Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Episode 2 – Rethinking Student Engagement, Post-COVID

Matt Wittstein (00:00:13):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. This month we discuss how COVID has changed things in Dr. Chris Trimby's physiology classroom at the University of Delaware, and specifically how we might reinvigorate student engagement. Author and teaching and learning consultant, Derek Bruff, joins Elon University's Dr. Jen Uno, associate professor and associate director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, and Ellery Ewell, a senior Center for Engaged Learning Student Scholar to talk about how engagement might look different and how we might support a thriving classroom. Thanks for listening and enjoy the show.

Matt Wittstein (00:01:07):

Welcome to the show, Chris. It's so exciting to have you here with us today. I want you to just kick us off by sharing with the audience a little bit about yourself, who you are, where you teach, what you teach, and we'll go from there.

Chris Trimby (00:01:19):

My name's Chris Trimby. I'm a faculty member at the University of Delaware in the Department of Biological Sciences. My main teaching responsibility is our sophomore junior level physiology lecture course. As you mentioned, it is decent sized, so depending on the semester, it's anywhere between 60 and 120 students in the class at one time. It's usually taught in one of our lecture halls. The course is oftentimes pretty active and engaged, where the students are doing things in class as opposed to me just lecturing. One of the things that I was in the process of transitioning towards before the pandemic and the pandemic fully kicked it there, was fully flipping the class. So, there's recorded lecture videos that students can or cannot watch as they choose ahead of class time. Then one day of class is devoted to students have some applied problems that they have to complete or at least partially complete ahead of that class period. Then in class they work on it a little bit more in groups. Then we discuss those from there.

(00:02:32):

Then the second day we do a quiz, a group quiz. In small groups, three to five students, they complete this quiz, the quiz is set up in the format where they immediately know whether they got the question right or wrong and then can keep trying until they finally get to the right answer. Then we do a poll to see which questions they want to talk about further. Then the remainder of that class time is us talking about those specific questions that either they had trouble with or they just want to hear more about, whatever the case may be.

Matt Wittstein (00:03:04):

You have been thinking about how learning has changed through the COVID pandemic, I'm curious, you mentioned engagement and one of the questions we're thinking about is how that engagement has changed. What are some of your insights of what that looked like three, four years ago compared to what it's looking like last semester, for example?

Chris Trimby (00:03:24):

Before the pandemic and we went online, in those lecture halls, we were still doing problems and students were working together. When they were working together, the conversations were loud and lively and they were, or at least seemed invested in the process while they were working together. And when I would ask for groups to report out or people to offer feedback on things or answer questions, for the most part, there was that ability to back and forth. Students would answer questions, students would respond, when I put questions out there to the group.

(00:04:04):

When we shifted online, that went away a little bit. But once we found our footing, we got a little bit of that back, especially with the chat feature of these online platforms. Students didn't always want to say things or couldn't always say things, because of background stuff going on in wherever they were coming to class from.

(00:04:24):

But the chat feature was, there was always people answering questions, asking questions, and it was great. This previous semester, so spring of 2022, was our first, my first, at least, back in person teaching the course again. All that's gone when. Students are working together on things, it's really quiet. It doesn't, I mean, there's groups that are working on things and there's groups that are invested, but it's not as, I don't want to use the word engaged again, but they just don't seem as engaged with each other while they're working on it. When I ask questions, when I ask for people to explain things, it's crickets. And it's crickets for getting into that period of time where I'm used to it being uncomfortable with it, but it's starting to be like, "Okay, really? Come on." And I'm trying to figure out, so what's changed or what's happened here to get us there?

Matt Wittstein (00:05:24):

What are some of your initial thoughts of... I think what you're describing is a really relevant thing that a lot of us are experiencing in the classroom that our students don't seem to engage in the same way. It sounds like you want them to be energized a little bit and we're seeing them engaged still, but just in different ways and how do we identify what's good engagement, what's contributing to their learning and so on? I'm curious from your perspective, what do you think has actually changed in your students?

Chris Trimby (00:05:58):

Some of these students have never been in a lecture hall before, potentially, before this semester. A lot of them don't know each other the way they might have in a sophomore or a junior level course that, I mean, most of them are biology majors. In theory, they would've had a course together before, but this may be the first time they've ever had a course together in person. So, there's maybe a little bit less of that. Some pre-established relationships. Of course, we're still wearing masks in the classroom or at least we were in the spring semester. So, I'm sure that contributes a little bit also. I mean, I think there's some things that are just part of where we are currently, but also I'm used to encouraging student involvement, engagement during the online versions of the course. I'm also still transitioning back to how do I encourage that student engagement in the in-person course. I think there's that aspect as well.

Matt Wittstein (00:07:00):

We all experienced some sort of shift in how we delivered our course content and you shifted to a completely online model. Did you make some changes at that time that helped with engagement?

Chris Trimby (00:07:13):

Well, I think part of it was heavily encouraging students who didn't feel comfortable saying something out loud, unmuting and speaking to use the chat feature in our platform. In that sense, they could type something in and they could even type it in directly to me, whereas the whole rest of the class wouldn't know they said anything or what they said. I think that helped folks a lot. There was also the opportunity, if they didn't even necessarily feel comfortable direct messaging me, I had undergraduate peer mentors in class, also, and, I mean, this is true for in person as well, but online we had them and they could direct message their peer mentor and their peer mentor could ask the question for them. So, there was a number of layers to insulate themselves from having the spotlight shown on them. I think that was really honestly the big thing. Otherwise, at least from my perspective, class was kind of the same.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:14):

So, leaning into that a little bit, I'm curious if what you've seen and changes in engagement is also having an effect on changes in their learning, in their performance in the course, and I'm scared to say the G word, grades, but how that maybe is influencing your perception of how their learning is doing?

Chris Trimby (00:08:37):

Yeah, I mean, I don't want to focus on grades as an actual measure of learning, necessarily, but grades have gone down for sure, especially exam grades where they're also being asked applied questions and stuff like that. That's one of the things that made me be even more concerned about this, because okay, fine, my class is usually in the morning, so fine, you're not mentally there always every single class period. Maybe we're not getting the full mental energy of students all the time, but also they didn't do as well on the course, which makes it even more concerning to me. Definitely, seeing a little bit of a dip in performance this in-person semester compared to the previous couple online semesters.

Matt Wittstein (00:09:29):

I want to make sure I'm understanding what the problem is that our panel might be able to help work through and ideate and think about what's worked in their classrooms or what they've heard from their colleagues or other students. It sounds like it's a mixed bag between changes in engagement levels from in person to online, to back being in person now, but also a drop in some of the performance. It sounds like what you're looking for is mostly how to reinvigorate them as learners, how to get them to be excited in the classroom. I wonder if some of that may just look different now or I wonder if it might be we need to come up with some new strategies to reteach them how to be great learners in the classroom.

Chris Trimby (00:10:23):

Yeah, I think definitely the recapturing that energy and getting them engaged with each other and the material in class and figuring out how to get some of that back is my main interest. Because I feel like if we can figure some of those things out, the performance in class will follow. Even if it doesn't directly follow, they're going to be in a better position to figure some of those things out. Because, I mean, if they're engaging with each other, there's more classroom community and they might study together more. Even if it's not just like, "Hey, let's have this exciting loud conversational class period," but develop those relationships so that maybe you start study groups and you start helping each other out and some of those kind of things, too, that I feel like follow from that.

Matt Wittstein (00:11:13):

You sound like somebody that I enjoys and appreciates tweaking their own teaching. Since you have transitioned back to some in person courses, what are the lessons you've learned at this point of what's worked a little bit but could be worked better, what hasn't worked at all?

Chris Trimby (00:11:30):

I think one of the things that's been surprisingly indifferent a little bit is the continued use of technology now that we're in person, which I thought maybe would be a helpful way to transition. I kept some of the things about the class the same when we were in person as to when we were online. They still had some online discussion boards and things like this is to answer, those applied problems they did as a group online or they could work on them as a group online ahead of time. I tried to keep some of those things and I never really got a feeling that that was useful in the sense of keeping some of those things, and I thought that would help with getting back into that in person.

Matt Wittstein (00:12:19):

I also want to ask if you've gotten any feedback from your students of things that they did appreciate and value for their learning at the end of that course with some of the tweaks that you made?

Chris Trimby (00:12:31):

Well, I think one of the big things that I learned from the pandemic and one of the things probably a lot of us learned was just being more responsive to students and student needs, and being more open and almost more vulnerable. A lot of pre-pandemic faculty were seen as not necessarily people, when somebody that they wind up and you go up to the front of the classroom and they deliver the material and they go back to wherever they're stored. But I think us being online and then seeing each other's in our homes and things like this, and us all having to navigate all this extra stuff going on around us helped break down some of those barriers a little bit. So, I think that's one of the things I've gotten a lot of really great feedback about is being open and understanding and much more relaxed about things and having students feel that that made me more approachable with problems or with issues and questions and stuff like this.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:25):

I think the last question I have for you is what would be most useful to get from our consultants, our panelists, as they think about what you've shared with us? Are there specific things you want advice on or is it really just the big picture, 30,000-foot view of this problem and some of the shared experiences?

Chris Trimby (00:13:47):

Well, I mean, I think both are going to be useful, but I think some of just... There's probably some very small scale tweaks that can be done to maybe help encourage or re-encourage some of more student engagement during the classroom time to build that community, where it's okay to answer a question wrong, where it's okay to ask a question during class and then these kind of things. I'm sure there's some small things that can help push that forward. It doesn't have to be fixed, but let's move it incrementally at least. What things can I do? What things can I build in on the front-end here? What things can I start to build in as the semester goes to try and do that? But then also, I mean, I'm sure this is... I can't imagine that I'm the only person who feels this way. So, there might be, I'm interested to hear what other people have done, other people have noticed and things like that in their classes and in other disciplines and in all sorts of different places.

Matt Wittstein (00:14:52):

I think we've got a lot of good stuff to share with our panel and we'll connect to share out what they talked about.

Chris Trimby (00:15:00):

Great. I'm looking forward to hearing.

Matt Wittstein (00:15:08):

We are here with our panel and I am so excited to have you on Limed: Teaching with a Twist. I want to first let you all introduce yourselves a little bit and as you introduce yourselves, I want to know what is one thing that's positive that has come out of all the adaptations we've had to make from the pandemic?

Ellery Ewell (00:15:29):

My name is Ellery. I am a student scholar with Elon's Center for Engaged Learning, and I'm also going to be a senior at Elon University this upcoming fall. One positive thing I think can be flexibility and awareness of differences in learning styles. So, having some flexibility in how we complete activities and using different platforms to make sure that everyone completes whatever in a different format that might work better for them.

Jen Uno (00:15:57):

My name is Jen Uno. I am an associate professor of biology at Elon University and an associate director in CATL, our Center for Academic Teaching and Learning. Let's see, one of the positives I think that has come out of the pandemic is probably accessibility. I feel like moving online made classes accessible to a population of students that maybe weren't as comfortable with in-person learning and has, I think, forced us all to find new and different ways to reach out to students.

Derek Bruff (00:16:27):

Hi, Matt. I'm Derek Bruff. I'm an assistant provost and executive director of the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University. Our version of a teaching center. My background is mathematics. I get to teach in the math department from time to time. In terms of one thing that's come out of all the adaptive teaching that took place over the last couple of years, I think, at least on my campus, and I think this is true for a lot of campuses, our faculty have a much bigger toolset when it comes to teaching. Not only with technologies, but also just different approaches to classroom interactions and activities. I think that's pretty exciting. Faculty had to figure out a lot of that by virtue of necessity, but they're bringing that creativity and that experience back into whatever classroom environment they find themselves in now.

Matt Wittstein (00:17:11):

Great. I imagine you have all figured out that we're going to talk a little bit about COVID in today's conversation. Recently, we were able to chat with Chris Trimby, a faculty member at University of Delaware. He teaches physiology courses and specifically the lecture component of a physiology course. His lecture is about 60 to 100 people, so larger than what we have at Elon, but not the biggest lecture hall ever. What he's experiencing is something that so many of us have experienced in our classrooms, whether as teachers or learners, of engagement is just different since COVID came along. I think we've

thought through that in a lot of different ways. Perhaps our high school preparation isn't quite as strong. Perhaps our experience in college isn't the same. So, we're not quite ready to engage in the same way.

(00:18:05):

So, what we want to talk about today is just broadly how has engagement changed? And then hopefully set a few ideas forward that people might be able to do to tweak their teaching and prepare their students to engage. Now, before we get into it, I want to pull just a couple specifics from our conversation with Chris and then get some of your initial thoughts on that.

(00:18:30):

As I said, Chris is teaching physiology in a larger classroom. He has actually completely flipped his classroom. A lot of his material are prerecorded. He does some small group work outside of class and then really activity-based reinforcing material in the classroom. What he's noticed is his students, since coming back to in-person classes, he describes it as them being less engaged. He described like, "Well, before it was a little bit more loud and lively and there was just more natural conversation and now it's just a lot quieter." But his bigger concern is that not only has engagement changed, he's seeing decreased performance in objective measures. So, his test scores are a little bit lower than they've been in the past.

(00:19:15):

I think all of us can appreciate that this is something that we've experienced in our classrooms in one way or another. But I think from your hopeful ideas around COVID, that we might have some ideas of things that might help as we move forward. I just want to know what are some of your initial thoughts about Chris's class and small things that you might change or small things you might do to encourage personal engagement.

Jen Uno (00:19:46):

I think it's interesting, because I think a lot of us flipped our classrooms post-COVID. I certainly did. I had a lot of recorded lectures that I worked really hard on that I didn't want to just let go of. I think there was a lot of desire to use that in a positive way. I didn't teach flipped very much before the pandemic happened. I know a lot of people, it's not a new technique, I think a lot of people had been doing it. But one of the things I do recognize and I too teach physiology is that a lot of our physiology students and a lot of those STEM students, they actually really crave lectures. They like them, they're used to it. They kind of know what to expect out of lectures, if you will. And I think we relied a lot on just their excitement for being back in the classroom with us to motivate them and to drive a natural conversation that would happen thinking that we'd all just fall into it. I don't know if that was a fair expectation.

(00:20:41):

I think you had to do a lot of work pre-COVID with a flipped classroom in order to get it to really work and for students to be comfortable having conversations. And I don't think that's any different now, except for the fact that you also are dealing with somewhat of a social interaction deficit from some of our students that are just not used to it. I think inherently I recognize that in the population of students that I teach, I teach mainly in STEM and they tend to be quieter students that like to sit back and listen and write everything they possibly can down.

Ellery Ewell (00:21:13):

I feel like a lot of what you said does make sense, especially coming from someone who's taken physiology and takes a lot of classes in that STEM space. I'd like lectures, I like to have that kind of interaction. But being psych is my primary major. I also really enjoy those discussions and I've felt very

much that when I go to each of my different classes, I'm kind of a different student in each of those classes. In my psych classes, I know that I might be expected to talk more, whereas if I walk into a chemistry or anatomy lecture, I know I'm there to take notes and learn more in myself, doing what I need to do to make sure I understand the material as opposed to connecting with others to figure out what we can all learn from each other.

(00:21:55):

I feel like this is an interesting challenge, especially being someone that teaches in the STEM discipline. I studied abroad this past semester, so I was at the University of Cape Town, which is a larger institution. I was in classes that had a lot of larger student group. South Africa is at a very different COVID stage than I would say the United States is. So, they were a lot more still getting back used to even being in person. So, the undergraduate degree in South Africa is three years. I was in classes with students as I took a 3000 level course that this was their first time even being on campus, because they had their first two years completely online and they were like, they literally had never even been in a lecture hall. They had no idea what to expect. There was a lot of interesting conversations I had with that of like, "Oh okay, I've actually been... I kind of know what I'm doing."

(00:22:46):

And there was a class in particular that had a lot of disconnect between I think what the instructor thought. Like you mentioned that we kind of expected everyone to just be excited to get back into the classroom. I think that prep work might be missing on that front-end of, "Okay, we're coming back into the classroom, these are the types of things we're going to do, this is what I expect from you as your professor and this is the kind of exchange that we can have." I think that assumption needs to be addressed early on in the semester to help facilitate engagement.

Derek Bruff (00:23:18):

I guess, I'm wondering, because Jen, I liked how you described students who are expecting a lecture and they want the lecture, they're going to sit, they're going to listen and then take notes. Ellery, you said that's certainly the approach that you take in some of your classes. I wonder if there might be some ways to upgrade that just a little bit like to lean into that expectation but to use the flip model to say to students, "Your first exposure to this material is coming before class. That's when you're going to listen and take notes. And the advantage of class time now is that you should hopefully come away knowing what you know and what you don't know. That way you'll be in a better position to study the stuff that you don't know and make some sense of it."

(00:23:59):

So, reframing that use of class time, it ties into what you said, Ellery, about shaping the expectations. What's class time going to look like? Why are we doing it? Because I think a lot of these students in STEM are also, sometimes, they're a little competitive, sometimes they want to test themselves and show that they've got it. So, you could frame some of the in-class activities as a way for them to actually see if they've understood the stuff and identify what they need to keep working on. It's still leaning into their expectations and a little bit of their strategic learning, but trying to move them into seeing the value in the more interactive pieces during class.

Jen Uno (00:24:36):

I mean, I think a big part of it is that these students really like to know what they need to do. I think that's a big part of any professor's challenge coming into a classroom or any teacher, for that matter, is making sure that you set up a class so that they know even in a flipped classroom, "This is what we're

doing." I am a firm believer in transparency, so I also add in the why we are doing it, "This is what we're doing, this is why we're doing it," whether it beat it, let them know, "We're doing it, so that you can see where your knowledge is, you can test how much you got out of the lectures, so that you feel prepared for the exam." Whatever it is, and then go from there.

Matt Wittstein (00:25:12):

A couple of the things I hear from you all are that it's really important to set expectations, but I'm also hearing this note that our comfort zones have maybe changed and our students' comfort zones have maybe changed. Ellery, do you have any thoughts on what has felt comfortable to you and how that has changed from your first year before COVID was here through now your senior year in whatever state we're in?

Ellery Ewell (00:25:38):

I think that there's been a lot more change in community and just the classroom environment and how it's able to be fostered in the same kind of way. My freshman year, I was making friends in my classes very easily. A lot of people I met my first year were just through interactions we had in class, just talking about the homework or interacting on a group project or something like that. But now I think a lot of the connections, they feel a little bit more forced when they do happen. Having a group project or having a small group assignment, some of that interaction feels more like we're doing this interaction just because it is assigned a group project or assigned a assignment. Then it's harder to make those natural connections as much. I feel like that has maybe changed with COVID as well, that people are turning to other avenues.

(00:26:35):

Not saying that you need to have best friends in all your classes, but I think part of that, building a classroom rapport is the students knowing each other and interacting with each other in that way. I don't know how we might get that back. There was some differences that I noticed in the bigger lectures that I was in when I did my semester abroad. They have WhatsApp groups that they use very frequently for all the classes and we have some of those as much. But when you're in a smaller class, I feel that you don't necessarily always think you need an external space to connect with students. It was really helpful to be in a group of 400 people but people asked questions, people joked, people use that as a space. I think that was really helpful because I could be like, oh if I have a question, it's okay to ask it in this space designated for students. Whereas in some of my smaller Elon classes, especially when you get to know everyone, you're like, "I can't really ask that maybe a little silly question, because they've known me since freshman year."

Derek Bruff (00:27:39):

Ellery, just a quick question. The WhatsApp group that you were in, in South Africa, was that initiated by the instructor or was that kind of a student-generated space?

Ellery Ewell (00:27:50):

Some of both. Every course at the University of Cape Town has a class representative. Normally, the professor has some sort of say, but they initiate this class representative election almost, and the students will normally decide, they normally pitch a little sentence or two about themselves and then this representative is the direct line for students to the professor. So, when you have a 500-person lecture, the professors are not going to field questions from all of those people. If someone would have a grievance, if you will, they would present that to the class representative and then the class

representative would communicate with the instructor. It was the expectation that the class representative would set up that group and would field questions from students and then be that link.

Derek Bruff (00:28:36):

Yeah. The reason I ask is that I do think, even in 2020, I talked to some faculty who, when they had to pivot online, the ones who already had a WhatsApp group or a Slack space or something seemed to make that transition a lot easier, because they already had this somewhat informal community-building space. Email doesn't always feel that way and the course management system doesn't always feel that way. But I think some of these messaging apps do feel a little bit more comfortable and casual and it was easier to maintain that sense of class community. I think that would be another thing I would think about, 500 students, that's a huge challenge. But if you've gotten that 60 to 100 range, having a WhatsApp or a Slack space for your class could be helpful because it gets a little bit of that good from the text chat in Zoom.

(00:29:26):

But actually one of the limits of the text chat is that it goes away when the Zoom meeting is over. But if you're using Slack or Teams or WhatsApp, that'll continue from session to session. So, some of those neat things that you can do in a Zoom chat, one of my favorites, it's the ready-set-go question, where you ask a question and then you have everyone compose a response and then they'll hit enter at the same time, sometimes called a waterfall. That's a great move. You wouldn't want to do it with 100, but you could have a rotation of 20 or 30 students responding that way.

(00:29:56):

It's hard to do that in a traditional lecture hall, but if you already had a second community space like flag, you could do that live during class. That connects to one of the things that I think a lot of faculty learn from teaching during COVID, is that class participation and engagement doesn't always have to be a student using their voice to speak out loud in front of everyone. That there are other ways that we can invite our students to participate meaningfully in class. And sometimes a text chat is a great way for a student to do the processing they need and to share something of use to their colleagues.

Jen Uno (00:30:30):

Yeah, I think also one of the things that I heard, Ellery, that you were talking about was just the differences in social interactions and in particular how challenging that's been. I think it's different for every level. I think for you, you started in person, you went offline and then you came back. I thought about this a lot with certain classes, especially classes like organic chemistry, where you have that first year of chemistry where you really do in a more "normal year." You had students that made bonds and really kind of plowed through a class together, so that when they started organic and this really traditionally hard class that everybody fears to begin with, they had a base of friends that they felt really comfortable with and people that they'd figured out how to study with going into that class. And we kind of lost a lot of that.

(00:31:17):

Helping students find ways to make those connections is really important now. I see it in my younger classes and they're coming off of two years of high school where they really didn't have very many interactions both with their professors, a classroom, or with their friends, and are now being thrown into a social situation where they're both trying to make friends and learn how to study at the same time, which is actually not a small fee. I had students last year that asked me to help them with strategies on how to get to class on time. I think at first I was really frightened, but then I recognized for

two years they could roll out of bed and turn on their computer without turning on their camera and just sit.

(00:32:02):

So, those skills I think that we all took for granted, I think, I've recognized to be a little bit more understanding of those needs and not to just be like, "Ah, the students can't get out of bed anymore." If you really want content to take a front row seat in your classroom, you have to address those other aspects as well in order to create a classroom community where people can successfully learn.

Matt Wittstein (00:32:29):

When I think of those in class, making friends, those clicks that naturally happen, even in your first year classes or senior classes, where they may already have some of those social groups put together. To me, the strength of that is really how it creates accountability between students, that it's somebody that I can say, "Hey, I'm struggling with this, can you help me with this?" Or, "Hey, how did that project go? How did your presentation go?" Even if it's a purely social interaction. But in some ways, it elevates taking ownership of your own learning. I think that's maybe a cool thing that folks could play into a little bit. Are there strategies that you've used in class to help students find their study buddies, to find their classroom friend group to make those connections?

Jen Uno (00:33:16):

I do little things like, I create a GroupMe, so I try to create classes that way. I also recognize that I work really hard to try to be super approachable to my students, but I recognize that classrooms aren't really democracies and I real realize, at some level, regardless of how approachable I try to make myself, I'm still an authority figure in the room. I've actually found things like having GroupMes where I'm actually not present is a really good way to help people do that. I also offer to help students connect up with other students.

(00:33:47):

I also recommend that they even use the tutoring services on campus to generate a four study group if you will. You can talk to a tutor in the same way that you can. It may not be as comfortable at first, but perhaps can be. Also, maybe trying to facilitate some small group work in classroom, where they can rotate around, so that they can get to know students. But I remember being a student and it being pretty golden when you found that group of students that challenged you in a way that helped you learn and it's not an easy group to find. So, I do just remind students of that, that it's okay if you take a little bit of time to find your peeps, that sometimes it doesn't happen overnight. It's just like finding any sort of friend group.

Derek Bruff (00:34:32):

I do think, if we're teaching synchronously, we have that class time to use, as an instructor, to try to encourage that. I think of it also as normalizing that. I think some students come to college thinking, "I have to show that I have what it takes to do this by myself. I have to prove that I wasn't the mistake that admissions led in." Those students will sometimes really study on their own thinking that's how they're going to prove their place at the college or the university. But, Jen, as you said, I think a lot of students benefit from studying collaboratively with their peers. So, I want to spend some class time doing that.

(00:35:08):

I think of structured small group activities. Here's one question that's a little bit challenging. Turn to your neighbor and talk about it or use a jigsaw approach where you remix the groups in some fashion. I think

students appreciate having a little structure so they're not just feeling like it's a cocktail party and they have to make small talk with their neighbor. There needs to be a point to it. But the more class time you spend doing that, I think, one, again, it normalizes that and says, "Hey, this is actually how you learn in college is you learn with others."

(00:35:39):

The other is it creates those opportunities for students to meet someone near them. I think the things we take for granted, typically, a lot of students are going to interact with the students who sit around them in the lecture hall. When we were teaching fully online, there wasn't an easy way to replicate that natural social interaction. But let's remember that in fact that is a great way for students to meet some colleagues is to leverage the fact that they tend to sit in the same place every day. But to encourage that with some structured small group activities.

Ellery Ewell (00:36:09):

I feel like also with the structure of having small group activities, making them not only purposeful but also being helpful, collaborative work. So, I've had professors say, "Oh, here's a set of questions, work through it with your team." And they're easy questions, things that I feel like I could just answer on my own and I'm not really getting any benefit from working with groups. But if there's a challenge, a challenging question, activity, anything that can I see that, "Oh okay, actually having another perspective on this would be helpful for me." Then I actually utilize those connections, I take a moment. Some of the communities that I've formed in classes have been from my hardest classes, but part of that is that shared, we're going through the same thing of we don't understand this right now, but we're both here in the same scenario, so let's work through this together. A lot of times, group projects I think are looked at negatively because there's something that you think you could do by yourself and you're being forced to work with this other person.

Jen Uno (00:37:14):

One of the other things I heard you say is just that comfort level. I think one of the other things that I try to do is also use silly icebreakers as well just so that students... Not all questions and work that we're doing in class has to be completely focused on whatever topic we're covering in class. Especially if you're diving into maybe a really hard topic of conversation, like I do in some of my seminar classes. When you have students that feel more comfortable talking with each other about what they ate last night, say, or their favorite thing to eat on campus, then they're a little bit more willing to open up to each other otherwise, as well.

(00:37:52):

Again, finding unique and different ways to develop community, but at the same time making those conversations meaningful and purposeful. Because I think sometimes students get very frustrated like, Ellery, you were saying, if they don't see the meaning or the purpose behind what a professor is doing, they feel like it's just busy work. I certainly don't busy work. I know my students don't really appreciate busy work. So, trying to make sure that they recognize that there is a reason and a purpose behind what it is we're introducing in class.

Ellery Ewell (00:38:22):

Yeah. Also, going off that, Jen, I feel like acknowledging that sometimes, even if there is spaces for interaction, that this is not the only space for interaction and acknowledging other things that might be preventing students from interacting in some of these ways. I know one thing that always comes to mind for me is, as a student of color at a predominantly white institution, sometimes I just don't feel the

immediate comfort of... It's my everyday reality. I know where I chose to go to school, I know that I was going to be surrounded by people that were not of my identity, but me having to work that extra step to then work with them can come. Then there's a lot of things that have come with the pandemic like social anxiety and those kinds of things.

(00:39:06):

So, I think encouraging these activities, but encouraging also from your words as an instructor that it's not the end, it is not the only space for interaction, that there's outside-of-class spaces to interact, even connecting across classes, across sections of the same course could be helpful. Facilitating that interaction that, "This is not the only space, but I'm encouraging you to interact, here's some other ideas, here's a study group that I know is going on in this section. Maybe you'd think about talking to them if you're not meshing that well with the people in your course." So, I think acknowledging that as you think about these spaces as well.

Matt Wittstein (00:39:45):

I want to come back a little bit and think about what are some tangible ways that you're able to check in with your students or, Ellery, as a student, you're able to check in with yourself or with your professor of how well you're engaging in the material?

Derek Bruff (00:40:02):

One thing I've tried the past few years is a little bit of self-assessment and self-reflection, and just ask students. In my classes, I tend to have a fair amount of online activities that are before or after class. Those activities usually have a couple of purposes. One is I want the students to engage with the material, but I also want them to share something interesting and useful with their peers, their thoughts on this question or a resource they found. So, I'll ask them a couple of times a semester, "Just rate yourself on a scale of zero to 10, how has your online participation been? Have you been responding to the prompts? Have you been sharing things that your classmates find interesting?"

(00:40:40):

What I like, as instructors, reading those short paragraphs that they send in, I don't always use the numbers they assign themselves. I think sometimes my students tend to low ball their participation, but the things they're asking themselves, I posted this resource in the discussion forum or in the Slack and Dr. Bruff or some other student mentioned it during class, that's a sign that they saw that someone was listening to what they were sharing. I think some kind of check-ins like that would be helpful. And if you have 100 students, if it's short enough, you might read all hundred paragraphs, but you could also just sample things and use that as one measure of how your students are engaging. Other ideas? I think it's a hard question, especially in a larger class.

Jen Uno (00:41:21):

Yeah, it is hard. I use Kahoot! a little bit, because the students seem to really like it. I think it brings out their competitive edge. I bring candy in, bringing in food, it's a love language for me. Bringing food into my class, whether it's chocolate or otherwise, I think sometimes gets things going a little bit. But in terms of checking in an engagement, I think things like Kahoot!, because it kind of gets them all into the material and it's also a way that you can also check on content knowledge. You can also use different things like the team mechanism, where they can work in groups to do it, which is also helpful and help facilitate the group work.

(00:41:55):

I also ask students what they feel like they might need, what things would help them feel like they could get more engaged in the material. Oftentimes, I'll do that anonymously, whether it's by putting up a Google form or something where they can check in or let me know, kind of in the same way that Derek was saying like, "How would you assess your engagement and what do you need to become more engaged?" I think sometimes helping students feel like they have that level of empowerment, that they have some sense of control, especially if they feel like they're not engaged, I think is sometimes helpful for students. Helping them recognize that there're many different ways that you can be engaged in a class.

Ellery Ewell (00:42:31):

To Derek's point, I think those check-ins are really important. They've been really helpful for me as a student to acknowledge what I've been doing that's gone well for me, what I haven't been doing that's not going well for me. I feel like I personally am very motivated to acknowledge my own engagement and I realize that maybe not all students have that intrinsic motivation to be engaged and ask questions if I have them. So, creating platforms and spaces for those thoughts to be shared.

(00:43:03):

Then the biggest thing I think is just listening to whatever kind of feedback. So, if students are saying they're not feeling like they're engaging in this platform or they're feeling like they don't engage because they're only engaging a certain way, then change up ways that students can engage. Or I've had some situations where they've asked for feedback or you've checked in and said, "Oh, I'm doing well on this, but not on this." Then there's no change. So, listening and having that feedback in a way that then can translate to your students.

Jen Uno (00:43:34):

I think it's a very common complaint from students when a professor asks for feedback and then does nothing to address the feedback. I think it's a very easy thing to do, because I think we all are like, "Yay, we asked for feedback." And then sometimes how we utilize that feedback is not always the most efficient. So, you should know from the professor speaking that that's not typically what we're thinking. I think sometimes we just get a little over excited about the front-end of things and are not always the best at following up with it. But I think it's an important thing to remember, that if you're going to ask for feedback, that you should really be willing to listen to what that feedback is and see if you can make any meaningful changes. And importantly to communicate those changes with students, because I think sometimes we do make changes and we don't articulate them with you all or communicate them with you. So, students may not always recognize the changes that we've made, because they're oftentimes very subtle.

Derek Bruff (00:44:26):

As a teaching consultant, I've worked with a lot of faculty to collect and respond to mid-semester student feedback and one of the things that sometimes happens is that the faculty member thought it was clear to their students why this structure, why this thing was happening and the students did not get it at all. So, sometimes you don't even have to change what you're doing, but you have to explain it in a way that actually makes sense to your students.

Ellery Ewell (00:44:50):

As students, I think we just want to feel heard and maybe it's not everything, but taking one piece of advice, whether it's just like, "Oh, I'll move the deadline of that." But I think creating that makes you feel

like you are being engaged with your learning, because you're communicating things to your professor and they're changing something based on what you said.

Matt Wittstein (00:45:10):

I have one more question I want to ask and it's that, does engagement look different today than it did, say, three years ago? And what I mean by that is that we could still have very high levels of engagement but it just looks very different, so we don't know that it's high levels of engagement anymore. I'm curious what you all think about how engagement has changed, not necessarily gotten better, gotten worse, but how it's different than it was previously?

Jen Uno (00:45:37):

Matt, I actually think that's a hard question to answer. I think that engagement has changed, but I think it goes back to what I thought initially. I think that we've all changed, we all went through this crazy pandemic where our worlds were kind of upturned and I think both how we learn and how we teach changed. So, I think how students engaged with material that we give them is just different now. I guess my answer is yes. I think there are probably seeds of change before the pandemic, as cheesy as that sounds. I think it has been changing slowly over time. I think the pandemic made everything maybe speed up a little bit more. I think of that in that content is very different to me than it was when I first started teaching. My students have access to information in ways that I never had when I was learning, initially. So, I think having them engage with material and content in a different way, because they have access to that content in a very different way has been a gradual change that I think the pandemic accelerated.

Matt Wittstein (00:46:44):

Maybe a slight reframing of that. What are some examples of where you know your students have been deeply engaged but it just was very different than our loud boisterous classroom that we were maybe used to a few years ago?

Jen Uno (00:46:57):

I think they're afraid of what to do when they don't have a mute button now, or they've forgotten that they can unmute in the classroom. I think we were less forgiving to our students to reenter that vocal framework.

Derek Bruff (00:47:11):

Yeah. I think a lot of our students were muting themselves before the pandemic. It was just easier for us not to notice. I think about the faculty who complained about teaching to a sea of black boxes on Zoom, but sometimes that's what the classroom felt like anyway. I mean they weren't black boxes, but they were blank faces, no one was engaged. I do think it's incumbent on us to think about how we structure our classrooms and how we can actually really invite and encourage students to engage in meaningful ways.

(00:47:40):

I do think the forms of engagement look a little different and this isn't a direct answer, but I do also feel like we have much more awareness now of people's bodies and the physical environment that we're in. The pandemic has taught us to pay a lot of attention to things like natural light and air circulation and our physical distance from other people. We saw a lot of our students enter into our Zoom classrooms

from very different physical environments than the typical college classroom. That was all relevant actually to their learning experience. I think a lot of faculty tried to be responsive to some of those challenges that students were facing.

(00:48:19):

Now when we walk into a classroom, we're all just kind of keenly aware there's lots of other people in the room and the physical environment may not actually be a great one there either. The other thing I would say is that we're also more aware of our students' lives outside of the classroom, because those lives intersected more directly with the online teaching experience. I think engagement works well when we as instructors can acknowledge some of those lived realities of the world that we're living, full of contentious everythings, and the physical environment that we're in. I think it helps our students to be seen in a way that's really meaningful. But I think it is important to... Rebuilding the rapport that perhaps once came a little easier between us and our students.

Ellery Ewell (00:49:06):

Engagement looks so different and I think that maybe sometimes there's a disconnect between how students feel they are engaging and how the professor might see them as engaging. I think that goes back to those setting up expectations and acknowledging different ways to engage. I think that keeping up with work in general and learning the course content in a way that makes sense to you is being engaged and part of that engagement can come from students themselves acknowledging what they need to do to learn the material and get the most out of the course that they can.

(00:49:44):

I think that kind of engagement can even just be self-reflection on, "Am I learning this the way that's helpful for me? Or it might be more helpful for me to watch all my lectures on the same day instead of going on the schedule that the instructors have set?" Part of engagement is really just figuring out what works for you and going about that in the way that you can learn. I think that there's that disconnect and it's changed, because there are so many different ways that it might seem as though engagement is that different.

Jen Uno (00:50:16):

I think also, too, I think in the heart of it, it's about cultivating a sense of belonging within your classroom and with the material that you're presenting. That sense of belonging is going to be different for all sorts of different students. And I think finding new and different ways that you can help foster and encourage and cultivate that sense of belonging, both within your classroom physically, but also with the material that there are a lot of different ways, learning is active, make it active. Teaching can be active, help students find a way that they can connect and feel like the material that they have a sense of ownership with the material and that they belong in that classroom just as much as the people next to them I think is really important. And I think that the pandemic helped a lot of us realize that just a little bit more, that having to step away from the classroom and not being able to have that connectiveness with my students has made me a lot more sensitive to it now.

Derek Bruff (00:51:13):

I'll add, because you mentioned the purpose and I think this is key. I think a lot of us spent a couple of years triaging our lives and deciding, "I don't have enough physical energy and mental bandwidths to do all the things today, so what's going to be the most important stuff that I have to do today?" I think for students who are probably still doing a lot of that, showing up for a class that doesn't seem relevant to their personal interest or their professional careers, it's going to be tough to engage that. I think it's

incumbent on us as instructors to try to help students find those connections, because that will definitely help with engagement.

Matt Wittstein (00:51:47):

I would love to hear from you all what maybe you think is one small tangible thing that you could do in your classroom, either as the teacher or the learner, to be more engaged in the next semester and school year.

Ellery Ewell (00:52:02):

As a senior also working in how this connects to the broader scheme, because I think, like you mentioned earlier, Derek, that connecting to your personal life can help you be more engaged. As I think about going to graduate school and my future career, I think taking everything I can that I learned in the classroom and, "Okay, how am I going to apply this to my future career?" I think that will help me become a lot more engaged in this final year.

Derek Bruff (00:52:28):

Something I keep coming back to that I want to learn more about is the role of our bodies and the physical environment in our learning. It was something that was really easy to take for granted before the pandemic, because classrooms looked like classrooms and everyone showed up and we just assumed that was the environment that we were in. But I've been reading and learning more about the differences that our bodies have as well as the impact our physical environment has on our ability to learn. There's a pretty new book called Minding Bodies by Susan Hrach, and I'm enjoying reading it and figuring out what role do our bodies have in our learning environment and then how can I take that into my classroom and being more intentional as an instructor to be mindful of the bodies in the physical environment that we're in? I share that to say that's something I want to learn more about this year, because I think it does play a role in engagement.

Jen Uno (00:53:16):

For me, I know that I spend a lot of time at the front-end of my class developing a sense of community within my classroom. I do a lot of pre-semester surveys. I send out a lot of personal message. I set up individual student meetings with all of my students. And I put a lot of effort into it. And I think it works really well at the start of the semester. I think it's very easy at that mid semester point to let a lot of that slide and to lose sight of some of those connections that I've made. I think one of my goals coming into this next coming year is to make sure that all of the effort that I put into the front-end of the year, finding ways to reconnect with that effort I guess in the midpoint of the year, not to let the doldrums of the mid-semester get me down and forget that I've made those connections, so that I can keep fostering that sense of community throughout the class, I think is really important. So, I'm going to try to work hard on that.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:10):

Jen, Ellery, Derek, thank you so much for working with Chris's problem in this classroom and sharing your insights, your experience today. I'm looking forward to having this follow-up conversation with Chris.

Derek Bruff (00:54:23):

Thanks for having this on, Matt. This has been a really fun conversation.

Jen Uno (00:54:27):

Yes, thank you.

Ellery Ewell (00:54:30):

Thank you both. I always love learning from people around me, so I appreciate this conversation and you listening to my experiences.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:42):

Just to start off, my biggest takeaway for what it's worth is that we are really still trying to figure things out in terms of how engagement has changed during the pandemic and therefore the sage-like wisdom that we have is try some things that you're comfortable with and gradually build and grow and adjust towards that continual improvement. It was really good conversation and there were a few themes that I heard during the conversation.

(00:55:08):

Starting off and really echoing some of the ideas from our first conversation is that this problem of engagement is really strongly linked to human connection. Getting students to engage with each other by creating connection, by creating community, by trying to create some sort of sense of belonging if they don't already have that in your classroom or at your university. Some of the ideas that the panelists presented were somewhere on that front-end side of things, things like doing a pre-semester survey so you can get to know your students better, know some of the connections they may already have. Things like requiring a one-on-one meeting. I know that might be difficult in a larger classroom setting, so maybe small group meetings early on. Or also setting up ways that students can communicate candidly with each other using things like Slack or Teams or GroupMe or whatever works for you.

(00:55:59):

But you had mentioned that chat box anonymity was maybe valuable in your Zoom classroom, in your online classroom. Creating some offline avenues for students to communicate with each other might be a good way to start building that. One of the takeaways from this is that there are so many different ways to develop community and sense of belonging, and it's really important to know that not all of those are your direct responsibility, but having some time and space within your classroom is going to help your students make some of those connections and hopefully benefit ultimately their learning in your course. Ellery even talked about some sort of in-class governance model that she experienced in South Africa, where one student served as sort of a liaison to the faculty member, and this was in a large lecture style. So, there are other models out there to explore that could be maybe fun to play with.

(00:56:51):

The next theme that I thought about a lot was just building in ways to check in, not only with the content that they're learning in the course, but actually the quality of their engagement. So, little things like having anonymous surveys and asking students what they need to engage better in your course, using elements of self-reflection and self-assessment would probably build some opportunities for some of those metacognitive skills we want our students to learn at different stages in their academic careers, but it's also going to give you some valuable feedback of what they're using, they're not using, what they think are their strengths, and gearing some of those assessments towards both the engagement piece and the content knowledge piece will probably give you a little bit more robust information to work with and make adjustments.

(00:57:39):

One of the really key points that I thought was from those check-ins is to make sure that you listen and that your students feel heard as you solicit some of that feedback. This aligns really well with some of the stuff in student development and autonomy of just ensuring that your learners feel heard, so that you're reporting back to them of the changes that you are making or why you're not making that. That also leads into our last point, which is really important for teaching at any level, in any space, is just remembering to do things with purpose. So, little things of just explaining why you have a particular attendance policy or maybe, in your case, telling them explicitly why you like the flipped classroom really goes a long way in building trust, in developing that strong learning culture.

(00:58:30):

Building purpose into the assignments can also happen in a number of ways, but a couple that I liked were connecting the students' lives and goals directly, taking advantage of some of the physical space in the body. So, in a physiology class, getting them up and moving around might, inject some energy into the classroom. But also using some of your synchronous time to set some expectations and help students build the connections that you want them to have with either each other or with you. So, actually, deliberately setting aside time for connection building.

(00:59:02):

One really great point was that groups for the sake of groups sort of stinks. So, making sure that there's even purpose behind why you're working in groups. One of the ideas there is that if it's something that they can accomplish on their own, well, why are they potentially doing it in groups? The idea even came up of, "Well, maybe if it's more challenging than one person can accomplish, well then it requires connection. It requires collaboration to be successful in the activity, to be successful in what you're trying to set out for that day."

(00:59:35):

Going back to kind of where I started, there's a sense that we're still learning how engagement has changed or maybe that those changes were sped up during the pandemic. So, what we really need are teachers like you to experiment and share your experiments, either through just conversations like this, working with colleagues at your own institution, or even if you've caught the SoTL bug a little bit of going out and doing some research and trying to publish and present in that fashion. After hearing all of that, what are some of your initial thoughts?

Chris Trimby (01:00:08):

Well, I think, initially, I mean, on a very positive side of things, some of the things that you mentioned are things that are or have been in place to varying degrees in the class. Maybe it's a matter of combining a couple points here, things that we're already doing, but maybe talking with the students a little bit more about why we're doing some of these things. In that sense, I feel like it's nice to see that I'm at least not way off and left field compared to some of the suggestions. We're kind of on of a similar mindset and it makes me feel better about continuing to do some of these things as opposed to junking some things that I've been doing that I maybe worried weren't quite as effective for whatever reason now that we're back from the pandemic.

(01:00:56):

From more specific, you refer to it I think as doing things with purpose, I think a transparency maybe would also be. I think one of the things as I actually am getting ready to start building things in the learning management system. Maybe in, obviously, I'll do this in class, too, but in some of the welcome materials that I put on there, putting it very explicitly like, "This is what we're going to do, this is why

we're going to do it, this is what the goal of that thing is, and this is what all of this is going to look like." And have that very clearly spelled out on the front-end of the semester.

(01:01:29):

That includes some of the things that I think might touch on some of the other stuff that you mentioned. Things like having peer mentors in the course, well, this is what they're there for, and they can act in a similar way that the student on the panel mentioned about the in-class governance student liaison kind of a mechanism, but having students understand that that's part of what they're there for. This is somebody to go to, to talk, if you're not... You don't want to be the person who brings it up to the instructor kind of a deal.

Matt Wittstein (01:01:55):

One of the things in my personal teaching experience is having that confirmation that I'm doing some things well and with good intentions and they should lead to the outcomes that I want. It's just making those small tweaks and changes, which is, I know what you were kind of coming out here, you're doing a lot of the things in a really smart and thoughtful way, so just gradually making some of those small changes. I'm curious if there's any specific small changes you're thinking of right now as you've gotten just a mouthful of feedback, but if there's any small changes you're thinking of now that you might make for this coming semester.

Chris Trimby (01:02:33):

Well, I think one thing is definitely we'll try to set aside some time in class to build connections between the students themselves and myself and the students. This upcoming semester, we're actually, and I just found this out, a little bit smaller in my class than we had been in the past. So, I think that gives me a little bit more flexibility to do some things like that. Then I think the other thing is I had always asked, done sort of a combination of muddiest points and asking what other things do we want to go back through? And things of this nature.

(01:03:08):

I think what I want to start doing is pushing out to them, "Here's a summary of what people were saying. Okay, we're going to try and touch on some of these, the top couple things, during class." But some of these other things that are maybe a little further down the list, maybe the peer mentors can help me pull together some resources or connect some other things like that and have that just be something we send out on a weekly basis to students, so that they know I'm actually reading them. I mean, I have always been reading them, but it's maybe not clear to them if the thing that we address in class is not the thing that they had an issue with.

Matt Wittstein (01:03:44):

Yeah. I think that's a great way to let them know that you are listening, that you are doing something with their feedback. Another thing that just popped into my head a little bit was finding the balance between some of those just connecting with people and some of those more disciplinary types of assessments that make sure you include some funny, silly things in there of what's your favorite food? Just to feel connected to somebody who has a similar favorite food. Also, remember that now that we're in person, they're probably most likely to talk to the people to their left and right, and in front of them and behind them. So, finding ways to either mix that up or leaning into the physical space that they're connect with your neighbors in a really strong way over and over again. Whatever works best for you in your class. Thinking about that physical space piece is different than the online course that we've had in the past.

Chris Trimby (01:04:39):

Yeah, most definitely. I think we're actually even in a room, not on a lecture hall, this upcoming semester, so we can move around a little bit more and rearrange a little bit more than we had been previously constrained by auditorium-style seating.

Matt Wittstein (01:04:52):

Thank you so much for sharing your time with us and sharing a little bit about your course and your goals with us. Good luck prepping for the semester and I look forward to hearing how everything goes in the spring.

Chris Trimby (01:05:04):

Thanks. Appreciate all of the ideas and feedback.

Speaker 1 (01:05:17):

Limed: Teaching with a Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, associate professor of exercise science. Dhvani Toprani is an instructional technologist and serves as a producer for the show. Music for the show was composed and recorded by Kai Mitchell, a class of 2024 music production and recording arts student at Elon University. 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. Thank you for listening and please subscribe, rate, review and share our show to help us keep it zesty.