Limed: Teaching with a Twist
Season 2, Episode 5 – Fostering Diverse Cultural Identities

Matt Wittstein (00:00:11):

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

(00:00:25):

How do we acknowledge, leverage, and sometimes break down cultural differences and barriers when trying to get students to critically engage in their learning?

(00:00:33):

Tugçe Aldemir is transitioning from postdoc to faculty and chats with host and producer Dhvani Toprani about some of her challenges and goals in the classroom as an international educator in the American higher ed system.

(00:00:47):

Our panel of Azul Bellot, Nermin Vehabovic, and Lisa Wolf-Wendel share ideas about creating brave spaces, mentalities of learning with and from each other and developing mature learners who can go beyond right and wrong answers.

(00:01:01):

As always, we would love your feedback and are always looking for new guests for the show. Please rate and review or reach out via email or our website, www.centerforengagedlearning.org/podcasts. Here's Dhvani Toprani. Enjoy the episode.

Dhvani Toprani (00:01:26):

Welcome to the show, Tugçe. We are so excited to have you with us and know more about your teaching journey. So can you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your teaching and learning context?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:01:37):

Certainly. Yeah, it's great to be here. Thanks so much for having me, Dhvani.

(00:01:39):

My name's Tugçe Aldemir. I'm currently a postdoctoral researcher at University of Pennsylvania, but I'm transitioning to Texas A&M as an assistant professor. And here at UPenn for the very first time I solo taught the class.

Dhvani Toprani (00:01:54):

Congratulations for that experience and it sounds very exciting. Can you tell us more about your experience as a young instructor in academia and what department do you teach in?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:02:05):

Certainly. It was in education and the majority of my students were master's students with one PhD student and all of them were international students. Actually, we didn't have American students in class. It was interesting experience to teach just the whole... I was a TA before, but I never again teach a whole class on my own. So it was a different experience first.

(00:02:28):

And the second different aspect of it was, the whole class was international so I could understand their journey to some degree because I was also international student. So there was this shared experience connection with them.

(00:02:41):

And also while they learn about the content, I also learned about expressing the content in a way that people can actually understand. So that was a different set of skillset that I had to experience, but it was interesting and I really enjoy it.

Dhvani Toprani (00:02:55):

So what about this experience surprised you as a new instructor and challenged you at the same time?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:03:01):

I think one thing is that really, not necessarily surprising maybe, but what's challenging to me was, while expressing my opinions, I realized that I may speak fast and when I speak very fast, my accent get probably really heavy, so that might create some challenges for my students. So I realized that and I actually put effort into speaking a little bit more slowly. So that's something that I realized about myself and I tried to fix it while teaching, which was another reason why it was a good experience for me.

(00:03:35):

And another thing is that, having students from different cultures, which was great, I really enjoy interacting with them, learning about them, but also this creates some form of different cultural norms which brought different cultural norm class. So that created occasionally some form of conflict between them because the way that they interpret the same event quite the first based on their cultural backgrounds or norms. So I needed to learn how to facilitate those kinds of conflicts amongst students that emerge from their cultural differences. I think these two things probably just challenged me and then I needed to learn or I work on how I can fix this kind of things while teaching.

Dhvani Toprani (00:04:22):

Can you give us an example of how these conflicts emerge in your learning environment?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:04:27):

For example, one of the classes, the first problem, well, kind of difficult, let's say, I was just talking about some futurist theory and then it's a very challenging theory to grasp at first. So you have to spend time on thinking about that. And while I was explaining that I realized students were not necessarily looking like they understood what I say and I just stop and ask them, "Hey, guys, how's it going?"

(00:04:55):

And of course, it might be a little bit challenging for them to challenge me because again, some students are coming from a culture where the teacher is the authority, right? And then I actually try to encourage them to speak, how can I help them better. And then one of them was, I guess the report that we built over time helped in a way that one of them said, "You speak really fast and then sometimes your accent might be getting heavier." And I had never noticed that before, which was a great feedback. So based on that feedback, I try to speak much slower, which was really, really helpful. And when I speak more slowly, my accent get actually lighter.

(00:05:37):

And the second issue was, just to give you an example, so we had online discussion forums, so they were supposed to respond to each other on that online discussion forum. However, one of the students, and he's from a culture where they are very direct and they're very, not necessarily confrontational, but they express their opinions more freely, let's say. So he had a disagreement with another student whose culture is more relatively, I would say conservative when it comes to speaking freely, I would say. Not freely, but I would say sharing the talks and being upfront and those kinds of things. So students get a little bit offended by that disagreement because she thought that that was a quite confrontational and quite aggressive message.

(00:06:26):

But I listened to both of side stories and it seems like the other person didn't necessarily understand the problem because that's how they usually interact with each other, right? So again, the different cultural background or norms created that conflict in the online discussion. But in class I try to navigate this process or this conflict by talking to them separately and then try to create the space where they can actually discuss why they are having this conflict. It's not they have this [inaudible 00:07:02] intention towards each other, but more again, this person's behaving this way because it's just simply the norm in their country.

Dhvani Toprani (00:07:11):

Thanks, Tugçe, that was really helpful. It sounds like there were some invisible cultural norms operating in your learning environment. I'm curious to know how all these things impacted you as an instructor while you were teaching.

Tugçe Aldemir (00:07:25):

Yes, certainly. So I want students to talk and discuss things. And, I mean, it's perfectly understandable that everybody has different opinions about things and the theories that occurring require some open-minded approach, right, and also it requires some form of critical lens to things? So I really, really want them to be more critical about things. And some students grasp up very fast.

(00:07:50):

I realized that some students were not challenging me, not just because they didn't understand the topic or maybe they don't necessarily want to think critically about these theories, but probably because it's their cultural norms not to challenge me in the class or not to challenge something, a theory that was published that has been there over, I don't know, decades or maybe less than decade, but is still established in learning sciences. So that created another level of meta thinking like, "Oh, how am I supposed to teach them?"

(00:08:25):

Or not necessarily teaching. It's not wrong or right, but I really want them to think critically about these things because these people are going to be designing learning experiences in the future for diverse groups of learners. So we needed some form of another level of thinking as a group, as a whole class about how to encourage that, that it's okay to challenge people's thoughts and it's okay to discuss this kind of things, of course in a very respectful and constructive manner and it's okay to disagree with each other.

(00:09:01):

So this kind of things require of course another level of teaching. I didn't necessarily have to just teach about content, but also I had to teach, I wouldn't call it teaching, but I would call it more encouraging, prompting people to experience or practice this skillset to challenge ideas in a respectful way, for sure.

Because again, these people are going to be designing learning experiences for diverse groups of learners, and these might require them think more critically about, again, the theories, about the needs, or the goals and so forth.

Dhvani Toprani (00:09:41):

So, Tugçe, as a young instructor, what do you hope to learn from our panel in order to manage these differences in a constructive way?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:09:49):

I think I would really love to learn more about others' experiences in terms of what they did in such context or such conflicts and how they again facilitate the whole process in a way that students over time felt more comfortable like, again, challenging each other, challenging teacher, the authority, the authority of literature, right? Because again, I want really my students to be critical about even the things that I say because I'm a human being. I can say something wrong and I would rather them challenge me on that perspectives.

(00:10:21):

And also, I have my own worldview of things and then my worldview of things shape my experiences, cultural background and everything. So that's why I think learning about others' experiences... Because these are things I feel like more tested knowledge that you gain through experiences, right? So that's why more senior instructors like what they did. I'm sure they face similar experiences because I think classrooms are getting more and more diverse in context, especially in the United States, people coming from different backgrounds, cultures and everything. So I would love to learn how they facilitate those kinds of conflict, I think interesting for me and very good for me to learn more about.

Dhvani Toprani (00:11:04):

Those were so many different layers of invisible cultural aspects within your learning environment that you shared with us. Thank you so much for doing that.

(00:11:11):

So, Tugçe, can you tell us more about your own cultural experiences that you bring to the classroom and how those shape you as an instructor?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:11:21):

My culture, I'm from Turkey, so I grew up in a culture where at least while I was attending school, again, teacher was the authority and you need to respect authority and you need to respect the teacher in the class and they're saying the ultimate truth, those kinds of things. And that's why I was just very understanding of the students who are coming from similar cultures.

(00:11:45):

But I've been living in the United States for more I think seven years now. So I can see the differences. I compare more grad class level, I compare. Maybe it's not a fair comparisons, but that was my experience, compare it. And then I realized that's more a open environment, more nobody's the authority in the class perspective. So me living in this country for seven years, I challenged that thought a lot, having an authority in the class.

(00:12:15):

And at first it was a little bit challenging for me to adjust, but now after again seven years, I am actually supporting or encouraging my students to challenge me on my thoughts, on my perspectives. Because I see the potential limitations of having or seeing teachers as the, again, single authority in the class regardless of the grade level, right? And I can see that here by comparing my experiences in this country versus my country. That's why I especially am very intentional about encouraging my students to challenging me and maybe each other in that notion. That's the, I think, one cultural baggage that I bring from Turkey, but I'm trying to challenge that. I've been really working on that and intentional about eliminating that baggage.

Dhvani Toprani (00:13:04):

It's so beautiful. You understand their journey so well because you have walked on the same path at some point yourself.

(00:13:11):

So in order to summarize what we discussed today, Tugçe, it looks like you are trying to manage cultural differences between yourself and your students who are coming from different cultural backgrounds. And you as an international instructor are coming with different cultural experiences. And you're also trying to manage these differences among your students as well to help them learn how experiences from different places, different location, different geographies can look and feel different and one should not judge intentions based on those experiences.

(00:13:48):

So you are really thinking about, how can we design learning experiences to foster and nurture diversity and learn from those differences in our experiences, even when they do not align with our own experiences so that we can become better educators, better designers as we move on to our professional life?

(00:14:09):

Was that a good way to summarize what you are looking for?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:14:12):

Yeah, I think that's a great way to summarize it. Thank you.

Dhvani Toprani (00:14:15):

So thank you so much, Tugçe, for bringing all that knowledge and insights about your learning environment and about diversity to our podcast. We look forward to talking more about this with your panel. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Tugçe Aldemir (00:14:29):

Thank you so much for having me. It was great to talk to you.

Dhvani Toprani (00:14:42):

Welcome to the show, Azul, Lisa, and Nermin. We are so excited to kick off this panel discussion about cultural diversity in learning environments with you all.

(00:14:52):

Let's begin with introductions and while you introduce yourself to our listeners, tell us about a cultural experience unique to your country or family that helps you become an effective teacher or learner.

Azul Bellot (00:15:05):

Hello, my name is Azul Bellot and I am a sophomore here at Elon University. I'm currently a student and a psychology major.

(00:15:13):

As per the question, I think personally in my family, we have a very big awareness of ourselves and others. I know growing up my family practiced many religions and also taught me about different religion awareness. As well as language, Spanish was my first language. So having that identity to know that other languages exist and the importance of those languages is also important.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:15:36):

Hi, everyone. I'm Lisa Wolf-Wendel. I am a faculty member at the University of Kansas and also wear some administrative hats. And I was invited here to talk to you today in part because of my research about faculty issues. But the question is really about my personal background and so I'm going to tell what I hope is a short story that might help answer the question, but also maybe contextualize me a little bit.

(00:16:00):

I grew up in Anchorage Alaska. My family moved there from New York, New York Jewish family moving to Alaska. And when I was growing up, I was the most New York Jewish person in my high school, which if you live in Alaska doesn't mean all that much. I was probably the only New York Jewish person in my high school. But when I went to college, I went back east because I thought that I would find my home and I would find my people and I would fit in.

(00:16:24):

But it turns out that being the most New York Jewish person in Alaska is not the same as being a New York Jewish person in an East Coast university. And I felt very isolated and left out, and my people didn't recognize me as part of their people, which I thought was really interesting. And that led to some interesting questions for myself about my own identity and what that meant and all of those things. And years later, and I contextualize this, that I've been a professor for 30 years, but I still remember going to college and looking for my people and feeling isolated and not sure who I was.

(00:16:56):

And I always think about that as a professor, how do I create a sense of community and belonging and comfort for my students so that they can figure out their own identity? And I am always very conscious of that. It doesn't always fit with every single course I teach, but I am aware through the work I've done that that's really important as an educator.

Nermin Vehabovic (00:17:18):

Thank you for sharing, Lisa, and Azul. And so on a similar note in just about a second, I'll just jump in and start talking about my own background and how that encapsulates my transcultural and cultural experiences that I've navigated my whole life. But before that, my name is Nermin Vehabovic. I'm an assistant professor of education at Elon University.

(00:17:39):

And so to go back to the question about a cultural experience, so just to situate myself within this conversation. So I was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and my family's from there. And then in the early 1990s, in 1992 when the war started, we became refugees. And so we had to cross multiple borders and eventually a year and a half later ended up in Germany. And so when the war officially had

ended, the government policies at the federal level in Germany was that all Bosnian refugees have to return, but we couldn't go back to our hometown because it wasn't safe.

(00:18:13):

And so we applied for refugee resettlement and ended up in the United States. And so to situate that ory, I guess my whole life, I felt I had to cross borders and boundaries and social boundaries, and just like Lisa had talked about, and they brought up issues of identity and belonging and certainly something that I'm still navigating and making sense of, right, where do I belong? What does it take for me to belong? How do I make other people belong? What does that look like in my classroom spaces and community spaces that we engage with and so forth?

Dhvani Toprani (00:18:45):

Wow. I'm just stunned by how many identities are there just now in the room and all the different experiences that we bring with ourselves.

(00:18:55):

So just a follow-up question to that, have you ever found yourself in a space where everyone's bringing their different identities and somewhere your cultural experiences are misunderstood or misinterpreted because of the differences in the room?

Nermin Vehabovic (00:19:09):

So something that I'm thinking about is, I often, and I'll be frank and open here, a lot of the times, the professional spaces that I find myself in are predominantly Anglo white spaces. And so it's always challenging for me how to navigate those spaces. Because when I think of my own identity, I think of myself as a person from Bosnia and I think of my identity as a Bosnian. So I don't really identify with Anglo white culture even though in a lot of these spaces here in the U.S. I guess I present white. And so a lot of people would consider me as a white person, but I still find those Anglo white aspects of culture and identity not something that truly resonates.

(00:19:55):

And so I find myself in meetings and sometimes even when I teach at an institution that's a predominantly white institution, I find myself recognizing that the way that I'm reacting or the way that I'm presenting in this situation is perhaps different or not something that might be expected of the people that I'm interacting with.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:20:18):

Nermin, I really appreciate what you're saying here because I think that I in some ways relate to it and in other ways don't. I mean, so as a Jewish woman, I walk into a room, I have a certain look, and I come from a very privileged, educated background, I've gotten all of the unearned benefits from my various identities, and I recognize that I don't have to tell people that I'm Jewish unless I choose to. In Kansas, it's similar to Alaska, it's not a space with a lot of Jewish folks, but I recognize all the privileges that I have. But I also recognize that my religion and my cultural background does make me different than the norms, the holidays that are celebrated by the campus, what's happening right now in Israel and the Gaza Strip affects me in ways that it doesn't affect most of the folks that I interact with on a daily basis now.

(00:21:14):

I have to navigate that space or people navigate it for me in different kinds of ways. So I'm usually aware that I have a difference and makes me in my identity than other folks around me. I think it partly makes me empathetic to other folks who are from maybe more marginalized identities, even though they might not know it.

Azul Bellot (00:21:36):

I think just bringing in my identity of growing up with multiple religions, being Hispanic as well as being transgender, I've had this fight of being in those spaces like, oh, you're not enough. Your identity isn't enough because you haven't gone through these struggles, because you haven't done these things.

(00:21:53):

And I feel just more specifically in my Hispanic identity, I feel when I do say I'm Hispanic, people assume negative stereotypes. People assume that either I'm from Mexico or Puerto Rico. They have these big categories under this large category, and they place those stereotypes in the identity that aren't true, that do damage to my identity.

(00:22:17):

I know growing up with multiple religions, I would tell my friends, my classmates, I'd be like, "Oh, yeah, no, I know about Buddhism, I know about Christianity, Catholicism." And people would say, "Well, which one do you believe in?" And I would respond and say, "Well, I have different beliefs. And some beliefs are from one religion and others are from others." And a lot of people are very quick to say, "No, you have to belong to one group," or "No, you can't do that. That's not how it works." And I feel, why doesn't that work? It's my belief. I feel I can choose and believe in what I want to and just not fit into this binary or this one individual like a vision of just no, everything has to be one way and if it's not this way, then your identity doesn't exist, your beliefs don't exist. You're not a true Catholic, you're not a true Buddhist. And I guess just oftentimes in these spaces, I struggle to connect with these people. I think, I guess, that, "Oh, they're going to react the same way as other people have reacted."

Dhvani Toprani (00:23:18):

I think we use the first 10 minutes of this podcast to just recreate what our guest speakers' learning environment looks like.

(00:23:25):

So we had a conversation with Dr. Tugçe Aldemir, who is currently an assistant professor at Texas A&M University. And we shared about her own journey as an academician from Turkey, now living in the United States for more than seven years, as a cultural transition for herself. She recently started teaching graduate level courses that help students learn more about learning theories, design of learning environments and research methods within the College of Education. And her students largely tend to be international.

(00:23:57):

Now facilitating these culturally diverse minds to think critically has been a challenge for her. Her own cultural background that prevented her from challenging teachers and authorities in classrooms has encouraged and pushed her to design more equitable learning environments where challenging content and instructor is a norm. However, depending on her learner's cultural background, they all respond very differently to this norm.

(00:24:25):

So my first question going into now Tugçe's context and really any other young international instructor's learning context is, how can we help our learners acknowledge and learn from cultural diversity, and really get our learners to think and engage in learning practices that may contradict their cultural experiences?

Azul Bellot (00:24:47):

I would like to start this off with just my personal experience at my institute here at Elon. I know my freshman year, one of my professors asked us to do this as an intersectionality, I believe, and just talk about just what our knowledge is and then just do a little bubble map where we draw lines of what we think our identities are. And then just going more off that, I feel that's a good way for the professors to just see visually where their students are in their identity, and then just talk about more topics.

(00:25:18):

I know for instance, in this class talking about our identities, and I mentioned about how I came from a low income class. I know I had a conversation with some students and they didn't think your social economics class actually played a role in your identity. And I just brought to their attention, well, there's certain things that I am not fortunate to have, whereas you maybe don't think twice, don't really pay attention to that because it's something that's already given and you don't worry or necessarily have that issue. So I feel starting off with that and then just from there, opening up students or learners perspective on just all these things make up you, how does that impact your learning?

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:25:57):

Dhvani's question was partly about teaching graduate students, but I want to say that obviously your professor mirrors things that I do in my graduate classes.

(00:26:07):

So if I'm going to get people to critique theories, which is ultimately my goal and potentially a good graduate class, I want them to not just know the theory, but I want them to be able to critique it and understand it and also eventually apply it, I actually have to start, I think, as an educator with getting people to feel comfortable with one another, getting people to get to know each other. We can't look at each other and, we can, we do look at each other and make a bunch of assumptions about people's backgrounds and identities that probably are inaccurate, right? Because we are using heuristics that are stereotyping people, and that's a normal way of functioning. I'm not critiquing that.

(00:26:47):

But in order to go past that, we have to create environments where people can feel comfortable with each other. And the way people can feel comfortable with each other is they get to know each other. And part of the way they get to know each other is to understand their intersectionality, understand the ways that who they are as humans, where they come from, where their families come from, the languages they speak, the socioeconomic status backgrounds, their gender identity, their racial identity, whatever it is that makes up who that person is and whatever issue salient.

(00:27:20):

So in this context, for example, it's not really salient that I'm also a mother. In other contexts, it's a very salient part of my identity. But in the context of a class for people to talk about who they are, how they come from, to get people to feel comfortable with each other, to get people to move beyond stereotypes, that is a way to build on that to then get into deeper conversations and deeper levels of thinking.

(00:27:46):

But you got to scaffold it. You can't just jump into, how do we apply this theory? You have to create a classroom environment that gives people a space that... I'm not a big person that believes in safe spaces, but I'm a person that believes in brave spaces. So to create an opportunity for people, and there's an article that I can share with you about this, but to create a space where people can be brave. And part of that is I think first establishing some safety and getting to know people.

Nermin Vehabovic (00:28:18):

Yeah. So I really appreciate what you said, Lisa, and also what Azul said. And so on that note, something that I'm thinking about, the phrase that came to mind is, learning with and from.

(00:28:27):

And so when I think of my teaching and the kind of educator that I want to be when I'm in the classroom, but also when I'm in the community, is this idea of learning within and from. And so the way that I'm thinking about that is, rather than the teacher being two steps above the student when we're able to have community spaces, so check-ins when... In classrooms, I tell my students like, "If you are comfortable, I encourage you to call me by my first name instead of Dr. Vehabovic," right? Because I think the formality in educational spaces, I think it's a barrier to being in community, to being listening to each other, truly having brave spaces, right? And so I think we can get into it later, but I think this notion of learning with and from, to me, it's connected to broader scholarship on care, also on scholarship around this notion of freedom of education and spaces and places serving as spaces where we can be free and dream.

(00:29:30):

So it's connected to a lot of the work that I pull from is situated by Bettina Love in this notion of freedom of disrupting traditional structures that are oppressive. And so that's what I pull from to inform my thinking.

Dhvani Toprani (00:29:45):

It's so beautiful to see each one of you talk about some kind of disruption and discomfort in this process of building brave cultural spaces for ourselves and for our learners.

(00:29:55):

So from your own experiences, how have you managed conflicts that have emerged from these cultural misunderstandings within your learning environment?

Nermin Vehabovic (00:30:04):

Earlier we talked about learning with and from and different framings and what that might look like in different places and spaces. And so I'm thinking about this notion that our classroom spaces and also our community spaces can serve as opportunities where we honor our students' experiences and also the different knowledges that they bring to the table. And so that's something at the forefront.

Azul Bellot (00:30:28):

I know you mentioned how you create these spaces to honor students, but I know through the students' perspective, or at least what I've heard from other students, I know oftentimes they get this clear view, either that's political, religious, et cetera, from the professor. And I know that I've talked to some

students who say that they purposely when writing papers for that class that they purposely make their views of the professor's views just that they can get a better grade.

(00:30:56):

And I feel, how can we, students and also as professors change that and make a space where having different points of views or different perspectives is good? Just because I thought that was very interesting. Because I personally didn't think about that, but I know other students have done that. And I just want to ask you guys that question.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:31:15):

I think it's very difficult to... I mean, I don't know. I hope people don't write to what they think I want to hear. I try to create opportunities for people to... I do this in the way I do readings, for example. So when I create readings for a class, I might have pick an original theorist, and then I might have a critique from this angle and a critique from that angle and a critique from another one. So that in the readings and in the things that I'm selecting as a professor, it's clear that there are multiple ways of looking at something, there isn't a right way or a wrong way.

(00:31:48):

And partly what I'm trying to do as a professor is get students to move from thinking that there is a yes, no, right, wrong answer, which is how we're taught in a K-12 space. Take the test, take this multiple choice. We overtrain people to think that there is an answer, and that developmentally, one of the things that we know from a cognitive development stance is that a more mature thinker or in a more advanced way of thinking cognitively is to understand, to recognize that in fact, there isn't a yes or no answer. That in fact there are multiple answers and there's a lot of gray.

(00:32:22):

The next developmental step beyond that though is actually then to be able to marshal evidence to say, "Well, there's a lot of gray and there isn't an answer. In this case, there might be a best answer. And this is the evidence that I would use to suggest that." So as from an academic perspective, I want to get people to move away from there's a yes, no. I want them actually to move away from that well, any answer is equally good to this is the answer that I think, and be able to marshal evidence to back that up. That's really what I'm hoping for.

(00:32:54):

So you can come at something with any belief that you want, as long as you are explaining how you got there, why you got there and it's not just, I was taught this. Think about the way your courses, your history class was probably taught in your high school compared to the way a history class is taught now at your university. My guess is it's less about facts and figures and memorizing things and more about the nuances and cultural differences of history, right? You're like, "I didn't know that history existed."

(00:33:25):

But I remember when I was in college, I mean, I thought I was really good at history. I took a course called Women in the French Revolution. It was my freshman year history class, and that class literally blew my mind because all I knew about the French Revolution was what the generals and the war and the treaties and the pacts were. I didn't know all of the things that were happening culturally in France, the way women helped lead the movement, because I hadn't read the history of women. And when I learned that there was this whole history I hadn't been told, then chances are good there are about a thousand histories I haven't been told, right? And so that kind of class showed me both that there is gray, but also that there are different ways of using evidence to understand something in different ways.

Nermin Vehabovic (00:34:16):

Lisa, I really appreciate your comments about this idea that there's not a yes or no answer. And so just really quickly, I just want to add on that note. So something that I do in my own classes is ungrading. Yeah. And so I do it at the undergraduate level, but also the graduate level.

(00:34:32):

And so initially, every semester there's always resistance. And so at mid-semester, I share a survey with all my students. And so, one of the questions on that survey is, "How was your initial reaction to this idea that we are doing ungrading?" And to me, within that space, what that means is at the end of the semester, the university requires that I provide a, A, B, C, right, type of grade? But the way that I can approach it with my students is, yes, you'll get the A, but the focus is on feedback. And so that requires ownership on your end to submit it, turn it in the first place, right? Because if it's missing, you'll not get it complete, but if it's there and if you're engaging with the assignment, and so you get feedback. And so sometimes that feedback is like, "Oh, have you thought about this? Have you thought about that?" And that requires a student to go back to it and continue unpacking, right?

(00:35:28):

So it's not a linear process like, my professor says I have to do X, Y, and Z, I do it, I turn it in. If I say it the way that I think they want me to say it, I'll get an A, right? So it disrupts that.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:35:41):

I use ungrading too, particularly for graduate classes. I will send you the link to a good book about ungrading. But part of it is, right, so again, this is a graduate student thing more so than an undergraduate? But, Azul, when you're in an undergraduate class and you hand in a paper, you never have to think about it again. Chances are good, like, "I'm done." But with graduate work, one of the things we want people to do is to think about writing as being iterative, right? Dhvani, this goes back to the original question, how do you in a graduate class get people to be critical thinkers or to question ideas, et cetera? Well, part of that is that a paper isn't done until it's done, right? So you write a paper and then I give you feedback. I haven't even given you a grade on it. I like, "Think about this, what about this," blah, blah, blah. Then you revise it, and then they hand it in and I give them feedback again, and then they handed it in.

(00:36:27):

Now, ultimately, there's a grade at the end, of course. I mean, we live in a system where you do get grades for things, although when you get to it, you're a graduate student and you're writing a dissertation, there isn't a grade for it, right? But thinking about writing as an iterative process can go a long way in getting people to think deeper about things, provide evidence to things, think about how their own background and identities, their positionality influences what they're writing, et cetera, all of those things gives you that opportunity because it's not a one draft wonder. Any writing that's a one draft wonder, it's going to be okay if you're a good writer to start with. But that's not how most of us who are professional writers, which is what I would call many academics, if research is part of their gig, right, that's not how we write? So we're trying to teach students how to get beyond the one draft wonder and think critically. So ungrading, does that.

Azul Bellot (00:37:22):

Just the question with the ungrading, when you guys do this and you do give out the feedback, do you give out a grade when you give out the feedback or just feedback? I think I had the same experience in one of my classes in my freshman year where it was ungrading, and then towards the end for our final,

we would have to argue our grade to see what we did in the class. And I personally struggled because I was very much grade focused and growing up in an environment which was just grade focused, I was like, "Oh, if I don't have a grade, I don't have to do it. I don't have to worry about it." And I often pushed it aside. And it got to the point where I was halfway through the semester and I was failing because I wasn't doing the work, and I was just like, "I don't know why I'm not doing it. I don't know if it's because I'm busy." I didn't have the motivation to do the work because I was so centrally grade focused.

(00:38:11):

So how as professors, how do you guys combat that? Or what are some ways you guys may combat that?

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:38:18):

So, Azul, I think it's a great question. I think it's our responsibility to socialize people to understand how this operates, and it is super hard.

(00:38:28):

I'm going to give you an example. I did say that I was a parent, so I have a daughter who is a senior in college. She was really upset one day. She calls me and she says, "Mom, I got this paper and the professor gave me all of this feedback and they didn't give me a grade on it, and I don't understand, and I must've done a horrible job," and blah, blah.

(00:38:48):

And she shared the paper with me and I said, "Oh, look, he said you did a good job on this," and blah, blah, blah, "And you should allow..." And she said, "I don't like this. I don't want this feedback. I just want the grade." And I was like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. This professor took a lot of time and energy to help you be a better thinker and a better writer." And she was so upset and I said, "This is what I do." And she said "You're a mean professor, mom. If that's what you do to your students, you're mean." And I said, "I'm not mean, that's love. But that feedback that I'm giving is time and energy and love." I said, "I didn't know people would hear it the way you're hearing it."

(00:39:23):

It was super interesting, super important for me as a faculty member. Because I thought I was giving care and love and belonging, and she thought I or her other professor were being mean. And so her perspective of it was very helpful to me. So one, I helped her put her comments from her professor into perspective and calmed her down. And it turns out she was doing great in the class.

(00:39:46):

I made her go to the office hours, which is something I tell all students to do, "Go to office hours." Anyway. She's like, "But I'm not struggling." Go to office hours. Get to know your professors.

(00:39:55):

Also, I decided that I needed to do a better job of telling my students what my philosophy of grading was, what ungrading meant, not making them guess what I intended when I wrote all over their paper. I'm intending to be helpful, but I have to make sure that my students know that because my daughter's example was a really good one. All of my intent was being lost. I was the mean professor. It wasn't my goal. So I do things a little differently now.

Dhvani Toprani (00:40:24):

A lot of what I hear each one of you talking here is collaboration, working with your students, making your intention clearer than your action. And I guess that's what brings us closer culturally to understand each other and to hear each other.

(00:40:39):

So what I'm curious to know more from all of you is, we are doing and we are expecting our learners to do a lot of difficult work, sometimes emotionally difficult as well. So how do we take care of ourselves and simultaneously also support our learners in this process? So while we are engaging in this complex work, we don't lose ourselves, we experience less frustration, and then we can empathize with each other of why the faculty member is doing what they're doing, why the learner is doing what they're doing, and don't end up calling each other evil.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:41:13):

Well, if you'll let me for a minute to go a little theoretical, I promise to come back to earth. So one of the things that I think is important, and I'm curious to hear Azul's thoughts about this, well, actually all of your thoughts about this, but I don't think that students understand and maybe even our graduate students understand what the work expectations are of faculty members. And I don't often think that faculty members understand what the work expectations are as faculty members. So Nermin and I work at different kinds of institutions, so we have slightly different expectations, right?

(00:41:46):

But at a research university like the University of Kansas, what they say is that 40% of our job is teaching, which includes advising, 40% of our job is doing research and publishing, and 20% of our jobs is service. And service can be any number of things. It can be being on a podcast, right, or it could be doing things for your department, doing admissions, doing recruitment for your department? It could be things for the school, it could be something for your field. Service actually takes up a lot more time than 20%, but it's not valued very highly in the calculus.

(00:42:20):

But I think we don't often talk about all the ways that those, teaching, research and service reinforce each other. The students might think, "Oh, a faculty member is only 40% teaching. They don't care about me as a student." But I think of my research as helping me be a better professor. I see those things as integrated, or as intersectional maybe, not as separate things.

(00:42:43):

But I think the other piece of this that I would add is that in the academy, in an academic position, and particularly for a tenure track academic position, we have what's called ideal worker norms, where there's this expectation that comes back from the history of being a tenure track faculty member, but that you're married to your work, that your work is everything that you do, and that somehow you have someone at home taking care of children or cooking food or doing all of these other things so that you can be 100% dedicated to your job.

(00:43:16):

And I think that as tenure positions become more scarce and they're replaced by non-tenure track positions, adjunct positions, teaching positions, I think that has amped up the ideal worker norms and the expectations and all of those things. And I think that it's really important, one, for our students to know those pressures that we're under, but also what our work is about. And I also think it's important to push back from that. Because I think that someone who lives a fulfilled life, someone who has work

outside of life, someone who integrates their teaching, research and service with fulfilling life outside of work is a better professor.

(00:43:59):

So I think being a mom makes me a better professor. Having my hobbies makes me a better professor. Being out in the community and doing service in the community, whether it counts or not, makes me a better professor. So some of it's being talking about my kids, talking about my life outside of work, making my students understand that I care about them and they're a very important part, but they're a piece of this larger puzzle of who I am as a human. And I think it's part of us teaching professors to understand that as well, right?

Nermin Vehabovic (00:44:31):

Yeah. So I really appreciate everything that you said, Lisa. And I can offer a slightly different perspective.

(00:44:36):

So the institution that I'm currently serving as a professor at is a teaching university, right? And so it's ranked number one in undergraduate teaching, and it's also supposed to be this relationship rich experience or various experiences for students, right? And so going back to your point that students don't entirely understand everything that is on my plate as an assistant professor, I think that definitely resonates with me because yes, teaching is number one, but also students don't see that research is also important. And so, when we get evaluated and when we're up for a tenure and promotion, it matters how much you published. And even though that there is not a specific number, but it matters that if you go up with very few publications, then you jeopardize being promoted and tenured at that institution.

(00:45:28):

And so students don't know that. And so sometimes when I get text messages from my students, like, "Oh, hey," a semester after they've been in my class, like, "Hey, do you remember that citation? What is it?" And so I respond, but I think, "Wow, perhaps they don't truly understand how much is on our plate." And so I think that connects with, it's important for us to think about what are our hobbies and are we living fulfilled lives? Because if you feel you're being a productive member of society, and if you're able to cultivate joy and if you feel you have time to sit down with a friend and catch up over coffee and just gossip, that makes you a better person because you'll go into that classroom more fulfilled, right, rather than thinking, "Oh, this is everything I have to do for my portfolio when I go up for whatever," right?

(00:46:20):

And so on my syllabus, I just make sure that I include... so it's structured as questions like, "What are we learning in this class, what...," right? And so one question is, "What does my professor do?" Well, first, one question is, "Who is my professor and how are they qualified for this class?" But then the second one is, "What does my professor do to live a fulfilled life?" And so I make sure I include a picture of my cat that I recently adopted. I make sure that to say that I enjoy cooking and hiking and spending time with family and friends, right? And so I think that's important to center in this conversation.

Azul Bellot (00:46:56):

I think it's important for professors and students to just talk about their lives outside of campus as well as just any involvements at the institutes, just so that students can get the perspective of, oh, my professor is actually a lot busier than I thought.

(00:47:10):

I know here at Elon specifically, we have a Take a Student to Lunch program, which as a student I use a lot, and I use that as a form for me to build that relationship between the professor and the student and then just talk about things that aren't necessarily school focused. Because oftentimes when we're on campus, we just only think about school.

(00:47:33):

I know for other of my classes, sometimes we leave the classroom and go for a walk or go outside in nature just to get out of the mindset of just like, "Oh, I'm only here for school. I have to do this amount of worksheets, and then I have to go on with my life," to just build that more aspect of, oh, I'm a person, you're a person, we can go outside, we can still do homework, we can still do class outside, it doesn't necessarily have to be centrally focused in the classroom. And then that just gives students a sense of, oh, my professor actually is a person. They're not just my professor. They are actually doing these amounts of activities that I didn't even know about had I not asked them, had I not questioned that?

Dhvani Toprani (00:48:15):

So we peel so many layers of learning learners in education, and I cannot appreciate all of your ideas and thoughts enough. Thank you, everyone, for being yourself, being vulnerable and sharing all the experiences that makes you culturally grounded individuals. I think that's exactly what we needed. That's exactly what our guest speaker needed here. So thank you so much. I have great ideas to share with Tugçe and I look forward to that. Thank you, everyone, for joining the show.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:48:44):

Thanks for having us.

Azul Bellot (00:48:45):

Thank you for having us.

Nermin Vehabovic (00:48:46):

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Lisa Wolf-Wendel (00:48:49):

It was fun getting to know you as well, and Nermin.

Dhvani Toprani (00:48:58):

Welcome back to the show, Tugçe.

Tugçe Aldemir (00:49:00):

Thank you so much, Dhvani. It's great to be here.

Dhvani Toprani (00:49:02):

We had a great conversation about your learning environment with our panel. Given the topic, I think it's important that I introduce our panel professionally and culturally to our listeners.

(00:49:11):

We had Azul Bellot, who is a psychology major and center for engaged learning, students scholar at Elon University. They identify as transgender, Hispanic, and grew up practicing multiple religions.

(00:49:23):

Our second panelist was Nermin Vehabovic, Assistant Professor of Education, Elon University. He shared his experiences as someone born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and navigating cultural realities in the U.S. after taking refuge in different countries during the war.

(00:49:40):

Our third panelist was Lisa Wolf-Wendel, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies in the School of Education and Human Sciences from the University of Kansas. She introduced herself as one of the few New York Jewish people growing up in Alaska and then moving back to the East Coast with blended cultural identities.

(00:49:59):

With a panel like that, we unpacked intricate personal narratives and learning philosophies around creating culturally brave spaces for engaging learners and helping them embrace their and others identities as learning opportunities. The panel wants us to think about identities as visible and invisible, where both facilitate communication and empathy among our learners, and hence articulating them is really important.

(00:50:26):

So the first learning philosophy that they shared was to build a sense of community among our learners where they feel comfortable revealing different aspects of their identity. Nermin presented the idea of learning with and from the community as a whole and breaking down the traditional hierarchical notion of the learner instructor roles. He does this by encouraging his students to call him by his first name. Lisa added being vulnerable and fallible as an instructor also helps in building this equitable learning space. And Azul suggested using identity maps in the beginning of the course to reveal intersectionality of everyone's identity.

(00:51:05):

The next learning philosophy that they talked about was the need to get learners away from thinking that there is a right and wrong answer and that there is nuance and ideas supported by evidence. This of course can't happen until the brave space is created. Azul said, in situations that disrupt normal learning environments, learners often mirror instructors beliefs and perspectives to get a good grade Agreeing with Azul's observation, Nermin and Lisa recommended using iterative assessment and ungrading to disrupt this kind of limited perspective building. Lisa also selects her course readings that present contradicting perspectives to emphasize exploring perspective rather than believing in one perspective. What they underlined in this process was also the need to communicate this learning philosophy to the students so they don't feel lost and can trust the process.

(00:51:55):

Finally, and I think we all can learn from this last point, we have to take care of ourselves as individuals while we are doing the hard complex work of teaching and supporting diverse learners, allowing your students to see you as a human by sharing some aspects of your professional life and personal identities may facilitate empathy and understanding.

(00:52:15):

Lisa talked a bit about how the role of teaching faculty has changed over time and how being a complete person outside her job actually makes her a better professor.

(00:52:25):

All panelists recognize that this work is time-consuming and depends on the class size and other factors, but doing something in this general direction is what they recommended.

(00:52:36):

They also urged institutions to keep this idea in the forefront while scaling up first year classes. When the class sizes are increased without increasing the number of faculty and staff members, we run the risk of losing relationship rich learning environments that are fundamental in supporting culturally diverse learners.

(00:52:54):

So the panel presented a micro and macro level perspective in managing diverse cultural identities in learning spaces. Did any of these strategies to nurture brave spaces resonate with your teaching philosophy, Tugçe?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:53:08):

Oh, thanks so much, Dhvani. I think these are great, great perspectives, and all of them I think captured to some extent to my teaching philosophies, right? For example, just to give you an idea, the last statement about building relationship with students, I think that's one of the basis of my teaching philosophy. Even currently, I'm trying my best to build relationship because I see this, not as a postdoc maybe while I was teaching back at Penn, but right now, as an assistant professor, I guess there's this hierarchical barrier, I guess, between students and you, and I didn't realize that before coming here, and that's something I'm not judging it or I'm not criticizing it, but that's there, right? It's just culturally or it is just this traditional roles of teacher versus students' notion.

(00:53:53):

I think I realized that here while I was doing postdoc, I try my best to build relationship with my students. That's why I thought that they were comfortable with coming to me and describing their problems with other classmates or when they have an issue. There were still a couple of students reaching out to me still saying that, "Hey," they started this PhD program, so they're happy. So I believe I try my best in terms of building that kind of relationship, and I'm currently trying that as well.

(00:54:21):

But I'm also feeling the power dynamics, which is very interesting because again, as a postdoc, I didn't see that maybe because of as a postdoc, people don't necessarily consider you as a professor. Or I don't know. That's perfect fine. I love the idea of horizontalized power dynamics, but right now I feel that I can't totally not see, but feel the power dynamics there, right? I'm trying my best to make sure that students are seeing me as a relatively more senior peer than a professor or an authority figure in the class, which is not easy because again, the traditional roles, like the long history of things.

(00:55:00):

But yeah, I'm trying in terms of, I am asking them. Some of the strategies you listed, I think they are great strategies by the amazing books that you listed asking them, "Call me with my first name rather than Dr. Aldemir," and that's perfect fine, if they are comfortable with that too. Because some folks are, because of their background, they literally feel more comfortable putting that barrier between you and themselves, and I'm perfect fine with it. Whatever that they're comfortable with, that's perfect fine with me.

(00:55:29):

And I have a couple of students also who come to me and I share their concerns, not necessarily about this course or other courses as well. And I like it because that means that I was able to develop some form of relationship.

Dhvani Toprani (00:55:44):

I'm curious, Tugçe, you mentioned that you don't feel great about being criticized, but you still encourage constructive criticism. How do you express your feeling about the criticisms that they give you?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:55:58):

Great question. So I guess as a human being, we just don't like the idea, or maybe it's just me or maybe just as a human being, it's just people don't like the idea of being criticized. Then you put too much effort into creating something, delivering something, right? But then, when they criticize me, I realized that even though I do my best to again, to break the barrier, I feel I'm a senior peer, but that may not necessarily reflect the same on the students, right?

(00:56:25):

So what happens is that I don't realize how I deliver things or how I create things do not necessarily translate to students in the same way that I talk or translate. So that is a very interesting perspective. I approach that as a very user experience design, right? It's just, you never know whether your design works or not until you just work with the user themselves. So exactly the same. This is why I really love the idea of them criticizing me because I don't see their perspective I realize even though I consider myself a long-term learner. Is like, I've been a student for a very long time, but still I observe that that's not something that I observe because they have differences, and that's exactly very normal. They're very perfect fine. And then, even though I'm like, "Ha, I worked so hard on this," but I'm just realizing, well, they're right. Obviously this is not working.

Dhvani Toprani (00:57:21):

I think welcoming criticism is definitely one way to break down that power dynamics that you were talking about earlier.

(00:57:28):

But how do you present yourself as vulnerable and fallible to your students when you're trying to understand them and you're also trying to model what you expect from them? How do you present yourself as being vulnerable?

Tugçe Aldemir (00:57:40):

Yeah, that's a great question. So I think I frankly leverage me being English as second language speaker. And how I do that is that... And I still don't know many things about, for example, in Texas, that was a little bit different in Philadelphia, when I was a postdoc teaching, because all of my students were international, so that card didn't work with them, of course. But here, I think that card work very well because all of my students are native English speakers. Some of them, very few of them are Spanish speakers as well, but still all of them speak English as their mother tongue.

(00:58:15):

So I ask them a lot of questions saying that, "Guys, I have no idea what this is about. Can you answer? Can you help me with that?" There are some vocabularies just popping up, I just ask, "Hey guys, I don't know what it means. Can you just clarify that for me?" Or, if there's something about specific texts, I ask

them, "Hey guys, I have no idea about what this is about. Can you clarify it?" Or pronunciations, oh my gosh, I ask too many questions about pronunciation. I'm teaching, right? I'm lecturing something, and then there's some vocabularies that I find it really hard to pronounce. When that happens usually, I don't really... might, I just literally say it's this, and then just tell people that, "Hey, this is my accent." But here what I do is that, "Hey guys, can you help me pronounce this word?" And I feel they like it. They like it that they can teach me something.

(00:59:02):

Sometimes they ask me questions about how do you feel about being Texas versus Pennsylvania? And I'm just explaining that Turkish culture... I'm from Turkey by the way. They ask me how is it like to be in Texas? And I'm telling them Turkish people are very community-based people. So I feel Texas is similar to that. So I really feel at home.

Dhvani Toprani (00:59:21):

That's such a great way to break down those barriers, Tugçe.

(00:59:24):

This has been a great cultural journey for me and for our listeners, I'm sure. So thank you so much for bringing this wonderful conversation to our podcast. We really enjoyed having you and your learning environment here.

Tugçe Aldemir (00:59:36):

Great to be here. Thanks so much for inviting me, and thank you so much for having those conversations with those amazing panelists. I'm learning a lot. I mean, again, new faculty, I'm learning a lot. Thanks so much for having me.

Matt Wittstein (00:59:55):

Limed: Teaching with a Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, Associate Professor of Exercise Science at Elon University.

(01:00:01):

Dhvani Toprani is Elon University's assistant director of learning design and support, and serves as a producer for the show.

(01:00:09):

Jeremiah Timberlake is a class of 2024, computer science and music in the liberal arts double major at Elon University and summer 2023 intern for Limed.

(01:00:18):

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

(01:00:26):

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

(01:00:42):

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