Published by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.com/podcasts/limed/

Limed: Teaching with a Twist
Episode 7 – Gamifying Multimedia Writing

Matt Wittstein (00:00:10):
You are listening to Limed: Teaching With A Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy.

(00:00:23):
Travis Maynard teaches professional writing and technology studio in which students begin learning some of the Adobe Creative Suite. Last semester, Travis had students work in groups to create fictional companies, then practice their design and rhetoric skills with small group projects to produce print, digital, audio, and video campaigns.

(00:00:43):
Jill McSweeney from Elon Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning returns to the panel and is joined by middle school teacher turned professor John Spencer from George Fox University and Annelise Weaver, a student scholar at Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

(00:00:58):
The panel shares some wisdom about fatigue cycles in the classroom and the workforce, getting better feedback from students, and supporting students with diverse strengths and personalities. If you enjoy this show or even if you think we could do it better, a great way to help us share and promote the show is to rate and review our podcast wherever you listen, Google Play, Apple Podcast, Spotify, and most other pod catchers. We would love to hear what you think and spread the word to a larger audience. I'm Matt Wittstein and you're listening to Limed, Teaching With A Twist.
(00:01:35):

Hey, Travis, welcome to the show. Would you take a second to introduce yourself to our audience?

Travis Maynard (00:01:40):
Hey, Matt. My name is Travis Maynard. I'm an assistant professor of English at Elon University, where I teach in the Professional Writing and Rhetoric Program.

Matt Wittstein (00:01:47):
I understand this past semester you tried out a new assignment in one of your classes.

Travis Maynard (00:01:53):
The class that I was teaching this past fall, we call our Professional Writing Technology Studio, and big picture, the idea is to introduce new professional writing majors to the types of multimedia writing they will likely encounter once they graduate and transition to their professional lives. So the assignment sequence that we'll be talking about today is really informed by recent insights from professional writing and rhetoric research in workplace writing and alumni writing to really try to identify what professional writing looks like in 2022, 2023.
(00:02:26):
A lot of what that research is showing is that as I think we well know by this point, a lot of professional writing is collaborative. It oftentimes requires professionals to compose in a lot of different media environments, and more specifically, they are oftentimes asked to work with preexisting materials and get it to function in different media environments. So they might be prepping a video or a piece of audio

or they might be taking a print advertisement and digitizing it in some way. So thinking about all of those different aspects of professional writing, I wanted to design an assignment sequence that would try to emulate or simulate that professional writing environment as best as I could.
(00:03:06):
So the way I went about this was actually framing this with a card game that I found at Goodwill of all places. The game is called Silicon Valley Start-Ups and it functions like in Apples to Apples or Cards Against Humanity, but instead of making jokes, the game actually gives each player different cards and it gives them an industry, their target user or target demographic, and some stipulations for the company name. The game is played where I get these cards, I come up with a company. So myself and the other players would pitch to you as the investor and you would choose which of the pitches was the best, and then I would be the winner of that round.

Matt Wittstein (00:03:47):
If I'm understanding this right, you are giving your students a completely fictional industry and environment upon which to create some professional marketing style things. It sounds really fun. Tell us more.

Travis Maynard (00:04:03):
That is exactly the idea. The first time that we really played this game together, I gave each of my student teams stacks of these different cards and just let them mix and match to find something that they thought sounded cool, sounded interesting, that really got their creative thinking really going. With that first assignment, I had them come up with that company, but then, really what I called, I had them create a brand identity sheet, where they were designing logos, they were coming up with slogans, they were choosing official fonts and typography, official colors to really get a sense of what this brand would look like, would feel like, and how they would target their specific demographic or their target market.
(00:04:43):
Then from that first assignment, at three different times throughout the semester, I had student teams design print slash digital video and audio advertisements for each of these fictional companies. The twist for this whole thing was the idea of if professional writers are expected to work with preexisting materials, they might be coming into a preexisting organization, they are creating things from scratch, they're being given materials. So I wanted to try to emulate that as best I could.
(00:05:16):
So with each iteration of this assignment, I was shuffling group members around so that each of them was coming in with less familiarity with each company. They were going to be able to pick up that brand identity sheet, start working within that, think about what's going to be the best platform printer digital, what's going to be the best type of video, what's going to be the best type of audio to really advertise and publicize each of these fictional companies.

Matt Wittstein (00:05:41):
Wow. So this sounds super cool. This sounds super fun to me. I really like how you're pulling into some gaming ideas of making sure we're just having fun with it, but you really have this novel and intentional way to create what students might experience in the workforce of having to work with a different team or having to work on a project that you don't know a whole lot about, to create something new and interesting and valuable to a potential client. I really love it. I imagine that this project fits into the larger framework of a class. Can you speak to some of the learning outcomes for the course that this project is really hitting on and which ones you might want to pull into the project in other ways?

Travis Maynard (00:06:24):
So broadly speaking, the course is, it's in 2,000 level. It's an introductory course to the major. It is trying to get students accustomed to multimedia, multimodal composing in different ways, and also trying to get them some experience in specific composing technologies. So alongside these collaborative projects, students are also completing a series of individual projects in the Adobe Creative Suite. So they are getting that professional industry standard experience within composing platforms. This second Silicon Valley sequence is extra practice, giving them some extra experience and really seeing something through from start to finish and working in the platforms and the software that's we have been working in.

Matt Wittstein (00:07:14):
I imagine in this type of course you have students coming in with a very wide range of ability levels, especially with some of the different technological tools. How do you adapt or how do you accommodate students that some are starting at a very high level and others are maybe just really being introduced to Adobe Premiere, for example?

Travis Maynard (00:07:34):
The Silicon Valley sequence happens alongside the individual sequence. So if a student was beginning to learn Adobe Premiere for the first time, each piece of software that we use, I have students complete a LinkedIn learning tutorial for Adobe Premiere. So it's a way in which an industry professional is really introducing the complete novice to, "Here are the basic functions of this program. Here are each of the key panels that you need to know. Here's what you need to get started." So we use that as a baseline.
(00:08:03):
Then we come into class and start editing together and that's where I'm there to offer my input, my experience with Premier as an example to really help students troubleshoot as they go. Then once we get into the collaborative space, ideally, they're a little bit more comfortable or they're a little bit more confident, and working in a team, that allows them to peer mentor a little bit in terms of like, "Oh, here's how you do this," and so there's a way for them to learn from one another as well.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:30):
So you've run this assignment through the semester. What are the things that went really well in the assignment?

Travis Maynard (00:08:36):
So I think, ultimately, I was really proud of my students just for their creativity and willingness to try this experiment with me. The two companies that my students came up with based on the cards that they selected for themselves, the first was an athleisure sportswear line targeted at vegans, and the company name that they created was Go Beyond. So they were really trying to focus on sustainable lifestyle, caring for the earth, trying to really market it and frame that sportswear line in that way.
(00:09:06):
The other was a CBD-infused frozen waffle line, and their target market was framed and phrased as folks who would spend $20 on avocado toast. So I really appreciated that zeal, and I think they really appreciated that creativity and they really took that really well. While students didn't really say much in terms of my course evaluations, they did say it was fun, and I think that that was at least one good thing that happened.
(00:09:37):

I also think the materials that they produced were really solid. I felt comfortable and confident that they would be reasonably satisfactory for public circulation. I think that maybe some word shopping, a couple of more drafts. A couple of things that I could tell or things that I would like to think about things that I think I could do better next time was, first, I scheduled one class period for their composing and drafting to finish this out. I don't think that was enough time. By the end of the semester, the second and third times that we really sat down to create, I could tell that they were really working more for efficiency and wanting to get it done rather than focusing on the effectiveness or the appropriateness of the artifacts or the documents themselves.
(00:10:22):
One novel thing that happens that I'm still not sure how to process or think about is for the video and audio projects, I had hoped that they would do record their own voiceovers, but instead, they actually defaulted to speech-to-text artificial intelligence. So it had that robotic quality to it. That's not what I had in mind, but I let them run with it just because it was a small scale, short-term assignments, I had mixed reactions and mixed results with that approach.
(00:10:51):
Then finally, just on the logistics side of things, I had trouble shuffling the groups between each iteration of this project. It was a small class, only two teams. Ideally, I would've liked to have had maybe four groups and things would've been passed around a little bit more, but because it was a small class, I had to swap back and forth with teams of four where each student was working for each company twice. So those were some of the things that I think went really well, but I could even see throughout the process of the semester that there are things that I can definitely tweak and do better with.

Matt Wittstein (00:11:25):
I was thinking through as you're talking about as they got further into the project that they were starting to do stuff a little bit more for completion of the task as opposed to really attenuating to the quality of the task. My teacher brain is asking the question of, how much do you expect them to get better at producing even better quality stuff through the second and third and fourth iteration?

Travis Maynard (00:11:50):
Yeah, I think that's a fair question. I wasn't necessarily expecting something that was ready for broadcast television or ready for widespread circulation on YouTube per se, but I could tell with the first print digital advertisement, the students and the teams were really being a lot more deliberate and they were experimenting. I could hear them saying, "We'll try it this way, try it that way." There was a lot more of that lively conversation, but as the semester went on, it became a pretty clear division of labor like, "You do this, you do this. We'll get it done and it'll be finished."
(00:12:24):
The quality part of that isn't my primary concern in terms of what I think didn't go that well. It's more so thinking about how to get students to go out of that mode of thinking of just what needs to get done and really trying to relish and embrace more of the creative process, I guess.

Matt Wittstein (00:12:42):
So if I translate that in a different lingo, one aspect of the course is the theory and the technical skills involved, and then this project is really the application of those skills in a bigger picture with, in your case, a hypothetical client that should apply to a real world client as well.

Travis Maynard (00:13:01):
Yes, conceptually. I couldn't have said it better myself. Thank you, Matt.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:05):
Are there aspects that you absolutely don't want to lose as you might change the project itself?

Travis Maynard (00:13:10):
No matter what, I do want to keep the general framing and the gamification approach of really giving students that freedom and that creativity to come up with companies that they feel invested in, and it allows them to really think about how industries, how audiences really work together so it really gives them a chance to think about, "What if this was the real world? How would I actually markets this product to a very specific demographic or a specific target audience?" So I think I want to keep that framing.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:41):
So I think we have lots of really quality stuff to bring to our panel. I want to make sure that we're doing you some justice with our conversation. What I outlined is the three main goals for our panel are, one, to just help you think about tweaking the idea in relatively small ways based on some of the feedback that you shared. Second, planning for how to shuffle your participants a little bit, but also how to scale it because I anticipate eight-ish students is a fairly small class size, and if it were much bigger, it would obviously have to be a little bit different. Then finally, really, how to get your students to sustain that creative energy, that passion about the project throughout the semester.

Travis Maynard (00:14:25):
Those are the three biggest things that I came to the conversation thinking with. If there were a fourth, if there's extra time, I would be curious to know the panel's thoughts on my students' strategy or decision to rely on the voice-to-text, the AI-generated audio for advertisements.

Matt Wittstein (00:14:42):
Awesome. Travis, thank you for sharing this with us. I'm excited to take this to our panel, and I'm really intrigued by this idea myself, so I can't wait to see what the panel has to say about it.

Travis Maynard (00:14:52):
No, thank you. I'm really excited to hear what they have to say, and thank you so much for having me on the show.

Matt Wittstein (00:15:02):
Welcome to the show, John, Jill, and Annelise. I'm really excited to share with you I had a conversation with Travis Maynard and we're going to talk about a really cool project that is instilled into his classroom. Before we get there to allow you to introduce yourself to our audience. I want to ask you, share your name, where you're situated, title, whatever you want to share, but I want to ask you, what is your process for making sure you're always getting better in the things that you're doing?

Jill McSweeney (00:15:31):
Thanks, Matt. My name is Jill McSweeney. I am the Assistant Director at the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at Elon University. This is a really great question, and I think I have maybe two different hats to answer it by. The first would be my educational developer hat, which would say you would want to think about a variety of evidence or opportunities to gain evidence in thinking about how things are going.
(00:15:55):

So typically in my teaching, I like to build in moments for students to tell me how things are going, so how is the course going in conjunction with other work that they might have, is the workload going okay, how are they finding the assessments, are the instructions okay, do they have questions. So I try to get feedback from students to see how things are going in my course, but then I also like to take a lot of time to make my own notes and reflect back on how things are going, are things taking more time than I anticipated. Maybe I'm seeing the same questions from students. Are the grades where I'm thinking they're at? Are students answering my questions or engaging in the learning activities in the way that I anticipate it?
(00:16:38):
So I think for me, continual improvement looks like gathering a variety of evidence for myself, but also the students in my course and then spending time to sit and chew and reflect upon it and think about what I can do maybe differently or adapt or continue to do the same thing. So things are going really well, you might not need to change what's not broken.

John Spencer (00:16:59):
I'm John Spencer. I'm a former middle school teacher, current Assistant Professor of Education at George Fox University. For me, similar to what Jill described, I try to get as much student feedback as possible. I find that course evaluations are false positives. They're way too nice and way too far after the fact. So I do a lot of really short surveys. For example, what was their efficacy level during that assignment? Did they believe that they could? I look at motivation through self-determination theory, how extrinsically, intrinsically, how much identified regulation do they have? These are really, really short surveys. I love to check the engagement level, just using Schlechty's levels of engagement of how focused were you, how was your attention, and how committed were you to the assignment while you were doing it.
(00:17:56):
Then I have for bigger projects that we do. I like to do a UX design rubric where they rate the UX design and the user experience of the project. Then the last piece that fits into that is just at the very beginning of the semester, I put as many of the course materials as I can onto a Google Doc and have them annotate the materials and ask clarifying questions and then tell me what parts are confusing. They answer each other's questions, and it's really modeling the notion of continual improvement is what we're going to do from day one. Honestly, I find that user feedback to be really helpful for me.

Annelise Weaver (00:18:41):
Hi, everyone. I'm Annelise Weaver. I am a sophomore here at Elon University, and I am the student. So thinking about how I can continuously improve myself, I'm known to get very overwhelmed with the amount of work that I might get provided by my professors. So I'm very big on communication. I like to check in with my professors, and I like to let them know where I am, and ways that they can help me improve. I also am very big on communicating with people outside of the university atmosphere. So for example, my parents, I'm very big on talking with them and seeing what advice they have for me and what they think I should be doing in certain situations, but at the end of the day, I know myself the best, so I know what's best for me and I know what I need to be doing to continuously improve myself.

Matt Wittstein (00:19:45):
So as I mentioned, Travis is doing this really cool project. So he teaches a professional writing and rhetoric course called Professional Writing Technology Studio, where essentially, it's the introduction to the major and students are going to learn how to use a lot of the technological tools to essentially create advertisements in his course project. So he's using the Adobe Creative Suite. Students are learning some

print and digital advertisement tools, some audio advertisement tools and some video advertisement tools. That's just one piece of the course. The course is also teaching them those technological skills.
(00:20:22):
What's really cool on his project is he's taking one group will get the first part of the project to create a brand ID for a fictional company, and then after they create that brand ID, they'll pass it off to another group to do the first print or digital, and then they'll keep rotating groups or people in groups to change the experiences that those groups are having.
(00:20:48):
One of his goals with this is just to connect with professional writing as a field. It is collaborative that you work with multiple media environments and you don't always come in having created all of the parts that were there. You don't necessarily have that innate knowledge. So he has a really cool way to do this. He's got a game called Silicon Valley Start-Ups where they essentially draw different cards that help them create a fictional company, and then project one is create the brand ID for that company. Think about who their target audience, their target customer is, and they had some great ideas for the last semester.
(00:21:28):
One of them I want to point out is athleisure, an athleisure company targeting vegans, and the company was called Go Beyond. I think it's a hint at Beyond Burgers maybe. I'm not entirely sure. It just has that sense of this could totally be real and you can see how it builds into that multimedia project that allows students to do that.
(00:21:50):
So as I talked to Travis, he admitted that he didn't have a lot of formal feedback. He had his end of semester evaluations, and in those, there weren't a lot of direct questions about what they thought of the project or a lot of feedback beyond it was fun. So he's trying to think about how to make some tweaks to that project coming from his own experience and maybe looking for some ways to get a little bit better feedback throughout the semester.
(00:22:17):
So where I want to start is Travis had mentioned that as the semester wore on, the students were really fun and excited about the project. They were turning in really good work. As the semester wore on, it seemed like they were maybe more ticking boxes and completing the tasks but maybe didn't have the same level of engagement. I want to ask you all real quick, just as a specific to Travis' project, how are ways you might make this more exciting and more fun for the students that are part of these teams?

John Spencer (00:22:49):
One of the things I'll say from what you described about the project earlier in this semester is it feels like he's already doing a lot of the things that work, breaking up the groups, creating novelty. So I would say build on those things that are working. Start there, right? My guess is he's probably being a little too hard on himself, and it was probably more engaging than he realized. I think we have to recognize that when we do projects in general, what we know just based on cognitive psychology, based on behavioral economics, everything that people have brought into this discussion before, that you tend to work harder when you're coming to the end of a phase or a task. You're more motivated, you are more energized, you're also more energized at the very beginning. There's always a lag in the middle.
(00:23:39):
So if the project is broken into phases with celebrations, with these benchmarks that create a little re-energizing moment, I think that goes a long way, but I would ask, if I'm looking at this saying there was this lag in the middle, which is what I'm hearing, come up with a diagnostic tool to see, is this an issue of

project fatigue? Is this an issue of cognitive overload? Are they overwhelmed by some part of the phase? So is this more of a design element or is this more of just the natural project fatigue?
(00:24:16):
I've personally found with both middle schoolers and then at the university level that when students hit project fatigue in the middle, taking a single day break from the project and doing a mastermind group, a carousel with pure feedback, doing skill workshops and letting them do almost like a writer's workshop but skill-based where they're solving each other's problems for a single day and then moving back to the project can be that boost that pushes them back in, if that makes any sense.
(00:24:50):
When you think about that question, Annelise, when you hit that middle zone in a project, is it usually more of that project fatigue for you or is it usually the directions and the aspects of the projects have become more unclear?

Annelise Weaver (00:25:03):
For me, I can absolutely relate to the students with the first half, I'm very motivated. It's a new project. It's brand new, and then towards the end, you do have that motivation to get it over with because the end is near. Going back to your question, John, the middle point of the semester, for me, I feel like, I mean, the project fatigue is definitely there, especially if it's something that I'm going to be working on for the entirety of the semester. I think having that break in between or seeing what the issue might be is something that would be very beneficial to students. It's more so of that project fatigue than it is other things.

Matt Wittstein (00:25:55):
Annelise, are you saying that there is almost every semester you just hit a fatigue point for all of your classes or is it within a project, within a class it hits at different time points?

Annelise Weaver (00:26:08):
I would say that in all of my classes, I absolutely hit that fatigue point at some point in the semester. I don't think it necessarily has to be project-based. I think that it's cool things that I'm learning and whatnot, but at some point I just get burnt out. I'm tired and I'm ready for the semester to be over with.

Jill McSweeney (00:26:33):
I would say too that that's probably not just for students. I would say even when I teach, the excitement and enjoyment of a new term, it lasts for a few weeks and then there's always that uphill battle where you're feeling the crunch of the term and trying to create longevity of that excitement and investment. I would say that that's probably some of what's happening here. So maybe one of the things to think about is how do you bring students back to feeling excited and invested and motivated in continuing on in the assessment.
(00:27:06):
One thing that might be possible is if the original first group where they do the brand assignment, maybe that's a continual group where the other groups come back to and then they pitch their idea and their work. So there's still that thread of, "I am invested in this project and where it's going, and I have that motivation and that intention to see where it's coming back." Then they have the ability to also switch between projects as the individuals that are pitching back to the client. So thinking about maybe that small change to create that motivation and engagement throughout could be something.
(00:27:44):

I also think about if we're thinking about the number of dynamics that you're having to negotiate socially. So figuring out how to work in a group is quite difficult. Thinking about how to build that culture, understanding tasks, the social norms. So I think understanding that there's probably a social cognitive capacity here of with each project you're figuring out who you're working with and how that team's going to work and there's that additional workload with that.
(00:28:13):
Then one thing, building on what John said about that continual feedback, integrating perhaps a start, stop, continue, really low-hanging fruit of getting an understanding of how students are doing. So what should you start doing? What should you stop doing? What could you continue to do? Then thinking about how you're building that in at the different phases, just to do a bit of a litmus test of seeing how things are going.
(00:28:37):
I try to, at the beginning of each of my classes, do a little, "How are things going? How are your other classes? Are you feeling overwhelmed?" That can help me understand the pace of my own course and how students are doing. If I need to maybe say, "Okay. Today, we're going to take a break. We're going to do something else because I can feel that stress coming up," and we'll have that, I don't want to say a break from class, but an opportunity to rethink about how we're doing and maybe get a cognitive snack before we go back to the main meal that we've just been working on.
(00:29:09):
So I think having that continual feedback process from your students to really understand how they're doing is important, and if you need to make any in the moment changes and that feedback, of course, is really great for the post-course changes that you want to make as well. Then again, just reiterating what John said, I think that the feedback is it's fun and engaging, and I think we're oftentimes harder on ourselves than we think. So just holding onto that feedback and capitalizing on what students really enjoy and then making small tweaks, but not feeling like you have to change everything all at once, but thinking about, "Okay. If I'm noticing disengagement, where can I target little things in what I'm doing to bring students back into them being invested into the work that they're engaging in?"

John Spencer (00:29:54):
I would also add that the notion of project fatigue happens in any industry. We all hit that moment where we're exhausted in the midpoint part of a project, and especially if it's also the midpoint part of a semester. That's a double whammy, but if we can help students know that this is a normal part of the process as well, obviously, we want to boost engagement. We want students to stay excited and energized, but letting them know, "Hey, what you're experiencing right now is project fatigue. We all experience it. Even if you have industry experts, you could talk about it." Labeling it, letting them know, and then having them figure out some strategies to get past the lull and get re-energized, I think it is helpful as well.

Annelise Weaver (00:30:45):
I think as a student that that would be very helpful if the teachers were communicating with us and checking in and showing us that they really do care about where we are as well in this semester. I think that I like both what you, John and Jill, said about that check-in, and I think as a student that would be very helpful.

Matt Wittstein (00:31:08):
I really like how this reflects our relationship-rich approach to teaching. Jill, you had talked a little bit about the social dynamics. The number of social dynamics adds a different cognitive load and how

changing those groups frequently might actually make things a little bit more difficult or uncomfortable for students or just something else that they have to think and worry about a little bit. How might you go about minimizing some of those social dynamics? Being mindful that it might be a small class setting or it could be a larger class setting of 25 or 30 students with four or five groups.

Jill McSweeney (00:31:45):
Creating community at the very first day of class is really important. That really lays the groundwork for building rapport between students and creating a space where they're both themselves, but they also feel part of a collective. I think that's really important. I also find that I personally like to give quite a bit of structure in the first few days of group work, so the first few exercises, so that students can understand where their strengths are, maybe where they want to develop new skills, and identify that and articulate that.
(00:32:19):
I've used group contracts as well, depending on if the groups are going to be staying consistent, and that's been really helpful at ensuring that people are accountable, but also knowing how their peers can hold their other peers to the accountable standards that you want to have because sometimes those difficult conversations can be really hard.
(00:32:38):
So I see it as building some additional skills of, "This is how it's going to be when you're beyond my course working with other professionals from different backgrounds, who have different goals, different skillsets," and really centering that part of this social dynamic and working as a group is building those important skills that you need.
(00:32:57):
I think particularly consistent groups can be helpful in a large class where students might not ever meet some of their peers just because of size. In a smaller class, you can do different things to build the larger group community outside of the smaller groups so that when they come together, they still have that rapport and that social construct that they've built as a larger class. I think that's a little bit helpful.
(00:33:21):
So thinking about scalability for this is important, and how much work you'll need to do to get students to feel comfortable to work together, but also how much time and space you're going to be giving to students during class to build those dynamics and those relationships because I think sometimes we plop students into a group and we think those dynamics are already there, but it's important to give space and time for students to actually talk, get to know each other and build that rapport.

John Spencer (00:33:49):
What you described was huge, the group contracts, group norms that you set up, shared commitments. Those pieces are significant. Also, having them help come up with what the roles are going to be within the groups, so clearly define roles. Then I found that it helps within the roles just for group cohesion to have, I guess I would say for lack of a better term, shared power within a group. So having a project management, having a leader, but they're two different roles. So a lot of times when I'm seeing a lack of group cohesion, there's a power imbalance. So trying to address that with how we divide up the roles and the tasks can be significant.

Jill McSweeney (00:34:37):
I've done it both ways. Sometimes I will define roles in a group and then I'll have them switch up over the course of the term. So everyone gets a chance to, say, maybe be the leader, the timekeeper, the minute taker, but then I've also tried to find out the strengths of students before I assign roles and then

allow them to pick or guide them to roles I think that they would be really strong at and have a group that has a diverse set of skills. I'm just wondering, how do you approach that? Do you do the same thing? Have you found pros and cons?

John Spencer (00:35:11):
Yeah, I think I've found pretty similar pros and cons to both approaches. I really like, if it's a long project, I like to rotate the roles where for a four-week long project, each of the four people in a group rotate and so they each get to practice a different role. I just think there's a lot of empathy gained for how hard it is to be the project manager or to be the leader or to be the critic who's offering feedback or asking questions, whatever those roles may be.
(00:35:41):
At the same time, I do think part of the university experience is discovering your strengths and growing in those strengths and letting that connect to the authentic reality of in most jobs that students are going to do where they're engaged in projects within most industries, they're not going to be rotating roles every week, right? So it's tough to balance the authenticity, but also with that sense of equity.
(00:36:06):
I find the challenge there is that some students would prefer to have one role and get really good at that one role over the course of a project. To them changing every week creates a new overwhelming thing, and then others, it's like a breath of fresh air. When you hear that question from your own perspective, Annelise, which would you rather have, and then when you think about the peers, what do you think your peers would prefer?

Annelise Weaver (00:36:32):
I'm obviously offering my perspective here as a student, but I also wanted to offer my perspective here as a massive introvert. So class, in general, makes me very uncomfortable and I struggle to find peace in a classroom setting. So partaking in this activity where I would have to be interacting with my peers is something that I definitely struggle with. So I would want to make sure that interacting with my peers, I would be interacting with them in a way that protects my privacy and makes me feel comfortable. For me, I think that I would prefer to zero in on one specific role and get really good at that role.
(00:37:21):
As for my peers, I don't know. I don't know. I feel like it really just depends on who they are as a student. I don't know what they feel would be best for them. I know some would prefer to just keep one role and go with it and others would be okay and open to mixing it up.

John Spencer (00:37:42):
I have a followup question to that. You described being an introvert. So if you think about a collaborative project where a lot of it is going to be interacting with peers in small groups, what are some things that you would like professors to do in a class like this, engagement-wise, to honor the need for that introvert, alone processing time.

Annelise Weaver (00:38:05):
I like what you had mentioned when you were talking about building that sense of community in a classroom. That's something that I really appreciate, and when I feel like I'm a part of something bigger than a class, it makes me feel more comfortable and opening up and sharing my ideas and thoughts with my peers. Just having teachers that recognize that there are students that are different from one another, obviously, I think that that's really important and it's something that I don't take that for granted.

Matt Wittstein (00:38:49):
I think we hear often on this podcast that we have to think about our individual learners individually, that we often think of best practices, but we always have to remember that there's somebody that that best practice may not be the best for. So I really appreciate this back and forth dialogue of thinking about different learners in that space. One of the things Travis brought up in their audio and in their video projects, his students opted to use artificial intelligence like speech-to-text as opposed to actually recording their own voices. Should he push back? Should he allow them to do that?

Jill McSweeney (00:39:29):
I'm happy to take the first jump in, and I feel as though this is a very deep and very big pool to jump into. I think the conversation of AI assistance or AI use in terms of assessment is huge and it's just bubbling over. So I would say to step back, to think about the learning outcomes. Is using AI to help with the output of the assessment changing the learning outcomes? Does it mean that they're not achieving the outcome that you have intended? If yes, then I think that that gives credence to why you should push back. If no, then say, "Okay. Well, is this providing a way for a student to use a different piece of technology, and then to develop a skill? Is it really impacting the intellectual work that's going into the final product?" I think that's the really key thing is how is it being used, and if its use isn't really truly impacting the learning outcomes that you have for the course and that you're hoping students will achieve, then is this something that you really need to push back upon?

Matt Wittstein (00:40:42):
So if I can attempt to translate that to Travis' course, if the learning outcome is to get them to record live audio, they probably shouldn't be using speech-to-text as part of that process, but if the learning outcome is to really produce the most appropriate professional writing, it may not matter quite as much if it's a speech-to-text voice doing it or an actual student's voice in the course.

Jill McSweeney (00:41:06):
Exactly. If you're trying to measure cadence, pronunciations, speed, things that really have to do with how you're speaking, particularly on recorded voice, then I think that's really important to practice, particularly if that's a skill the students are going to need beyond the course, but if it's really focusing on can this brand be aligned to what the client wants and are we creating a video that aligns with that brand, then maybe those fire points of who's speaking is probably likely not going to matter. It would be like if you brought a voice actor in, you're still going to be doing the scripting and everything. They're just delivering the words.

John Spencer (00:41:44):
Yeah, I mean, I think the whole AI thing is fascinating, and that could be an entirely different panel discussion. I think it's important to recognize, I love what Jill brought up with it's basically like having a voice actor. The big question is what are the learning outcomes and is AI doing the cognitive load for you or are you co-partnering with it? I think we need to remember that there are deeply human things that we can always do better than AI, empathy, context, divergent thinking, and really voice.
(00:42:22):
I think one of the reasons I would probably choose to have students record their voice is that despite the discomfort, it's necessary. I think that there are certain things that almost universally we all dislike about ourselves, and they are all the very things that make us who we are and give us our unique voice.
(00:42:49):

So I see this, for example, when it comes to having students do sketch noting for notes and sharing ideas, I have students who hate that because they're not, quote, "good artists". We're all convinced that we have horrible voices. I hate hearing my voice recorded, and I make podcasts and videos. We are all convinced that we can't draw. We are all convinced that we can't think mathematically, and yet all of those things are not true.
(00:43:17):
Most of us are pretty good thinking mathematically. We all are better at doodling and drawing than we think. We all have better voices than we think. Some of what a university course can do is creating a safe space for discomfort, which is what I think that is. What you're doing is you're creating slack to develop grit. If a student can come in nervous, and I was that kid, that introvert who hated speaking in front of a group, well, what you're doing by having voice recording is you're giving the permission to rehearse the voice over and over and over again until it can be good enough.

Jill McSweeney (00:43:57):
I just want to build on because I think that they're both interconnected. So I think when we're thinking about branding and creating something that's marketable, you're going to want to have a professionalism. So you're going to want this to be like what you would give to a client or what would happen in the real world, and with a video use AI speech, probably not. So I think even if you're not comfortable saying no, you can frame it in the realm of saying, "Aligned with our learning outcomes around real world experience, thinking about the tangibility of what you would give to a client, would you give a client something that is AI- generated? Probably not."
(00:44:37):
So it gives credence to say, "Maybe don't use it." You're giving grounding, embed it within the learning outcome of why you might not want to use AI. I do like this idea of creating a safe space. When we think about triggering content and trauma, having students have the flexibility and the space to understand how they would cope or approach it or deal with that content is really important so that they're not just approaching it once they get into the workforce, and they might have higher stakes on the line for them to really see, "Okay. This is how I would develop the skill. This is maybe how I respond."
(00:45:16):
So I think there's two sides to it. I think there's pros and cons. I go back to the learning outcome, but I do like this idea that it does give space for students to be maybe pushed to an area where they might not feel as comfortable or think that they can exceed or excel and then give them that space to really develop that skill.

John Spencer (00:45:36):
It really depends on the course design, but it's also possible to do a little bit of a both and. You can have a project where everyone does everything, and that's really important because they need exposure to everything, but you could do a mini-project design, sprint, something, where students then are able to identify their greatest strengths, whether it's visual design, voiceovers, whatever, and contribute something to a different project or to multiple projects.
(00:46:09):
I'll give a small example of this. I was working last week with a high school where they have a really cool entrepreneurial program, and one of the things that they were realizing is not everyone is strong in every area of being an entrepreneur, and they're forcing everyone to do everything within these groups in the name of they need to develop these skills. So we talked about what would it look like to have teams of two for entrepreneurs rather than always four because most entrepreneurs really are duos.
(00:46:40):

Then on top of that, allow some students after the first initial project and pitch to be solopreneurs who are strong in voiceover, visual design, marketing, whatever it is, and then the teams of two entrepreneurs can pay people based on their strengths with they're using a fictitious currency.
(00:47:03):
So I think, too, there's a time and a place in a course like this to say maybe at the end if you do a final project or you do a mini project, you let people find their strengths at the end of a course after an exploratory phase because this is an intro course, and then play into those strengths and be able to say, "You know what? Voice acting is not my thing," or, "You know what? That is actually something I'm strong at, and I feel really good about it."

Matt Wittstein (00:47:31):
One of the last questions I want to ask is, how do we get honest feedback from our students? We know with the end of semester evaluations that those can be hit or miss, they can be biased, they can sometimes be useful. More often, they're just echoing what they think I want to hear, whether it's informal feedback or formal feedback. I find students have this natural ability to think they know exactly what I want to hear. So I'm curious, what are ways that we can actually get stronger, more honest feedback from our students? Annelise, I'm going to start with you to share some of your student perspective of what allows you to tell your professor when something is not going well or when it's going super awesome.

Annelise Weaver (00:48:16):
I have been fortunate enough during the past three semesters I've been here. I've had teachers who are very open with their students and they want that feedback from their students and they say it all the time. For example, I had one teacher who every class period he would remind us, "If there's something that you don't like about this class, you are more than welcome to come and speak with me about it," and it wasn't like in a confrontational way. It was very nice. It was in a very nice and open way.
(00:48:48):
So I don't know what it would be like for other students who haven't had that type of experience that I have been fortunate enough to have, but I feel like I've really had the jackpot so far with what these really awesome teachers who they don't really necessarily care what the student is saying. They just want that honest and raw feedback from the student. Teachers being as open and honest with their students as possible, I think that would really help.

Jill McSweeney (00:49:18):
That's so great to hear, Annelise, and I think having that reinforcement from students of creating that culture in your classroom of wanting feedback, valuing it, soliciting the student voice is really important. It's lovely to hear that students see that and they recognize it and it makes them feel as though not only can they give feedback, but that their feedback will be useful because I think from talking to students a lot, sometimes they're dissuaded from giving feedback because they think, "Oh, the professor's not going to read it. They're not going to utilize it." So really having those conversations from the very beginning of the course about how you value feedback, how you've stood in the past.
(00:50:02):
Some of the things that I've done is at the end of the class, I will have students do a short form of, "This is what I really liked about the course. This is what I didn't. This is what I would tell the students from the next iteration." Then the first day of class of the next iteration, I pull it up and say, "Okay. Feedback is an important thing. These are what your students have said in the past, but this is also how I've changed the course from the past based on the feedback."

(00:50:26):
I think also providing students multiple opportunities to give feedback and practice giving it. Sometimes this is the first time students had to give feedback, so maybe they're not quite sure what's important to talk about. How do you give constructive but maybe critical feedback? Having a conversation with students about what is good feedback, what does that look like, and modeling that feedback yourself. So saying, "Here's the feedback that I'm giving you. This is an opportunity for you to share your experience and give me that feedback."
(00:50:57):
I think it's a multiple-pronged approach to really make those end of course feedback opportunities meaningful, and it's something that you have to do throughout the time that you're with students and just reminding them that, "Your feedback's useful. I listened. I hear it, I integrate it, and I value it." Then also teaching about how to give good feedback is also equally important.

John Spencer (00:51:17):
I think not only explicitly soliciting that feedback, but then telling students, "This is what I'm doing today based on the feedback that you got lets people know I'm using that." I think of, for example, this was pre-COVID. I was part of the team that piloted our virtual cohort, and one of the first things that happened the first night is we did breakout rooms. I thought things were going interactive. I got the feedback of there was no silence and think time, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh." So I explicitly said the next time, "Hey, based on the feedback I got, three people mentioned this. It tells me that was pretty important." In thinking about Zoom was uncomfortable with the notion of we're going to be silent on Zoom, but I'm implementing this. It's just letting them know, "Hey, this was a piece of feedback that I got that was really good and this is why we're doing this right now."

Jill McSweeney (00:52:20):
Building on that, John, I think too, letting students know what you can't change as well and being very transparent about, "This is great feedback. I understand maybe you do not like this, maybe it's not supporting your learning, but given the boundaries and constraints that I'm under, this is how it has to be.
(00:52:40):
So sometimes building in that transparency and talking about some of your pedagogical decisions, decisions around course design and why it's important for learning can be really helpful. That's something that happened to me in my course when we transitioned to online and the use of discussion boards, there was a lot of feedback about, "Please no more discussion boards. We absolutely hate them." So I had to have a really hard and honest conversation about, "This is a blended course, so you'll sometimes never interact with some of your peers in a synchronous moment, and this asynchronous opportunity allows you to have conversations."
(00:53:16):
So really building in, "This is why I'm doing. I know it might not be your favorite approach, but this is the benefit that you're getting, and the transparency around why I'm making some of those decisions."
(00:53:26):
I would also say sometimes you don't have to take all the feedback and implement it in one try. So if you're getting a bunch of different feedback, pick and choose what you want to do and then do that. Don't change everything all at once or try to integrate all the feedback at once because sometimes that can be overwhelming for yourself and also for your students as well.

Matt Wittstein (00:53:46):
I think this conversation is going to give me a lot of good information to share with Travis and some great insight on how you might make some small tweaks and adjustments in a project. I want to thank you all just one more time. So thank you so much, John, Jill, Annelise. Thank you for your time, your sharing your experiences, and being a part of Limed.

Jill McSweeney (00:54:06):
Thanks for the invite. It was lovely to meet you, John and Annelise.

John Spencer (00:54:09):
Yeah, thanks. Back at you.

Annelise Weaver (00:54:11):
Yeah. Thank you, guys. It was a pleasure to meet you all.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:21):
Welcome back to the show, Travis. We had an awesome conversation.

Travis Maynard (00:54:24):
Thanks for having me back, Matt. I'm really excited to hear about what the panel had to say about my Silicon Valley Start-Ups project.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:31):
So I threw out to our panel, which included Jill McSweeney, Assistant Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning here at Elon University, John Spencer, an Associate Professor of Education at George Fox University, and he does some work with project-based learning and design thinking, he has a podcast as well, and Annelise Weaver, who is a Center for Engaged Learning student scholar and a sophomore psychology major.
(00:54:57):
I shared with them and I threw out to them how do they go through that iterative process to ensure that they're growing, that they're getting better in that teaching and learning setting, and what they shared back, Jill said, listen to both students and yourself. You need those separate streams of information. John started a little bit of talking about, "Well, setting the stage, setting the mindset initially from the get-go that this is about growth." Having continual growth from the beginning allows you to actually be better at it. Annelise talked about getting some feedback that may be even outside of that academic context. So for her as a student, thinking about sharing with a parent or a friend or somebody in a different class that still knows school but sees it from a different lens. So that was really telling of our conversation. That was really engaging for me as the listener and the guide person of the conversation.
(00:55:59):
I do have four main points that we talked about. First, we talked about fatigue. One, fatigue is absolutely normal. We talked a little bit about how when you start or end some phase of something, that that's usually the exciting part. So maybe thinking about ways to just shorten or minimize that middle phase, but we also talked about how that's a very real thing for faculty. It's also a semester cycle type of thing. At this point in the semester, everyone seems to be tired in the academic setting, but it's also a real world industry type of thing in professions.
(00:56:36):

As these students graduate, they're going to feel fatigue in projects that they're working on, and maybe this can be an opportunity to talk about that and actually prepare students for the real world of like, "Hey, I noticed you're a little bit tired and less engaged with this part of the project. That's a normal thing in the workforce, but how do we still make sure we get really high quality products and still do really good work?" Maybe some ways you can also build in against that fatigue is creating some little mini celebrations to kick off or to end a phase of the project.
(00:57:12):
The second point is we talked about how to get a little bit better feedback from students. You had mentioned that you didn't get a lot of explicit feedback about that aspect of your course. Our panelists said to really build it in at different phases. Jill talked about a start, stop, and continue activity. If you're not familiar with it, it says, essentially, "Here's things that I want you to start doing, here's things that I want you to stop doing, and here's things that are going well that you should keep doing." It's a really low stakes way to have that conversation with your students or with groups.
(00:57:46):
They also talked a little bit about if you do some of that feedback in the classroom, to give time to sit and think, some silent time to work through what feedback they actually want to give. That may go beyond just the feedback. I mean, I think through any project work, I need to let students think about stuff before they answer a question, especially if it's a complex question.
(00:58:10):
Then the third bit of advice, which I think was really the most helpful, is that you really need to find ways to signal that you're open to feedback. Show your students, tell your students how you have used feedback in the past, how you will use the feedback they're giving you. Make sure that they're involved and feel like you're being transparent, but let them know. Ask them often for feedback. Remind them that you really want to be the best teacher and that's going to make it more likely that they'll give you real authentic feedback when you come ask for it. I think we all know we can't rely on those end of course evaluations to hit all the notes we want. So build it into the project itself.
(00:58:51):
The next point was to allow students to find their strengths and then make some adjustments. This is where we had a little bit of a conversation about general group dynamics and students maybe not knowing what their strengths and weaknesses are, not knowing the strengths and weaknesses of everyone else. So as you do some of those feedback and some of those check-ins, making sure that they're at a time point where you can make real adjustments.
(00:59:16):
We also had a little conversation about acknowledging that all of our students are a little bit different. Annelise identified herself as being pretty introverted, and the classroom can be a very different setting than what she perceives her extroverted peers might be experiencing. Just being mindful of the individual differences that our students have as humans is really helpful in there.
(00:59:39):
We did have a little bit of a conversation about the speech-to-text and artificial intelligence, and big picture, that's a much larger conversation, but I do want to share that in this podcast a lot, we point back to our learning outcomes that that piece, if students need to learn how to record live audio, that's the learning outcome, well, then they probably shouldn't use speech-to-text, but if the learning outcome is to develop a really strong script that identifies well with the client, does it really matter if it's speech-to-text? It's like using a voiceover actor, using Samuel L. Jackson or Morgan Freeman. If they can get them, I mean, that would be fantastic too.
(01:00:18):

Pushing back on that a little bit, John did talk about how we all don't really love listening to our own voice, and that piece might help students work through some little small fears. It might help them develop some empathy for people that go through that process regularly and understanding how difficult it is. It might also give them both a literal and a figurative voice in the final product. So it was really nice conversation there.
(01:00:45):
The last bit I wanted to touch on, we didn't talk too much about the scaling and shuffling of groups, but there was a really cool idea about considering making a static and a dynamic group instead of just those shifting groups, where the static group would act as the client and be able to provide feedback at each stage. Whereas the dynamic group would be those moving pieces that is the actual working group for part A, part B, part C, part D, and so on, but it might create ... I thought it was a cool novel way to have some similarity but still have some opportunities for shuffling.
(01:01:23):
We did talk a little bit though about how if you have too many group shifts, that's actually another cognitive and social load for our students that will detract from their learning. So maybe more leaning towards the static side a little bit, but we really trust you to make the right decision in terms of the size of your classroom and the number of products that they can meaningfully actually create unique things for.
(01:01:47):
So as I hope you can tell, we had a really awesome conversation. I would love to know what adjustments you think you might make in version 2.0 of your assignment.

Travis Maynard (01:01:56):
Sure. So before I dive into that, I just want to thank the committee or thank the panel, rather, for giving me these really thoughtful, insightful things to think with. Thinking about I have my own ideas about what I want to do in the next 2.0 version, but in reading across what the committee raises, I think I can incorporate some of those ideas and synthesize some of these ideas to make it a more engaging experience for students.
(01:02:22):
So as I've been thinking about it, I know that I want to give students more time. I only gave them one single class period, but I think letting it breathe a little bit more might ensure that students are engaging with the task because I think it was partly semester fatigue, but at the same time, more of a matter of knowing that they have one class period, they just wanted to finish it. So I think giving students a little bit more time would be really helpful.
(01:02:46):
I like the idea of the feedback outside of school, feedback from someone who isn't in the class, from a parent, from a friend's, and I think possibly, a way to build in some of that feedback would be the static versus dynamic group. So it might be that's the group of four or five that create the company, there's the board of directors, and then in subsequent versions, they're giving that feedback, and that might be a way to liven up the middle part of the assignment sequence, knowing that they're going to have to take it back to that board of directors or that static group. I really like that idea.
(01:03:22):
In thinking about some of the group dynamics, I recognize and I do want to appreciate the cognitive load that this does ask, that this places upon students because it can be very difficult for them to reorient and really figure out. So it might be that having students be a little bit more upfront or open about, "Here's my strengths. Here's what I would like to do. Here are my drawbacks, what I want to avoid," as students are stepping into this new group if you're doing that multiple times.

Matt Wittstein (01:03:55):
It sounds like you've gotten a lot from this. One question I have been thinking about with your class being typically the introductory course to the major, probably earlier stage learners in their academic and their university journey. When we typically think about a curricular structure, I think very often we think of knowledge, skills, application, and maybe in that order, maybe get that foundational knowledge, and maybe along the way pick up the skills of how to use that, and then that applied piece. You have an introductory course that's really, even though it's a fictional company, is a exercise in applying skills as you are developing them. Do you think that's a strong way to prepare sophomores to be in the workforce in three, four, five years?

Travis Maynard (01:04:49):
I really like this question. I think it's a great question because, how do we really think about scaffolding the knowledge skills application? I think that at least in my case, with professional writing and rhetoric, so much of the disciplinary knowledge that I'm trying to give to students is geared toward application from the very beginning, "Here's how we think about purpose. Here's how we think about audience." So at least within professional writing, I would say the skills come from the application. So it's always intertwined. It's always practice-based for students to really be able to take the concepts, take the theories that we're reading and thinking with, and they have to apply it to really develop those skills. So I think from my perspective as a writing professor, it seems to be that knowledge, skills, and application are always intertwined.

Matt Wittstein (01:05:37):
I think what I really love about your idea is how playful it is in the classroom and how you are being intentional in trying to make improvements. As so many of us as faculty, we just want to be the best that we can and a little bit better than the previous semester. So Travis, thank you so much and good luck with 2.0 of Silicon Valley Start-Ups in the professional writing and rhetoric classroom.

Travis Maynard (01:05:58):
Oh, thank you so much for having me, Matt. I'd like to say thank you again to the panel and I can't wait to hear the final version.

Matt Wittstein (01:06:14):
Limed: Teaching With A Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, Associate Professor of Exercise Science. Devani 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.