



- Nat: Welcome back to Reach, Teach, Talk, and I'm very excited today to talk about a concept that is on everybody's tips of their tongues when it comes to how to look at the classroom experience as a place of connection built on empathy. As teachers, every day we have the opportunity to scan across our classroom and look through 25 different lenses on a piece of writing that we're studying together or on a science lab that we're working on together or, in the case of our guest today, in a piece of literature that is from a different culture, in a different language, requiring not just transcription and conversion, but also an appreciation for the sound, the technique, the color, the texture of what that writer is communicating in this different language.
- Nat: I am very happy that today we have this incredible teacher, who's been teaching world languages for 23 years in schools across the United States. Ms. Ann Diedrich, welcome to the show, and I'm so excited to learn from you about how the teaching of language and also the exposure to different cultures, in real life exposure, has created empathy, has built empathy in your students, your high school level students.
- Nat: Ann comes from, as I said, 23 years of teaching. She has led over 20 trips in her experience, 20 student trips to countries and cultures all around the world. Ann speaks flip fluently French, Spanish and ...
- Ann: English.
- Nat: ... we'll find out now and English, because we are not running a Spanish- or a French-speaking podcast today. So, again, welcome, and I'm going to start this off with just a question for you about when you think back on a teacher that you had when you were growing up who really exposed you to the value of learning a different language, the exposure to a different culture, take a moment and think about who that teacher was and maybe how she or he really kind of got under your skin in a way that, really, when you look back, might have transformed who you have become or contributed to who you have become today.
- Ann: Well, there's so many language teachers that I can think of, but my high school French teacher, David Eastburn, he was a master of empathy-building. He left space for everyone in the group, in the class to express themselves, to be comfortable with doubt and uncertainty, to give them a space to fumble around and make mistakes. He left a space for the class members who were very, very different in age and ability and background to relate to each other and form a family, and there was a lot of humor incorporated into that. We played pranks on each other, all in French, and really got to know ... It was a French literature class, actually, and so we were reading classical pieces

of literature that were very challenging. It didn't seem difficult with the atmosphere in the class.

Nat: So let's back it up, and I want to get a little character view of who David Eastburn was. So what did he look like? When you think about him in your memory, in the photo memory of your mind about who he was, can you describe him in a few words?

Ann: He was a typical British professor with glasses, the jacket, the tweed jacket and the tie, and very athletic and energetic, very conservative-looking. So he didn't look like the man who would dramatically re-enact a tragic French piece of theater, falling on the ground and just being completely silly so that we would all loosen up and feel for him, that he was taking a risk.

Nat: So Mr. Eastburn was a kind of a larger-than-life figure, it sounds like, somebody who was a performer and somebody who used some improvisation as a way of engaging you. Also, though, where empathy comes into play, if you're watching the only adult in the room be silly and take chances day after day, then it must have an effect on you as a student to take chances, be silly, and, in so doing, have fun ...

Ann: Right.

Nat: ... with language, in this case, have fun with the material that you're reading in French literature.

Ann: Yeah, and he completely empathized. He actually had a PhD but was very down to earth, and he empathized with these tragic characters. You could see that he was actually very saddened by these scenes that he had taught for probably over 40 years. He taught French literature masterfully, but he made us all feel the emotions, these deep human emotions that all of these characters had. So when I went into teaching, that was the model I had. So I didn't really have the technique, but I had the feeling and the spirit.

Nat: You just mentioned that ... Sorry to interrupt, but you just mentioned that he had taught for 40 years. This was not somebody who's just fresh out of university with his fresh Master's or PhD teaching you with such energy and such passion. That's fascinating, because, in my head, I was thinking about somebody who was much younger, because I was just stereotyping that, oh, you've got to be younger to have that much energy and passion. So that also is a lesson in empathy, I imagine, for you, the idea that you can be somebody who's taught for decades but still maintain this youthful passion for what you're teaching.

Ann: Yeah, and another one of my muses is the late Dr. Rassias, John Rassias, who was the head of the language department or the French department at Dartmouth College. He founded a method in the '60s called the Rassias Method, and it was all about making people speak to learn, not learn to speak, get out of their heads, improvise, engage, be silly, open the space for just a non-error zone.

Ann: He said nothing really touches you unless it's real. You have to have an emotion. You have to have a connection to be able to learn, to be able to feel the culture of someone

else. You have to participate in it, engage in it, connect with others. You cannot do this by yourself.

Ann: So he passed away two years ago, I believe, maybe three years ago, but he always talked about the importance of bringing people together in a community, and the online, all the technology that you were talking about in the introduction, that is important. That's a great way to merge people, but you can't really have that emotion unless you're connected on a human level.

Nat: Rassias, R-A-S-S-I-A-S.

Ann: Correct.

Nat: There was an incredible profile on him in the Atlantic magazine about seven years ago that I recommend any of you, anybody listening here to please look up. Google search ... What's his first name?

Ann: John Rassias, Dr. John Rassias.

Nat: Yeah.

Ann: He also had a 60 Minutes episode about him with Ed Bradley and Morley Safer.

Nat: That's fantastic.

Ann: He's done an incredible amount of work, but, basically, his methods are used with the State Department and the Peace Corps and the foreign service. It's a rapid-fire drilling technique which is based on improv and Theatre of the Absurd.

Nat: I want to get into the technique in just a minute, but before I forget, there was something you said earlier about what he recognized back in the '60s, long before neuroscience was able to actually prove evidence to this: the idea that learning involves an emotional component. You have to be touched by something in order to open your mind. You have to find relevancy. You have to find empathy with what you're learning, emotions and also the social side of learning.

Nat: Dr Rassias knew this 50 years ago, and brain studies today, research today is only proving that and then some, that what he intuitively understood about learning, about opening the brain and the connection to emotions and the connection to social reciprocity, is essential to good learning and to long-term attention. So I just wanted to touch on that, because that's fascinating that he knew this and the program and the approach that he derived out of that has been just so effective afterwards.

Ann: So John Rassias was an actor. He was trained in the theater, and to be a successful actor, you have to have a deep understanding of others' emotions. So he thought, "Wow, we're missing something. When we're in the classroom, we have all these kids who are sort of sitting here, prisoner. They're required to sit here with us, and so we have them captive. But what if we make them forget that they are in this contained environment? What if we forget about that and we just make it a place of play? What if we make this a

place where people can imagine and we can create and develop games that just take people out of this sense of requirement, this sense of duty, and into the sense of possibility?"

Ann: So he built that. It's edutainment at its best. I mean, I've been doing the Rassias Method since the early 2000s, the early [inaudible 00:11:26], and the kids just laugh. They are a little shocked, they are on their toes, and then, in the end, they help each other, because part of the technique is peers correct each other.

Ann: There's a very safe, very congratulatory, safe environment for students to make errors and then to correct each other and to help each other, because, in improv ... and I've been doing improv at Second City since 2011, I want to say. I actually got to feel that myself, because everyone is on a different path in their learning of a language, in their learning of improvisation. Everyone is on a path, but we can help each other, and, as a group, we can definitely relate to each other and connect to each other, empathize with each other, and be better for it.

Nat: That's beautifully said. You meet the students where they are, and you trick them into learning. It's this idea of ... But what about the AP scores, Ann? How do these students who are learning without knowing that they're learning and they're roleplaying and they're having conversations in French cafes in the middle of their classroom, for the skeptics out there ...

Ann: I would say that, having taught the AP class, doing these ridiculous improvisational techniques in the language classes, the scores have been fours or fives. I think they were higher than they were pre-Rassias, because the students are engaged all the time and they're active, because if you had a stopwatch and you counted or you clicked how many times people spoke in a given hour, they speak from 100 to 125 times, because they're doing choral repetition. They're speaking without really thinking. They're getting out all of those phrases that are somehow the different syntactical structures that are not so easy. But it's becoming automated.

Ann: So when you have an AP exam that's timed, they're used to ... They're raring and ready to go. They're like horses in the gate at the Kentucky Derby. They're ready to just take off. So, in fact, most people freeze at these AP exams, especially when you have a microphone in your face and the headset's on, and here, they're just like, "Bring it on."

Nat: Yeah. Beautifully said. I mean, imagine then that those 120 spoken contributions per hour per student, you also have students who are just tripping over themselves and probably, more than half the time, they're making mistakes, syntax mistakes, grammar mistakes. But at least they're talking, because, I mean, I've got to be honest. My experience with learning a foreign language was not a positive one for me. I struggled memorizing. I struggled with the verb tenses and which pronoun, agreement, whatever to use.

Ann: Many people struggle.

Nat: For me, it was just an exercise in hiding. I've got to be honest. Yet there was such a part of myself that wanted to explore the world and had so much of a vision of who I wanted

to be as an adult, as I'm sitting there in the classroom as a 15-year-old, but feeling like the gap between who I wanted to be as an adult in the world versus how I felt in that French 2 classroom just was so wide.

Nat: If I had had a teacher like Mr. Eastburn, who I did not have, I think that that would have been different. I would've felt more safe saying the wrong thing, because you know what I remember? I remember it would just be, "Okay, so, Nat, answer this question, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah," and all eyes would be on me to answer the question. I would inevitably make a mistake, and I would just feel like French 2 was an exercise in self-censoring and not having and feeling very stressed.

Nat: So, anyhow, all that to say I think that to put me in a robust classroom like how you're describing, where it's okay to trip over yourself, keep talking, you're still in that French cafe in the middle of the classroom, you're still ordering duck confit from the waiter, and you may be ordering something completely different, or the waiter might not understand you, but it's okay, because you're going to be speaking constantly.

Ann: You speak to learn. You don't learn to speak. Get out of your head. Actually, just to follow up, David Eastburn came up to Dartmouth while I was teaching in their accelerated language programs, and he sat in my Spanish class, because I'm a Spanish teacher as well. So Dr. Rassias also came in every day in my Spanish class.

Ann: So they met each other, and they both participated so enthusiastically and asked a lot of questions. "When did you feel that the rhythm and the tone of the class was at its best?", observing those moments of connection. Even until he was in his late 80s, John and he would have breakfast with me afterwards and say, "You know what? I noticed at this one point, everyone was just joyful or just fully engaged."

Nat: In order to recognize that point of full engagement and joy, Dr. Rassias, as an observer, had to have not just his mind open, but also his heart, his gut, that intuitive sense of, "This class is robust right now. This class is thick with learning."

Ann: But, beneath that, he was a very empathetic man. So you would see him. This man was a big shot in the academic world. He had led this new language methodology he had. He was very well for what he did. He was a chair of the French and Italian department at Dartmouth, had won many awards. Yet, I was walking down in the basement at Dartmouth Hall, and I saw him talking to a custodial worker who was going through a really tough time. He was completely present and concerned about this man, and he just stopped and gave his time to everyone who came his way. He celebrated the presence of everyone.

Ann: That's why he's my guru, because he reminds me that ... Every time I think about him, I think of the joy and the celebration of every human being that crossed his path, and that came through in his teaching.

Nat: Wow, and also in his persona. You were describing him at the beginning of this episode. You were describing him as a very joyous, very happy, very positive, gregarious spirit. Right? I love what you just shared about him with the custodian in the hallway and

taking the time to connect with him, because the classroom experience, the improv, the drills ... I don't want to call it drills. What do you call them?

Ann: They do drills.

Nat: You call them drills?

Ann: The master teacher kind of ... Well, in a high school classroom, I do it all. But you teach the lesson in an engaging way, and then you run these rapid-fire drills ...

Nat: Right.

Ann: ... where the students have to stay on their toes and are drilled at random. Yeah.

Nat: So staying on your toes, rapid-fire, drilled at random.

Ann: Interjecting cultural significance. So expressions that would not be in a textbook. So the teacher actually has to build these drills.

Nat: Absolutely.

Ann: So it requires creativity and a lot of work on the part of the teacher. But you want to give them colloquial expressions that are used today. You don't want to give them 1980s vocab that is in the book. That has been edited and re-edited, but it has, still, the language of the 1980s. These are kids right here and now in 2019 ...

Nat: Right, right, right.

Ann: ... and issues. So if you've got a cultural issue that you want to talk about, like climate change, you can actually add expressions that would get the kids thinking about responses.

Nat: Yes. The fast-paced nature of the classroom juxtaposed with his moment in the hallway with the custodian I keep coming back to, because I just love the juxtaposition between fast-paced, dah dah dah, and actually, "I know you, I see you, and I'm going to take the time to share space with you."

Nat: That all seems to factor into this full-body approach to teaching, because, in order to truly bond and build a trust bridge with your students, right, they need to know that you're not so rushed and so frenetic that you can't see them for where they are right now.

Ann: Right. It's a fast pace, but it's not rushed, and when you are, it's the teacher going up to individual students for their drill, the teacher is looking at them and connecting with the student, the given student drilling or the person next door correcting, right, editing the student, helping the student, partnering with the student, and then they're giving a high-five. There's a lot of love, congratulations for making that effort. So it's fast, but it's not rushed.

Nat: I see the same thing.

Ann: It's excited.

Nat: Yeah, it's excited. I love that, and it's always positive.

Ann: It's this urgency to learn ...

Nat: Right.

Ann: ... and urgency to get this, because we've got so much to do. We have so many connections to make. It's so exciting.

Nat: Connections to make, and, again, you're tricking them into learning. Time probably has a whole different definition when there's so much froth, sparks, and fizz in the class. You know what I'm saying? Just that description, and I think this is applicable, also, to ... I think about math class, where you can, as a math teacher, generate an incredibly positive, high -five-based, "Yay for trying," where you have a student up at the board and they're working out a problem, and they might be making a mistake. They might be making a mistake, but the students who are watching, observing are helping that student to unpack the mistake that he's making at the board. "Have you tried this approach?", whatever, and it's all we're all in this together, right, and we're all supporting each other.

Nat: That is all about empathy, because if you're able to, as a teacher, right from day one, establish that we're coming into this class. This is going to be an adventure for us. The next 180 school days, we're going to be on this path together. We're going to trip on some roots, and we're going to not want to go up that hill and scale that boulder, but we will, with each other's support, succeed at doing this.

Nat: It's almost like you're at the mountain top as a teacher, and you want to kind of say, "There is a destination that we will all get to," whether it be mastering second-year French, fourth-year Spanish, whatnot. But when you say that there's an empathy that is embedded in that approach, that positive classroom-building approach ...

Ann: Right. Well, there's definitely an empathy built into that, and we've actually extended that. At previous schools where I've gone and at my current school, we have students actually learning this method. So if you're a heritage speaker of a language, like Mandarin Chinese or French or Spanish, they can learn how to drill. Maybe these kids are not as successful at writing the language, but they can be useful tools and celebrated for the knowledge that they have.

Ann: With English, everyone at our schools in the United States, these very competitive high schools, they speak incredible English, and they have a tool.

Nat: Yes.

- Ann: If they learn how to drill in a structured way, they can help other communities and extend their lives into communities where they would be really uncomfortable normally.
- Nat: We talk about student tourism versus ego tourism, which it just makes me bristle when I think about groups that have the opportunity go for a week to Belize or a week to Beijing and Shanghai or a week to Madrid or London and yet they don't come back with anything sustainable. It's clear they just did this. It's ego tourism. "I saw a show in the West End, and then I went to Canterbury. Then I saw St. Paul's Cathedral, and I went to go on a ferry ride on the Thames." Okay, but how did you connect with the culture?
- Nat: It sounds like, for you ... and I'm just going to repeat, but bullet point, what it seems like are essential ingredients for a successful, enriching cross-cultural experience. Number one, have a focus. Have a program you're going to work on. If you're going to Belize, have a reason for being there.
- Nat: Number two, learn the language. Expose yourself to the language so that when you get there, you're able to at least show that you're attempting to respect the culture by speaking the language.
- Nat: Number three, homestays. Live with a family. Experience waking up at the sunrise and the traditions and the breakfast. Do they have lunch, or is it a big lunch and a small dinner? Is it a huge dinner and a small lunch? All of that. Those are the three that I was deriving from what you said before, but what else?
- Ann: Right. So when we do these, they're not considered trips, because it's not just a one hit wonder. It's really you're preparing with curriculum before leaving, and the kids need to generate questions as well. The participants of the travel program need to really think about what they want to learn. Then they have the experience. They need to reflect on the experience at night and think about how they want to deepen their experience for the following day. Right?
- Ann: They're going to make mistakes along the way and be embarrassing. Right? That's what we all do when we travel to another place, and then, when they come back, how are they going to bring this experience home and impact their community to the greatest extent? That's been very challenging as an educator to sort of ... How do we get our kids to not drop that recent experience that was so impactful and just focus on the next test tomorrow?
- Nat: Right.
- Ann: Right? Or raising your grade point average. How do you keep that with them and have them focus on impacting their community, right, keeping that community that they just met in their heart?
- Nat: That's such an amazing example to leave us with when we think about the importance of language learning and its connection to building empathy, because if language is taught the way you spent the past 40 minutes talking, in this very ideal way, idealistic, no, but a very genuine way of teaching language, which involves risk-taking, it involves

making mistakes, it involves tripping over your words, it involves misplaced syntax, but all in the guise of fun, joyousness through improvisation, through being silly.

Nat: Getting back to David Eastburn, your teacher, where you opened this conversation with, somebody who was silly and who would take chances and who would laugh at himself and be that example, I think about the play *History Boys* by Alan Bennett and how, much like how you described David Eastburn's class of being this raucous, creative, bouncing off the walls, but not chaotic classroom, and your classroom must be much the same.

Nat: Alan Bennett's play *History Boys* is all about that. They had a piano in their classroom, and these boys would play the piano and just riff. They would dress up in costumes and you read poems in the character to whom the poet was writing the poem for, the Shakespeare sonnet or whatever. We need this. Wouldn't you agree? We need this in our classrooms, because we need to celebrate the human experience of what learning is, because, as Rassias knew intuitively 50 years ago, learning is cognitive, emotional, and social.

Ann: Right.

Nat: Last word about that.

Ann: Connecting hearts. So that's at the heart. I mean, John Rassias had two images, sort of cartoon images, of two people, the students and the teacher, and he misspelled that. But at the center, we're all covered with so many crusts. We have our family issues, we have our friend issues, we have our cultural issues, and what we really need, our major goal is to burn through, put dynamite on those crusts and get two hearts connected.

Ann: That's the first thing he says ... well, he used to say at every one of his workshops. So if you cannot connect to the heart, there's no method. It doesn't matter unless you can connect the hearts and also affirm that other individual, which is the ace of improv. "Yes, and" ... I'm going to add. I'm going to complement and add on to what you're saying. I hear you. I'm going to restate what you said, because it matters.

Nat: Wow. Ann Diedrich, touching thousands of hearts in your teaching career all around the world and doing good things, doing amazing things and giving me ... I mean, just these past 40 minutes, you've given me so much hope about the tools we have at our disposal as teachers today, through technology, through being able to read, in different languages, genuine accounts of what it is to live in this culture, this society, for those very lucky students who are actually able to join into and integrate themselves into a different society than their own and bring that experience back with them with reflection and with real ... this focus on keeping that experience, the spirit of the experience alive.

Nat: All of this is just phenomenal, and it comes back to the importance and how we are addressing the importance of building empathy in a world that is increasingly cold, increasingly bifurcated, Balkanized. It just gives me so much hope, the conversations like this one, that the future actually has the potential to, as you said earlier, or as Rassias

said, break down those walls that stratify us through labels and through politics and, instead, join our hearts together.

Nat: So thank you for joining your heart with mine today and anybody listening and watching, and I'm just so grateful for your being on this episode of the podcast.

Ann: Thank you for having me.

Announcer: You've been listening to Reach, Teach, Talk with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to nat@reachacademics.com.