Limed: Teaching with a Twist
Season 2, Episode 7 – Designing an Interdisciplinary Capstone, Part 1: Faculty Perspectives

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

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

(00:22):

This episode, we decided to try a slightly different format by splitting it into two parts. This month you'll hear faculty perspectives from Janet Bean and Drew Pearl, contributors to the book Cultivating Capstones: Designing High Quality Culminating Experiences for Student Learning, about prepping a brand new interdisciplinary minors Capstone Course. Lina Kuhn and Kai Swanson have just had their global film and cultures minor approved and will be teaching its capstone for the first time next spring, and are looking for ways to innovate through co-creation with students that honors the interdisciplinarity of their program. Next month we'll share our episode featuring student perspectives on the global film capstone. Get your popcorn ready and enjoy the show. I'm Matt Wittstein.

Hi Lina. Hi Kai. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. To introduce yourselves to our audience, we're going to be talking about global films. So I want to know in addition to name and what you do, what film, what global film do you recommend that every single one of our podcast listeners goes out and watches after they listen to this podcast?

Lina Kuhn (01:32):

Hi, I am Lina. I'm a lecturer in the English department at Elon, and my kind of area of expertise is science and the humanities and the horror genre. So for my favorite global film that I think everyone should watch, I'm going to have to pick a horror film. So I'll say Nosferatu from 1922, which is just a classic black and white horror, but also a really good example of German expressionism and just so influential on all the horror that comes after. Definitely a great one if you haven't seen it yet, I'd have to agree with that.

Kai Swanson (02:15):

Hello, I'm Kai Swanson. I'm an assistant professor in Cinema Intelligent Arts at Elon University and I teach an array of things, but mainly what I teach is comedy writing, comedy production and TV production along with that narrative aesthetics. And so a lot of what I think about is the subtext behind films.

(02:34):

I'm also a filmmaker, I'm an independent filmmaker, producer and writer, and so I like films that are not afraid to get into uncomfortable topics in order to shed light on what's actually happening in society. And so a recent film that I saw that just got wide release and also it is up for best picture in the 2024 Oscar race is Jonathan Glazer's Zone of Interest. I legitimately think it's the greatest film I've ever seen and I think it's very timely and important. It has to do with the Holocaust and it is a very different perspective on the Holocaust and I've never seen a film quite like it before, but I really strongly suggest it to all of the listeners.

Matt Wittstein (03:11):

Well, I'm excited to add those to my watch list after this. So I know you both have worked on developing a global films minor here at Elon University and you're in the stages of thinking about that capstone experience. But before we get there, can you tell us a little bit about the minor and the process and the state that you're in with that minor?

Lina Kuhn (03:30):

Yes, so we are fully approved, which is very exciting. We're just waiting to get all of the classes and the description added to the academic catalog so that students and faculty can both see it. But right now we're working on the website to help market the program and we're thinking about events that we want to put on to better market the program. But along with that, we are going to be running the capstone course for the first time next spring and we really want to make sure that it is a robust course. So we're really hoping to get feedback on really anything because it is an interdisciplinary program. It is between the department of English and the Department of Cinema and Television Arts, which English is in arts and sciences and Cinema and Television Arts is with the School of Communications. We're hoping to have students from different interdisciplinary backgrounds and we want to make sure that they take everything that they've learned across all of the courses that they've taken with the minor and they're able to pull together a capstone project but also support each other with their final capstone projects.

Kai Swanson (04:38):

And I'll give a bit of background about the minor. So it's the Global Film and Cultures minor, and the thought behind it is that we'll have students from all across the university and we've pulled classes from all across the university that will count. So students will take an intro class and then three electives and the electives will be in the areas of global film history, global film industries and global film theory and interpretation. And so students will take one class within each of those tracks and that interdisciplinary nature of the minor, the fact that we have students coming from all kinds of different disciplinary backgrounds and that they are taking all kinds of different electives when they come into the capstone class really is what we're hoping to focus on today and thinking about how to make the best capstone class when it is that interdisciplinary just by the nature of the minor and the students in the minor.

Matt Wittstein (05:44):

I really appreciate that context and sort that breadth of the elective fitting into different categories. Can you tell us just a little bit more of what fits into each of these categories? So I think history of film kind of makes sense, but I'm not sure I know as much about your sort of industry and interpretation categories, but for our audience, what types of courses fit into each of those categories?

Lina Kuhn (06:06):

I can speak to the industries. Something I don't think I really have a formal education in, but I always wanted an education in is how industries marketing PR money really actually impacts what films get made, what films don't get made and how films get made. Because a film with a hundred thousand dollars budget is very different than a film with a hundred million dollar budget. So I think really pointing to students understanding that is vitally important. We have a number of courses. One of the courses happens to be my Hollywood Sundance study, USA course because it is an industry analysis course. Another one is the entertainment business course In the school of communications we're also opening up to all across campus, so we're hoping to get a business course, an economics course, world Languages and Cultures course because I think there are a lot of classes across campus that are doing a form of industry analysis. And so I mean it can be really any type of topic, something that goes into Marxist theory because that's looking at cultural industries and cultural reproduction, which is a major part of the film industry. I think that kind of covers industries.

Kai Swanson (07:19):

So for theory and interpretation, the way we're thinking about that is not on the side of people who are making the film, but once the film has been created, how then do we theorize it and talk about it? So for example, in the English department, we have a class called Literature on Screen. It's taught by one of the co-founders of the minor Dan Burns, and that class is looking at film adaptations of literature. So that would be one avenue to study. Film would be thinking about adaptations and how adaptations work. The history side, again, we're hoping will be across campus including from foreign languages. We have an Italian cinema course on the books right now that will count. We have a couple political science courses that will count that are kind of looking across a political history at a certain avenue of film. So yeah, really hoping to get courses that go in lots of different directions

Lina Kuhn (08:21):

And with the interdisciplinarity of the minor, it's open to anybody who is any major. We just want students to see the intersection of how film and media has impacted a lot of different cultures and a lot of different societies and able to see that, hey, if you have this film education, if you understand the history, the theory and industries behind films, you have a future in filmmaking or promotion of films in being a film scholar, of being a writer, a reviewer. I mean, I know for myself and I know for the other leaders of the minor, I just want students to see how much you can do with an education in film.

Matt Wittstein (09:04):

I especially appreciate that it's really open to every student from sort of any discipline. And I can see how someone who might not be in English or cinema and television arts might be really fascinated by this topic and then realize they're also getting the knowledge and skills to potentially go into that industry because of the context that this minor might provide. So I think that's super cool. The purpose of our podcast today is to think about that capstone experience. It sounds like you have sort of a bookend model for your course, you have an intro course, you have a capstone course on the other end and some electives in the middle. Where are you in developing that capstone course?

Kai Swanson (09:45):

So the capstone course, we have a sample syllabus that we submitted when we submitted the course for approval to the curriculum council. And the way we've set it up is actually really, really open. So we're really hoping the capstone will be a co-created class where we have a syllabus that is just the bare outlines of an idea of what we might do week to week, but we want the students to fill it in. And again, because of that interdisciplinary aspect and the fact that we want to have final projects that are tailored to the students, it's not set in stone certainly. And we've got a general idea of where we'll go with the capstone, but lots of room for changing things around.

Lina Kuhn (10:32):

I'm in line to teach it next spring, which I am extremely excited about because of the number of opportunities that students have when it comes to a culminating class and the types of projects they can do. And we have a list of all of these different types of final capstone projects that they can do. We really keep it open, and I know if a student comes to me as part of their final capstone projects, instead of writing a formal film paper or writing a screenplay or making a film, if they were like, Hey, I want to do a university-wide global film screening, what an incredible opportunity. And absolutely there's so much work goes into something like that. It's just a really fantastic opportunity for students to make any type of project they're interested in and pulling together everything they've learned from the previous classes while also pulling in their own self-interests.

Matt Wittstein (11:18):

In your process of developing this, what are some of the concerns you have moving forward?

Kai Swanson (11:25):

One thing that we were thinking about with this capstone, there are a lot of strengths that come from it being interdisciplinary, but there are potential for some difficulties with that as well. And capstones there partially about integration of all of the knowledge that they've already accumulated over their time at the university. And then part of it we're hoping will be about transition to what comes next. So yeah, one of the difficulties would be how do we ensure that students who have been taking electives all across the university still have kind of a base understanding of the three areas that we want them to have. And then pedagogically as well, if they all come in with different disciplinary backgrounds and then they want to do different things moving forward and they're creating all these different projects that Kai was describing, how can we as the instructors best teach to all of those different disciplines and how can we make sure that the students have the best input and advice as they are working on these projects?

Lina Kuhn (12:33):

Something that I think a lot about is class culture, specifically when students are at this place where they're in a capstone course and they're thinking about their professional development beyond Elon University and looking forward, and oftentimes students, which I love because they're invested in their work, but they think, oh, making a film is significantly more important than putting on a university wide screening. And they don't give the best type of advice to each other or they don't find the importance in each other's work. So a top priority for me to establish when I'm teaching my first capstone course, but I really hope anybody who teaches the capstone course takes into consideration is that every single discipline, every single capstone project that students are working on are vitally important to the film industry and that they are respectful of each other's projects and they're invested in each other's projects so that they can give advice coming from their different disciplines. I mean, that's what I love interdisciplinarity. I love people who come from different backgrounds. When I'm working on a set, I love to bounce ideas off of someone who has never worked in the industry before. We all have blind spots and that's why we have people from different majors coming from across campus into this minor. So I just really want to make sure that I am cultivating a positive and collaborative environment amongst students and students who are going to support each other with their final capstone projects.

Matt Wittstein (13:59):

You all have clearly put a lot of thought into this, and I want to ask, are there things that you want to absolutely a hundred percent make sure are a part of that capstone experience?

Lina Kuhn (14:10):

Yeah, I think a showcase, I really want to do a showcase to the public. I think it's great experience for students with their projects, every single project. I want students to have an opportunity to share it with the public and to get public feedback. That is something that's a priority for me as well because global cinema is a public facing medium and I really want to make sure students understand that before they graduate. And so I'd like to give students an opportunity to do some sort of public facing event with their capstone projects.

Kai Swanson (14:40):

I think what will also be very important is again, just building that community and having them use each other's expertise. So I teach a lot of first year writing classes as well. That's one of my areas. And as far as workshopping, we've been thinking about different workshop models for the projects and I'm really hoping that students will feel empowered to build on each other's strengths. So I think devoting a large part of the capstone course to the workshopping process and the collaborating in creation will be very important as well. One other thing that we are really hoping for is modeling the collaboration for our students. So Kai and I were talking about what is really important to us as instructors is also bringing in the expertise of other people on campus. So for instance, Kai obviously works in the industry and has that background. I do not have that background. So if I was teaching the capstone in the future, I would ask Kai to come give a guest lecture or to come and review some of the projects that are maybe more focused on that industry's track. So I think modeling that collaboration for our students as well, by bringing in outside expertise and bringing in as many voices as we can will also be a really important part of the capstone.

Lina Kuhn (16:03):

We are all scholars, and while we have a plethora of scholarship in many different disciplines, we have brilliant scholars from across campus and beyond. And so I think it's important for students to understand that you don't just have to rely on yourself, that it's important that you are open to feedback from other people and oftentimes people who have maybe more experience than you do. So I think, yeah, I agree with you. Just modeling that behavior from the top down I think will lead to success and collaboration across students.

Matt Wittstein (16:32):

Lina, Kai, this has been fantastic conversation and I can't wait to learn what our panel thinks about it.

Lina Kuhn (16:38):
Thank you. We're excited.

Kai Swanson (16:39):
Yes, very excited. Thank you so much.

Matt Wittstein (16:59):
Hi Janet. Hi Drew. Welcome to the show. I'm really excited to have you here and to introduce yourselves to our audience, can you tell me what a capstone is?

Janet Bean (17:09):
Hi, I am Janet Bean from the University of Akron in Ohio. I direct the Institute for Teaching and Learning and an English professor. A capstone experience is a culminating experience for an academic program that gives students a chance to pull together and make sense of what their program meant.

Drew Pearl (17:32):
Hello, everyone. My name is Drew Pearl. I use he him pronouns, and I serve as the director of community engagement research and publications at the University of Alabama's Center for community-based partnerships. To me, a capstone project is an opportunity to celebrate, to celebrate learning, to celebrate the culmination of work that has been done and to see sort of the outcomes and the why of

the work that we've been doing. We learn things in all of our different courses and the capstone as that opportunity for us to put all the different pieces together.

Matt Wittstein (18:09):

I really like both of those pieces of it sort of being a culminating thing, but it's also a celebration. Very often capstones we're kind of at the end of our experiences and it's a celebration of that transition from where you are to where you're going. And I think those are great cool sentiments. So we just talked with Lina Kuhn and Kai Swanson who recently proposed a global film and cultures minor. It was accepted and now they have to teach it. So they're working on developing their capstone course for that minor and they are seeking some advice on how to make that as exciting and engaging and effective as possible as they're thinking about having students from very diverse backgrounds, some from arts and sciences, some from cinema and television arts and other communications majors, probably some that are juniors and some that are seniors at different stages of their own academic development. And so they're trying to think about what a capstone experience for this really strong interdisciplinary program can look like. And that's why we turn to you to get started. I know you all are well-versed in capstone experiences, and as we think about an interdisciplinary program, a minor program, and we think about the things that make capstones effective, are there any features of capstones that you think are especially important for this context

Janet Bean (19:36):

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this program? That it's really, really important to have opportunities for students to reflect and to have guidance about how they're reflecting because actually interdisciplinary work is really, really hard and everything about our academic experiences tends to put us in silos of our disciplines. And so what this program is really helping students do is do something integrative and different and we have to recognize that that's a different thing for them and they need practice and opportunities to think about what it means to be interdisciplinary. So I say reflection is one of the key things that I would recommend that they build into this capstone.

Drew Pearl (20:22):

Janet, I love that you really focused on that reflection, that critical reflection that's necessary because in a lot of ways, a capstone really is a big reflection. It is the opportunity to borrow from one of my colleagues in the community engagement world, Patty Clayton, for students to be able to generate learning. They generate by doing the capstone, by doing this reflection, they deepen their learning. They sort of dig a little bit more purposefully into the work that they're doing, and then they have this way to document their learning. They're working towards some goals, some sort of public demonstration, some sort of portfolio that they can take with them to the next thing. So really this capstone can be an opportunity for them to work toward something really impactful for the students coming from a lot of different disciplines.

Janet Bean (21:10):

Drew, when you said document, I think that is one of the real challenges because for students to document something, the faculty need to be very clear about what their goals are for their learning. And one of the things I will congratulate Lina and Kai is how well they structured this program. Having the introductory course where you can really get students thinking about what the goals of the program are, then having the electives and then having this culminating experience is actually an ideal way to structure a program. So there's a lot of opportunities, and I think it's really important to be transparent

and very clear right from the start about what the goals of the program are. And one of the things I know that Kai and Lina are interested in is having some open space for creative projects. I think that's going to be a little bit of a tension between that creativity and this idea of what are your learning outcomes and what needs to be documented. So I think that it can be a productive tension, but it will be a tension.

Drew Pearl (22:14):

I love that, and it really speaks to the fact that documentation looks different to students who are coming from different places and who have different career goals, career trajectories. Some of them may be wanting to continue on to grad school, some of them, this may be the last thing with film studies that they ever do, or some of them might want to go right into the workforce taking the things that they've learned from this experience and pointed it into practice. So thinking about what documentation looks like from all those different perspectives. That's why I'm really excited that it seems to be very intentional that Lena and Kai are focusing on this idea of co-creation with the students, not only co-creating with each other and really identifying goals that aren't separate coming from their different disciplines, but are really integrative and pulling everything together. Having students a part of that conversation I think is going to be really critical. There's a whole literature, a whole academic journal focused on students as partners. If they're really partners in this experience, that is going to be really important in helping them to identify, define success for themselves, and then be able to assess whether they've achieved that success that they've laid out for themselves.

Matt Wittstein (23:26):

That's a great segue because one of their goals is to really think about the co-creation with students, but one of the challenges with that is in our time locked semester, there isn't necessarily a lot of time to spend co-creating. So I would love just a brief overview of some of the pitfalls and success stories of co-creating that maybe you've experienced or that some of your colleagues at your institutions have experienced

Janet Bean (23:55):

At the University of Akron. We have a wonderful program through our Center for Engaged Learning where faculty and students work together to create courses and they're called unclass because they really want to emphasize that this is not your typical class. This is a class. Often the students come up with the idea for the class and it's a wonderful idea, but it certainly has had its growing pains in terms of how do you get students to co-create the curriculum? How do you get students to actually come out with products at the end? How does the whole thing work? I have seen several courses struggle, and I've seen several courses that have been successful and the ones that have been more successful have actually had some kind of target at the end. And I think that Kai and Lina are having this idea of public sharing at the end, and that can be a way to help students know at the end, we need you to do this. There will be a sort of a culminating thing that you have to deliver something at the end. So I think by really defining that would be really helpful for students in this co-create process.

Drew Pearl (25:10):

One of the things that comes to my mind when you ask this question is how are the students arriving to us? How are they coming to us? I know with a lot of the students that I work with, a lot of the students that my colleagues here work with, they often just want to be told exactly what to do, exactly what answers they are supposed to come up with. So if we start throwing them into a capstone course and

say like, listen, I want you to co-create this syllabus with me. Some of the questions we're going to get back from the students are like, okay, well what do you want me to co-create? How would you like me to co-create? And so I think that I love the phrase unclass because sometimes I think there's a little bit of unlearning that needs to happen as we go through these processes because students are, especially the high achieving students that are going to take on really exciting minor programs like this, they are very used to coming up with the answers and knowing that there is a right or a wrong answer. So I love the opportunity that might be there to really use that intro course to level set with the students to do some of that unlearning, maybe even turn that into a type of unclass where the students kind of learn a little bit more about the agency that they have in creating what their curriculum looks like, co-creating what that capstone looks like. I think that could be a really nice arc starting in the intro course and leading to the capstone.

Matt Wittstein (26:43):

So you both are kind of guiding this conversation in a way that I think Lina and Kai were hoping to get answers, so I'll just follow your lead from here on out, I guess. And so you started thinking about how students are arriving to us, I think is the phrase you used Drew in an interdisciplinary program like this. They're going to be coming from completely different disciplines, even different colleges here at Elon Communications versus Arts and Sciences. Some might be STEM students, some might be social science students. Some might have explicit dreams of making films someday. Some may just really have good fond memories of watching films as a kid with their family and just developed a passion for it after that intro course. And they actually get into their major disciplines and they start developing these very important skills for their academic development. How do you bring them back together in a capstone experience to get them back on the same page for this minor and this common goal, this target at the end of the capstone,

Janet Bean (27:46):

One of my colleagues does this wonderful thing where she takes an inventory of skills as part of the introductory activities. Students talk about what kind of skills they're bringing, what kind of knowledge they're bringing to this interdisciplinary class, and it can be part of a posting on your learning management system. So people can go back and say, okay, who has some skills? I need some skills in maybe video production. Who can do that? I need some skills in political analysis or somebody who knows a lot about Latin America. So this idea of getting students from the start to articulate what their skills are is a really helpful and also a positive way to start the class.

Drew Pearl (28:31):

I also really like the possibilities that might exist in having students, whether it's in the intro course or throughout the electives that they're taking, or even at the beginning of the capstone to define for themselves what interdisciplinary means. I think interdisciplinary can mean a lot of different things depending on where you're coming from and the work that I do in community engagement, we often talk about the transdisciplinary nature of work where we are kind of transcending the disciplines and really making them a bit more integrative, bringing in some of that knowledge from even outside of the academy to thinking about the work that we do. And I think that in hearing Lina and Kai's description of what the minor looks like, it seems like there are opportunities to really transcend the discipline. So it's not, well, here are my goals for things related to history or things related to production or things related to theory.

(29:22):

It's like, here are my learning goals that cover all of those things. So it's not balancing all these different disciplines that are coming together, but it's really creating a more open door. How do we create space for all these come together and really make a common learning goal that again, transcends all these different disciplines. So I think that there could be some really interesting opportunities to let students do some of that definitions defining of interdisciplinary for themselves to help them see that they're all on the same page or coming from different perspectives. One of the concepts that we talk a lot about in community engagement is this idea of full participation and the necessity of full participation in effective public and community engagement. Meaning that we're not just opening the door. So no matter who someone is, what their background is, where they're coming from, what sort of prior knowledge they have, not only can they come in and participate, but that their voice is elevated and valued and considered an integral part of the experience.

(30:25):

So even if a student is in their first semester, maybe they just saw this and thought it sounded like a fun idea. They met, as you said, they had fond memories of watching movies as a kid, so they thought this would be a cool thing to check out. We want that student as a part of this process, and we don't want them sort of taking a backseat to someone who has more of a background. In theory, we want all the different voices coming to the table and to borrow from some of the literature around full participation contribute to the flourishing of everybody. This minor program, and I would say most of higher education should be about flourishing. It's something I think that gets lost sometimes as we talk about the different mechanics of what we need to check off for our majors and our minors and all that is important, but especially for something that is focused on film and culture, flourishing is a really important piece of that. So making sure that all students, no matter who they are or where they're coming from, have that ability to contribute to the flourishing of their peers and to tole and kaya as well. I think that this is a great opportunity for them to learn as much from the students as the students are learning from them.

Matt Wittstein (31:33):

That really resonates here. We sometimes talk about trying to get our students to thrive, and it's sort of flourishing thrive. It has a fluffy meaning to it, but we all understand the emotion that it conveys. We don't necessarily know exactly what the word means, but we know the emotion that it brings out in us and what it brings out in others. So I want to ask you both, do you have examples or stories of when you really saw students thrive or flourish or colleagues thrive or flourish in their teaching of capstones or their learning through capstone experiences?

Drew Pearl (32:10):

Absolutely. This is at a previous institution, but it is an example that I love pointing to because I think it really speaks to the power of what higher education can be. So at my previous institution, we were opening a new campus in a very remote part of the states, geographically very isolated from other institutions of higher education, and it certainly helped that the speaker of the State House was from the county where the new campus was located, but it served a really important need for that community. Most folks in those counties had never been to college. So a lot of the students that were going to be coming to that campus were the first in their families to ever come to college. We recognized as we were putting this program together that it's not just about opening the door and throwing students into a college going experience if they were not prepared to do so.

(33:04):

So we came up with a scholars program for a lot of these students where it was a first year learning community that had a community-based learning component to it. And the students took all of their core general education courses together as a cohort, and they also took sort of a community leadership zero hour course to sort of give them the opportunity to put together and reflect on why they were taking the courses that they were. As we went through the year, the students were also hearing from different folks in the community who were talking about important issues, things that they saw on the horizon and things that our students could work toward. So the culminating experience, sort of the capstone for those students first year was to do some sort of public education program focused on what these important community issues were that they were hearing from different leaders in the community themselves.

(34:05):

So it was a really interesting opportunity not only for the students to see the relevance of higher education, most of them at that campus there wouldn't have thought about going to college because it didn't feel real and relevant to them. But by taking these courses and reflecting on how they mattered in a broader context and outside of the walls of the university was a really eye-opening experience for them, and they were able to see how the things they were learning could have a real direct outcome for the people in their community where they were coming from. A lot of times in rural communities, there's a narrative that like, oh, you're going to college, you'll never come back. But these students could really see how the things that they were learning could be put into practice to the people in the places that really mattered the most to them.

Janet Bean (34:51):

One of my colleagues that I worked with on some research on capstones, Dave Lewis from the University of Leeds in the UK, he has a wonderful program at his university where they took a challenge that was actually causing a lot of stress for faculty and students in that they didn't really have enough space for all the biology students to do a traditional biology lab-based capstone. And so what Dave did with through his leadership is develop different types of capstones that students could do. It might be a community engaged project, it might be an educational project, it might be some kind of public project, it could be a traditional project. And basically by just sort of shaking up this traditional idea of what a capstone is and actually acknowledging that students really don't end up doing lab work if they're biologists, they often go into all sorts of other jobs. So this idea of connecting the capstone to what students might be doing in the future or to have the capstone help them enrich their skills and their abilities and their vision of what biology might do, that's what Dave's program at the University of Leeds did. And I think that it really helped both the faculty and the students flourish.

Matt Wittstein (36:23):

Janet, you're sort of talking about the capstone being a transition for some of those students and your colleague at Leeds kind of created, they had a unique challenge and they figured out a way to solve it by having a lot of different options, but there's a lot of uncertainty in what students might do and how they might use the knowledge from their programs in their future. And there's also a lot of variability that all the students aren't going to go do the same thing. So do you have any advice for how to be okay with that uncertainty and especially how the faculty members, Lina and Kai and other listeners might support their students in being comfortable with that uncertainty and still seeing the value of what they're doing within the course setting?

Janet Bean (37:07):

I know that Dave Lewis at the University of Leeds, they actually organized different potential projects for students and students signed up. So in some ways, I just putting some guardrails on it or some guide rails on what kind of projects might be available, I think kind of lowers the anxiety of students. So if you come in and you might say, here are five different types of projects you might do, and even better if you could say, here are some examples from previous years. So students might have a vision of what is possible. And also we're open for other ideas as well, but I think it really helps students if you could be transparent about the possibilities to give examples and to really help scaffold their thinking.

Drew Pearl (38:00):

I also think it's valuable to sort of muddle around in that uncertainty and that unpredictability. That's where a lot of the magic can happen for the students. The whole higher education rigamarole, it's all about learning for the students. We want our students to put together this pristine project at the end. Like yes, we want to give them all the tools necessary to work toward that, but we really want them to learn along the way. These are experiential learning opportunities and in my experience, I mess up a lot more often than I am successful. So having these conversations with students and letting them know that that's where the really important learning happens. You come up against an obstacle, you see something, you're not sure what the quote right answer is supposed to be, that's where you start to learn what's important to you, what's important to your colleagues, what's important to other stakeholders that are involved. I think playing around in that uncertainty can be really valuable for students and not something that they always have the opportunity to experience.

Janet Bean (39:07):

I think it's very funny, Matt, that you've brought together me and Drew, I'm talking about let's have some guide rails for the students and Drew is talking about let's play around in the mess. So I think it has to be both, but I do value both.

Matt Wittstein (39:22):

I mean, I think a lot about that in my own teaching when I give a somewhat open-ended project that you have to find this right balance between the tension of giving them enough information to get started, but giving them enough freedom to do something that they're excited about that they can really flourish doing. And what I really like is that I think by bringing you both together, I think Drew phrased it well is that this is really about the learning, and I think both of you would agree that there's different approaches. It's not a one size fits all. It's okay to take some different approaches.

Janet Bean (39:54):

This is shifting gears a little bit, but one of the things that I'm really interested in thinking about a program that's about global film and culture is the culture part of it and how they can lean into the possibilities of this capstone being a place where students can think about differences and intercultural interactions and the kind of, I would say, learning about diversity and living in a diverse world. And so I know that I'm sure that that's part of their thinking. It does pose an interesting question. How do you get students to deeply engage in what is intercultural work if you're thinking about global film?

Drew Pearl (40:41):

So Janet, as you're saying that one of the things that jumps to mind is how we think about what global culture means to the different students that we're working with. And it really makes me think sometimes in higher education, it is easy for us to have learning experience for students and here are

outcomes. So hopefully the things that happen in that magic black box of learning lead to these amazing outcomes, these transformative learning experiences for the students. But sometimes some of the things that can get overlooked is the things that students are bringing with them into the experiences. So what are their understandings of global culture? Do we have students that are coming from a culture that we're studying in the class? What does that mean if we are talking about them and their identity as global culture? Well, that's my culture. Does that necessarily mean it's a global culture? So I think playing around and understanding what our students' understandings of what culture means, what global culture means, and how we can kind of navigate that, that's some of the things that are popping to mind as you're posing your questions.

Matt Wittstein (41:49):

I was wondering if there's some connection between some of that community engaged learning work where some folks see that as sort of volunteer work, but if you're really working within community-based learning or community engaged learning, there's actually a pedagogy behind it and thinking about how do we actually get those students to go from volunteering time and service to deeply engaging and understanding their community and starting to learn what questions to ask. But I think the big piece is how do we get them to bring that back into the classroom during that capstone experience so they can actually share themselves holistically with each other, with the professors, and reflect on that. And I think that kind of goes full circle to what Janet started off with in saying that critical reflection, the opportunity to reflect and have some guidance for that reflection is one of the most important pieces in this interdisciplinary capstone. So I have one sort of I hope, fun wrap up question. You've talked about having some targets and having some clear products and some opportunities there. I want to just put you on the spot and say, if you were teaching a global film and culture's capstone, what product, what showcase would you be most excited about seeing your students sort of turn in at the end of the semester?

Janet Bean (43:11):

Well, I'm going to shamelessly borrow my colleague Jenny Ebert's film studies project. She has her students propose a film screening for a particular group on campus. So basically they have to review a film, pitch a film, figure out what would this campus event look like if the L-G-B-T-Q student group wanted to do a film. I really love that assignment and it's really fun and it gets students thinking about what the various groups on campus, what might they need in terms of thinking about film and using film for their own student organizational goals. So I like the idea of giving students some kind of project that they have freedom to do something in the community, whether it's the campus community or the broader city community, and think about how can film help organizations meet their goals.

Drew Pearl (44:09):

Yeah, Janet, I think we're thinking along very similar lines. I have recently been playing around with Photovoice methodology, so it is a participatory qualitative research technique that puts cameras in the hands of people in the community and lets you see the world through their eyes. And one of the key elements of Photovoice is having some sort of public demonstration that is intentionally designed to reach stakeholders, decision makers, policy makers, and I think something parallel to that could be a really interesting component of this minor program have this really intentional outcome of reaching people who make decisions that could be on campus, that could be in the community, that could be reaching peers, that could be coming up with some sort of theoretical or conceptual or hypothetical

decision maker, but having something where you are trying to say something important through the work that you're doing and have that be a part of the public demonstration.

Matt Wittstein (45:11):

I really love some of those ideas. I want to thank you both so much for your time and your wisdom and your thoughts, and I can't wait to share this with Lena and Kai as they continue their process of developing their course.

Drew Pearl (45:24):

Yeah, thanks for the invitation. I'm super excited for Lena and Kai. It is no small thing for a minor or a course even to get accepted through a curriculum committee, so they deserve a lot of credit for the hard work that they've already done. Now they get to do the exciting thing of putting things into practice. So I'm excited to see what happens.

Janet Bean (45:44):

And it was great talking to you, Matt and Drew,

Matt Wittstein (46:01):

Lina, Kai, it's great to see you and talk to you again,

Kai Swanson (46:04):

Talk again. So excited to be back and hear what the panel came up with.

Lina Kuhn (46:08):

Same. Very, very excited to be here.

Matt Wittstein (46:11):

So we decided to do a little twist on the show and try interviewing our educators and our students. Separately, we were able to talk with Janet Bean from the University of Akron and Drew Pearl from the University of Alabama. Both Janet and Drew participated in a multi-year, multi-institutional summer research seminar about capstone experiences and both contributed chapters to cultivating capstones, designing high quality culminating experiences for student learning from the series on engaged learning and teaching, I started the conversation by asking Janet and Drew to share what they felt was the most salient part of a capstone experience, and they agreed that it should somehow be culminating, help celebrate the journey and successes of student learning and help students see the why. When asked about features that make those possible, we spent some time discussing reflection, having guidance for the reflection, helping students document their learning and products of learning and providing transparency and clear goals of the program.

(47:09):

At this point, they really wanted to commend your minor design and ask you to think about how to embed some expectations or previews of the capstone in that introductory course or even in some of the electives. I like the idea of scaffolding some of the expectations across the courses, but we acknowledge that might be difficult with the breadth of elective options that would many non minor students. We talked a little bit about getting students from diverse disciplines up to the same speed, and

Janet immediately thought of a skills inventory that could be used to get students to start talking about what they know and can do and what they might need to get from partnership or additional learning. Drew got excited about the opportunity that exists to make this transdisciplinary by really blurring those interdisciplinary boundaries and setting high expectations of students to bring their knowledge and experience into the class and any sort of project.

(48:02):

When thinking about that final project piece, having some clarity and a target and balancing the tension between giving examples that might be mimicked or giving a blank page that might feel overwhelming is really important. As instructors, it's probably our responsibility to remove some of that burden by providing options and examples, scaffolding and being adaptable. When asked about co-creation, Janet talked about Unclass at the University of Akron, which are described as, and I quote, an interdisciplinary playground for students, faculty, and community stakeholders to work together to experiment with various approaches to problem solving and respond collaboratively to opportunities and challenges in our shared community. The way Janet described it, it sounds like students, faculty or community partners can propose a concept for an unclass. Then smaller class sizes would allow all the partners to work together to craft the course as it goes. While I know this isn't a perfect match for your global film and cultures minor capstone, I thought this model was really imaginative and encouraging that true co-creation is actually possible. Finally, I really want to emphasize one piece that sort of echoed throughout the conversation. Drew referred to it as flourishing, and I think at Elon we typically call it thriving, trying to get us and our students to celebrate in the process of learning the actual flourishing of thought and action to practice skills like engaging with uncertainty in what a final project might look like or deepening engagement by honoring what students might be bringing into the discipline from outside the academy. These are what capstones are really about.

Lina Kuhn (49:41):

I'm just so appreciative and thankful for both Janet and Drew for their incredible feedback. Specifically, I really like their suggestions related to target goals, getting students to flourish. I like that word flourish. I mean, it has a different definition than Thrive, and so I like the idea of integrating that into the capstone course, but always making sure to scaffold in reflection, not only just with the capstone course but across the minor. So all of that feedback was really fantastic, and I know it'll be helpful as we go back to reflecting on the capstone course and finding ways to improve its structure.

Kai Swanson (50:20):

One thing I thought was extremely interesting that I could see us wanting to implement would be the skills inventory and not potentially as a way like quiz the students, what are the skills that you have? And then let's make sure that we teach the rest of you the things that are missing, but more as a way to figure out which skills they are bringing in that they can then be those experts for each other, obviously in inventory. That would be a great way to make sure that the electives are working the way that we want them to, that they are having some of these film related skills as they enter the capstone. But I think it would also be really nice way to have the students feel confident, Hey, look, you marked this particular skill as very high on your list. This other peer has this other skill. I think the two work well together for this project. Why don't you have a conversation? I think that sounds like a great jumping off point for building some of that interdisciplinary community

Lina Kuhn (51:25):

Along with that in the community building, also, having students improve upon their skills by helping other students with understanding certain skills and certain ideas, certain ideologies and certain cultures.

Matt Wittstein (51:40):

So I really like what Drew shared about the idea of flourishing, and I want to ask you sort of the hypothetical, what would it look like if your students were flourishing in your capstone course? What would that actually look and feel like?

Lina Kuhn (51:54):

To me, that would mean students each week are identifying parts of their project because it is a project based capstone. They're identifying texts, they're working on it rather than, I feel like in a lot of cases, students in capstone courses or with capstone projects, they're like, oh, I got to get it all done in one particular sit down. But they understand that process is part of making a better project, and they really, each week they come to class with new readings, with new objectives for themselves, and they are weaving in aspects of previous electives in the intro course along with their outside relationship with film and television. But I think each week coming in with new objectives each week with coming in with new ideas related to their projects and seeing it in a holistic perspective and knowing they will not have all of the answers. They might not even have a final cut or a final draft by the end of the semester, but knowing that this is a process and that this is a project that will continue to grow as filmmakers, as screenwriters, as artists, as teachers, whatever path they choose after this minor that they can continue to grow and that they can continue to expand upon this project.

Kai Swanson (53:11):

Building on that, I think the idea of frustration, which maybe is not a word you typically put with flourishing, but for me, I think I would feel really good about their engagement. If, for example, they are doing a video essay and then they're having some kind of technology troubles or something like that that maybe is frustrating, but that they are so into their projects that they're willing to work through it and find new ways and problem solve and maybe see frustrations or problems that occur during the project as an opportunity for something new or some way of learning. I think that for me would be flourishing if the students are really excited about their projects wherever they may take them, even if sometimes it's not in a direction they expect at first.

Matt Wittstein (54:03):

So does anything that they say affirm or change your thinking.

Kai Swanson (54:07):

I was thinking about this scaffolding and the connection between the introduction class and the capstone class, and I think when we created those syllabi, we really did think about that. So we went back and forth and thought, okay, if this is the goal of the intro class, what does this look like in the capstone version? How can we ramp this up for an upper level class that is at the end of their time in the four year college? And then as far as that connection between them, I was kind of thinking about what happens in the middle is maybe the experiences and hopefully that the students are getting to experience things that might be a bit of a tangent, but I think about this a lot. How can they bring outside experiences into the classroom and how can we help them have those experiences?

Lina Kuhn (55:03):

It was really nice to hear that when listening to what Janet and Drew had to say, hearing, oh, okay, we did something right. When two professionals who are at the top of their fields related to developing capstone courses were like, oh, make sure you scaffold in this particular way. And we did that, and that was a major part of structuring both the capstone, but also the intro course.

Kai Swanson (55:27):

One thing that I think would be really great for us to consider for the capstone would be the learning community, especially because we already have that model here at Elon, and that does seem like a very obvious way to create a cohort, to have maybe some minors, some film miners who maybe otherwise would feel disconnected, enter a learning community together. I think that could be a really great idea.

Lina Kuhn (55:53):

I love that, and I think that makes so much sense, particularly there's nothing quite like people in groups of people who are very passionate about cinema, about film, about media, and so bringing these people together, because really the point of this minor was to create a stronger community of global film on campus. It's already present, but I think across campus. And so having some sort of LLC or something like that, some sort of student organization would really help with fostering that type of scaffolding that Janet and Drew mentioned.

Matt Wittstein (56:28):

And that really echoes what you all said when we interviewed the first time of really establishing stuff that goes beyond the classroom of having film viewings and having these pieces that are happening outside the course. And I wonder if there's ways to lean into that piece as part of that scaffolding process.

Kai Swanson (56:46):

Since the minor is new, I'm hoping that as we continue on with it, we build more connections to actually the outside of Elon communities, so Greensboro theaters or programs at NC State or film festivals that are happening in Carrboro. And once we have some of those connections as well, that will be a really great space for us to consider moving beyond the Elon community in the way that Drew was talking about. It sounds like that would be another great opportunity that we've certainly been considering, but maybe don't quite have the structure yet to delve into.

Matt Wittstein (57:28):

Yeah, I think you all really have a discipline and topic area that lends itself well to creating a really cool capstone, and I can't wait to see what our student panelists have to say about it. So Lina, Kai, thank you and I look forward to chatting with you both again.

Kai Swanson (57:44):

Thanks.

Lina Kuhn (57:45):

Thank you.

Matt Wittstein (58:01):

Limed Teaching with a Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, associate professor of Exercise science at Elon University. Dhvani Toprani is Elon University's assistant director of learning design and support, and serves as a producer for the show. 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. 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.