Limed: Teaching with a Twist
Episode 6 – Course Construction: Bridging the Academy

Matt Wittstein (00:00:10):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. Katherine Fox is a medical anthropologist at Southern Oregon University. As her university is adopting a new general education requirement, she asks our panel for their ideas that might help her students translate their work in the social sciences into their future aspirations. Jeff Grabill from Leeds University joins student Yuzu Do and Design Thinking guru Danielle Lake, both from Elon University, and together, they try to help Katherine get started in developing her new course. I'm Matt Wittstein and you're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist.

(00:01:00):

Hi, Katherine. Welcome to the show. I am really looking forward to talking to you today about your project that is going to bridge some academic and community engagement. Before we get started, would you just introduce yourself to our audience?

Katherine Fox (00:01:14):

Hi, Matt. Thanks for having me on. My name's Katherine Fox and I'm a medical anthropologist teaching at Southern Oregon University. I teach in the sociology and anthropology department, but it's a very interdisciplinary school and I'm also affiliated with healthcare administration and gender, sexuality, and women's studies.

Matt Wittstein (00:01:34):

You've shared with me that you are looking at developing a new course. Do you want to tell me a little bit more about how that came about?

Katherine Fox (00:01:41):

Sure. The course in question is going to be an open variable topics course, so different professors will teach this on areas of interest or expertise, but the common thread is that they should all be something that helps students do something that is bridging what they've learned in social sciences with skills that they would use in other settings or with public discourse or public engagement, those kinds of things. Whether I would teach something health-related or LGBTQ-related or if my colleague would do something about migrant workers or substance abuse, that could all happen, but they would all be trying to bridge academic knowledge with more lay spaces and discourses.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:30):

Where did this initiative come from? It sounds like it's within your department, but I think some of our previous conversation suggests it's coming from the university level. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Katherine Fox (00:02:41):

Yeah, there are a couple of different things that made us think about this. First, our university is doing a new gen ed curriculum, and one of these core capacities that they are using in this gen ed curriculum is called creativity and innovation. We really wanted to have an offering within our department that would

meet those requirements. Secondly, we have a student body that while some of them are thinking about graduate school, a lot of them are going to be looking for jobs after the bachelor's degree, and since sociology and anthropology aren't a particularly vocational degree, students don't always know what to do with it after they've gotten this degree and we're hoping that this course also shows them some ways that they can articulate and demonstrate the transferable skills that they do learn through this major.

Matt Wittstein (00:03:33):

That's great. It's sounds like you found a really cool intersection of what the university needs, but also a way to service your students in your department. I'm curious a little bit, are the students that would take your course exclusively from your department or would they be from across the university?

Katherine Fox (00:03:50):

They wouldn't be just our department necessarily. I think that's an exciting part of this. We have it set up so that students will be junior standing or have instructor permission to take this, but they can be from any major, and because of the variable topics, I think it could definitely, when I teach it in a health related topic, it could draw some healthcare administration students or depending on what that topic was, it might appeal to different audiences.

Matt Wittstein (00:04:17):

What are the appropriate pre-reqs and skills you would expect your students to come into that classroom with?

Katherine Fox (00:04:24):

We wanted it to be a junior level class because we didn't want it to be students who were still sort of finding their way through college. It's a 10-week quarter at our school and we want them to be doing some kind of project. We want them to come in ready to go with things like time management and organizational skills with some background either in social science or the topic at hand. We don't really have prerequisites on it in terms of other courses they have to have taken, but we don't want to be teaching students how to college while we try to get this project going.

Matt Wittstein (00:05:03):

I think that's a really good thing to distinguish. I also think that you will still probably be teaching a few students how to college as we know as the nature of higher education. It sounds like you have a general skeleton of what you want to accomplish through a class in terms of learning goals. I'm curious what specific things you're hoping to gain from being on our podcast.

Katherine Fox (00:05:27):

I'm looking for some ideas from people from all different fields or expertise about what kind of projects this class could entail, what kinds of things they think would be good at teaching students how to bridge academic and public engagement. When I think about the ways that I teach this course, as a medical anthropologist health behavior researcher, I think about being creative and innovative in ways that think of new ways to address problems that haven't been tried before, or I think about communicating with the public so I can see myself doing community health projects, maybe I could get a grant that would allow us to do something like that.

(00:06:10):

I have a colleague who is working on this with me that she's really interested in performance arts. She's interested in storytelling or maybe having a student write a play or do some kind of performance. Those are sort of two ways that we could see this going, but I'm sure there are more and I would love to have some more ideas to put in with some of the paperwork and syllabi for this class for other people whose areas of interest and expertise don't necessarily align with those. For people coming with other backgrounds, I'd love to be able to give them some more ideas for what they could do in this kind of course.

Matt Wittstein (00:06:49):

You seem to want to get an idea of different possibilities that this course could take on from that project-based learning perspective. Do you have experience of projects that have worked well in your field in this context hitting some of those learning goals of creativity and innovation for the students, but also job preparedness and maybe transference of skills?

Katherine Fox (00:07:14):

A couple examples that come to mind right now. One was from my undergraduate institution that was really involved in the Appalachian teaching project, and so, they did some things over a course of a couple of different classes that involved doing a community needs assessment and doing some surveys about asset-based development in the town. There was also one that dealt with bridging the university and the town. I don't know if you've heard the phrase town versus gown, but there were some just disconnect between what these two groups wanted and sometimes some negative feelings about that. Another example is something we've done in one of the LGBTQ communities courses. We had students making zines. They were to choose an issue that they thought was important for their community to know and they put this together and then we actually printed and distributed those.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:12):

I want to ask you the flip side of that, is their project ideas that you just are against or you don't think would work very well for this type of course?

Katherine Fox (00:08:23):

Nothing comes to mind, but the one thing that I think is a consideration is the fact that we have a 10-week term. We need to think of things that are doable within that time period or something where they could propose an idea for a creative or innovative solution and do a part of it even if they couldn't accomplish the whole thing in 10 weeks. I guess something that can be broken down into pieces would be really the best.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:52):

Yeah, I was curious about that 10-week term and more specifically in the context of this course. I know most of the courses I teach, there is very often a project as part of the course, but it's not necessarily the entire course. I'm getting the sense this might be able to be a bigger part of the course. Is that accurate?

Katherine Fox (00:09:10):

Yes. Currently, we are thinking that the first couple of weeks of the course will introduce them to the problem, the topic, whatever it is. We will have students doing some collaborative research to see

what's already been tried and what's already been done on this issue and we'll spend a little bit of time discussing what does creativity and innovation actually entail. But from there, we hope to spend the rest of the term really working on this project. We'd like to have students proposing some solutions and then coming up with some ideas that they could do this project on.

Matt Wittstein (00:09:46):

In a sense, you're creating a new course proposal, which several of us have done in our roles as faculty members. But the unique thing is that you want to create something that has the guideposts to support colleagues in your department to teach the course in their own way and not necessarily dictate what projects they'll do, but provide a sampling of ideas that they might be able to be creative and innovative in their own way with their own course as they develop it with their expertise area.

Katherine Fox (00:10:19):

Yeah, that's a great way to put it.

Matt Wittstein (00:10:21):

Just to summarize and make sure that our panel is able to provide you with useful information, you're really looking for some deep ideation on potential types of projects that might work that bridge that academic and community engagement of how we communicate with the community that we're in. But you also want to be mindful that students are maybe having different perspectives on what to gain from this type of course, that some of them might be looking for specific skills, others might be looking for application to transferable skills for jobs, and you also want to create something that is versatile to what your colleagues in the department and potentially even other departments might model after.

Katherine Fox (00:11:06):

Yeah, I think that's a fair assessment and what I would possibly add to it are showing them how they can articulate the value of what they've learned in these social science majors. There are some assignments that I give even in other classes. For instance, there's one assignment where I have them make a one-sheet sort of an infographic with some visually engaging materials to communicate information. I tell them, "Hey, this has been really useful, for example, when I have a research project and I need to get an organization on board with letting me recruit from their clientele or something like that, this is not just about making something pretty. This is actually a skill. If you know how to use some of these software programs, if you can make an engaging one-page informational sheet, it will serve you in a lot of different job areas."

Matt Wittstein (00:12:02):

What most excites you about this new course?

Katherine Fox (00:12:05):

I think one of the things that I both missed as a student and what I really appreciated was that opportunity to see how what I learned in anthropology, as it was my case, could be something that would be useful in other fields and something I could get paid for as my current university as a state school, and I also went to a state school for undergrad. And so, I didn't really see those things until a little bit in my senior year. I'm really hoping to show students that anthropology is not just something where 50 years ago, people went to the bush to talk to uncontacted tribes. This is something that you

can do in the 21st century and it's really useful for creating new and practical solutions to problems that we deal with. Most of the problems are people problems, and we are all about figuring out why people do and think and feel the way they do.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:01):

Thank you so much for sharing this. I am really excited to take this to our panel and I can't wait to see what ideas they come up with that I'm going to share back with you soon. Thanks, Katherine.

Katherine Fox (00:13:10):

Thank you.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:18):

Panelists, welcome to our show. I'm super excited to have you all here. To help you introduce yourselves to our audience, I'd like you to just go around a little bit and answer this question, how do we enable learners or how can we enable learners to activate that creative and innovative mode of participating in a project or participating in group work?

Danielle Lake (00:13:43):

Thank you. I'm Danielle Lake. I am the director of Design Thinking and a associate professor here at Elon University. I think activating learners to contribute to a project to bring creativity and innovation to that project requires that they get to know one another, that we feel a sense of trust and connection in the classroom, and that we're willing to share to risk sharing authentic ideas, to risk collaborating and making mistakes together so that we can create together. And so, a lot of it falls back on building relationships and a sense of connection in the classroom. I'd also say it requires making, it requires we learn by doing. We can't just talk, we need to imagine and embody that in some kind of way.

Yuzu Do (00:14:25):

I'm Yuzu, a senior and the executive director of Outreach and Collaboration at Elon Volunteers! at Elon University. To answer the questions, I agree with Danielle with her answer in terms of building relationships. Another point that I thought of was to enable to activate in creative and innovations, giving the participant the freedoms to branch out and pursue their interests in those projects and activities, allow them to be more engaged and it's helped to increase the participation.

Jeff Grabill (00:14:57):

I'm Jeff Grabill. I'm the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Education and a professor at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. I don't have an English accent, which you can probably tell. I spent most of my career in my native country at Michigan State University and at Georgia State University. I think Danielle and Yuzu gave great answers. I'll build on what they provided.

(00:15:23):

I think in addition to what they said, we have to invite students into that work and I think the invitation is really important. It changes the nature of the conversation with students that's distinct from require or demand. The invitation changes the nature of the relationships in that learning environment, but also the work itself. I appreciate that Danielle said you have to make things. O the work itself has to require creativity and innovation from students. It has to be sufficiently complex and sufficiently compelling that students will understand that this learning experience is unlike anything else that I've participated in.

The rules are different and I have to bring a different version of myself, or I'm invited to bring a different version of myself to that learning experience.

Matt Wittstein (00:16:17):

I really love how your responses fed off of each other as there's some value in that. I think you can all probably guess, we're going to talk a little bit about how to make learning creative and innovative. From my perspective, that means it's fun. I recently spoke with Katherine Fox who is a medical anthropologist at Southern Oregon University, which is a state school in Oregon. She has been tasked for her department to develop a new course that other faculty in her department could possibly teach that fits with a new university requirement that's really about communicating across fields and having this interdisciplinary component about communicating across fields.

(00:17:06):

As she's embarking on figuring out this new class, she really wants help and ideas with brainstorming assignments and projects that would really feed into that. Some of the parts that I think we can help her with are also things of thinking about how to scaffold it. Her semester is a 10-week-long semester, so it's a little shorter frame than our traditional semester system. She anticipates there being about 15 to 20 students in a class. From my perspective, that's a great class size, especially for making small groups and not have too many of them or even doing one big large project to create some versatility.

(00:17:47):

One of the learning goals for her students is for them to be able to articulate the value of their social sciences degree in a different way than, say, STEM students might be able to. It's really this complex course where some of the goals are based in communication. She wants it to be creative and innovative. She wants it to be disciplinary, but she also wants it to serve her students in a professional development setting. As we get started in this conversation, I just want to lead off with what are some of your initial thoughts, Danielle, and your Design Thinking, you do wicked problems. This is a big crunchy thing. What are some of your initial thoughts of designing a brand new course that has some of these learning outcomes?

Danielle Lake (00:18:36):

One piece on creating something tangible that the students do, a project that they can cultivate into a portfolio, a story, a narrative, a reflection that captures the value of what they've done from their perspective and from a course client or community partners, from somebody else's perspective on the value of this really real world project that they were engaged in is usually essential. Requiring that students in their final assignment or exam somehow articulate that, visualize it, say it to each other, archive it for themselves for future employers that they somehow get practice at transferring what they've learned in this experience, in this project to how this is valuable for their future, what capacities and skills has it built and what's the story? Because it's very unlikely that whatever they've created, a future employer or grad school is going to look at it deeply. But what's the culminating piece here? What helps them move forward?

(00:19:40):

My first thought is leaping to the back end of the course and thinking about that transfer piece, and then building in assignments and projects that help them develop those skills of transferring what they've just done into its usefulness for their future. Then, I, coming out of the liberal arts and humanities don't really care only about its professional value, but its personal and civic value. In the assignments that I'm going to craft for them as well, I want them to think about how it's transformed them or prepare them

for their future life period. Then, often, I would say sharing those assignments or projects with each other so that students can learn from each other's stories and can uncover some of those other ways about how to share.

Jeff Grabill (00:20:21):

I can respond in a completely unhelpful way. Let me tell you a story, because I love this example because it's such a rich and important and necessary educational space and learning experience. Let me offer a story as a provocation. When I was in Michigan State, we had this entity called the Hub for Innovation and Learning and Technology, which was this really interesting intentional design space. One of our projects was this project called studios. Studios were a particular kind of learning experience, which is really similar to what we're talking about today. The only requirements were that it had to be a real wicked problem or challenging problem in the world. It had to admit any student from any part of the university at any point in their time at the university and it also had to be collaboratively taught.

(00:21:15):

And so, my favorite studio was focused on wildlife conservation in Africa and it was led by a faculty member who did wildlife conservation, but it was team taught with a rhetoric professor and a supply chain professor, because the problem of wildlife conservation isn't just a simple or narrow problem, it's an ecosystem that also involves the Anthropocene that human impact on that world. And so, people hunt bushmeat, they hunt animals that need to be preserved because they need to eat and humans destroy habitat, if you will, because they need to live. And so, in order to solve problems of wildlife conservation, you have to solve very human problems of how to make a living and how to have a life in a community.

(00:22:05):

These students worked on a really hard problem around making art, believe it or not. How do you bring artwork to market from this community as a primary way of earning money that has packaging issues and supply chain issues and marketing issues and sociological issues and more narrowly construed wildlife conservation issues. It's cross-cultural. It's a really complicated space, better defined than I've done here, and it's the kind of learning environment that changed lives. And so, not only did it change the trajectories of those students, some of whom were late in their time and their degree program and decided to do something different, but it changed the trajectory of the faculty member who taught it. All of them were not the same after a studio. It was true for most of our studios. They stopped teaching the way they were teaching, they started thinking about different kinds of problems that were not present to them in their own research programs.

(00:23:05):

And so, I tell that story because I hope it's full of provocations for this particular case because in my view, the more transdisciplinary and collaborative and complex the problem, the more it requires collaboration among faculty members and the more it pushes and challenges what students know in their own discipline and requires them to collaborate in particular sorts of ways. If we start with the kinds of learning outcomes we want students to be able to articulate out of an experience like that, the story we want them to tell about who they are and what they can do, it's also going to address some of those workplace life trajectory, civic engagement. Learning is about identity formation and identity change, so how do we get some of those identity change issues front and center in terms of how students articulate what they learned and how they experienced it.

(00:24:03):

If I were designing higher education, everything would be a studio and students would take a number of studios during their time, and hopefully in a coherent way. I offer that, it's my favorite story, which is why I like to tell it, so completely selfish and indulgent of me. But I offer that story hopefully as a rich resource for this particular design problem that our colleague in Southern Oregon has in front of her.

Yuzu Do (00:24:33):

I think when I learn about the topic that we have for this podcast, from the student perspective, this reminds me a lot of the project in the States where we have the last year of high school where we have senior project or a Core capstone at Elon sometime. This is the kind of class where I feel like the student have a lot of independence, freedoms and options so they can explore. At the same time, it really requires a lot of proactive energy from the students to go out there trying to find out what they can research about, work on and intertwine their interests and preferences and their knowledge about those topic and can share it with their peers and their educators. At first for me, I think it's very general and wide, and as you said, very complex course that I feel like, but I think there are a lot of potential and energy that it can bring to the students once they were able to identify what they want to do with it.

Jeff Grabill (00:25:40):

Yuzu, can I ask you a question? I'm going to be completely unfair and ask you, put you on the spot.

Yuzu Do (00:25:45):

Yes.

Jeff Grabill (00:25:46):

It's a gentle question. Capstones are often in the final year, but what if they're in the third year? If the capstone were in the third year and it challenged you to be creative and innovative and imaginative, changed you as a person, what do you think you might do with your fourth year?

Yuzu Do (00:26:04):

Thank you for the question. Actually, the question applied to me. For Core capstone, most of the time, Yale student take it at our fourth year or senior year. But for me, my academic trajectory was interesting. I took my Core capstone in the second year of sophomore year. I have two years afterward that I can think about after the Core capstone. It was a very interesting class because all the Core capstone courses are very different. Mine was more of a relaxer. The course is called the Science of Happiness. It's more focusing on the psychology and sociology portion of my study. It's very changing for me.

(00:26:44):

At the end of the class, one of our media project was to write a letter to yourself in seven years. In seven years, the professor will send us back that letter. For me, I think it just make you think more about your future and what you're going to do and thinking it far away, far ahead. I think the courses, regardless of when it is taken before fourth year or at fourth year, but for me it's very impactful to taking it at my second year because it's making me think more of an adult, like what do I do do based on this course, what do I do afterwards? It's a very interesting experience taking a Core capstone at second year. I'm not sure if it's an answer your questions or not, but thank you for the question.

Danielle Lake (00:27:32):

Yuzu, I would love to build on that. I'm a strong advocate for these courses happening in the first, second, third year of students' lives so that they can cultivate lessons learned so that they can stay involved in projects if they found a passion, a joy, a relationship, or an opportunity that they didn't get a chance to finish because the semester's done, it's been 15 weeks. My huge concern about this work is that it is artificially, narrowly constructed and very much student-centered. If we're going to do community and client-based projects that make a difference in this world addressing complex challenges, we can't just keep rolling them over every 15 weeks.

(00:28:12):

But there's that sadness of just beginning to develop these relationships, just beginning to do work that you really valued and then it's all coming to, and that's sad for everybody involved. And so, my goal is to create pathways for students to find ways to leverage that opportunity forward and for community. Under the constraints of the current structures within universities, we make it really hard for students, we make it really hard for faculty to do that kind of work because of the course load, because of all of the way we carve classes and so on. And so, I'm interested in breaking some of that and recreating it.

Matt Wittstein (00:28:49):

I really love the direction that this turned into. I just want to pull real quick, what are some examples of some projects that y'all have been a part of in any way that have gone outside of the bounds of our typical semester schedule? Because that's one of the challenges in academia we face is the semester ends, I have to submit grades, I have to move on to the next semester. What are some examples of stuff that has worked well to either allow it to roll over and build over multiple semesters or projects that you have personally carried through multiple semesters?

Jeff Grabill (00:29:26):

When I was in the classroom, I would extend classes for an entire year using some sort of mix of an established course in the curriculum and some independent studies. It's not every faculty member who can bend the system to his or her own will, but one of the ways I solved the time problem was to extend learning experiences throughout the year. I also appreciate deeply Danielle's commentary about ethical ways to handle community partners and students in these contexts. My long-term solution for that was grounding some of my community-based teaching in my own research programs so that the relationship was mine and I could find responsible ways to bring students in out of that relationship that did not overly burden my partners and made for a coherent and reasonable experience for them. And so, sometimes, I think the mistake we make is we understand the learning experience as the container, and when in fact, the research program might be the proper container for some of these experiences.

(00:30:38):

The other example is not mine. I'm a huge fan of the X-Labs at James Madison University in Virginia, which is kind of co-curricular, and has curricular components. It has both curricular and co-curricular components to it as a way to extend learning experiences appropriately within the lives of students and partners. I think there's lots of models out there. Universities are much more flexible than most faculty members in particular think they are. Universities can bend, particularly in the US. UK universities are a little more rigid, but US universities are more flexible and dynamic than people think that they are.

Danielle Lake (00:31:22):

I would love to hear more about that because we constantly talk about universities as changing incredibly slowly, as being resistant, and as having these archaic structures. But you're right, we do and can bend and adapt, so I just found that to be fascinating.

Jeff Grabill (00:31:38):

I've been thinking about this for a long time, and look, some of the oldest continuously existing institutions in human history are universities. There's a reason for that. It's not that they're rigid and inflexible, it's because they're exceptionally dynamic and adaptable. But you're right, sometimes it's really, really slow. But what I like about universities is they're also incoherent in so many ways and in those spaces, in those moments of incoherence and misalignment, there's lots of room to maneuver. And so, there's lots of flexibility usually built into the way institutions operate laying around for people to discover.

Yuzu Do (00:32:19):

I kind of want to build a little bit on that on Jeff's answer as well in term of the flexibility of university. At Elon University, we have for graduation, each student is required to fulfill two credits of ELR units and that stands for experiential learning requirements. The university is very flexible in that aspect where they allow us to have different experience to fulfill those ELRs. We have internship, we have volunteers, so there are many other options that they can participate in to fulfill those ELRs. I think that's one approach that was really flexible to me, and sometime, even for us at Elon Volunteers! where we oversee the process of approving the service hours for the students so they can fulfill that ELR for the graduation requirements, that was a very flexible process for me because sometime the student will walk in and they would say, "Hey, I volunteer with this organization but there weren't there in the list when you provided me for the organization to volunteer with."

(00:33:26):

We would go through the same process of checking through, researching those organizations and see if those are the organization that we can allow the student to fulfill their ELR with. I agree with Jeff in that aspect that I'm not sure with all the university, but at least I think most universities are very flexible when it comes to providing their students the opportunities to fulfill their academic requirements and also gaining experience during their graduate or undergraduate time.

Matt Wittstein (00:33:55):

I know one of Katherine's goals is to have some tangible project ideas that allow her students to be creative and innovative. Y'all just talked about the value of being dynamic and adaptable. What is project work look like that fits those goals, allows students to be creative and innovative but is dynamic and adaptable so it can be sustainable, can be meaningful work?

Danielle Lake (00:34:19):

First, I want to challenge the conversation earlier around giving students really high stakes, complex wicked problems in the community to solve, especially if we're thinking about first and second year students and then asking them to just figure it out. And so, the first year I did that, there was a lot of anxiety and stress and tears and it was a lot to take on it, especially if you're used to taking an exam privately, turning in a final paper. And so, I love the idea of scaffolding opportunities for students and beginning with personal projects, where to some extent, they get to choose the issue, the topic, something they want to address in their own life or in their own local communities with their own

friends if it's possible in a social science or humanities class to give them some choice, some authentic buy-in and to reduce the stakes of them building the skillsets, building some of the capacities beginning to do the work, but in a way on something that's intrinsically hopefully motivating because it involves them and there's some choice in it, but there's parameters around it.

(00:35:22):

Then, building up from that experience towards a community-based, a public-facing, a higher stakes project, that they feel more prepared for it and they built relationships with each other through the personalized design projects as they were leading up to that. An example for us is around storytelling, we capture oral histories and digital stories of community members here, especially historically marginalized communities. But what is it like to share your own story, to create a digital story, to be vulnerable and authentic with yourself or to interview each other and then to share that with each other before we're going to ask others to do that work?

(00:36:00):

What is it like to take from a 60-minute interview and to craft a 5-minute story, so to build their capacities and to give them that lived experience, that authentic experience with each other first. Then, as you're doing that building relationships with community members and building into that more public facing, we're going to archive this for all of history. We're going to share it in a final digital screening with the entire community. We build towards that at the end of the semester. And so, that's a way to, again, scaffold the experience and give them the tangible making opportunities I think they need to build that confidence and that trust and connection with each other.

Jeff Grabill (00:36:39):

That makes a lot of sense to me, Danielle, and resonates with my own teaching experience. One of the things to add to that which can make the total curricular experience more coherent from students is some of that scaffolding doesn't have to happen within a single class. And so, if we're working together as colleagues, as educators in interesting ways, sometimes we can scaffold from an earlier class or experience if we can count on the students having had it a more sophisticated curricular approach to scaffolding, which sometimes takes the pressure, if possible, takes the pressure on any given faculty member in any of different class to contain too much. I think the scaffolding's really important.

(00:37:21):

To be honest with you, I find that a really difficult question to answer, but let me try to answer it anyway from my own. I teach rhetoric and a lot of what I would do with students in similar situations is identify what sorts of learning outcomes resonated with the particular kinds of community engaged work that we were doing that met the needs of our partners in appropriate ways and didn't overly burden them, but also what do they need to make.

(00:37:52):

Oftentimes, students would make communication rules for organizations that they couldn't make themselves. Now, the problem we had to also solve is how to sustain those communication tools for an organization to be able to sustain that work over time. It doesn't help to make a website for an organization that can't maintain the website. Some of that making and some of that work has to include a way to sustain the effort once the students are gone, which presents a different kind of challenge.

Yuzu Do (00:38:25):

I think both Danielle and Jeff have already covered the most significance part of this project planning because this project, it seems to want to involve more communication skills with the community partners. I think that it would be helpful just for the students to include the perspective of the community partners in their assignment as well because volunteering or community service is a two-way work. It's not you just helping them, but the community is helping you as well in a way that is a mutual learning experience. I think it'll also be very helpful, and this might be included in their conversation already, but it'd be very helpful for the student to include their reflection on how impactful the assignment has been to them and the process of making it and just include their future plans following the end of that assignment, the end of that project to see what potential that assignment or project or the ideas can help them extend their personal experience afterward.

Danielle Lake (00:39:28):

I would strongly recommend that the faculty member consider, take a look at the course learning objectives and then think about community-based issues or partners or course clients or future employers, people that might want to engage in the course that might find value in connecting with students and might have a real situation or project they would like support with, brainstorming that they would like research done on. Even just the fact that our universities and students have access to all of these knowledge bases that are often foreclosed that nonprofits and businesses cannot easily access, just sharing that research with them, sharing what students are learning is often incredibly valuable. You can often find partners or real projects by engaging in early conversations before the semester begins with those who might want to be a part of your course, who might want to support students and support projects and help you imagine a project that meets their needs and meets your course learning goals.

(00:40:26):

Then, that moves towards that co-creative component of the course, which again can de-center the faculty member and give space for creating those mutually beneficial partnerships. Then, my other recommendation on that front is to sustain those. When you develop those relationships and they're working, to allow those projects and those partnerships to evolve over time because they're hard to uncover. A lot of the workload is upfront in imagining that, but then as the projects emerge, you can build on them if you want. Another way to allow projects to sustain is to have future students take on projects that were begun in prior semesters, but allow them to evolve or emerge as they do in partnership with the same collaborators or course clients that you might have had in the past. And so, we might also recommend to this faculty member that they seek out the guidance of those who are living these situations or problems that their students are going to be confronting in the future.

Matt Wittstein (00:41:22):

It sounds like we're all on the bandwagon of project work, group work builds skills allows us to maybe do some bigger things, but I think we also are aware that group work, project work can be a little bit difficult both from the instructor designing the project perspective, but also from the student perspective. Yuzu, I want to ask you, how do project-based assignments, group work type of things, how is that challenging and what might some of your instructors do to ease some of those challenges that you typically face in group work?

Yuzu Do (00:41:57):

I think my experience talking to my peers about group project is really is hit or miss. Most of the time, it depends if it is a group-based, it really depends on your team members. For me, I have both experience

of where the group team members are very cooperative, where we work really well together collaboratively, but there are experiences where it takes more initiations from myself or from some team members to get the works running and start it. Challenge is definitely getting the work started and just the motivation or the passion or the energy put into the project.

(00:42:41):

I think for a instructor, a lot of time they try to make it very flexible in giving the students the opportunity to choose the topic that they want to work on because most of the time when we're given a specific topic that some of us are not interested in, it takes a lot of energy away where I have experiences where near the deadline, I was just sitting there like I have no idea what to do. I would text my group members, we're like, "So do you know what to do? What do we do now?"

(00:43:10):

We're all at the same page. Once we have more interest in the topic or in the assignments that we're given, it's much easier for us to feel more engaged and can just work with each other into a group project. If you're interested in a topic, no matter how busy you are, I would be willing to work on them, but if I have free time all the day and it's a topic that I have to do a lot of researching and learning more and have no interest in, it takes a lot of energy to just get engaged into those topics.

Matt Wittstein (00:43:43):

What I hear you saying is that classic trade off between providing enough structure so it's easy to know what you have to do for the project to earn the grade and reach the learning outcomes that you're wanting to reach versus the flexibility to be able to do something you're actually excited about as opposed to something that's been assigned to you. How do you build in the right amount of structure versus flexibility so you can hit both of those things? It's a project that's cognitively easy for the students to know what they're supposed to do, but really energizing in terms of the content area or whatever it is that gives them energy and passion to complete something, and in my experience, usually that turns into a better project altogether.

Danielle Lake (00:44:30):

I'm going to be a complainer. On one hand, I'm going to say it's impossible, so there's this Zone of Proximal Development where you're pushing people past their comfort zones into a space of discomfort and growth and learning, but if you push too far past that as well, we shut down. I feel like in 15 years of this, to do that perfectly for 30 students, it's impossible, but we can try. One of the ways that I think I've tried to do that is to help all of us in the room understand ourselves and the strengths and what we're bringing to the project, and to ask those questions. What about this motivates you? What role do you want to play? If it's a complex problem, there should be a role for everyone in a way. We just today we're doing, and there's so many assessments out there, this one, we were doing a strengths finder, but becoming more aware of what your preferences and strengths are in the world of what you might be bringing to a team or a project.

(00:45:28):

I love learning. It's like I love input, I love intellection, I'm not as relational as I wish I would, but recognizing like, "Okay, I'm going to be our researcher, or you're the director," but if you can help all of us in the room understand what we have to offer and we can celebrate and share that, we can get rid of some of the challenges of this kind of learning. I'm going to add to that that we need to do more than just do a little workshop at the beginning of the semester because we then all fall right back into our habits and our tropes and our ways of being. Life gets busy and we're stressed and everything else. And

so, what I've also built into these courses are opportunities to remind us of that. And so, holding time for that in the classroom, that work has significantly reduced the kind of tension and stress that these kinds of courses can cause students, that relational work of understanding ourselves, of co-creating over time and having those check-ins with each other.

Jeff Grabill (00:46:25):

Now, I think what both of you are saying is just remarkably accurate and smart, both from the student perspective and from... Danielle, one of the ways I heard what you were saying is you can't... Let me work by analogy. There's a difference between assigning writing and teaching writing in my world. There's a difference between assigning group work and collaboration and teaching group work and collaboration. I also really understand the experience of we don't have time to do it. You don't have time not to do it. I think part of the, and this is where the total load of the course faculty members like me routinely overburden a course and a student with too much stuff when lessons probably more, and so, you have to take the time to teach collaboration and you have to take the time to teach the things that are going to enable to scaffold students through the non-cognitive part of the work and the relationship part of the work.

(00:47:26):

One of the things that I was lousy at and learned really late in my classroom career that I should have been much better at sooner was actually project management. Sometimes, it's a matter of helping students learn the basics of project management because some of the scaffolding and structure that's associated with good project management actually helps them scaffold and structure the human relationships that students need to have with each other to figure out what to do next in a project and who's going to do it. That is a transferable skill and also a really valuable way to give some scaffolding to the collaborative work that we ask students to do. Danielle, I think you nailed a really good answer for the problem that you've had in your learning experiences, which is beyond motivation and interest, you sometimes need some help working with all these complex people on all these hard problems that professors give you to work on.

Danielle Lake (00:48:28):

I love everything you just said and I want to add on to that that we as individual faculty members do not necessarily need how to do it all, and that most of our universities and colleges, there are centers or others that we can bring into our classrooms. I wasn't leaving the workshop on strengths skills today, but that we might be able to leverage other resources on our campus to support us and support our students and also get our students out of our classroom into those spaces. There's community organizations, but there's campus centers as often or faculty who might have an expertise they're willing to share. I love that collaborative component of this. And so, I would really encourage the faculty member to not feel like they have to do it all on their own.

Yuzu Do (00:49:13):

I really appreciate Danielle's and Jeff's recognition on the faculties' and instructors' effort into project management and checking in with the students throughout the process because based on my experience learning and working on group projects, there is great difference between when the professor assign us the assignment and then they were like, "Hey, I'll come back at the end of the semester and then deliver the project." There's difference between that and when the professor give out a deadline quarterly throughout the semester and say, "Oh, by this time, this is due and just kind of

reminder." It's like a quick reminder in the class like, "Remember, we're going to have this and just let me know if you have any questions."

(00:49:57):

A lot of time just those little encouragement and reminder from the professor is really helpful for us because a lot of us shy away from group project and project assignments mostly because of our previous experience with group project, not because we don't want to do it, but it's just the build-up of not very successful group project that lead us to be very not motivated or inspired to work on group project. I remember even yesterday at my first day of the J-term here at Elon University, we were reviewing the syllabus for that and my friend sitting next to me, we just look at the syllabus and see group project and we looked at each other like, "Oh wow, we have group project again."

Jeff Grabill (00:50:38):

Yuzu, when I was teaching, I did a lot of group work and students would just universally groan. Because it is also, yeah, your experience resonates deeply with my own experience as a student and a teacher that students don't like group work as group work kind of sucks. It is incumbent upon our colleague who's going to do this amazing course at Southern Oregon to figure out how to support students. Just acknowledge that, just talk with students about, one of the things I used to do because they would groan, is unpack with them why did their prior work collaboratively, why was it so awful for them? Usually, you could probably list three or four things that are true for your bad experiences and use that as a baseline for developing some rules for how we're going to engage with each other as colleagues in this particular learning experience.

(00:51:36):

I tried to turn that. I tried to turn prior negative experiences with collaborative and group work into the baseline for how to have an explicit and intentional and thoughtful and reflective conversation about how not to have those experiences in this particular course. Then, that also told me as a teacher what students needed. If you struggled with these things in the past, then I now know that my job as an instructor is to make sure that this particular experience provides you with some resources so we can collectively work through those challenges that you've had in the past. So yeah, the groaning.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:13):

I think I have a lot here to share back with Katherine. This has been an incredible conversation and I want to thank you all one more time for being a part of our panel today.

Jeff Grabill (00:52:23):

It was a pleasure and it was a real pleasure to get to know Yuzu and Danielle. I learned a lot from you. It was a smart, smart conversation and was fun, so thank you.

Danielle Lake (00:52:33):

I agree. An honor, I knew that this would be so much fun.

Yuzu Do (00:52:37):

It is also an honor for me as well, especially as a student. Thank you so much.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:48):

It's great to have you back, Katherine. We had a great conversation with our panel about developing projects that allow students to activate both their creative and innovative sides while also discussing some of the challenges and features that group work presents.

Katherine Fox (00:53:02):

Thanks. I'm excited to see what they had to say.

Matt Wittstein (00:53:05):

We talked with Yuzu Do, the executive director of Outreach and Collaboration for Elon Volunteers! and an accounting student here at Elon. Jeff Grabill, the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Education at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, and Danielle Lake, the director of Design Thinking at Elon University.

(00:53:24):

While I tried to refocus our attention to tangible project ideas, our conversation tended to be more abstract, guidelines, and tips. It was a good reminder that the disciplinary expertise and context is really needed when you're thinking about creating a new course, new projects, new assignments, and workshopping those ideas. We felt a little weird not having you in that direct conversation. Connecting back to some of your learning goals, specifically the piece about helping students articulate the value of their learning and relating to professional development, we really talked about making sure to include learning goals explicitly as part of your project work.

(00:54:03):

This could be scaffolded at some stage of the project that asks students to directly reflect on their goals, connect to their professional trajectory, or even list specific skills that they've learned or practiced through your course. You could even bring in a career services office to help with that piece. Jeff brought up the idea of assigning versus teaching and maybe project management is something that you can actually spend time teaching your students as well as something that is super valuable for the workforce in any field.

(00:54:34):

We also spent some time considering the ethics of course-based projects, especially if you're involving community partners or clients, so how might the project live on after the semester's over, especially if there's some kind of client involved that will live on after the semester is over. The panel thought about how you might extend a course or project, and some of these ideas were to use independent studies or develop an elective course, so even though your semester has ended, a student or a small group of students could continue that in a future semester and really extend that, or designing into the project some pieces that allow students to explore what is next so there's an easy pickup point for a future group.

(00:55:13):

Throughout the conversation, we also talked about what makes or breaks group work. Building trust within the classroom and with partners will really allow groups to flourish. Yuzu wanted to stress the role that investment and passion in the project plays and how much students might enjoy the work leading us to talk about how finding that delicate balance between complete freedom that we think we all want, and clear rubrics and instruction that often allow us to initiate work on a project. Danielle had some nice points that the best projects tend to be the ones that are dynamic and adaptable.

(00:55:46):

If I can attempt to summarize everything into just a couple sentences, find the right balance of structure that allows students to get started and to see their progress as they're going through the project and enough autonomy that might allow for a little bit more passion and investment in a project which is ultimately going to lead to that creativity and innovation that you want to see from your students and you want to see them develop. You can use your learning outcomes as guides for scaffolding, and your scaffolding as opportunities to check in and make those dynamic adjustments on the fly.

(00:56:19):

Finally, make sure you include partners in the work. We talked a lot about building relationships and trust. Work with your colleagues in your department, work with your students, work with potential clients or even potential employers to understand what skills they want to see out of your students. Don't forget all of those useful campus offices and resources that our universities typically have. After sharing all of that out, and I'm really sorry I have a comprehensive list of possible projects to report back, where does this lead you in developing your course?

Katherine Fox (00:56:50):

Thank you. Since I last talked to you, I've had more discussions, particularly with one colleague in sociology and we actually arrived at some similar ideas, which is to say that everybody who does this course is going to do it differently, because I think of things like the project management. One of the things that I might want to do with them is teaching them how to use some of the Agile Project Management techniques or other things. I might be more likely to do those group kinds of projects, she is more likely to do arts-based individual projects. It's really going to vary based on each instructor.

(00:57:33):

And so, at this point, I think the way we're seeing it going forward is that each professor will come up with what they want to the course to be in that particular term and we'll be advertising it as such. If I want to do a group project with a community partner, it will be very explicitly advertised to students as this is what you will be doing in this course, and the same thing when others do it differently.

Matt Wittstein (00:58:00):

I really like how your department is looking at that from a curricular lens of how you'll do this as different faculty potentially teaching it. I know at my institution we have some courses that sometimes I teach, sometimes someone else teach, there are maybe topics that are related to our specific expertise, but they always have the same learning outcomes in our course description. How are you all developing learning outcomes or learning goals that are adaptable to different instructors?

Katherine Fox (00:58:28):

We are really focusing this on having students being able to assess what has already been done and already been tried and think of something new to do, whether they actually can complete some kind of new intervention in the course will vary, but being able to recognize opportunities for creativity is one of our major objectives. Then, we also want to really focus on iterative development. We plan to work in a lot of proposal and feedback stages, whatever the project is, if it's an artistic one, if it's a project proposal, something like that. We want them to get used to receiving and giving constructive feedback to adjust whatever their project is.

Matt Wittstein (00:59:18):

I think that's such a useful skill, and when we think of professional workforce of, yeah, your boss is going to need you to do the job, but they're also going to tell you how you could have done it better. They'll be accepting of the work that you've done, but you constantly need to improve to be a useful member of their organization.

Katherine Fox (00:59:36):

I'm glad we had the opportunity to chat about some of these things, even if they didn't go in the direction that we originally thought they would.

Matt Wittstein (00:59:43):

I think for me, one of the most exciting things is when I get to follow up with you and see what actual projects you came up with, what projects your colleagues may have come up with. I just want to thank you one last time for sharing yourself and your class and your university with our show, and allowing us to have this awesome conversation about project-based work and how to design something with creativity and innovation in mind.

Katherine Fox (01:00:07):

Thanks. I hope in a year, I can tell you all sorts of fun examples that maybe you can pass on to someone.

Matt Wittstein (01:00:20):

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.