

Designed for Learning Ep9 Transcript

Making the Space to Reimagine Teaching (September 4, 2025)

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Guest: Jordan Troisi

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[JIM LANG]

(cheerful upbeat music)

Welcome to Designed for Learning, a podcast from Notre Dame Learning. I'm your host, Jim Lang.

When you become a teacher, you commit to a life of learning, not just for your students, but for yourself. Each new group of students that walks into our classrooms poses new challenges to us, and the world around us keeps evolving. We can feel totally comfortable and confident in our teaching practices, and then suddenly, some new technology or some new group of students comes along and upends everything we think we know about education. So in those moments, teachers have to recommit themselves to learning: reading new resources, having conversations with their peers, experimenting with new techniques, and listening to their students. But actually committing ourselves to change is another story. Giving up a beloved teaching technique can provoke a real sense of loss. Adopting a new approach can be scary. So what motivates teachers to commit to such changes? What would help guide them through that process?

On today's episode, we speak with one of the authors of a new book about course design institutes, in which teachers gather with colleagues and teaching specialists in an extended process of reimagining themselves as teachers.

Jordan Troisi serves as the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Colby College after nine years as a psychology professor. At Colby, he leads numerous initiatives to help faculty transform their teaching. His scholarly work includes over 20 peer-reviewed and invited publications on effective teaching, as well as two books: *Midcourse Correction for the College Classroom: Putting Small Group Instructional Diagnosis to Work*, and the book we'll talk about today, *Developing High-Impact Course Design Institutes: A Model for Change*.

Welcome to Designed for Learning, Jordan.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Thank you so much. I'm so pleased to be here.

[JIM LANG]

Okay. So before we discuss the course design institutes that your book analyzes, give me an example of a moment or an experience in your teaching life that forced you--either forced you or invited you to make a significant change to your teaching practices.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah, I mean, I'm happy to talk about this. And I think the word invitation to me is really the operational one here. I've been around reflective teachers since my undergraduate years. I went to Albion College. I worked closely with a number of professors and came to view early in my professional life that teaching was a really important thing to do, and that I was always looking to figure out how to do it better.

You know, I started to give this a really concrete look when I started to engage in really meaningful course design work. Some of this occurred while I was on research sabbatical at Colby College, where I now work, in the 2018–2019 school year. There I got a chance to work with Carol Hurney, who is also one of the authors on this book, to get a sense of just what are some of the possibilities that could help me articulate what I was trying to do, transparently communicate with students.

One really concrete change that I made in my practice, you know, as I started, as it turns out, started wrapping up my full-time teaching career (laughs), before entering into the Center for Teaching and Learning space, I started having students engage in a lot more reflective writing, both during class periods, as well as sort of the end of a class period. You know, this would, perhaps the final three to five minutes, I would kind of go in any number of directions on this. Sometimes I would have them work to connect ideas from this class period to previous class periods, or have them make some predictions or plans for the future, right? Like, what do we think is gonna come next? Or we're working on this group project; what are the things I need to focus on in this next week to kind of set them up for success? Other times it was to have them, you know, draw some sort of bigger meaning or sense of relevance or sense of ways in which they felt a sense of belonging in the course, right? To say, like, how do I see myself here?

I'll speak to one example in particular. A course I was teaching in the 2019–2020 school year, there was a student in this course--it was a course of about 12 students. So not, not huge. I was teaching at a liberal arts school, about 12 students in the course, and one student who just, I never really heard from all that often. You know, he'd talk when folks were working in small groups and things like that. So it's not like he was totally checked out, but it was just like, I don't, I don't really know what's going on in this student's head, right? Like, he doesn't speak up in front of the whole class, or he hadn't come to the office hours or things like that.

So it was through some of this reflective writing at the end of courses that I started to introduce that I really got a sense of like, what was happening in a student. We got about midway through the course, and we were talking about a particular topic. This was a laboratory course in social psychology. And he, you know, I saw in his reflective writing, you know, a short paragraph where

he said something to the effect of, you know, the topic from this class period got me really thinking about near-death experiences, and I looked through the book over the weekend, and I realized that we weren't really going to be talking about that, it wasn't going to be a content piece in the course. But it made me think, I wanna go look up some more information about this on my own.

And for me, like, you know, I'm reading this reflective, you know, little slip of paper in my office, and I'm just like, yes (both laugh). Like, I, I had this thought that I was like, this student is really digging in a way that is profound, is meaningful, that has implications for his life, the things that he's fascinated in. And, you know, I sort of like three seconds later was like, if I hadn't started engaging in this kind of reflective writing, I never would've known that at all, right? I never would've heard from this student, or I don't know, maybe I would've had some tidbits, but it was like, this was totally flying under the radar. And until I made that change it never would've come to me, right? This would've been the student who would've gone through the semester and did okay, and you know, I never hear from again or anything like that.

[JIM LANG]

Well, that's great. Reflective writing, you're speaking my language (laughs) as a former English professor, so absolutely. So it sounds to me, like, you know, this makes sense because you're directing a teaching center now. You were always, you know, your teaching was always evolving when you were a faculty member, always trying to find new ways to reach students and improve your practices, and so sort of like a lifelong project for you. But the course design institutes are oftentimes these sort of, you know, moments where people kind of step away and really think through in a very concrete and extended process. So tell me what these things look like. Give me a sense of, like, what models of these look like and what you actually do at Colby.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah, sure. So you know, as we discussed in the context of our book, we actually had like a hard time, our co-authors, really coming up with like a concrete definition. Because we kept adding more like pieces and little bits to it. But I'll touch down on some of the things that we thought were sort of really meaningful. And also, you know, we, we surveyed almost 70 centers for teaching and learning that ran course design institutes in the United States. So this is really the conglomerate of how all these places are doing them.

So, a couple of features that are sort of hallmark for them. One, they are structured experiences, so they're not just sort of, like, come and revise your syllabus or something like that. We walk through, we walk folks through a process where they give consideration to a number of ideas. They get feedback and guidance. Two, they tend to, we identify them as multi-day experiences. And they differ in length. We could talk about that a little bit more, but a three-hour workshop or even just, like, one day together, I think doesn't give folks, one, enough length of time to give a lot of consideration to their approaches, but also doesn't give folks enough time to kind of, like, digest some of the ideas and say like, oh, okay, what we were talking about today, and now I'm eating dinner, and now I've slept on it a little bit, and let me see how I feel about it tomorrow.

I'll say as well another feature of it is that it involves a cohort of peers, right? So it involves instructors coming together with one another. We could do some course design work with individuals. You know, I could consult with people for a long time and help them develop a course. But I think there's a really meaningful way in which folks interact with one another, get a sense of the struggles, the difficulties, the experiences that one another are having, that makes it really important for the ways in which we design our own courses, right? We need to be able to, when we engage in this space, accept risk, and we're talking about potentially really big changes. And for those of us who've been in higher ed long enough, it's no surprise that the things that we work on in our teaching, our courses or our approaches, are not only tactics, but they're features of our identity. So, when we work in this space together, we need to figure out what's the way that we get people working with one another, having confidence to work with one another, having the chance to say, I've never talked with anyone about why I made this choice. It's a really bold move for people to make. So we think a lot about how we construct the environments that will let people do that.

Some other features: It's important that folks gain some knowledge about either course design approaches or specific practices in the classroom. For us at Colby, when we have folks who come to our course design institute, some of them have done it many times and have been at Colby many years, so they're looking for some new tidbits. Others might be first-time faculty members. They've never taught a full course on their own before. They probably got some ideas, but that said, they've got a lot more ground to cover, right? They've got a lot more things for which it would be helpful to introduce them to. And this is something we're always thinking about. What are some of the newest practices that help us give consideration to this?

[JIM LANG]

So it's not—yeah, sorry. Oh, so I was just gonna say, so there has to be some kind of either reading or presentation from you all for them to engage with ideas somehow. They're not just coming together to talk.

[JORDAN TROISI]

That's right.

[JIM LANG]

There's a grounding. Yeah.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. So that's a part of that structure that I mentioned a moment ago, right? So, you know, the way that we, we at Colby tend to structure our day is, generally, we start folks with like a warmup to get folks familiar with one another, to get folks comfortable in their teams. We then introduce a series of ideas and then kind of like, you know, a dynamic lecture period where we say, oh, okay, here's a couple of key concepts for today. And then we have folks engage in a work period in the late morning for about an hour, hour and a half, where we say, now let's apply these ideas, right? Let's take a look at what we talked about this morning and then situate it in

your course, in your course, in your course. We tend to do a similar process of the afternoon and kind of extend some of those ideas a little bit more.

So yeah, it's like this kind of robust mixture of like, what's a little bit of information that you can work with, and then go work with it, right? In that way, that working on implementation, it's super applied, right? As I often describe it, this isn't just an exercise for you, right? Like, you here in our course design institute are working on a class you are going to execute. And you know, maybe it's a couple weeks, maybe it's in a semester. So like, what do you want to get out of this experience? And what can myself or my team do to help get you there, right? Like, get you to the place you wanna be in.

And to that, I'd also add just one little bit, the process of receiving feedback and consulting with others is also integral to this, right? So they don't just, you know, do their work in a little workbook and then say like, oh, yeah, sounds good. There's a lot of interaction to say, like, tell me why you've picked this, and then if this is your learning outcome, explain to me the kinds of things that you're gonna do in class that will help get students prepared to do that kind of thing.

[JIM LANG]

So you mentioned it's important for people to extend this process over time because as you—you're right, your brain's working in the background, right? And it takes time for you to accept changes, especially when you're making larger changes, right? So I, the ones I've been involved with have been every month for the whole academic year. It sounds like yours is maybe a start of the year. So what's your actual, how do you build that time in?

[JORDAN TROISI]

Sure. Yeah, it's a good question, right? So when we surveyed folks at different centers, we got a sense of the many different configurations that folks do. Some do, I'd say like a monthly touchdown where they continue that work throughout a school year. What we found is that a lot of centers will do a sort of like multi-day string of events, a course design institute that's a multi-day experience. For us at Colby, we run it for three days in a row. At other places, it may be two days or four days, or as many as five days. I'll say as well, there's a lot of different configurations we've seen where folks will say, like, they'll do a once-a-week thing, and then they'll do some asynchronous involvement and then come back.

So there's a lot of different ways that it can be configured. I think that the prolonged attention to the topic is very important. And I think the questions of sort of like the when and how, those are really context-dependent, right? Like, when will our faculty members choose to engage with us? Or when are they on vacation? Or do we have a set aside time that we can do this? Or perhaps if we're working with a cohort, maybe we're working with a cohort of new faculty members or folks who teach large STEM courses, what's the context that will really engage with them, and, you know, in a concrete way work for the schedule, right? It's gotta make sense.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. So, as I mentioned, I started one of these at Assumption University many years ago and had the unfortunate title of Course Innovation Academy. And the acronym was CIA (laughs). There was a lot of jokes about that (laughs). And then now here at Notre Dame, I've observed the one that we do here in the Kaneb Center. I've not been part of that one. And both those are month-long—I'm sorry, a year long, but like, you know, monthly meetings. And I think, you know, whatever choice you make about that, the really, I think the challenge I faced at Assumption, I think what we face here, is how do you get people to come into it and to really sort of make that commitment? Not only just to say, I'm willing to set aside, you know, three hours a month to just talk about and think about my teaching with a bunch of peers, and then actually make the changes. So how do you convince people to do that?

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, to me, this is an important question and a good question about motivation, right? And I think that, you know, the context matters greatly, right? And then we can take in information about context to get a sense of what is it that folks will make time for, right? You know, I'll say a bit jokingly, but a bit not jokingly, what's the incentive structure, right?

[JIM LANG]

Right.

[JORDAN TROISI]

So I will say some colleges and universities provide a bit of an incentive for participants in a course design institute, maybe a financial one, or maybe, you know, some other kind of incentive. And let us also be clear: Never undervalue a free lunch for someone in higher education. A free lunch and coffee breaks and treats and other giveaways go a long way and generate a lot of goodwill.

But that said, I think kind of directly to your question, something to think about is, like, figuring out what's the, what's the thing at my institution that will get people in the door, that they will find motivating, worthwhile? Are folks motivated by new ideas? Are they motivated by a chance to share with their colleagues what their approaches are? You know, if we're at an institution that has a really good sense of collegiality, then they'll say like, I love getting together with these people, it's really exciting. Maybe they want to meet new colleagues or, you know, I mean, I'll say this sometimes, just sort of the dedicated work time is something that people find extremely valuable. That sense of, like, accountability and then as a consequence, finding sort of the right period for that is something that's meaningful, right?

Something I give consideration to is, we try not to hold a course design institute too close to the new semester, right? Like, if it was like the week before, it wouldn't be enough time for them to really digest the ideas and get them implemented for the coming semester. So what's the time period that will catch them at the sort of right motivational moment? You know, some other considerations to make, you know, at many institutions where promotion and tenure as well as retention are major factors, think about the ways in which we tie this kind of work directly to

those outcomes, right? So what are the ways in which the course design institute or the center for teaching and learning is saying, we've recognized that these are the things that individuals need to do to progress professionally here, and we are going to help you realize those things, right? We are gonna directly target some of those things. This isn't just a fun little side activity. We're helping you get where you need to be professionally.

And I think from one institution to another, we can get that information in some valuable ways by, you know, talking to important individuals on the campus, right? Whether that's leadership or perhaps, you know, some thought leaders among the faculty, right? That sort of carry a lot of weight. I'd also say, you know, if we're in a space where we're trying to get a sense of what are the, what are the things that are gonna get people in the door, it might be valuable to bring together a couple of focus groups with some instructors or faculty members that are the relevant audience, and just are, you know, we'll buy a lunch, I'd love to hear what you think about either what we are offering or what we are thinking about offering. What are the things that would bring you and three of your department colleagues to this event, right? What would get you in the door?

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. That's great. And I think, you know, you mentioned a few things, which we did also. Like we offered a financial incentive at Assumption. It wasn't huge, but it was enough. I think it would get a few people in the door that maybe otherwise would not have. And the other thing we did was we, we would sort of document their participation, and they could use that in their tenure-promotion files. We didn't necessarily do like a recommendation, but we'd sort of document this is what this person did. And you know, at Assumption, it was a very teaching-focused institution, so teaching, you know, these kinds of things mattered for their tenure and promotion applications.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah, absolutely. We're doing the same thing. And in fact we're working to iron out a system that makes that really streamlined and straightforward for folks to say, like, make this a part of your narrative, right? Make this a part of it.

[JIM LANG]

Exactly.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Because it is.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. Because it's self-evaluation that people have to write for tenure-promotion. That's a narrative, right? Like, here's how I've evolved and grown, here's what I've done over the course of my time here, here's how I've contributed to this university. And that can be part of a narrative, a convincing part of it actually to say, you set this time to commit yourself to

improving your teaching and improving, you know, the experiences of your students. So absolutely.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. Well, I, I love that kind of approach, and I'll say that, you know, some of the folks that have been involved in some of our programs here at Colby, we have the mid-semester feedback program that follows the small group instructional diagnosis. And I have a colleague who I think [is] really reflective of his work, and the way he described it is he got mid-semester feedback every semester for quite a few—he's like, early on, I kept getting this kind of nagging comment that I was just like, ah, you know, I hate that that's how students are seeing this or thinking about it. And he said, like, he got it and he got it a little less. He got a little less, and then he started getting it not at all. And he's like, whatever I've been working on, right, the changes I've been making, the ways that I've been reflecting on this course, have moved me in the direction that I wanted to go, right? Like, it changed the thing that was kind of a real thorn in my side. I love to hear it, right? That's exactly the kind of thing we'd love to have folks respond with.

[JIM LANG]

So you just finished yours. And so, what's on people's minds? Obviously it's AI. People are concerned about reshaping their courses in the light of AI. Anything else? Like what are the big things that are on people's minds right now that they're trying to change in your course design institute?

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. And AI is a big one. I'd, you know, be happy to, to touch down on that a little more. I mean, I will say something that has been true for the last handful of years and continues to be true for us is a lot of folks are giving a really concerted look at their grading approaches.

[JIM LANG]

Oh, yes.

[JORDAN TROISI]

You know, thinking about (laughs), I used to joke that when I'd go to a conference and I'd talk with people about, you know, their classes or how their teaching was going, the thing that would come up for the thing that faculty members like least, like 90% of the time was grading.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah.

[JORDAN TROISI]

And whenever I get like a 90% answer, I'm like, oh, we've touched a nerve here, right? There's something going on here. (laughs) So when it comes to grading, I mean, I think there are just like so many things involved that are really, you know, I think are really frustrating for instructors. You know, one is that it takes a lot of time. A lot more time than what people want. I think as well, you know, there are folks that have really legitimate concerns about the

propensity for grading and certain grading approaches to actually be conducive to learning or not, right?

Like, is this just about, you know, a kind of rewards and punishments setup rather than is about, say, fostering intrinsic motivation or the development of mastery or a student being reflective of their learning journey, right? So grading is something that we spend a lot of time with. At Colby, as is true in lots of places, folks are trying a lot of alternative approaches that, you know, aren't the straight 0% to 100% and A-minus and B-plus and so on. So, you know, we've been framing things as a set of choices that individuals might make, right? How important is revision or numerous revisions of individuals work in the course? And then how does that factor into the ways in which we do grades? So things like choice or thinking about, you know, our more formative and summative assessments, right? How is it that we get folks useful feedback as they're developing in the course so that when it comes time for that, you know, whether it's a final exam or a project or whatever, that they're ready for it? The language I'm sometimes using on that is, how is it that we give folks rehearsals and the right amount of rehearsals so that when we have the performance, it can really shine?

[JIM LANG]

Last question before we sort of wrap things up here. This notion of like, who comes to these things, and this is like maybe a little bit of small ball for faculty development, but we kind of know that certain people are attracted to these events, and some people are not. And sometimes the people who are not attracted are the people who should probably come (laughs), right? This notion that sometimes we get the, we're preaching to the choir. Any thoughts about that for a course design institute?

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. I mean, certainly it is easy to preach to the choir. Sometimes the term that we use is who are our frequent flyers, and yes, you've got them, right? I think about, you know, certainly as we discussed a little bit before, questions of motivation, right? Like, what's the thing that folks need or would find, you know, fascinating, valuable, worthwhile? But then I also think that something to leverage that is really meaningful are the relational factors that occur between instructors, faculty members, departments, right? Is there a way that we could say— you know, we've kind of got this frequent flyer all-star over here in the music department; are there folks that he can bring along? Right? Is there someone that he thinks either, you know, maybe sees someone struggling and gives them a friendly nudge, or realizes that like there's someone who really geeks out about pedagogy and it's like, Hey, you know what, why don't we spend three days doing that? So I think the relational piece is one that can really be a very motivating factor—at least I find this to be true at Colby College, you know, a liberal arts institution with a faculty body of two to three hundred.

But I don't know. I mean, my background is as a psychologist, and I studied human motivation and belonging. And as I often say, if I had to pull one lever in education, it would be the belonging lever.

[JIM LANG]

Hmm. Hmm.

[JORDAN TROISI]

You know, I think so much falls from that. So much of it comes after that. Like, do folks feel that this is valuable? I have a place here. This helps me be a bigger part of this educational community. I think that would be the place that I, that would be the lever that I would pull, and I think things would follow from that.

[JIM LANG]

That's really interesting. You might think about, like, a center director maybe looking for the people that maybe don't feel quite as they belong as others on campus, like other faculty members, and invite them to say, hey, meet a bunch of colleagues, sit with us for a, you know, a week or—yeah.

[JORDAN TROISI]

I think it's tremendously useful. And I think that that's—you know, we've been collecting data both in a like formal and less formal way about this in our CTL, and some of the things that come up is that, you know, we often get members of departments that I think are functioning pretty well, and like groups of them come to us, right? But then we also sometimes get individuals, you know, maybe who are in a department that's got a little bit of tension, right? Or things like that. And then, you know, some of these folks when they come to the CTL, events we're having or a course design institute, will sort of say like, this is where I found my people, or this is where I can be myself, or this is where I feel heard. And I think that, you know, there's no substitute for that, right? Like, that individual really did need an entity like our CTL or an event like our Course Design institute.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. That's great. Okay. So let's wrap up by having you sort of make a pitch for an institution or a CTL, even to administrators: Why do you have a course design institute and what are the two or three things they should really, you know, focus on, make sure they do when they create a design institute?

[JORDAN TROISI]

Yeah. So I think for me, as is so often true in higher education, I think that something that's really important is to figure out what are the right questions to ask to gather perspectives and ideas? And when it comes to, say, an institution that maybe wants to start a course design institute or revamp theirs, like what are some of the questions that they could ask of folks like faculty members, folks like members of the administration, or other instructors to get a sense of what is it they're really looking for?

Within the context of our book (laughs), we kind of got on like a real hot streak with coming up with all the questions that we might ask. We've got a list of maybe like 50 of them that we would like, you know, let's talk about what pieces of content do people need? Structure, what

would be useful for people? What would fit into their schedules? Who should our facilitators be? Should it be folks like center for teaching and learning staff? Should it be folks in our libraries or academic technology? Should it be experienced faculty members? Should we have students involved? Right? Perhaps as individuals who provide feedback on the teaching practices that our faculty members and instructors are developing, we found that to be immensely useful. (laughs) And the students will be candid with you. They'll say like, students aren't gonna get this, or like, this part is motivating to me, but this part is, you know, I don't get it. So I think coming up with the kinds of questions that you could bring to important constituencies on your campus is a really valuable one.

I think as well, you know, for those who've done course design work a lot, this is also preaching to the choir, but like really focusing on what those outcomes are that we want, in this case, instructors to move towards, right? So, you know, we often think in teaching about thinking, what do we want our students to move towards? But in this case we're working with instructors, so what do we want them to move towards? You know, they are the participants in this event, so what do they really want? What do they really need? What does the institution want? What does the institution need? And then I think when you start to piece these things all together, those outcomes can really be like the north star that you're trying towards.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, that's great. Yeah. All right. That's great. Remind us of the book and your co-authors too.

[JORDAN TROISI]

That's right. So it is *Developing High-Impact Course Design Institutes: A Model for Change* published by Routledge in this last year. It's written by myself, Michael Palmer, Mary Wright, Lori Hostetler, and Carol Hurney. We are collectively folks across the United States and one of us, Mary Wright, down in Australia these days. So across the U.S. and across the globe. Really hard to find meeting times it turns out now that someone's 12 hours' time difference.

[JIM LANG]

(cheerful upbeat music)

(laughs) Yeah. All right, that's great. Thanks for joining us today, Jordan.

[JORDAN TROISI]

Thank you so much.

[JIM LANG]

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