

# Florida Tech FIT to Teach Podcast

## MR. JASON GRIGGS AND THE MAGIC OF TEAMWORK

**Jared Campbell:** Hello everybody, I am Jared Campbell, I'm joined here with Jason Griggs, a veteran teacher here at the Florida Institute of Technology. Welcome to FIT to teach, Jason.

**Jason Griggs:** Thank you, Jared. I'm happy to be here.

**Jared Campbell:** Why don't you tell us a little bit about your teaching experience?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, it kind of fell into teaching, actually, in 1999. I was still in graduate school at the University of South Alabama. And I had a professor who said in class one night, does anybody want to go to Japan to teach for a year? And that sounded like a good idea. I'd never really considered too much about wanting to be a teacher necessarily, but I went over there and started doing it and I was only gonna do it for one year, you know, to take a little sabbatical from school, I guess, but ended up staying in Japan two years and loving teaching.

**Jared Campbell:** What did you teach while you were in Japan?

**Jason Griggs:** It was English as a second language, but I started in middle schools and elementary schools. So that's trouble far there. If you can teach middle school as you well know, you can teach anyone.

I'm pretty sure it goes even farther than that. If you can teach middle school, you can do anything.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah, that's that's a tough age even in Japan. I mean, of course, in America, a lot of people have this impression of Japanese kids being super disciplined. And, you know, overall they are, but they have problem children in Japan just like problem children in America. They have better school public schools in Japan, just like we have better public schools in America. So it was interesting. And, uh, but I definitely developed a love for teaching by taking that adventure.

**Jared Campbell:** So what do you teach here at the Florida Institute of Technology?

**Jason Griggs:** I teach writing typically a basic level writing mostly adjunct, because my full time job, as you know, is an instructional designer here on campus. But before I came to Florida Tech, I mean, since 99, I've been teaching pretty much full time a lot of higher education experience, mostly just those five years in Japan teaching high school and middle school. But then, uh, yeah, I taught literature, composition, creative writing. So a lot of teaching experience.

**Jared Campbell:** Tell me, is there something that you do in your class that is particularly successful for you that really gets the students going? And how do you know that it's working?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, at my college level experience, I've always taught, say, COM or English 1101 or 101, depending what it's called, depending what school you go to. But and those classes are required. And most students don't necessarily want to take those classes. I mean, here in Florida Tech, a great example. I mean, with the engineering students really don't want to take those classes. They don't feel like they need them in any way. So I think my main job is motivation and motivating students to show them the benefit of taking classes they don't necessarily want to take. And that approach kind of goes back to a sixth grade teacher. I had Mrs. West. I remember the first day of class, she said, I mean, here's how many of you students, your favorite classes, English and no one raised their hand, she said by the end of this year, most of you are going to say English is your favorite class. And it wasn't because she was a super nice lady. In fact,

she was kind of mean as a teacher, but she was super engaging and had a great ability to motivate students. And that's kind of what I learned when I started teaching in Japan in '99 because I didn't know much about teaching and never really thought about it. I just sat down and made a list of all the great teachers I had growing up. You know, Mr. Smith in second grade, Miss Zerrin in fifth grade, Miss West in sixth grade. He knows I'm skipping a lot of people there because I a lot of crappy teachers and I grew up in southeast Alabama. And Alabama is not known for a great public education system or much else for that matter, except maybe college football. But I did have some really good teachers and I started thinking, OK, what was good about those teachers? And almost across the board, it was the ability to motivate students.

**Jason Griggs:** And a lot of times students who didn't want to be there, for example, in some classes I taught like 11 English 1102 or COM 1102 here at Florida Tech. And at my previous job at Troy University, these classes were writing about literature. And at Troy University, I had a lot of kind of liberal arts majors here, Florida Tech, not so many. But what I would try to do is pick readings that students could engage with. And I tried to pick things that they had never read before, for example, to the drama section a lot of instructors would make for the whole section. The students have to read one long Shakespeare play Hamlet, King Lear or something like that. And I love those personally, but a lot of students don't. And if you're only teaching one play for, say, five weeks, if the student doesn't like the play, they're going to be bored the whole five weeks. So what I would do would be do a series of one act plays, say seven authors they'd never heard of, and all the plays would be modern. So they would have themes of, say, dating in the modern world or I mean something else. I would use obscure authors like David Ives and Jane Martin and these authors have cool stories and the writing about today. And I would always tell students like if you don't like one play this week, you might like to one tomorrow, next week or the next day. So I put a lot of effort in to try to create cool assignments, engaging assignments, just to try to get the students to take ownership of the class a little bit.

**Jared Campbell:** So are you saying that if you talk about contemporary issues, that students generally will gravitate towards understanding that these things have worth?

**Jason Griggs:** Oh, yes. And not just some abstract concepts or some abstract exercise in thought, which, of course, has value, but the students need to apply these to their own lives. Each individual student, I think in some way to get meaning. Of course, I can try to generate discussion and involvement and engagement in the classroom as a unit. But in the end, those students are at their homes by themselves, usually working on these assignments or wherever the dorm room, wherever they are working on this. And they have to do it themselves.

**Jared Campbell:** That that reminds me a wise person once told me that if you can make your lesson about who's going out with who or what's for lunch, you will never lose your students. They will be there till the end and contemplating in the way that you wished. So how do you know that they're successful though? What what is the result of you providing more of a contemporary lesson on some of these, you know, classic themes?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, I think in a face to face class, it's kind of easier to tell, of course, because you have the students right in front of you and you can see the students say it the first week or two of class who are not really engaged or not speaking much. And you can see them kind of come out of their shell a little bit and start participating in the class and the class discussions get lively. And so it's kind of easier face to face classes. And you can see I mean, it's pretty easy if you've been teaching while if you because most of the time students in my classes, they write papers, I can kind of tell how much time a student works on a paper. It's pretty obvious the way to the level writing the level of thought. And a lot of times I see improvement with that throughout the semester, which I like and I love when students come up to me after the class or write student evaluations. This is the only English class I've ever had I've liked or it was super hard, but I learned a lot, of course. Do some students care about grades and it will get you might be into a medical school or something, but in the end, I don't care if a student makes an A or B or

C necessarily. If they learn something, they take something away that will help them in their next class, in the next class, in the next class and in their job in the future. To me, grades are as much as important as what you learn.

**Jared Campbell:** I had an instructor when I was in ninth grade freshman in high school, and he taught a world history class that I completely failed. But what I learned from that class was that it was actually cool to be smart. And I see him as a hero. Of course, that when we're talking about a University experience, you know, those grades do kind of translate into careers.

**Jason Griggs:** Right.

**Jared Campbell:** Or something else. So I think the motivation for a grade is probably a little bit different for a freshman in high school than it would be for a freshman in the university. But that being said, I'm still very grateful for the experience that I've had in that class.

**Jason Griggs:** One of my worst classes I had in college was Physics 1. The semester was this professor of nuclear physics who was teaching at a community college was kind of weird. We started that quarter. It was a quarter at the time with 20 something students in the class. By the end of that quarter, there were four of us left. I bombed the first test like an F. I mean, just a 30 something F and that was one of the higher scores in the class because I didn't have to study. I mean, I did what I did in high school, which was very little to study for the test in high school. I just walk through the super easy. I was also stubborn. And so I thought, well, I'm not gonna let this guy get me. I'm not quitting. But I learn how to study in that class. And I made a C in that class and I didn't make many C's in college. And but then I had Physics 2. And there were four of us in the class. And I had to work my guts out to get a B, but I learned how to study and I learned how to dig into a subject. And Physics 3, there were only three of us because some guy just burned out, one of the four who survived. He just completely burned out. But they had to offer the class because it was a series and and make an A in that class.

I don't know if he had pity. It took some pity on me, but I worked so hard and and that taught me a valuable lesson. Never worked harder. I didn't necessarily like the guy. The guy was a bit of a jerk. But in some ways he was my best professor because I learned a lot about Physics and a lot about Calculus, but also how to think differently and how to study. So I think there's value in the classes that you don't need or want.

**Jared Campbell:** Do you think there is a connection between how somebody behaves as a student to how they behave as an instructor?

**Jason Griggs:** It's tough for me to say without knowing each individual, but I know it influenced me a lot because I think you had you said a second ago about you learn that it's OK to be smart. I had a similar lesson in fifth grade. I mentioned Miss Zerrin earlier, my fifth grade teacher. She's the one that kind of took me out of the trash heap a little bit and said, you know, you're a smart kid, you need to be doing more. I mean, I kind of identified myself up until that point. Is poor white trash kid. I mean, that's kind of how I was lumped in in those years. I up until fifth grade, I got the worst teacher, it seemed like always and I wasn't necessarily at the best public school in the town. And I seemed to always get the worst teacher with the exception of second grade. Somehow my my parents, they weren't the type of people in the early 80s to go whine at the school and made sure I had a certain teacher and they didn't know who the certain teachers were. They were supposed I was supposed to get. But in fifth grade, I happened to luck into this really good teacher and she's like, you know, you're not who they say you are. You should be working harder. You should be more engaged. You're smarter than this. You're better than this. And I've always took that lesson. I mean, and try to apply that to students that I work with as well and to motivate those students who don't think they. Well, I've never been good at English. I don't care about that. You can be I've never been good at something but I can be I mean, if you work at it, I mean, English is just like anything else. I try to demystify it a little bit. I think just because they were not good and middle school or high school, they can't be good in college. That's to me, that's not right. And so maybe I as an instructor have empathy for students because some people didn't have empathy for me as a student.

**Jared Campbell:** What do you think the main differences between a bad teacher and a good teacher?

**Jason Griggs:** I mean, I've worked with a lot of other instructors here in higher education and in Japan as well in middle school and high schools. But it seems like the less effective instructors seem to not care about their students quite as much. They're more in it for themselves for some reason, or they're into the idea of being a teacher or they got stuck with that job. I know I've talked to some colleagues who complain about the students a lot and they complain about the job a lot. But I think this might be true of any profession in some way. What makes an effective employer for someone who is really ineffective, someone who wants to be there? I mean, to me, teaching magical and just watching the light turn on for people, it's amazing. And of course, you can't reach everyone. I mean, I'm not some super idealistic guy who thinks I can make everyone a great writer, but I think I can motivate people more than some. And I care about students. And I think effective teachers care about students, more than ineffective ones who only care about their own world and not necessarily the world of students. I think good teachers have to be student centered.

**Jared Campbell:** You know, I wonder if teachers who teach the way they were taught, if they miss out on some things, you know, because because I look at teaching as being this kind of like you're surfing new knowledge with the students, you know, and you never know where that's going to lead to.

**Jason Griggs:** Right

**Jared Campbell:** And a lot of people will will stick to the way they had been in the past or the experiences that they have had in the past, and they neglect that that bright future of that unknowing. You know, I think I think sometimes teachers who stick too close to to those roots that they they don't necessarily see the blossom from from their own perspective, you know, of themselves as an instructor.

**Jason Griggs:** I think you have to be flexible. I mean, for sure. I mean, I've talked back to back sections of a class, say, English 1102 in each class, its own character. I mean, I'm teaching the same lesson back to back, but the classes are different. So I have to approach the same material a little differently based on the personalities of the class. I think some instructors, they just go up there and they do their thing and there could be no students in the class for all they care. And they don't care how the students do. They don't care if a student shows up for class.

**Jared Campbell:** I heard about this one instructor from a from another colleague of mine who talked about he was taking a master's level course in something. I don't remember something science, something very math based. And the professor would start writing on the board that he had like chalkboards was back when they used chalkboards.

**Jason Griggs:** There's still some on campus, I think.

**Jared Campbell:** I think so. Very good ones, though. They they would start on the you know, from the students perspective on the left, most board, they would keep facing the chalkboard and they would write their notes, never turn around. They would get all the way and fill up the entire set of chalkboards that were in the class. And when they reached the end of that writing surface, that was when the class was up. They never turned around.

**Jason Griggs:** I'm sure there's a lot of sleeping and cell phone enjoyment in that class.

**Jared Campbell:** Yeah, I don't know if cell phones were such a distraction here. Our cell phones are a distraction for you.

**Jason Griggs:** Not really, you just nipped in that in the butt to start with usually.

**Jared Campbell:** How do you how do you do that?

**Jason Griggs:** Just make a clear statement or two at the beginning. And if there's some infractions that start with you, you clamp down hard. And I mean just a bit like a drill instructor mentality. You go in hard to start with and then ease up as you go along. But yeah, I never really have a problem with cell phones. I mean, someone is staring at the crotch. You say, oh, you're staring at your crotch and he's a little well, public embarrassment. Well, weeds it out a little bit.

**Jared Campbell:** That that's good advice there. That's good advice for sure.

**Jason Griggs:** You get to know who's in front of you a little bit. Just simple rhetoric. It's just audience analysis. Each class is a little different and each student's a little different. Each class takes his own personality. Each student has their own personality. But you have to know your audience a little bit. It's interesting. At my previous job at Troy in Alabama, it was a satellite branch of the main university and they cater to adult learners. But we also accepted dual enrollment students from high school, so I would I had classes where I'd have a 16 year old in the class sitting next to a 70 year old student. And it's an interesting thing to think about in a lot of ways. A lot of those adult learners, a lot of them had failed previously at college or failed in their attempt to go to college or and some of it was their lifelong dream to be in college. But they didn't think they had the skills as the recently graduated high school student. And a lot of times they had way more skills in the recently graduated high school student because they'd been in the workplace and knew what it took to be successful.

**Jared Campbell:** How did you manage that, though? How did you manage? You have these perhaps idealistic youngsters that are in there with some people who have had a lot more life experience. How did you did you find the interactions between those sets of classmates, like, for instance, discussions? How did that work? How did that how did that go? Did you ever have any clashes? Did you have anything like that?

**Jason Griggs:** Oh, not really, no. I was always tried to, you know, try to get the older students to, well, tell them a little about when you graduated high school. And then I would try to get the younger students to see that, OK, this is perhaps your future a little bit. Try to give them, you know, find a common ground between them, but they can share experiences. They ended up learning a lot from each other.

**Jared Campbell:** I always like classes where it felt like you were together, like those classes. I feel kind of that familial sense or that, you know, you're in the trenches together or something like this. It sounds like you you fostered that.

**Jason Griggs:** Well, yeah, I always try to create I don't create groups in my classes. I created teams and a lot of my team exercises and grades. They were interdependent on each other. So it wasn't just the group does a project and the whole group gets the same grade. There's part of it was that but also let them rate each other as a team and also had a typically have this assignment where each member of the group has 100 points to give out to all the group members and they have to divvy it up that hundred points. If there's four people in the group that they give each person twenty five points or do they give one person ten and then divvy up the other way. And that kind of polices itself a little bit and also try to create a little competition among the teams because some students seem to thrive on competition a little bit. I mean, it's crazy. I would do these games in class sometimes where it would be a team competition and it would be worth some worthless ten points. I mean, nothing. I mean, it's sort of like whose line is it anyway? The points don't matter. But of course, I don't tell them that necessarily. But just when you introduce competition, you would have these students who wouldn't say much at all. Suddenly the knives are out for them. You know, they've got to win. It's so interesting to watch the students come alive for a little competition. They get a lot out of it.

**Jared Campbell:** Kind of goes back to your original point about the fact that motivation has.

**Jason Griggs:** And the point you made about marching forward together. If you start getting where they're interdependent on each other, they don't feel like it's just them or if it's a, oh, we're doing group work with these people. And if someone's not going to do the work well, they're all going to do the work.

**Jared Campbell:** You made a differentiation between group and team.

**Jason Griggs:** Yes.

**Jared Campbell:** What is the difference between group and team?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, I think a lot of students have that negative connotations of group work. That just sounds like a bunch of people thrown together. But a team tends to have a common goal. I mean, especially if you have students who are athletes or have some experience working as a team. And I think when they get into the job force and the job market and when they start getting to real world, I'm on a number of committees which I consider teams to solve common problems. That's what I was kind of tried to create a sense of community that a team has. Teams tend to bond together, whereas groups just exist. I mean, you can we have a group of people you sit with at lunch that's not as a team that just people wander in and sit down together.

**Jared Campbell:** What did you do to foster a team as opposed to what someone would do to foster a group?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, again, some of the competitions among the teams, I would do that. So they they had the bond together to beat, quote unquote, the other teams in these competitions. Also, I tend to give them team names.

**Jared Campbell:** You gave the names or the students come up with their own?

**Jason Griggs:** Well, no, I let the students pick, but I am like, OK, everybody, OK, you're an NFL team. Pick a name as a group or as a team. You know, you got to make your own team. But they all had the I would usually do a theme for that class. So everyone's a football team or baseball team or soccer team or whatever I say. Or you can come up with your own creative team name. Sometimes I did as well, but it had to be like city mascot

**Jared Campbell:** Ok, I see I see.

**Jason Griggs:** Something like that. And I've given that I mentioned earlier about that rating sheet where teammates rate each other. I've given that to a few instructors here on campus.

**Jared Campbell:** Yeah, that's that's that's fantastic.

**Jason Griggs:** I use it in my previous school, but where they have to you have a hundred points to give to each members of your all the members of your group. How do you divvy it up?

**Jared Campbell:** So how do you do that in there? How do you how do you assess that in your class? Do you actually give them all the points? What if, for instance, one kid is one of the more maybe he's the he's the captain of the football team or something, you know, and everybody's a little worried that he's going to do something against them or retaliate or something like that if he doesn't get the greatest grade on the assignment.

**Jason Griggs:** I've never seen that and I've never seen that it is this is the self police pretty well. I mean. I know which students are slacking in the teams, but so are the students, but students love that they can rate their teammates. And it's not just the two who are doing all the work, do a great assignment and then the slackers get the good grade also. I mean, there is a group, our team grade for the final project, let's say for the

final team project and the teamwork which I give, but also a component of each student's grade is what the teammates give them.

**Jared Campbell:** That can be brutal, I think. Oh, I like it.

**Jason Griggs:** It can be brutal for the slackers.

**Jared Campbell:** Yeah, Yeah, for the slackers as well.

**Jason Griggs:** But I've never seen where someone is doing a lot of work in the team and in the teammates to slam them for that. It's always the slackers who get slammed and but that tends to eliminate the slackers a little bit.

**Jared Campbell:** So do you have this do you have a written version of this like a like a the grading sheet or something that you give to your students? Do you do you have that?

**Jason Griggs:** Oh, yes. Not on me right now.

**Jared Campbell:** Well, not on you right now.

**Jason Griggs:** I got a digital copy.

**Jared Campbell:** A digital copy. Would you send that to me and I will put it on to the podcast page.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah, sure.

**Jared Campbell:** OK, great. Because I think people would really appreciate that and it would help remind them that this is an opportunity that they have in their class.

**Jason Griggs:** I mean, it's like the senior design projects, which we saw not too long ago here.

**Jared Campbell:** Phenomenal.

**Jason Griggs:** Gleason's. But that's teams, that's teamwork typically I think that's not like a group project where you randomly throw three people together. I'm sure there are some slackers involved in those. And I've actually heard some of my former students here on campus. I did a lot more work than that person, but.

**Jared Campbell:** I've heard these same stories.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah

**Jared Campbell:** It's a it's the reality training right.

**Jason Griggs:** I think is the key is for teams or groups, whatever you want to call it is to create that interdependence. So they are dependent upon each other for the grade and but also they can rate each other. And there's consequences for that rating. Not just a student comes to the instructor. Well, my teammate is a slacker. A lot of times nothing happens there in the student really doesn't have much power in that. But if you empower the students like, look, you're going to be rating each other and your teammates will be rating you also and their rating impacts your grade.

**Jared Campbell:** That's good. That's very motivating.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah.

**Jared Campbell:** I would think I can I can imagine that would be some people would be like doing back flips and other people would be like, oh no, I got to actually work.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah.

**Jared Campbell:** And that's very I like the idea that that definitely pleases the assignment.

**Jason Griggs:** But having the same teams throughout the whole semester, the with some in class work and some of those competitions, they develop relationships.

**Jared Campbell:** Yeah. And probably methods to keep people motivated within the group, you know, their own personal methods. You know.

**Jason Griggs:** I had, I had this couple that they met at one of my classes and they were on a team. They ended up moving to Australia to go to grad school together.

**Jared Campbell:** Oh, wow.

**Jason Griggs:** And I think they're married now.

**Jared Campbell:** Wow.

**Jared Campbell:** Yeah. You're Cupid.

**Jason Griggs:** Yeah.

**Jared Campbell:** Teachers do the darndest things.

**Jason Griggs:** They never know where these things can lead.

**Jared Campbell:** That's true. That's true. So what does your future bring you?

**Jason Griggs:** That's a great question. I don't know. I hope I keep teaching, keep learning, keep having fun. I love my jobs. I love what I do.

**Jared Campbell:** Alright, on behalf of the Florida Institute of Technology, the teaching counsel here, we've got Mr. Jason Griggs. I'd like to thank him for coming into the FIT to teach podcast studios that we're teaching that we're doing finally at the glorious WFIT Studios and Studio B. Thanks for having us and happy teaching, everyone.