

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Episode 1 – Critical Service Learning: Letters with Incarcerated People

Matt Wittstein (00:00:13):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy.

(00:00:21):

On this episode, Dr. Lucy Arnold from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, shares her plans to have students and her citizenship course exchange letters with incarcerated people. Our panel of Vanessa-Drew Branch, Associate Professor of Human Services Studies, Phillip Motley, Associate Professor of Communications, and Sophie Miller, a center for engaged learning student scholar, share some of their experiences and ideas and tips to help ensure Lucy's implementation of critical service learning run smoothly in her classroom.

(00:00:55):

Thanks for listening and enjoy the episode.

Matt Wittstein (00:00:57):

Hi Lucy, welcome to the show. We're so happy to have you on Limed today. I'd like you to just take a second to introduce yourself, where you're teaching, and whatever else you want to share with us real quick.

Lucy Arnold (00:01:21):

Thank you so much for having me on the show. I'm really excited. I'm Lucy Arnold, I'm the director of educational partnerships at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, where I've been teaching for several years now.

(00:01:35):

I've been in higher ed for about 10 years generally, and my research and writing is focused on critical service learning.

Matt Wittstein (00:01:44):

I want to just lean right into that critical service learning. What is that to you? And how is that different from say academic service learning?

Lucy Arnold (00:01:55):

Yeah, that's a really good question. It's really a branch of service learning, so service learning is just any activity that is a part of a course that students are doing community engagement. So that's service learning.

(00:02:11):

When we get into critical service learning, we think about having an orientation toward social justice, toward change, with an eye toward power dynamics and the development of authentic relationships.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:25):

Can you tell us a little bit about the class that you're implementing this critical service learning work in?

Lucy Arnold (00:02:31):

So the course that I teach for UNC Charlotte is actually for the honors college, and all students at UNC Charlotte take liberal studies classes as a part of their curriculum, which is I think pretty common at four year universities.

(00:02:47):

And one of their required liberal studies courses for honors college students is this one called citizenship. It's a three hour course, and the goal of the course is critical thinking like a lot of other college courses, but with a particular interest in that community engagement piece. And helping students see themselves as part of a larger community, both local and globally.

(00:03:12):

This semester, I have a new aspect of that critical service learning piece that I'm looking to implement.

Matt Wittstein (00:03:20):

So in this citizenship course, it's part of the honors college. Are these first year students, second year students? Does the course serve as a prerequisite for future courses, or are there any prerequisites that your students have already had?

Lucy Arnold (00:03:35):

Most of my students are second year students. However, I do get a pretty solid number of first year students, because honor students so often come in with all that AP and IB credit into the program.

(00:03:47):

So I typically have had a mix of first and second year, and a couple of upperclassmen as well. And it is also going to be a really diverse group of majors. The honors college is very diverse in majors, and then we also serve honors programs in other colleges.

(00:04:04):

So for example, the business college, they have their own honors program, healthcare and medicine, they have their own honors program. So I also will have students from those other parts of the university and they all take this course together.

Matt Wittstein (00:04:18):

How many of them come in with any previous experience of service opportunities or especially critical service learning?

Lucy Arnold (00:04:26):

I've found a lot of them have community service experiences in the past. A lot of them are coming from honor societies and programs in their high schools where they do some kind of community service component. Some of them do that with their communities and with their churches.

(00:04:45):

I would say they have minimal exposure to service learning in an academic perspective and critical service learning for sure. I generally do teach them what that means early in the semester so it can be part of our conversation, and most of them find that that's a new concept.

Matt Wittstein (00:05:07):

So you're going to take some very young adults that have some experience with wanting to do good in the world. And tell us about your idea, this is the part I'm most excited for.

Lucy Arnold (00:05:19):

Yeah, me too. So I'll give you just a tiny bit of background first, because for the past two semesters, my previous work with the course, I have been encouraging my students to consider incarcerated people and the conditions in prisons in the United States.

(00:05:39):

I would actually encourage any listeners to look into that, it's been particularly egregious under COVID. Incarcerated people are often cut off from communication, people haven't been able to visit prisons. And there's a whole slate of new legislation that's restricting the ways in which people can even communicate with people who are incarcerated.

(00:06:01):

So there's a lot of things to consider with incarcerated people. Some of the readings I do in the class have to do with history and incarceration in prisons as well. And I was very fortunate last year to become connected with an organization called Prison Abolition Prisoner Support, PAPS for short, and what this organization does is support incarcerated people in a whole variety of ways.

(00:06:29):

One thing that my students were able to participate in last year was helping incarcerated people receive their stimulus money. Everybody was eligible to receive it, but there were a lot of barriers for incarcerated people. We processed a lot of mail and sent out 1040 forms and forms for taxpayer advocates.

(00:06:52):

So we sent out a whole lot of information to incarcerated people last spring, and that was really good work. And I think we helped some people by doing that.

(00:07:01):

This year, PAPS also runs a pen pal program. And so this year, because I have had some time to do some planning in advance, my students are going to be able to have a pen pal who's an incarcerated person. And I will share that this was something that I really wanted to do from the beginning, but one of my blockers was service learning happens in the context of a class, and semesters end.

(00:07:29):

But I didn't want to cause harm to anybody who is incarcerated by be connected with a pen pal who then just drops off the face of the earth at the end of the semester. And in critical service learning we think a lot about how our work coincides and doesn't coincide with academic semesters.

(00:07:48):

Fortunately though, through PAPS I've been connected with some other folks who do this work, and what they have is a program so that incarcerated people can choose to be a part of our pen pal program.

(00:08:01):

So they sign a contract from the beginning. They understand that some students may not continue to write past the semester. They understand who they're going to be writing to and agree not to write

certain types of content with our students. So I feel like this situation solves some of the concerns I had about setting up a pen pal program with my students previously, and I'm really excited to implement this with my critical service learning students this semester.

(00:08:31):

So a lot of my course content is going to continue to be the same, in terms of our readings, in terms of some of our academic work. But the service learning is going to include a series of four letters the students will write, and write back and forth to incarcerated people.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:50):

So it sounds like you've got a lot to think about going into this. You're thinking about how to be protective of the incarcerated people, but I'm curious what protections you have in place for your students to really help them be prepared for that experience. Because I imagine it'll be a very different experience than most of them have had.

Lucy Arnold (00:09:14):

Yeah, when we processed a lot of mail from incarcerated people in the spring I knew it was going to be a powerful experience, but I was not prepared for the transformative nature of that experience for my students.

(00:09:29):

Everyone who participated was I think changed by that experience, by really recognizing that humanity and being able to empathize with folks in those letters. So I think I have a couple of levels of protections in place for my students. One is the contract that incarcerated people will sign in order to participate in the program.

(00:09:52):

And I'm thinking about how I'm going to be preparing some coursework and some activities in class to help prepare my students for how to engage with that as well.

(00:10:02):

In fact, one of my big questions going into it right now is how to get started really quickly with this project, because in order to have this back and forth at least four times over the course of the semester, we're going to have to get started pretty quickly.

(00:10:18):

And so I'm really trying to figure out how to negotiate that at the beginning of the semester, while also teaching some of the content that they need. And doing the team building and community building activities that really make a class important and powerful and meaningful to students.

(00:10:38):

So I feel like there's so much work that's going to need to be done in those first few weeks of the semester, and it's a little overwhelming to think about how I'm going to manage all of that. I guess I'll go ahead and share my second question too, which is about grading.

(00:10:52):

If you have any experience doing service learning at all you can already guess how fraught it is to think about grading in a service learning context. I have to give a grade. And so figuring out how to fit this project in with that is definitely plaguing me.

Matt Wittstein (00:11:10):

So you brought up some quick concerns that you have, how to get the ball rolling very quickly. At the end of this all, how do you grade? Are there any other concerns you have?

Lucy Arnold (00:11:23):

I'm also in process on writing the contract that my students are going to sign. I have the parallel contract that my community partner will be using with incarcerated people, but I do think the contract that my students are going to sign is going to need to look a little bit different.

(00:11:40):

I'm thinking about what I want that contract to look like for them and how much, I guess, dialogue I want involved in that contract process.

Matt Wittstein (00:11:52):

I think I have one lingering question about this overall course and assignment that I know will be helpful to panelists to talk about this. What are some of your learning objectives and how might that be different than some of the developmental objectives for your students?

Lucy Arnold (00:12:09):

We basically have three learning outcomes for this course. One is around critical thinking, and the second one is about communication. The one that I have about communication is very general. I tend to make it a little bit more narrow to be able to talk about advocacy. And then the third one is really the big one, it's social context.

(00:12:30):

Students will demonstrate the ability to take a critical perspective on issues relating to personal or societal ethics, and our issues over which belief systems, values, or cultures clash.

(00:12:42):

That's really the one I feel I am most engaging with, obviously the other two as well, but that third one with my particular projects. And I think it actually aligns really well with where my students are developmentally.

(00:13:02):

Over the past year it's been really interesting, because a lot of my students have been back in person for the first time. A lot of them have really been online for two, three years at this point.

(00:13:12):

So part of this course is about learning how to engage with other people at all, on top of that we're doing really challenging work. So I feel like there has been a lot going on as I think about developmentally where my students are and what they need in order to be able to work on those objectives for the course.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:33):

This all sounds so incredible. You're doing some really cool work, working with some really cool people and partners. And it seems like you have a lot of experience and a lot of the pieces in place.

(00:13:44):

So I want to bring this back and wrap around to what do you hope to get from our panelists by being on this podcast? What would be the most helpful for you?

Lucy Arnold (00:13:55):

At this point I think I'm pretty deep in on thinking about it, and I've taught the class for two semesters and I do have a really strong sense of my students and really of my community that I engage with.

(00:14:11):

So it would really be helpful to me to have a vantage point of people who understand higher ed and understand courses, and students to think about how they're going to be coming at this course. And how I can best organize the course and grade the course and teach the course to be able to do the most that we can in the short amount of time that we have in this semester.

(00:14:40):

So I really feel having people looking at this with fresh eyes is what I need right now, and I would definitely really value that.

Matt Wittstein (00:14:49):

That's fantastic. We're going to take this conversation to our panelists and we'll be back in touch.

Lucy Arnold (00:14:55):

I'm really excited. I'm really excited to hear what perspectives you all will bring to this.

Matt Wittstein (00:15:00):

So we're here with our panel, and we just had a great conversation with Lucy. And we're here with Sophie Miller, Phillip Motley, and Vanessa Drew-Branch, all from Elon. I would love for you all to introduce yourselves to the audience where you're at right now. And I also want to know what is the most positive outcome that you have experienced through academic or other service learning?

Sophie Miller (00:15:27):

Hi, I'm Sophie. I'm going into my third year at Elon. My most positive outcome from my service learning experiences, which I've had two of, have been connecting with the outside community in a very meaningful way.

(00:15:43):

So Elon is very much a bubble and is referred to as a bubble because it is a small private school, but the outside community in town does not necessarily always fit those same demographics. And so being able to go out and interact with those community members really grounded me in understanding where am I and what kind of world are we living in, instead of just saying stuck in this very privileged higher ed community.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:16:11):

I'm Vanessa Drew-Branch. I teach in the human services studies department at Elon. I have been teaching service oriented classes, my professional background is in social work for a very long time. And so I have a lot of really cool experiences, but some of the overarching theme of the meaningful experiences have always been whenever we're able to help my students blur those lines to where they're able to come out of the classroom and participate with the community members as community

members, where they start to see themselves as members of these vibrant communities that we are a part of but don't always feel connected to.

Phillip Motley (00:16:59):

Hi everybody, I'm Phillip Motley. I'm an associate professor in the Department of Communication Design at Elon. I'm also the current faculty fellow for service learning and community engagement.

(00:17:10):

Most meaningful experience with service learning almost always is because students forget about things that they usually obsess over, like grades, and pleasing the teacher to put that in simple terms. And the connections they make to community members, the needs of the community, the authentic environment in which they work somehow seem to surmount that natural instinct to be very obsessed about grades in ways that they seem to care more about the wellbeing and outcomes that they're addressing through their service learning work with and for those communities. And that never gets old for me, ever.

Matt Wittstein (00:17:52):

I love that. So I think you all have gathered that we're talking about service learning. And specifically we talked with Lucy Arnold, who is a faculty member at UNC Charlotte. She teaches a course called citizenship, which is in their liberal arts education. It's through their honors college where they're trying to teach things like critical thinking, both local and global ideas. It's a diverse group of majors. So people from different backgrounds.

(00:18:21):

It's sophomores, it's juniors, it's everybody across the way. And what she's really interested in doing, she has a lot of experience in doing what she frames as critical service learning. So service learning through a social justice lens.

(00:18:37):

What she's interested in doing this semester is she has a partner, the Prison Abolition Prisoner Support, that she will be working with to have her students write a series of letters back and forth, almost like pen pals, with incarcerated people.

(00:18:52):

And what she's really hoping to get from the panel today and workshop that idea a little bit are some practical things that she can do to one, get things moving fairly quickly, because we do have that time limitation of a 15 week semester in our case and in her case.

(00:19:14):

Two, to prepare her students for some of that transformative nature of service learning. So some general tips of how do you prepare students to be ready for what the experience might be. And then three, some tips for assessment, things like assignments she might include or specific things she might put in a student contract. I'm going to lean into Vanessa a little bit and ask, what are some of your initial thoughts? How do you approach setting up a service experience that might include vulnerable populations?

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:19:51):

So I think it takes a lot of familiarity with the instructor about that specific population and the culture of that population, the setting, the context.

(00:20:04):

One of the things that I'm really passionate about is understanding place, because place matters. So I live in Charlotte but I work in Burlington at Elon. Those are two very different places. And so the way in which we interact with groups has to be different.

(00:20:26):

And so when we are thinking about how we're setting up a course, the place in which we occupy. And then the context that our population is in, they both have to be considered. So I think there's a lot of upfront work for instructors to think about, okay, what place are my students in in terms of our academic context, but then also what's the culture that I'm trying to engage with?

(00:20:54):

I think it's really dope that they're planning to work with the incarcerated population, but the incarcerated population has a culture of its own. And has that been acknowledged?

(00:21:07):

And not just acknowledged as if it exists, but also from a strength-based perspective, have we seen value or survival or whatever positive attributes that exist in that culture that we can glean upon so that we're not leaning into this sympathetic approach where our assignments and our energy is coming from a, we feel bad for these people and so let's help them, but it's coming from a much more humanistic approach that they have developed this culture of resilience and resistance, even within the space that they're occupying. And there's some value in human dignity that exists within that space as well.

Matt Wittstein (00:21:53):

There's a lot to think about there. I'm going to flip over to Phillip a little bit and just ask broadly, how do you set up a service learning experience, especially within that academic setting of how do you get this to work within 15 weeks?

Phillip Motley (00:22:11):

Wow, short answer is I don't really know. But I'll throw some things out there that I would be thinking about if I was her, I think Vanessa already raised some of them around how do you understand that culture and that place where the incarcerated came from before they ended up being imprisoned? And how do you do that from afar?

(00:22:33):

There are lots of barriers, I guess, for lack of a better word that are presented in this particular context that I don't have personal experience with, but I think it would be a challenge. I think Vanessa also was right in saying that you need to start early and you need to do some homework.

(00:22:50):

And so for example, if the participants in the prison are already identified, could at least Lucy be writing letters to them to better understand their context to learn who they are ahead of the start of the semester and the students beginning to do the same so that she herself has some understanding of who they are?

(00:23:10):

Maybe even learn a bit about the actual facility they're in and that culture, because I think Vanessa again is right, that culture will be very specific to that place as well.

(00:23:20):

And the other thing that I would say is understanding that we in academia, students and faculty alike, live in these weird time bound structures that the rest of the world doesn't operate in. 15 week semester in which you have to do a fair amount of work to meet the objectives of the course and the things that you want your students to learn, and the things you want to achieve with your community partner, you need to take some amount of time to understand the lay of the land.

(00:23:45):

So I think that's something that she's going to have to rustle with how she's going to not go too fast but still be mindful of the 15 week semester.

Matt Wittstein (00:23:52):

So Sophie, I know you've been in a couple of academic service learning courses in the past. What were the pace of those courses like?

(00:24:01):

Were there spots where they could go faster, spots where it would've been helpful if they slowed down? What were some of the first activities that you maybe participated in to get you ready?

Sophie Miller (00:24:10):

My most recent class, the service learning was there's a variety of different opportunities actually. So I think that there were four different placements that we could choose from. And so depending on where you chose to go and contribute your time just depended on when you started doing the work.

(00:24:35):

So there was a lot of delay there. I don't think it was until halfway through the semester that some of those partnerships were really hammered out, and the logistics of students giving their time, whether it be virtually or coming in person. And then there was a lot of stress that followed that logistically with getting your hours in because we had to log a certain amount of hours. I don't think that that was productive for a lot of students, they were just really worried about their hours.

(00:25:03):

For me, I was less worried because my partnership was actually in Alamance County, which was right near Elon. So it was super easy. Everything got hammered out well.

(00:25:13):

There was a lot of buildup beforehand where we were talking about different communities because it was a community psychology class. So talking about what kind of places are people coming from and how does that dictate how they're acting, and then as a community psychologist, which is not necessarily where every student was destined to be in that class, there was a variety of different types of students in the class. But with that kind of mindset of, if I'm a community psychologist, how am I coming into these different places?

(00:25:45):

And not trying to fix people or fix communities, but rather be an understanding ear. And so we did a lot of talking about that. And a lot of that was just hearing our professor telling stories about different communities. And it was all of those human things and human interactions that I think made the information easier to digest from a student perspective, rather than it being super duper textbook.

(00:26:15):

And then when we went out in the communities it all started to click, at least for me.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:26:20):

Really click off of that, Sophie. I love the student's perspective because I think we get really caught in our heads. We have to get this done and we set these lofty expectations as instructors of, here's what I need you to get.

(00:26:36):

And people know I love parables, but one African parable that I love is that if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. And so one thing that I have found is that I've had to dial back logistically what I want to accomplish, and have much more reasonable expectations about the products.

(00:27:02):

I've also spent a lot of time trying to decolonize my practice around service learning. What that means is we don't always need to assess everything, meaning I don't need to attach a grade to everything. I think one of the logistic things with this project that Lucy is lofty and dope, and I'm really excited to see what the outcome is, but you're going to have to spend a lot of time around the white savior complex and how we're not going in to rescue these people.

(00:27:35):

Following that up with a lot of discussions around intercultural communications and really thinking about the language in which we use and how we can bridge that gap and allow space for people. That takes weeks, which is why Sophie got the delay. Because what we don't want to do is send students out to fail, or to do more harm than they do good.

(00:28:04):

In thinking about writing letters, logistically that could not happen until midterm for me because I would have to spend at least four to five weeks of that 15 weeks really digesting language, intercultural communication, really thinking about this population and all of that is to build up to the actual action. Which it's probably not a really good professor answer, but I think it gives a better product.

(00:28:34):

I've noticed that our students do a assignment called a IPM or a inter-processing model where we teach them how to think about these experiences from a very... It's a step model and it has eight steps in it, a very linear way, which also drives me crazy but it is a good way to help them think about what they're experiencing.

(00:29:00):

But that takes probably about four to five weeks of lecture and discussion to get them to think about their thinking, be able to articulate what they're experiencing. And so I think having reasonable expectations about what can be done and then also dialing back the amount of assignments, because for me, service learning is not about counting beans. It's more about building a lifelong learner and a really good global community citizen.

Phillip Motley (00:29:31):

Going off what Vanessa was just saying and the question that you brought up earlier when you brought up the white savior complex, and I think you could even extend that to the non-incarcerated savior complex versus the incarcerated. I wonder what Lucy's ultimate goal is or goals in terms of her hoped for outcomes with the students.

(00:29:50):

But one thought would be for her to, and she may have already done this obviously, to really think about flipping that in a way that everything that the students write to the people in the institution is about what they can learn from them rather than the ways in which I can help you from the outside.

(00:30:09):

So that from the very beginning the dynamic is one of, we want to learn from you. We want to see this as in an asset-based construct rather than, Hey, how'd you end up there? And be either instructive or try to be that savior thing.

(00:30:26):

The other thing that occurred to me is that any institution that teaches service learning falls in the trap of having a student like Sophie, who's clearly already taken two service learning courses and maybe she'll even do another one, ending up having the same service learning 101 jargon presented to her even though now she's advanced. She's had two experiences, she's learned a lot, and so how do we think about scaffolding the experiences for students that are specific to the service learning.

(00:30:56):

So that's a challenge I think we all have that I'm constantly thinking about. So how can we provide that in a module that doesn't exist during the actual class time, or some other fashion like that?

Sophie Miller (00:31:05):

I think that's a really interesting point and something that I haven't actually thought about before. And I think it's just because, at least for me, my service learning experiences were so different. And at the core I was going out and working in my community, I was actually working with kids both times. But I was coming from I was in a psychology class and then an education class.

(00:31:26):

So I think the basics doesn't ever hurt, especially when you're going into different contexts and coming from different perspectives. I don't really see it as a concern. I also just wanted to touch on one other thing that Vanessa brought up I think is really important is the idea of not grading all the time. Because I think the intention of service learning classes are to go out in the community and actually learn something that's impactful to a person in their being instead of just as a student, and just on a very superficial level learning from a textbook or from a lecture does.

(00:32:05):

I think that then it needs to be followed through with the assignments not always grading and having these reflective moments. And I think then too, the reflection needs to be taught as well. How are students supposed to process all this information? Maybe it's somebody's first time going out into a community that they're not used to, how are they supposed to process that? And it's very different for somebody.

(00:32:31):

And then there's also you know want your requirements for grading, and how am I going to acknowledge that this person did this? Or in terms of requiring hours, how do you balance the, oh, I need to meet these logistical requirements, but what's going to be most impactful as a student?

Matt Wittstein (00:32:47):

I think that's a perfect segue, and I want to dig into that idea of grading and buy-in a little bit. So for most of us in higher ed we do have to assign grades at the end of a semester. Depending what

institution you're at you may have some flexibility to play around with different grading models, alternative grading on grading, those types of things.

(00:33:08):

But one thing you said, Sophie, was something along the lines of the specific hours requirement became the thing that all of your classmates were just thinking about. And something Phillip said earlier about his favorite part is when they stop caring about the grade, those feel like they are related to me.

(00:33:27):

So I'm curious if you all have some ideas of how to create that buy-in from your students, that they're committed to that, while still working within that infrastructure of needing to assign a grade at the end of the day or at the end of the semester.

Phillip Motley (00:33:45):

I'll jump in here really quick and then I'll let my colleagues here take over. But I didn't say earlier, it seemed like too much information, but it's a strange thing that I'm the faculty fellow for service learning and community engagement at Elon and I've never taught an academic service learning course, meaning one that counts the hours and gives experiential learning requirement credit to Elon students like Sophie.

(00:34:06):

I've taught many courses that we call community engaged at Elon, which have a community based component but they don't necessarily meet the hours. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing for me or my students, I don't really know. But I will say that my students didn't have to obsess over the hours, and that may be why many times I've experienced a thing where it almost frees them from the grade or the counting in ways that's kind of wonderful.

(00:34:31):

They focus so much then on their community partner and in all honesty, then the hours take care of themselves because they put their whole selves into the work and they're committed to it. But they don't have that number hanging out in front of them, Sophie, that I think you were talking about, that sooner or later, if you're trying to get the grade or at Elon trying to earn that credit, Elon students need two of those before they graduate. That's an extrinsic motivator that we're all afraid of those, the intrinsic ones are the ones we're trying to hit on because they're the ones we do because we love it.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:35:01):

In our major, HSS, we have a lot of courses that actually count the beans, so that have the academic service learning designation. And I've taught a lot of them. And I think one of the ways is that I do that intercultural communications conversation, I really focus on advocacy, and I try to create an experience for students where they feel connected to the work so that it doesn't feel like work.

(00:35:35):

That they're invested in working with the kids at the boys and girls club. That they are invested in working with the older folks at Twin Lakes. So that the number doesn't feel as onerous as it can if they didn't love what they were doing, if they weren't invested. But once again, that all starts with the front work of helping them to feel connected to the community that they will inevitably be serving, because the number absolutely can be cumbersome.

(00:36:09):

I understand that we need grades, and I'm kind of on the fence with grades, but I understand the logistics around it. And so one thing that I have, that's why we teach reflecting and we grade the reflections. We don't grade the quality in terms of did they have a great experience, but we teach them how to think about these experiences and what they've gained from it? Or how they can improve it for the next time they have the service learning course.

(00:36:39):

I think that for me it's significant for us to be very mindful of what we grade in these courses and for it not to become busy work, because it's just not meaningful at all. And students get lost in the busy work and then they miss what you're really trying to teach them.

Sophie Miller (00:37:00):

So in my first service learning class that I ever took was in my first year, and the way that it was formatted was we all did the hours together. Granted it was a really, really, really small class. I think it was six students total. And it was during COVID so we did our service virtually.

(00:37:22):

But we would all hop on Zoom at a scheduled time every week. I don't even remember having a conversation about hours and having to meet a certain amount. And so our professor had just taken care of that for us, and made sure that on her end she felt comfortable with the amount of service that we were doing. And for us, we were just showing up for another class basically.

(00:37:48):

And I think that was really nice, because it totally took away any worry about hours or requirements or this or that. And then we had a lot of class discussions, which was really easy because we had great community in our classroom because it was so small. But we all could chit chat and talk and give advice because we were tutoring. So we gave advice to each other about how to approach that.

(00:38:12):

And then when it came to writing a reflection, it also felt really easy because we had already had conversations and discussions. And now I have all of these things to say because it's already been generated from more organic conversations.

Matt Wittstein (00:38:30):

So I want to be mindful of folks that may not have our requirements for service learning courses, that they may have other requirements. But I think the general point, the general idea here is how to get the students thoughts away from the grade requirement and focused on the learning opportunity that's in front of them.

(00:38:52):

So I want to go real specific to Lucy's concept of writing four letters back and forth with incarcerated people. Is that enough? How might you go about assessing those types of assignments? What other assignments might you tack in there to help them prepare for that experience or to assess how they're doing it along the way?

Sophie Miller (00:39:17):

I think something that I learned very recently is that people can go to prison for all sorts of things that you normally wouldn't even think about, I guess. I think for a long time I had a very preconceived notion

of what criminal acts were, and then I realized that there's all sorts of just financial fraud and just different kinds of criminal acts that people have to go and serve a lot of time for.

(00:39:44):

But the justice system can be really weird, especially in the US, and people may not go to trial for things or they're appealing their trials. There's just so many complicated things. And whether people are really guilty or not, or what they're in there for, it just ends up getting really messy and complicated. And I had no idea the depths of that, and I still don't fully.

(00:40:06):

And so I think that's something that could be really interesting for this class specifically that goes along with just writing letters, is doing a lot of research and background work for the students to learn in a greater scope who the people that they're talking to may be. And not just, oh, they're criminals who have done all of these crazy things that you might see on TV, but they're human beings and where are they coming from? And where they face too?

Matt Wittstein (00:40:38):

I really like how that connects back to what Vanessa said earlier about knowing place, knowing your place but also knowing the partner's place, and really having a deeper understanding for how people are in different circumstances.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:40:53):

I think I would question the four letters. Is there a reason for that number? Is it designed for relationship building? What is the motivation behind that number of contact points?

(00:41:11):

I think for me, transformational learning of any sort, but particularly the type that interfaces with the community is not always... And Phillip and I have definitely tussled about this, it's not always the number. It has more to do with the quality over quantity.

(00:41:30):

I've had students who've had two or three amazing contacts with a community partner, and then I've had some that have been there for our total of 40 hours and have not had as meaningful of an experience. And so I think I would be curious as to what is the rationale behind that number of contacts. Because transformational for me is just tussling with these emotions and these concepts, and feeling uncomfortable about what you're experiencing and exploring the dissonance and integrating that new knowledge into how you see the world.

(00:42:09):

And like Sophie said, being much more curious about a system that is all around us but many of us have never touched in that way. So I'm not sure that you need to put pressure on yourself to have that many points of contact. If two get you to that transformational tussling point, that struggle point, then it could be enough. And it could create space for write a letter, have this really good discussion about what these letters created as an experience, and then write a response and then have a closing discussion.

Phillip Motley (00:42:46):

I am interested in what you're saying, Vanessa, the number four to me, it seems arbitrary, but also that I feel like there's got to be something after that. We wrote four letters. We learned these things about each other, and then... But I'm not sure what the end then is. Maybe that's still being worked out. A lot

of these things with service learning and where there's a community-based component where you don't have absolute control, I think is what sometimes faculty are nervous about, anxious about, because they don't have complete control of their learning environment.

(00:43:16):

But I think that's also the most beneficial part for the students, because the world is not an absolute place, things are constantly in flux. I would be very curious just to know what is the ultimate goal of the four letters. And the other thought that I had is much like reflection. If you just ask a student to write about what happened today and the experience that might get you to a certain place, but if you provide some probing questions or some sort of prompts that are germane to the specifics of that situation, maybe you can get to somewhere deeper quicker.

(00:43:45):

So I wonder again, I would think Lucy's thought about a lot of these things, but does each letter of the four have a different theme or a focus of the interaction? And I think another point would be to really think that if I'm writing a letter to someone in prison and that person's writing back to me, it's not four letters. It's eight. That full cycle is not just sending four letters. And so thinking about that in a more full, complete way might be helpful.

Sophie Miller (00:44:13):

Something that makes me think about is the whole writing process. Some students might have a lot of really, really interesting questions and others might feel really daunted by sending a letter to an incarcerated person. I think that there could be some really cool opportunities there for maybe some peer support and discussion and reviewing too of what kinds of questions do I want to ask and how do I want to write this letter?

(00:44:41):

And then you also maybe have a partner in your class that you can lean on when you get a really heavy letter, and try to process that and talk through things so there's not only just personal reflection or only big group reflection, it adds some dynamic aspects to it.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:44:58):

And really quickly, one thing I'm hopeful that students in service learning really walk away from, one tangible takeaway, is that learning how to be instead of always doing. So yes, write the letter, but then learn how to sit with the response. Learn how to process what's going on in your body, like really learning how to be in the world I think is a tangible takeaway. In a 15 week, and I am very guilty of this, in a 15 week semester we don't create enough space for that to develop.

(00:45:39):

Because we oftentimes as academics feel like we have to be doing something in order for it to be a meaningful experience. But I think one of the things that I'm learning in my older age is that sometimes things grow when it's quiet, things grow when it's settled. I have a plant in my office that has blossomed over the summer because I'm not there to harass it.

(00:46:03):

And so I just think that if we can slow down the pace, it really gives students some time to sit and learn how to be and not always be so reactive. They don't have to be doing things in order to be engaged in meaningful learning.

Phillip Motley (00:46:22):

Vanessa, I think you're becoming a Buddhist.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:46:24):

Yes, sir.

Phillip Motley (00:46:27):

All kidding aside, you sound like one. The other thought though, I love the buddy system idea, Sophie, I think that's a really important one, especially in a situation like this where there's going to be I would imagine a lot of anxiety, some trivial and minor and some maybe pretty intense. And this buddy system idea that you threw out there, even though you didn't call it that, I feel like that's a great one, especially if you can develop a meaningful relationship with whoever your buddy is. So that offline, during class, whenever, wow, I got this letter and I need to talk about it.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:46:59):

But you know what, Philip, I also think that we don't know where students are coming from, where also this is not the banking model where we're just pouring into these empty vessels. So in addition to the buddy system I also think that it could be very triggering for some students. We don't know what their backgrounds are. We don't know what types of communities they've come from, what their family connections are, their friends connections are.

(00:47:26):

And those experience, so we also may want to encourage and have available counseling services and all that good stuff, because this could be really triggering. We don't know what will be disclosed in the letters. And even if it's super benign, we don't know how it can affect a student.

Phillip Motley (00:47:45):

I agree. You make me think that there ought to be, this will sound really institutional, but a screening or some procedure by which this Lucy is able to have a conversation with a student maybe ahead of the class saying, here's the deal and here's some of the things we're going to do. And make sure that you really want to be a part of this in some way to...

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:48:08):

And not the generic research letter that we send out saying that this is more than a little minimal risk. Really thinking about, because that's what community engaged learning, academic service learning is, it's about caring for the whole person. And our students are coming in with a lot of stuff too, and so we want to make sure that we're also taking care of them if in fact they have, I think, Sophie, that was a great point, a heavy letter.

Phillip Motley (00:48:34):

I agree. I think it can't be the research letter or we're telling you how you might be harmed, it seems like it would need to be a 10 minute, 15 minute conversation or some way where I can look at you. I can see your eyes, you can see mine. And we can, I don't know, it seems like a human connection has to happen there to have that be figured out.

Matt Wittstein (00:48:52):

So you brought up this idea of possibly having some level of oversight of the letters, of the screening process, or something like that. Is there a scale at which that's appropriate or a scale at which that's inappropriate of when it's you need to just let it happen versus, nope, we really want to make sure we're protecting both our students and the partners that we're working with. So we are going to have that screening. Just curious on your thoughts on how that actual screening process might work.

Phillip Motley (00:49:20):

It makes me think of the IRB question that you brought up earlier, Vanessa, in that you go through the IRB process, you've clearly agreed to some constraints with the IRB administrator or committee. I would feel like as the faculty member, the instructor, you might need to read the letters before they're mailed if for no other reason than to make sure you're not outside the bounds of your IRB agreement. And for any number of other reasons.

(00:49:46):

But that seems like dangerous territory to me. If I was Lucy, that would be the thing that stressed me out I think at some point

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:49:53):

I think that for me reading the letters would be definitely a part of it, because I also don't want to make assumptions that... Human connections can be messy and they can be complicated, and so just to make sure that there's good boundaries on my students side, there's good boundaries on mainly my students side so that we are learning how to do things also safely would be important for me.

(00:50:23):

So I think reading letters, definitely screening. I would not feel as if I'm doing my due diligence as an instructor if I didn't cover both ends on that one.

Matt Wittstein (00:50:36):

Sophie, do you think that would be infringing on some of your privacy in conversations, or how would you feel about an instructor reading your letters to another person?

Sophie Miller (00:50:48):

I've been trying to figure that out as I hear you all talk about wanting to do your job as an instructor. Because I think at first I'm like, oh, if I'm writing a letter to someone it's to them, that's how I feel. I feel the same way with someone reading my text messages. Even if we're talking about what we are eating for dinner, I still don't want someone else to read it because I didn't send it to them.

(00:51:14):

But I think that there's a level of professionalism that needs to be had when you're... And I don't know if I love the word professionalism for this, but I think it's the best fit. Is when there's a student going and doing something for their academics and reaching out to community members, professionalism needs to be had a little bit. Because Vanessa's right, human connections are really complicated.

(00:51:42):

So I think that when a professor would say in front of the class, think about what you're writing here, I will be reading them before I send. And then they need to say why, and really make sure that students understand why so that they don't feel really disrespected by it.

(00:51:57):

That then also I think pushes the students even further to make sure that they're upholding that level of professionalism, and just knowing it's being monitored to a certain extent. So I think it's just a fine line. And I think it's all about communication from the instructor of why they're doing this, and that it's not going to be graded, the letters themselves. Feedback will only be given when it's asked for so that there's still that personal level of you're writing a letter to the human being.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:28):

So trying to summarize some of the conversation that we had to share with Lucy, I think we started off with one of the bigger points is that you really just need to know your partners. You need to do some of that background, initial work outside of the in the classroom time yourself to really know who you're working with. And then conveying that in the classroom so students can start to understand who they are, who their partners are, and how they're going to potentially interact.

(00:52:57):

And Phillip, you said the exact phrase I wrote in my notes of human connection, of having that very real human connection, whether that's the buddy system with a learning partner in the classroom or it's creating connections with the partners you're writing letters with. I think there was also some notes about it's okay to start slow. I think Lucy's pretty on, I've got to get all this done.

(00:53:23):

And I hear you all saying, "Nope, it's okay. Slow it down, do a little bit less, but do it really well and do it really intentionally."

(00:53:31):

And then the other note that I have here is maybe hide the grading, find ways that it's less obvious to students so they really can focus on that personal interaction.

Vanessa Drew-Branch (00:53:44):

I think I would just add, start with cultural humility, cultural responsiveness, and let things flow from there. And I'm excited to see where this goes.

Phillip Motley (00:53:57):

And I just want to know when she figures out how to hide the grading, can she share those tips with us? And good luck. Yeah, sounds like a really exciting project and class.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:05):

Awesome, so thank you all so much for being a part of the show. I'm real excited to share this information with Lucy.

(00:54:15):

Lucy, our panel is so excited to see how your work goes this semester, and they had some great ideas for me to share with you today.

Lucy Arnold (00:54:23):

I am so psyched to hear what they had to say. I'm really excited.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:28):

We had Vanessa Drew-Branch, Phillip Motley, and Sophie Miller, talking about their experiences and sharing some ideas. Vanessa is a social worker by training. Phillip is Elon's faculty fellow for service learning, and his work centers around community engagement. And then Sophie is a junior psychology major and she's also a center for engaged learning student scholar that's taken a couple service learning courses, as well as participating in a research group that's looking for they're examining conditions for meaningful learning.

(00:55:01):

So all three of these folks were right up your alley. So we tried to hit on some of the questions that you had about logistics, ways to prepare students for the work and how to approach assessment.

(00:55:14):

And a big takeaway for me, and especially because you're working with a very vulnerable population, was actually to slow things down and take the time to allow your students and yourself to make some really important human connections before they start that actual work sharing letters.

(00:55:32):

So we talked about those connections being about things like understanding themselves, understanding what your role is in that partnership as an instructor, and starting with some of that work in cultural humility that requires your students to learn about their partners as people. Understanding more about the criminal justice system as a whole, building some of those intercultural communication skills, and even the topic of white savior complex came up of how do we combat some of those emotions and feelings and ideas.

(00:56:06):

I also really liked one point of getting students to be ready to come from a place of strength and not from a place of sympathy as can sometimes be a little trap in some of these service related courses. So starting with cultural humility to prep your class for the experience is really the way to get them to come from this spot of strength instead of sympathy.

(00:56:28):

That process takes time and probably a lot of homework on your part to prep for the experience, so maybe pulling back a little bit on the number of letters that they have to write and some of the formal assignments that they have to do is maybe the way you create space for this type of work that really prepares them for that experience. That was my big takeaway from the conversation.

(00:56:52):

So one of the areas we focused on a bit was really how to hide the grading part. At our university, to receive service learning designation students have to complete a certain number of hours of direct service, but that tends to lead to things like bean counting and focusing on just what you have to do to get the grade that you want.

(00:57:11):

And everyone on our panel agreed that the best experiences that they've had either teaching or being a part of service learning, those great experiences happen when the students stop thinking about the grade and they just dive full into the thing that you're actually doing.

(00:57:27):

So if there's ways to refocus attention to the experience and the learning as opposed to the grade that they're getting. And depending on your institution, that might be trying things like ungrading or contract

grading, that might help facilitate focusing on the experience and the learning instead of focusing on the grade they get at the end of the semester.

(00:57:47):

And certainly with those types of pedagogies, elements of reflection and self-assessment are certainly going to be useful. And I know you're already pretty skillful in that area, working with your students. So hopefully that bit will feel fairly natural.

(00:58:01):

We also talked a little bit about what level of oversight you might want to have, and it was almost unanimous that you should be screening every single letter. And Sophie had the point of to maintain trust and transparency, just coming from a professional level of explaining to your students why you're doing that. And that might be elements of safety. It could be elements of knowing the quality of the letters, but it could be other factors that are important to your own learning goals for the class.

(00:58:30):

Some other safeguards and preparations might also be helpful for the transformative nature of the experience. Your students are really likely to experience a really wide array of emotions, both good and some maybe not so good, maybe a little worrying as they approach this experience.

(00:58:47):

So Sophie suggested, and I really loved this idea, was creating some sort of buddy system in your class of a partner that they can maybe debrief with after a letter or after an impactful experience. Just someone to share in that processing part.

(00:59:03):

Vanessa went so far as to saying having counseling services or similar types of resources, at least students knowing where to access those, or even bringing them to the classroom could be helpful.

(00:59:15):

And Phillip suggested having almost a disclaimer of the risks that might be involved in participating this, almost the way that we do an institutional ethical review for experimental research. But letting students know explicitly, these are potential risks in engaging in this.

(00:59:33):

Making sure there's time just to process and be without having to do something right away, so not having to immediately respond to the letter but process what actually happened in that letter is a skill that your class really could allow students to practice really well. And I think that's one of the strengths of it.

(00:59:51):

So I've said a lot, and I can't emphasize enough that we are genuinely excited to see how this course is going to work for you and your students. And I want to ask you just to get things started a little bit. As we're close to a new semester starting, what are your steps at this point to prep for this class?

Lucy Arnold (01:00:10):

It's interesting, because some of the things that you brought up are definitely some of the things that I'm immediately concerned with. We have had a conversation between me and my community partner actually about whether we're going to do snail mail or email.

(01:00:28):

If we go the email route then students are going to be able to receive those correspondences without the screening, but it allows for much quicker. So a lot of the things that you have said, I've definitely touched on that quandary that my community partner and I are currently mulling over.

(01:00:50):

I think the thing that you said that resonates with me the most and that I'm probably going to write and hang above my computer actually is about slowing things down, because I have a tendency to put a lot of balls in the air and have a lot going on. I definitely feel that slowing things down and being present in the moment is really crucial to this kind of work of being successful. So I'm really going to try and inhabit that.

Matt Wittstein (01:01:21):

To me, writing four letters back and forth doesn't seem like a lot, but as they were talking through it and thinking about all of that initial work to prepare students for really deep, possibly stressful or exciting but emotional conversations and letters, all of that work takes time too.

(01:01:42):

So I thought that was a really good piece of like, Hey, why do we need this many letters? Have you thought about ways to integrate some of those safeguards even through email? Could you set up a email that everybody sends it to? I think you can still create that mechanism for screening through email, but it does have the benefit of the process happening a little bit quicker.

Lucy Arnold (01:02:09):

I have my own JPay account. JPay is the system that most prisons use for handling communication, and I have my own JPay that I'm using for recruiting folks and screening folks to be a part of it.

(01:02:26):

But my community partner, the person who has facilitated this with other classes before really wants the students to have their own JPay accounts if they're going to participate in it.

(01:02:38):

Some of my choices are coming more from her and her experiences and why she thinks we ought to do it that way. Another thing that I wanted to comment on that I am definitely going to use is the idea about the buddy system. I use Thinking Dyads in one of my other classes, and it had not occurred to me to use that for this class too but I love the idea of using Dyads or Triads to have somebody to bounce ideas off and just talk about things with in the class.

(01:03:09):

So I am absolutely going to use that, I'm going to add it to my syllabus as soon as we're off this call.

Matt Wittstein (01:03:14):

I think if we draw back to what our panelists said, it was really about those human connections of how the students to each other can service each other in their learning, and processing what your role is in that journey, what the partner's role is in that journey. I do want to ask you one final question of, does this change your thinking as you approach the semester or does it affirm the things that you were already thinking about and planning?

Lucy Arnold (01:03:43):

The thing about slowing down was what I needed to hear today. As a professor beginning the semester, everything just feels very frantic. So that reminder to slow down is crucial to me.

(01:03:55):

And a few of these other things definitely are aligned with what I was already thinking about. What I like a lot about what the panel had to say was the focus on supporting my students in their emotional journey, and how they might be feeling and experiencing these letters and these relationships. Because I know from experiencing that it is going to be a lot, they're going to have some probably powerful reactions to the things that they're learning about.

(01:04:27):

And so making sure that I build the time into the class and some structures into the class that are going to be able to help them with that, it's really helpful to me.

(01:04:37):

I'm really incredibly grateful to you, Matt, and to the panel for talking over all of these things. This is wonderful.

Matt Wittstein (01:04:48):

Lucy, thank you so much for sharing your class and your work, and what you're planning for this semester with our show. We are super excited to see how this turns out

Speaker 1 (01:05:10):

Limed, Teaching with a Twist, was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, Associate Professor of Exercise Science. Divani Teprani is an instructional technologist and serves as a producer for the show.

(01:05:20):

Music for the show was composed and recorded by Kai Mitchell, a class of 2024 music production and recording arts student at Elon University.

(01:05:28):

Limed, Teaching with a Twist, is published by and produced in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University. For more information, including show notes and additional engaged learning resources, visit www.centerforengagedlearning.org.

(01:05:45):

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