommate anymore. And especially of course with stress and so on, the social relations can fray. But among our students, we don't see those kinds of declines.

There's not quite as statistically significant as some of the other measures that we have, but still a really illustrative one, that there's something that everyone starts kind of in the same place, but for many students, there are significant challenges that they don't really recover from very well after that first semester. It may take them much longer or in some cases may actually get worse.

David Macasaet: Many TAs, for instance, have that dual role of being both a

student as well as an instructor. And for me personally, I was reflecting on teaching during COVID that I need to do some work on myself before I feel ready to come back and do this again. So my question is, can we extrapolate some sort of top contour for individuals who want to be effective in their classrooms in this coming term, and maybe have something to draw upon to better understand how they can do this work themselves?

John Dunne: That's a great question, David. Let me say, first of all, actually as a kind of plug for the Center for Healthy Minds, that our Healthy Minds program could be something that instructors will find helpful. A number of people on campus have been using it, and we've been kind of slowly finding ways to share it effectively on campus, with students especially, but looking also at staff. Right now, it's something that is being used on campus by staff at the University of Virginia, actually.

And so this is an app that we've developed that's available for free, completely free. No in-app purchases or anything like that. And it actually got a great review from the Wirecutter, The New York Times review site, and you can read about it there if you're interested. And of course, we also have information about it on our website.

It basically takes this, you know, this framework of awareness, connection, insight, and purpose and provides both kind of very short podcast-like little didactic segments along with specific kinds of practices. For example, mindfulness style practices, mindful awareness, but also practices for cultivating connection and compassion. And so I just say, you know, instructors may find it helpful to check it out.

It's not necessary to kind of go through the whole app in order to really get some benefit from it. We actually use the app in class, so this is part of the way we teach the practices in class, practices like mindfulness or compassion practices or practices that are a reflection on, you know, identity, for example. We use the app to help scaffold students to engage in those kinds of practices.

John Dunne: So that's something that, you know, instructors may find helpful just to kind of ground themselves. But the other thing is that there are certain kinds of practices one can adopt, I think, in the classroom that can be very helpful. And I don't just mean sort of mindfulness style practices. Mindfulness is

something that one can use in the classroom, and we're trying to think about how we can make resources available to instructors who want to try to use some of these types of techniques in the classroom.

What we do at the start of every class in the Art and Science of Human Flourishing is we just do about 1 to 2 minutes of a very basic kind of awareness practice, a basic kind of mindful awareness practice that just allows the students to settle. And at the end of class, when they're all about to try to get up and leave, we do the same thing, actually.

And, you know, we—I remember we use a kind of phrase that was developed by Chad Magee, who used to be at the Center for Healthy Minds and is now working for UW Athletics, but who's still a strong collaborator. “Just be where your feet are,” right? Be where your feet are. And just that moment as they're trying to, you know, anxiously get their things together.

And just for a moment, taking a pause has two effects. One of them is it enables them to drop out of that, you know, kind of hyper state of arousal that is causing them stress, frankly, and needlessly. And second, and this is, I think, a key element that instructors can use even if they don't want to do a mindfulness practice in class, is it's something they're all doing together, but it's not something that in a sense has a grade or a measurement tied to it. It's just something they all do together.

In that sense, part of what we found in the class and that we got—we do a lot of work with feedback from the students, focus groups and so on. And part of what we found that students really like is just the ability to connect with other students. So every Monday, for example, we do a check in. Like class starts with a little bit of meditation, the kind of usually a mindful awareness or something else from the Healthy Minds app. And then they do a check in for 2 minutes about whatever, you know. So here this term check in refers to just, you know, sharing with each other, “Hey, what happened recently?” or “What'd you do this weekend?” In other words, not something that's really goal directed or anything. It's just really about connecting with somebody else. So they love that.

And I think that's something that people can also take, taking 60 or 90 seconds or 2 minutes in a class to allow students to do a check in—and we probably do more like 3 minutes, I guess—really can change the whole tenor of the class and how it

feels.

And then having activities. And this is another thing we do quite a lot in class is we first of all recognize that in the digital age, attention wanes fairly quickly. So after about 20 minutes, you're going to run up against, you know, a certain amount of distraction. The whole time we're going to be dealing with distraction in the classroom, from devices usually. So part of what we also try to do is structure the class in a way that—if we are lecturing—that after about 20 minutes or so, you just have some kind of a joint exercise for students to do. And again, something that is for them to do together. Like sometimes you'll have students pause and write down and reflect something.

And that's okay. I think that can be very useful too. But I think then have them share. So just that activity of kind of sharing, of doing something together in small groups can have a really big impact on how the students experience the course and also refreshes their attention and enables you to then go on and do something more that requires a bit of focus. So that's another kind of activity, or let's say a technique, that can be very effective. And these, I think, can apply in all kinds of classes. You can do this in, you know, in a STEM course. You can do it in a humanities course, you know, where you have a check in maybe at the beginning. We just do it on Mondays. And we meet three times a week—twice in plenary session and then once in a discussion or contemplative lab. So, you know, I think these types of techniques—really simple, but actually can be very effective in creating a different kind of class environment.

Again, that sense of connectivity, but also a sense maybe of a little spaciousness in the experience of learning.

David Macasaet: There's this aspect of traditional teaching that maybe is a little recalcitrant that has like, you know, ranging from things like sort of weeding out students if they're not doing well to just that suffering aspect of, you know, getting through something that's very difficult and that being a feature. I think my question is related to the resilience and maybe anti-fragility that you mentioned earlier, and individuals that may be inherently skeptical about how far they move or where they perceive the idea of inclusive teaching is, and if there's anything that we can do to shed light on what that really means in practice as opposed to what's kind of floating out there in the nebulous world of social media and little impressions of inclusive teaching.

John Dunne: Well, I'm still myself really learning about this. My colleague Tony Chambers has been thinking about it much more than have over the years. So I encourage you to speak with him. But, you know, one of the features when we say inclusive teaching, and one way to thinking about that is non-exclusive teaching. Like, what am I doing in the classroom that is excluding? How is my course structured or my assessment structured in such a way that I am excluding certain people? Usually that means we're excluding minoritized students. Students who are in some sense or another, you know, not again, in the center lands or not, you know, in that mainstream or whatever would be, at least in some aspect of their identity.

And that can be very simple. It can be as simple as the kinds of examples one chooses to use when trying to illustrate some points. That examples that draw on a highly privileged lifestyle, for example, are just gonna immediately send a signal to students who are from more challenging backgrounds. It's just gonna immediately send a signal like, oh, you know, this is what everyone else here is experiencing. Maybe your experience wasn't like that, but the rest of us, this is what we experience. That may or may not be true, but that can certainly be the feeling, the sense that a student can get from using just those, just the kinds of examples that I choose to use.

You know, let's say, oh, well, you know, when I was out golfing or whatever it might be, something that really kind of assumes a certain level of privilege. I was out of my sailboat or, you know, I was on vacation in The Bahamas or whatever it is. Certain kinds of examples that will be received as excluding certain students. So that's one issue.

I think another issue then is actually a sort of sensitivity to the challenges that students face from—and every student, again, especially freshman, as I pointed out, every freshman is facing a challenge when they come to campus, maybe there are a couple who aren't, but you know, every freshman I've encountered, and certainly the feedback we get from the course and based on our researchers, we know they're all really feeling challenged by this transition.

And those challenges are different. They're not always the same kinds of challenges. So one of the things we do is, for example, we have—there's a great essay a couple of years ago from the New York Times by Abraham Jack, who's

now a professor of sociology, I believe. I can't remember at what institution, but he's black and, you know, grew up in a challenging environment, where there was quite a lot of poverty, and the essay really just talks about what it's like to be a student who's coming from those challenges. What it's like, for example, to have to send money home. That that was, you know, part of what was simply integral to his life. And that opens the eyes of our students who are not from that kind of background, but it also tells the students who are from that kind of background that, hey, we're paying attention to that. We are trying to pay attention to the challenges, the unique kinds of challenges that you face, and these kinds of challenges are—they're wide ranging. Some of them actually also have to do with levels of stress so that as stress increases to a certain point, we know that in some contexts, especially with very simple kinds of activities, lots of stress doesn't necessarily get in the way. That levels of activation, so to speak, levels of arousal is a term you might hear, don't necessarily get in the way. But for the most part, especially for more complicated tasks, if I'm feeling too hepped up, if I'm basically feeling too worried, too anxious, or just too activated in this task, I'm not gonna perform as well.

And part of that getting hepped up is also kind of really a physiological state of arousal and stress that students can face. And my colleagues, my scientific colleagues tell me that, you know, this concept of what's called allostatic load, which is essentially that I can be coming from an environment in which, if my levels of stress expressed in physiological terms are just always at a higher level because of the challenges innate to that environment, whether it's an environment where there's food insecurity or where there's neighborhood violence or unstable social relations or whatever it might be. That if I'm coming from that kind of environment with these persistent challenges and then on top of it, I'm embedded inside of a larger culture that excludes me, right? That that kind of, I mean, that's a key feature of all that. That exclusion is also why those environments can be like that very often, that there's a causal relationship there. So that sense of being a kind of minoritized person coming from a challenging background can actually, literally just raise the baseline level of stress for an individual so that when finals come around and so on, individuals can be even more susceptible to the additional challenges that come from being overstressed.

David Macasaet: One situational factor is the pandemic and what seemed to me during that time teaching the Wisconsin Experience Seminar was a more

focused, intentional, campus directive to think about what students were going through. And I wonder if you have any reflections about the intersection of that major influence on the world and the course and supports for students and inclusive teaching.

John Dunne: I think one of the places to start here is, again, that idea that to be human is to be socially embedded. Is to be connected. There's even—we've drawn on research and students learn about something called social baseline theory developed by Jim Coan at the University of Virginia.

But this is very similar to lots of other kinds of theoretical accounts about human connectivity essentially. And part of what Jim and his group have found is that actually, immune response is related to one's sense of social connectivity. So a lack of social connectivity can lead to a much stronger inflammatory response, which we know can have—especially if it's chronic over the long term—it can have really negative effects, including, it would appear, psychological effects on anxiety and depression, being constantly sort of ready to deal with the threat. Constantly activated in that sense. To the extent that that can lead to an inflammatory response, it seems like this is not a good thing from what we can see if it's chronic, and that can be really moderated by the degree that one has a sense of being socially connected, of being socially embedded.

So social connectivity, humans just seem to work better when they are socially connected. As Jim likes to say, we basically outsource a lot of our cognitive load. We outsource some of our emotion regulation. Like we don't just have to regulate our emotions on our own, we see other people reacting to us.

We know this almost unconsciously, little micro expressions in the face, ways that they're reacting that are helping us to notice, oh, am I getting a little too worked up? And you know, what's going on with me in terms of my emotions? We actually can see that from others. So this kind of way of being embedded socially is critically important for humans.

And part of what the pandemic did is it really disembedded people. Zoom is not the same. There's probably something, but that we really don't know. And here I'm, you know, just speculating. But there's probably something about social connection, which really depends upon physical proximity, like real presence with each other. And Zoom just doesn't provide that. Also, very often what we found

when we were teaching the class online over Zoom, which we did, a lot of the time, the students would just turn their cameras off and there would be, you know, a class of 150 or something, you'd have maybe a very large number turning their cameras off.

We tried to change that over time and encourage them to put them back on, but that just shows you that there's a sense in which it's sort of, they are not connecting. They don't even wanna be seen. They don't want their image on this screen. So that was a very tough time, I think, for students. But that trend, actually, I do not think is just a result of the pandemic. I think that there is something about the way social media works, about engagement with devices that can also be exacerbating this, where instead of, if you sometimes see a bunch of students in the hallway waiting for class, very often they're all looking at their phones. They're not looking at each other. And I think there's something about a kind of social disconnection that despite the fact that it seems like social media makes us more connected, there actually may be leading to a level of disconnection. In any case, it's quite clear that students reported themselves as feeling more isolated.

We know that loneliness is a real risk factor for all kinds of issues, and that sense of loneliness and isolation of being disembedded is exacerbated by their use of social media probably, but then is also exacerbated by something else that we really talk about quite a lot in the course and which is really relevant to this, to inclusive teaching, which is the sense in which the dominant kind of mainstream society in the United States is so individualistic.

We have the students read something by Hazel Markus, for example, the well-known social psychologist who talks about this. The upshot is that that sense that to be successful—and very often they come into the course thinking flourishing, leading the good life means being successful.

And if I'm not being, again, if I'm, you know, facing a failure, if I'm, you know, having a hard time that somehow that I can't be flourishing even in the midst of that. I can't be somehow developing and learning from that. So they think they have to be successful. That that's what it means to flourish, first of all.

And secondly, that to succeed, to really be successful means you have to do it all on your own. So many of the students come in with this kind of mainstream point

of view. Remember of course there are many other cultures, subcultures, if you want to call them that, in the United States that are much more collectivists, right?

And we have many of those here in Wisconsin. We have our indigenous communities that are much more collectivist. We have our Hmong community that's much more collectivists, our Tibetan community. And those communities interact in interesting ways with, you know, this highly individualistic society in ways that can make them also feel not included actually, right? So in a certain, it's kind of, it's sort of ironic because a highly individualistic approach to one's own personal identity into the sense of what will matter in life and how I'm going to succeed in life is actually kind of excluding everybody, right? Because it's, you know, it all has to be on my own.

So part of what we really work with the students is again, a kind of account—and you can think of the course. Part of what the course is doing is giving a sort of account of what it is to be human. A certain story almost of what it is to be human. And a big part of that story is to be human, again, is to be connected, is to be in relationship, is to be in community.

And that that is, whether we like it or not, that's what it means to be human. And that there's a certain myth of that hyperindividualism that students need to move past.

David Macasaet: I was gonna ask, do you have a personal philosophy about how much to communicate with students about these other contemporary traumas in the world: war, pandemic, death, shootings?

Because sometimes I have felt that being a another person to voice that can be adding to their stress and it's just a confusing landscape, right?

John Dunne: One way to think about this is in terms of what's called adverse childhood experiences, and there's basically a kind of checklist. And once you get to a certain number of them, it really correlates quite highly with the number of difficulties in life, both in terms of both mental and physical health, where there's a higher likelihood of having some real challenges. So that's one way to think about trauma, is trauma coming from adverse childhood experiences. And there's other, many other forms of trauma or sources of trauma.

And I'm not speaking here as an expert, but rather as someone who's been working with colleagues who do have some expertise on this. Because of the nature of the class, we actually have a segment in which we have a core—each week within those—remember we have our foundations module, and then we have awareness, connection, insight, and integration, right? And each of those has a few weeks associated with it, and each week has a title, right? Of the 15 weeks over the semester. So in our connection module, we have a week called diversity. Of course, issues around diversity and equity and inclusion are part of the course throughout, but we have a week in which we really focus specifically in on that.

And in that week we do discuss actually, you know, the history of racism. The idea that actually race as a construct comes out of racism and not the other way around, just as an example. We read some of the book, *How the Word Is Passed*, right? Which was used on campus this year, by Clint Smith.

We looked at the chapter on New York, which is a really great chapter, especially for someone like me coming from New York who was completely ignorant of what was going on or what had gone on historically. So that material is really directly about all kinds of racial trauma in particular, but that's because it's part of the class.

So if we just have kind of traumatic incidents or just the baseline trauma of our world going on, I don't know whether it makes sense always to talk about it, but when there are major events, obviously, you know, we weren't teaching when the George Floyd murder happened, but, we did talk about it in the fall.

You know, it was part of what we needed to talk about in the following fall, and we still refer to it. But especially that following fall, it was very important. When there are certain cases of mass shootings, we sometimes will take a moment to just acknowledge that this is happening, that this has happened, especially if they are targeting some kind of a minoritized community.

And just take a moment to acknowledge what's happening and to invite people also to reflect and even comment if they wish on it before we move on to the material for the day. So I do think sometimes rather than like making a statement, just creating a space to acknowledge when these events happen can be very

helpful.

You know, what's the threshold at which, you know—I mean, there's so many reasons that one could take a pause. I'm not sure that it makes sense to do that every class. You could. There's so many things that you really could, but maybe what each individual needs to decide, like what's the threshold at which we really need to take a pause and acknowledge what's happened here, but not necessarily to say something, but rather just to give a space and to acknowledge that this has happened and to give a space maybe for conversation if the students are feeling comfortable about it.

One of the things that I think also is very important in this context then is that there can be things that one does. They're not necessarily, you know, saying something or even giving a space, but that one is attentive to what potential triggers there are for students, whether it's the result of a particular event or maybe something that's more broadly a source of trauma.

So when we were teaching mindfulness meditation, for example, especially in the period right after George Floyd, when we were teaching in the fall, we really moved away from something that's very commonly done, which is using the breath as an object of meditation because you know, I can't breathe.

And especially for some of our students, our black students, that is just too—paying attention to the breath was not a good idea then, maybe not a good idea ever actually, but especially not then. That kind of thing. Just being sensitive to what's gonna work for people and also, especially again, what's gonna make certain people feel excluded in terms of activities, in terms of content, examples, and so on, I think is really important.

David Macasaet: I find hearing these specific words so helpful because it's almost like having those techniques is like a key to getting past any awkwardness or trepidation as an instructor having to call audibles based on the given circumstances, but just having a reservoir of tools is super helpful.

John Dunne: Yes. And I think another thing that's really helpful for me as an instructor and my—I have a great, you know, teaching team. We're lucky that we are able to have several people involved in the teaching and that really helps. And part of it is also then just being open about when one makes a mistake.

When one says the wrong thing or when students are feeling excluded. Hopefully having some mechanism for feedback.

And we do feedback at the end of the course, but we're also looking at ways to try to get more feedback during the course. We've done that in past years, but not recently. And some mechanism for students to be able to provide anonymous feedback as the course is going along is actually a good idea and being able to, or at least if you have TAs, getting feedback from your TAs about anything that's coming up in sections.

And then, you know, if there's something that one has done that has been harmful or that has created a sense of exclusion or in some sense has triggered people, if that's the right term, that it's useful to acknowledge that and to say, yeah, you know, I made a mistake and I'm gonna try to do better.

That I think is really important, to acknowledge when things don't go well. This doesn't mean, by the way, that we have to, when we're working with students, that we need to treat them like they're soap bubbles, and if we just kind of, you know, touch the surface, they're gonna pop. Students aren't that fragile.

If they've gotten to, if they've been admitted to the university, they're already got some significant level of resilience for sure. So we're not saying you have to, we have to like walk on eggshells about every student cuz there, I mean, students broadly have—we're not just talking about minoritized students, you know, we have students with mental health issues. We have students who identify with different types of gender identities and so on. It's not just a racial minoritization. There's all kinds of minoritization and exclusion that can happen and we need to be careful in the classroom for sure. We don't wanna be in the classroom and give students the impression that we think they're so fragile that we're afraid to say the wrong thing. Right? We want them to—you know, sometimes we will say the wrong thing, right? We may and we will make mistakes, but we don't want that to project to them a sense in which like, oh, you're so fragile that anything I do could potentially, you know, be disastrous for you. We don't wanna create that impression when we're trying to teach inclusively, trying to be sensitive to trauma. My sense of it, in terms of how I've been working through it, just personally, is that I wanna be just honest with students.

I wanna be aware of them. I want to try to understand their context, even if I

haven't lived with the same kinds of traumas, to at least be sensitive to and to understand it, but not in a way that says, you're broken. And since you're broken, if I touch you, you know, if I say the wrong thing, it's going to, you're gonna break further. I don't wanna create that impression. So I think there's a kind of fine line there between, you know, being sensitive and compassionate and just aware on the one hand, and on the other hand, in a sense, you know, almost debilitating students by conveying to them a sense in which they are broken.

David Macasaet: It makes me think about the importance of not shedding your leadership as an instructor. And if you have the confidence to see the many potential scenarios that might occur, then you're not reacting. You're maybe creating community agreements. You're getting out in front of any potential issues before they ever happen.

John Dunne: Yeah, that's great. Actually. Community agreement, creating a kind of, you know, code of conduct for a class is an excellent example that I should have mentioned earlier, actually, that you can include in the syllabus and that really is a way of helping everyone to feel like they belong.

And part of that is just respectful listening because students can be very disrespectful sometimes when they're, when other students are speaking because they're, I know, shopping on Amazon or whatever it is. And when they do that, that doesn't—especially if one's coming from a certain kind of background, a minoritized background, as one is responding in class or whatever—it can be especially hurtful.

So, you know, and having a code of conduct that says, hey, you know, let's be respectful when other students are speaking, just as an example, is a really great idea. And yes, that's something that the instructor needs to take leadership on and also needs to call out when it's happening, even if it's actually a TA who's somehow not following that code of conduct, right? Or a co-instructor. It's really important for someone to be paying attention to that, be paying attention to the classroom environment. So, yeah, that's a very good example of how instructors can really lead. At the same time, I think that instructors need to be receptive and open to, you know, you can be an imperfect leader, right? That one can acknowledge the ways in which one is not yet ready or capable of addressing all these issues as one might want to. And that's okay too, to just do the best you can and to be committed to a sense of learning. And actually a lot of that learning

is learning from the students.

David Macasaet: Professor Dunne, it's been such a privilege to sit with you for the past hour. I think we could do another hour if we had all the time in the world. But I wanted to end by just asking if there was anything that you wanted to share that I haven't asked about.

John Dunne: I would just encourage instructors to think of themselves as also models for our students and that part of—again, imperfect models—but that part of what we are doing and part of what students are learning is they're learning to be people. They're learning to be adults. And we instructors are still learning that too, right? And it's hopefully a lifelong process, but our students—we stand because, you know, in whatever way we are gonna be standing up there and they're gonna be seeing us and we are models for them.

And just to really embrace that, that that's part of education and not to be concerned, first of all, to recognize, again, our own imperfections, but also not to be concerned about that role. And even to, you know, try to work with that role and to think about what kinds of models we are and how you said, like coming out of the pandemic, you and I both, we definitely, I needed to work on myself too and you know, just acknowledging that that's part of what we do, that we are working on ourselves. We're trying to develop ourselves, in other words, that we are models for the virtues that we want our students to also embody and to not shy away from that task, to see that as part of what it means to be an instructor.

I think that's, you know, really in the larger sense, what the university is about, that kind of education.

Erika Schock: Thanks once again for listening to the special bonus episode. We hope you found the additional information helpful, and we'd love to hear your thoughts. Let us know how we're doing by leaving a review on Apple Podcasts or add to the conversation by leaving us a voicemail. Check out conversation starters and resources on our website. Until next time, on Wisconsin.