

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 2, Episode 8 – Designing an Interdisciplinary Capstone, Part 2: Student Perspectives

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

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

(00:22):

Welcome back to another episode of Limed Teaching with a Twist. Last month we got the faculty perspective on the development of a new global film and Cultures minor capstone course at Elon University with Lina Kuhn and Kai Swanson. Our conversation featured educators, Janet Bean and Drew Pearl, both contributors to the book *Cultivating Capstones: Designing High Quality Culminating Experiences for Student Learning*. Together Janet and Drew shared insights on fostering a supportive environment that encourages diverse projects, integrating various disciplines, ultimately preparing students for careers in the film industry or other pathways. Co-creation with students was a central theme emphasizing the importance of enabling meaningful contributions from students of different backgrounds. They underscored the significance of reflection documentation and giving clear goals to students while also providing suggestions for embedding capstone expectations throughout the entire curriculum. This month we conclude our episode by hearing from two Elon students with very different perspectives and experiences. Gianna Smurro is a cinema and television art senior and Mia Kass is an international and global studies sophomore. Both love films but both have different expectations for a culminating capstone. Enjoy part two of designing Interdisciplinary Capstones student perspectives. I'm Matt Wittstein.

(01:50):

Hi Mia. Hi Gianna. I'm so excited to have you here to talk about Lena and Kai's plans for their global film and culture's minor capstone. To get us started off, I want you to introduce yourself to our audience and I also want to know what's one of the most effective ways that you've seen film use that's really helped you learning in a classroom or even outside of the classroom?

Gianna Smurro (02:11):

Hi, my name's Gianna Smurro. I'm a senior at Elon University majoring in journalism and cinema and television arts and I also have a minor in political science. So one way that I've kind of seen film used throughout my education very obviously is through my cinema major. A lot of times we'll be watching films in our classrooms that will allow us to inspire us to do future projects and to show us the way different lighting and sound and visuals can be used. But I think it's also very interesting that it's also been used in my other majors as well for my journalism degree. We've been looking at a lot of documentary work, doing a lot of broadcast work, videography work, and I have also even had the opportunity to take a film politics and security course and my political science minor. So I think it's kind of going a little bit into this now, but it is a very interdisciplinary subject. Doing film, it can really relate to many different topics. So I think just being able to watch and learn from the films that are out there has been very beneficial for me.

Mia Kass (03:04):

Hi, my name's Mia Kass. I am a sophomore at Elon University. This is my first year here and I'm studying international global studies with a focus on Europe and minoring in computer science and Spanish. And to answer your question, so right now I'm taking this class, it's learning Spanish through film. We finished watching our first film, it was called *Lingua de Las Mari*, and it takes place in Spain right before

the Spanish Civil War. So kind of giving us context about what society was like, what everyday people were kind of going through during that time. And yeah, just film has been used to help me understand how in different cultures, what is acceptable, what's not, and just it adds a visual component instead of just reading a paper or something on different cultures

Matt Wittstein (04:11):

And my Spanish is not the best in the world, but I think that was something like the language of the butterflies. Is that close to accurate?

Mia Kass (04:19):

Yep, you got it. Got it.

Matt Wittstein (04:21):

Awesome. So that's super cool and I really like that it seems like films naturally fit into some of the programs that you're doing. What we're going to talk about today is Lina Kuhn and Kai Swanson have proposed and had their global films and cultures minor accepted through our curriculum process. They've also had their capstone course accepted through that process, but now they have to actually run the course at some point and they've reached out to get a sense of what might work well for a global film and cultures minor capstone. So to provide a little bit of context about their program, it has four courses and then the capstone experience. The first course is an intro course and then three courses that are split between three categories of disciplines within the minor. One that's a history of film and culture, one that's more of a production of film and society there and then more of a theoretical interpretation of film and culture and then they take this capstone experience that can be anything.

(05:26):

They've talked a little bit about how they want it to serve sort of as a transition for their students. They talked a little bit about how they want their students to lean into the interdisciplinarity of the program. They've thought about their students being from a lot of different disciplines, from art, from psychology, from political science, from obviously cinema and television arts and English as well. What they're really trying to get at this point is a sense of how can they approach teaching diverse learners? How can they streamline getting those sort of up to speed with that interdisciplinarity? How can they ensure some opportunities to lean into the interdisciplinarity as well as they would love to just hear some success stories of capstone experiences and specifically how it would feel to co-create with your professors in what a project would be for a class. After we talked with Kai and Lena, we also talked with Janet Bean from University of Akron and Drew Pearl from University of Alabama and they shared some of their experience and expertise in capstone experience to just talk about some tips for Lena and Kai and the big tips that they had is that one, a capstone experience should have some sort of target goal Two, there should be elements of reflection and guided reflection to help the metacognitive processes.

(06:50):

And three, that a great marker of a great capstone is that your students are flourishing. And I think this connects back to something that Kai said, how can I get my students to see that their voice, their experiences, their skills are valued and very much needed in the cinema production world and when they add that cultural piece in there, it's really bringing something new and something valuable to that industry. So as we get started here, I've thrown a lot at you and I want to just ask you real quickly, what do you think are the most important pieces of a capstone course just broadly, not a film capstone

course, not a culture capstone course, but what do you think are the most important things to sort of bring people together and help them transition, help students transition to what's next for them?

Gianna Smurro (07:39):

I could start with that. So I think one of the most important parts of a capstone course is kind of making students see the value of all the things that they have learned up until that point and see them almost culminate in one final experience. When I think of a capstone course, I think of it being like, this is the end. This is where all the things I've learned have come to up until this very, very end point. So at least my expectations out of a capstone course would be some reflection. Being able to take all the things I've learned and actually internalizing and seeing how they have progressed my learning as I have gone through a specific degree or program. So I think especially in my experiences with capstone courses, we've kind of been taking those different pieces and kind of putting them together with facilitating new learning and kind of preparing for the next step.

(08:25):

So going into a specific, now I know you asked for a general, but in my great ideas of research course, which is the capstone for all of the comm majors at Elon, you have to facilitate your own research project that has to do with your major. So in those courses it's also all students from the five different communications majors. So there's a lot of interdisciplinary learning even within the school of communications that we have. But also through that course we have these seminars where we discuss things that are going on in the industry that we will be able to better prepare ourselves for the industries that we will be going into in a few short months after graduation. So I really think that the importance of a capstone course is really being able to take what you've learned and reflect upon it. What would you say Mia?

Mia Kass (09:09):

Okay, so I haven't had a lot of experiences with capstone courses, but so I think just in general for any course, just making it clear that it's okay to fail so that way you're able to get that confidence to experiment with different things and yeah, apply your knowledge for your final project.

Gianna Smurro (09:29):

I think that's very good to say because I think a common fear that a lot of students have when it comes to capstone courses is that it's almost a fear of realizing that you are at the end and that you do have to start thinking about what you want to be doing next in life, whether that's graduate school or getting a job or something along those lines. I think there's kind of that fear of being like, okay, what's coming next in the future? And having that capstone course as almost like a reinforcement of you've done the work, you've put the work in, you are ready for this next step. I think that's very important.

Mia Kass (10:00):

Yeah, it's almost like a trial run for the real world.

Matt Wittstein (10:04):

I like that idea of it being sort of a trial run for what's next. I want to pull into the context of this being a minor capstone that is crossing over history and political science and English and cinema and film and television production. You could have students that have vastly different experiences and skills. Have you all ever been on projects where you had students that are just at completely different levels and

what are some ways you found professors approach that to get people up to the same speed and were the students involved in that process in any way? Were you able to help people along or were people able to help you along to get you up to speed in different things?

Gianna Smurro (10:43):

The first thing that comes to my mind is this past semester I just started working with the Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics here at school. So as a communications major, I'm one of the few people who are working on the journal as an editor who is not a political science major. So kind of the way in which we kind of started off this semester and trying to get everybody on an equal playing field is we've all kind of gone over, essentially we're looking over research papers to be publishing an addition of this journal and so getting handouts of learning what is a theory paper, what is these different kind of research that students are conducting, what is original research, just even though a lot of people have already served on the journal for multiple semesters at this point, just gathering everybody that one or two weeks to do a blanket coverage of this is what we expect, this is what the things that you'll be learning.

(11:36):

And then just providing those different resources for people who may not be as knowledgeable about certain tasks, providing those resources for them to be able to ask questions. Putting out there, you can come to office hours, you can discuss things with us. There are other people that can help you in understanding those things. There's other people in the journal who major in statistics or major in sociology, so I think it's really important to kind of have those different voices because you have those different perspectives on a given topic at hand, but then providing supplementary resources for them, if the majority is of a certain background, it can be a little bit difficult to pull in those voices of the minority who might not have those experiences. But I think just providing such resources for them to get them up onto the same playing field would probably go miles for them.

Mia Kass (12:21):

So over J term, I took this course called the Middle East people in place and it was just like an overview of the Middle East and Middle Eastern culture and so everyone was coming in at different levels of knowledge about the Middle East. So one thing that I found that the professor did, he gave a poll at the very beginning of the class to gauge where everyone was and then from there he kind adjusted the readings and he also supplied extra readings if you're curious to delve deeper into whatever topic we were discussing in class. Also, he made himself very accessible to us and he made it clear his office hours, you can hear the times he can email me and just communication, clear communication with the students I found was very helpful. I came in knowing a little bit, but not a lot.

Gianna Smurro (13:19):

And I do think this is something that could shift as the minor is in place for a couple of years because especially as it's going to be introduced next academic year, there might be a lot of upperclassmen who might be taking these courses, students who might not have cinema or literature background experience. So I think for the first couple of years it could possibly be a little bit different than it would be in say four years from now when there might be a lot more interest in pursuing this minor as an underclassman, whether that be freshman or sophomore year. So I do think that it is something that could evolve over the years and they could see a shift and the students who will be pursuing the minor as it progresses.

Matt Wittstein (13:57):

If I can recap real quick, it sounds like Gianna, you're saying one of your recommendations would be to provide some basic resources but also try to elevate and support all voices in the classroom. Sort of being aware of some voices might be louder than others because they are more comfortable in that space. And Mia, you're saying that there's an opportunity to sort of check in directly with your students at the beginning of the semester, but not only that to actually make adjustments based on that. I want to ask about that accessibility, and I'm curious, Mia, did you ever use the office hours? Do you know if any of your classmates used the office hours? Did you go solo? Did you go in groups? How well did that get used?

Mia Kass (14:39):

Okay, I did not use office hours, but there was a time when I had missed, we had a take home quiz and I'd missed the deadline that we had to do online and so I emailed him at 1:00 AM in the morning and I was like, I'm so sorry I completely spaced on this and he emailed me back five minutes later, which I'm not saying that your professor has to be on call 24 7, but I knew that he had given a specific time. He said, I'll be answering emails from after class to probably 1 32 in the morning. And so I knew there was a chance that he would be up, but in terms of office hours preparing for the final people did go. I was not one of them, but I think that they found that very useful.

Matt Wittstein (15:30):

So it sounds like in both your experience and my experience that office hours don't get used as much as they could now I'm curious what are ways that faculty in general can make themselves accessible to build some of those relationships that are things other than office hours, things that have worked well or other ideas that you just think could work that you've never seen done?

Gianna Smurro (15:52):

I think one of the ways that I've seen this is through almost setting up meetings with students in their courses. So whether it's in a group project setting or in an individual setting, I've kind of seen that one-on-one conversations with peer professor through a more structured environment kind of helps lead to a more outside of the classroom connection. It's very rare that you get to have those one-on-one conversations with your professor and some people might be a little more nervous to kind of go to office hours swiping through in the classroom, kind of connecting with students in that kind of way, whether that's through checking in on their progress throughout the semester or just consulting on different projects. I think that's a very beneficial way to bridge the gap between a professor and a student.

Mia Kass (16:34):

Yeah, I'm one of those students who finds it very awkward to go to office hours, which is why I don't, but I find that the professors who kind of linger after class for a couple minutes and make it very clear that they are approachable and if you have any questions that you're afraid to ask during class, come up after and they'll be more than happy to answer them.

Matt Wittstein (17:00):

I want to get us back to sort of the capstone experience and what projects look like in different courses, and I know you all are at different stages of your academic career, so it might look different for you, but could you maybe share an experience about a project that you did for a discipline that you didn't know a

whole lot about, at least when you started the project, and then what aspects made the project easy or what aspects made the project really challenging for you?

Mia Kass (17:26):

I took photography in high school and the first year we had to create a portfolio by the end of the semester and we were using film cameras and so I had difficulties with learning about the aperture and how to focus with the camera, and so one thing that really helped me was talking to the professor after class and I think what really helped again was going back to being approachable. I really loved my photography teacher. We connected, he made it very clear that it was okay if every picture you took didn't have to be perfect. It was okay to make mistakes. So I was able to, starting from scratch, knowing nothing about photography, slowly put together this collage of photos by the end.

Gianna Smurro (18:19):

So in the second semester of my freshman year, all communications majors had to take a coding class that was with a computer science professor, and so to culminate that course, we had to complete our own website that we had completely coded. And so this was something that I had never really done before and something I didn't have much experience with. And so I actually really utilized office hours in regards to that class to kind of help gauge my learning with that, but really kind of helped me get through that was really being open with my professor, being open to him helping me and him showing me how to do it because it's something that I was very unfamiliar with and something that many of my friends were also very unfamiliar with because it's not something that we deal with that often in a communications realm because a lot of times we're dealing with interfaces that I've already been created and we're uploading our own media to it and creating the actual base platform that we upload those things to was something that was very unfamiliar to me, but something that I'm really grateful to now have in my skillset.

Matt Wittstein (19:15):

You've shared a few examples of different sort of project outcomes that you all could have, Gianna. You talked a little bit about creating a website and Mia you talked about a portfolio for a photography course and those are all very different mediums, very different outputs, different ways to approach that, but all of those types of things could sort of fit into a capstone experience. I'm wondering, as you think about something that's global film and cultures, what might capstone projects look like if there were no limitations, like creativity is our limitation, what might that look like to you? What would be really fun for you all?

Gianna Smurro (19:53):

I think that could look like many different things. I think it could look like films that students could create at the end of this project. I think it could also look like possibly website designs of putting out that different kinds of information or even it could be a photography project as well. I think it can be a multimedia project. I think it can combine many different ways in which things can be conveyed to the public. I think it could also be done through presentations. It can possibly be done through research that incorporates a visual medium. So a course that I had taken was a study abroad course that took place in London and at the end of that experience, we have to come up with the final project and the only limitations on that is that it has to do with the books that we had read, the literature that we had read for that class.

(20:42):

It is a multimedia project. We all have our own autonomy to do whatever with that project. We can do websites, we can make social media campaigns. There's many different ways that we can take that project to facilitate the things that we had learned in that class and through that experience and then supplementing it with the things that we have taken from that course. It's even a possibility to kind of leave it open to those students to almost consult with their professors on different things that they can do for that project and working through ways in which each of them can have those different components of reflection and writing and research, but also tying it into a more creative medium.

Mia Kass (21:24):

I loved all the examples you gave Gianna. I'm going to kind of come from the point of view where I'm very daunted, a blank canvas is daunting to me. So having a lot of creative freedom, I get a deer in headlights. So I think giving students an example but also adding on that you can go crazy, do whatever you want,

Gianna Smurro (21:49):

Just providing a list of different opportunities. Even though this is a very new minor, I think that they can pull projects from a lot of different courses that are happening on campus such as since the minor is a collaboration between the English and the cinema departments, you can pull projects such as the ones that we're working on in my English literature course that kind of combined almost a global experience with literature and kind of putting those two things together. I think you can kind of pull examples from many different courses that these professors have taught to give examples of these are kind of inspiration pieces for students to use to do their own learning and I think as the course progresses, they can definitely pull things from the actual course itself that previous students have done to give students an idea of things that are possible for them.

Matt Wittstein (22:35):

One of the things I love about talking with students is especially more than one at a time, is that it's always a great reminder that we have different perspectives. We have different things that we like. So Mia, you're like the blank canvas is terrible, but someone else's, you ask them and they're like, oh, I love a blank canvas. It's like I can't do anything wrong. But we always think about, and this relates to what Janet and Drew shared of that tension between how do you get them started versus how do you give them the freedom to do Mia, what you talked about of the ability to fail safely and to experiment and to take some risks in their project without giving them that blank canvas. That can be a little scary sometimes.

Gianna Smurro (23:18):

I think kind of piggybacking off of the example that I had given about my study abroad course that kind of incorporated literature into it was we had to complete field research while we were abroad in London on a specific book that we had read and chosen to read before we had traveled abroad and our professors were very available throughout that entire trip. We had lunches with our professors in which we were able to discuss aspects of our book and how we're relating them to the places that we were visiting and the places that we were seeing. And so I just felt very supported in that because it can be very daunting being in a new city, a big city and having to then go out and actually take your own learning into your own hands. And so I think just kind of having that constant support of checking in with students and kind of letting them know that they're there for you even after the experience as we're now crafting a capstone, I guess you can call it capstone project for that course, just kind of being that

open resource and reinforcing to students that they are there for you and that they are invested in your success and in your own personal learning.

Mia Kass (24:21):

In middle school for my English class, we had to give a presentation in front of the entire class and a lot of people, myself included, were not really comfortable talking in front of a big classroom, and so to kind of help us get over our fear of public speaking, my English teacher made everyone stand up in front of the class and we could just talk about whatever we wanted, but we couldn't stutter. We couldn't say if we did, we had to sit down and he would time us and whoever was able to stand up there and talk for the longest got it was like a Snickers bar or something, but it was very fun and everyone was having a good time and it made me step out of my comfort zone. But I also felt, well, I was a little uncomfortable, but I felt okay because everyone else was doing it. So I think I guess making everyone fail collectively helped me step out of my comfort zone.

Matt Wittstein (25:25):

I like that idea of the impossible task where everybody's going to fail so you can see other people fail and it doesn't feel embarrassing, but you learn through the different ways people attempt that task. So I think one of the things that we think about with capstone projects is that there often is some sort of public display. How would you all feel about getting out there in front of your peers and having your film or your poster or your social media campaign being sort of publicly accessible? And if you don't feel good about that, what can we do as teachers to make you feel better about it?

Gianna Smurro (26:03):

So coming from the communications major perspective, I think at least if you're kind of pursuing that kind of major or that kind of career path and you're less inclined to be afraid to put your work out there in the sense that it is the only kind of way nor in which for you to advance in a certain industry, if I'm writing an article, I have to be putting that out there to be published, to be viewed, to be read by a larger audience. If I'm creating a film that's to be submitted to a film festival, then I'm submitting it with the knowledge that there will be a greater population of people who will possibly be watching my film. So I think it kind of depends on the background you're coming from and industry or course experience. So what I think is really great about this minor is that you are taking people from all those different backgrounds, all those different majors, and some of them might not have the goal of looking to put their work out there for a greater public.

(26:59):

Maybe they're looking to just gain a greater understanding of film and how it relates into their own career paths in the future. So I think it's kind of a difficult balance to gauge how to do almost a public display in this kind of a capstone course because people heck are coming in with such different intentions for their own learning. I think almost providing an avenue for people to display their work in a more public setting is great, but I'm not sure it should be required of all people. Some people might not be looking to create a final project that's kind of geared more toward a film that can be publicly displayed, or maybe they're looking to do more of that traditional research kind of capstone. So I think it also depends on how open of a final project the capstone course will have, how broad it will be for the students and their own terms of their creativity, and I think that will kind of be able to play into how outwardly facing the display of these projects could be.

Mia Kass (28:00):

Yeah. So when I was looking at the summary of this capstone, I kind of assumed that showing your final product to the public was an inherent part of this capstone, but I guess making people feel comfortable about displaying their work publicly. Exactly. I think that's something that you just kind of got to go and head first.

Gianna Smurro (28:25):

I think even providing other avenues for presenting, whether that be in class because you kind of form a bond with students who are in your class and you're able to of create those relationships with those people. So I think it could even be an in-class presentation for people who weren't comfortable for doing something more outwardly facing, such as a lot of times in my cinema classes we will have showings in Turner Theater, which is our big theater on our campus at the comp school. So I think there's different kind of ways in which you can kind of do it. You can even have a smaller in-classroom presentation and invite other people to come and view it. I feel like there's kind of a safety for some students being in a classroom setting, even if there might be other people coming and listening into those different spaces and conversations and presentations. So I think also having that as an option might be great for some students.

Matt Wittstein (29:15):

Out of curiosity, especially in this class where there's so much interdisciplinarity, how do you feel about an individual project versus a group project? And I know sometimes it's nicer to rely on yourself and that individual work. How would you bring the interdisciplinary nature into an individual project thinking about it's a whole course, it's not just a project. There's other aspects, but how might you do that if you prefer an individual project or if a student prefers to work individually on their project?

Gianna Smurro (29:44):

My immediate thought on the way that you can bring in other voices more an interdisciplinary experience to a personal individual project would probably be through kind of consultation with other students in the course, kind of providing specific steps throughout the production of such a project on which other people can put and put their voices during the creative process. Because I think that's kind of, especially in let's say a student decided to pursue who was a cinema student, decided to produce their own film as their capstone project for this course. I think being able to have conversations with students as they're producing this film and the pre-production process while they're possibly filming on a set, kind of having those different voices kind of informing the judgments of their project would probably be the best way to kind of do that. So I think it would almost have to be structured in a way that it is someone's individual project, but everybody in the class has the space to have input on each other's projects.

(30:43):

I think that's kind of the only way to foster that interdisciplinary experience when you're of working within your own frame of knowledge, you're not really able to get those different experiences, and so I think it would have to be an individual project with the expectation that you would also be at least partially invested in everybody else's projects as well. Not having your own stake at the end of it, of you'll be graded or off of their project, but kind of this expectation or even possibly a reflection component of you engaging with other people in that course and their projects and showing the ways in which possibly their projects are informing your own. I think just facilitating those conversations would be the way that you can pull that interdisciplinary experience to a personal project.

Mia Kass (31:29):

Yeah, I agree. Having a peer review or check in with your fellow students during the production process, if you want to do make a short film by yourself, film is collaborative

Gianna Smurro (31:43):

And I think even let's say someone were to pursue a research paper, I think it could also be said for the same thing of pointing to different areas of current trends in an industry to guide someone's thinking in that. So I think it could also even just extend to many different types of projects that people can have an input in. Say someone were to be doing a social media campaign where a lot of people are very avenue users of social media and just kind of explaining the different ways in which they consume media, possibly different people that they might follow that you can emulate throughout the creation of your social media campaign could also be another great example. So I think it really is able to be applied to a multitude of different projects that people can kind of collaborate on.

Matt Wittstein (32:20):

So I just want to acknowledge that neither of you answered the question that I actually asked. You gave great information, but the very basic question was would you prefer an individual or a group project

Mia Kass (32:30):

Group? I would say group, because film is collaborative and you're combining, yeah, history, production and then interpreting film. So yeah, I group,

Gianna Smurro (32:42):

I would also say group project just because of the nature of the minor. I think a group project will facilitate that learning between students.

Matt Wittstein (32:50):

I love that you both agree that group is totally better for this, but you offered such good ideas of how you might do this in an individual way that I'm excited to share with Lena and Kai because we always have those exceptions to those types of things. So to sort of wrap up our conversation, I have two requests for you. I want you to give us one piece of advice that you have for Lena and Kai, just one simple thing that they should do or think about as they're developing their capstone. And second, I want you to recommend a film that you think absolutely should be part of in some way, a global film and cultures minor. I know you both are somewhat a film buff, so I want you to just pick the one that you want to make sure is in there.

Mia Kass (33:34):

My piece of advice, so this is a new capstone and you're going into uncharted territory, but I do believe that the course selection process, I'm going to rate my professor and checking to see how other students, what they think of the professor. So yeah, it is the professor that makes the course.

Gianna Smurro (33:59):

So my piece of advice for the course would be able to be open to the fact that there will be students from all these different disciplines and finding the ways in which you can combine those experiences. I think it also heavily depends on what kind of group of students you have in a particular course and kind

being open to the fact that every single time you teach a particular course in this minor, there will be a completely different experience for all the people involved based on who is in that particular class and being open to kind of mold the expectations in the project or the goals of that course based on who is taking it at that specific time. I think that would be my biggest piece of advice. And then for a film that I think should be included, I think parasite should be included, which is a South Korean black comedy thriller film. I think that would be a great film to be included in this course. This was a film that I had actually watched as a part of this course because mine was actually taught by a communications professor. It's spoken in Korean, so it was kind of a great way to bridge international cinema with learning here in us and kind being able to bridge seeing cinema in a different way.

Mia Kass (35:07):

My film would be all quiet on the western front and my dad actually, he made me watch that because we were going to different World War I battlefields and so to kind of give my sister and I context, yeah, he made us watch this movie and yeah, it is from the perspective of a young German soldier and his experiences during world I and what it was like living in the trenches, which it was awful. It looked awful, would not want to do that. So yeah, that's the film I would recommend.

Matt Wittstein (35:49):

Mia and Gianna, I just want to thank you so much for your time, your perspective. I think you're going to be giving Lena and Kai a lot of really good ideas to fit into their development course and maybe Mia you'll be able to take that in a couple years.

Gianna Smurro (36:05):

Thank you very much for having us. Really appreciate it.

Mia Kass (36:08):

Thank you.

Matt Wittstein (36:21):

Hi Kai. Hi Lena. Thanks for coming back to help us conclude this two-parter.

Lina Kuhn (36:26):

Thanks for having us. I'm so excited to hear what the students had to say.

Mia Kass (36:30):

Same. Thank you so much for having us back.

Matt Wittstein (36:33):

So we already shared about Janet Bean and Drew Pearl's discussion and listeners can check that out on last month's episode. To briefly recap, Janet and Drew emphasized guided reflection, the idea of helping students flourish and having a clear target and creating a structure that fits the tension between finding the right amount of freedom and guidance. I also got to talk with Gianna Smurro and Mia Kass, two Elon University students, about your capstone course. Gianna is a center for engaged learning student scholar and graduating cinema and television arts major and political science minor. Mia is a sophomore international and global studies student and a computer science student and a self-proclaimed lover of

films. Interestingly, when I asked Gianna and Mia about effective ways films have been used in their classes, they both almost went directly to the content direct pieces that watching films and talking about films is innate to gianna's major and watching film to help Mia understand different cultures and even improve some language skills.

(37:32):

As an international and global studies student, I asked what would make a capstone experience valuable to them and they had slightly different perspectives. Gianna wanted everything she had done to be used and valued in some way and to have some reflection connecting to Drew and Janet's suggestion to help her see how her learning has progressed. On the flip side, Mia wants you to make space where students can experiment and feel safe failing while trying some new ideas out. I explicitly asked them about examples when they worked in groups and not everyone was starting from the same knowledge or skill base, and they shared wonderful cross-disciplinary examples of providing some of the basic resources and foundations as refreshers, as well as instructors doing an early semester poll to assess knowledge that adjusting learning activities to match the learners. However, Mia really wanted to stress that making yourself both available and approachable is what works best for her to feel like she can actually be successful in a course.

(38:30):

I wanted to learn a little bit more about what they view as available and approachable, and they admitted that things like office hours are nice but probably aren't really the most used method of availability. Mia shared a story of sending an email to a professor at 1:00 AM but knowing that it was okay because that professor had shared that they would likely be responding to emails very late that night. Gianna echoed that by suggesting building some of that relationship structure into the class, having a class period set aside for talking with students or groups individually clearly indicating when and how you're available, and Mia added those five minutes right after class are always really handy. One of the things I loved about this conversation is how different our students perspectives were. For example, Gianna was excited about student choice and agency, but Mia finds a blank canvas daunting.

(39:16):

This sounded a lot like the tension that Janet and Drew described about giving them too much information and that crippling our creativity or giving them no information and crippling their ability to actually do something. I also asked them about group work versus individual work, and though they agreed that a group project makes a lot of sense for an interdisciplinary program like this, they also had some great ideas of how to work individually or involve peers in the process, which might help with that, onboarding students from different backgrounds or different disciplines. Mostly the ideas revolved around having elements of peer review, consultation, checking in with each other often and building on each other's strengths. If I could sum it up in a few points, our students echoed that reflection is essential and also want the capstone to be a place where they can imagine try new things and not fear failing. They felt that the professor is so important to success and that a great professor will learn who their students are and adapt to their needs throughout the semester. Mia and Gianna offered a lot of advice and personal experience, so is there anything that stands out to you from what they said?

Kai Swanson (40:23):

Absolutely. I really appreciate their feedback and I couldn't agree more. I think back to my experiences of undergrad and grad school and how so many of my best experiences in the classroom and outside of the classroom really came from having supportive faculty and staff. And so it's important for students to know that they're supported, that they have an anchor and they also have an entire network of people

who are there to support them with their ideas and helping them come to fruition. So yeah, that was kind of the first thing that caught me, that it's like, yes, absolutely. I think that's so important. And I really think a priority of not just capstone course, but all of the courses that are part of the global filming cultures minor. And then the other aspect that I really appreciated as well was trying new things and not fearing failure. That is the point. That's what innovation is and that's a major goal and making sure students know that if they try something, we're going to be there to support them through the capacity that we can and we will provide them with other resources as well to help them with their idea and with their project. I really very thankful for Gianna and Mia and their wonderful feedback.

Lina Kuhn (41:36):

I really like the idea of the safe place for failing, and this goes back to that blank piece of paper that you were talking about versus giving them too much structure. And I think some students will really jump at the chance to do a final project that is tapping into skills that they have never flexed before. Whereas some students might really want to stick with something they feel comfortable with, and I think having that flexibility will probably be a good model for the capstone. Maybe we give them several examples of projects that they could do. They then will have to decide, do I want to pick a project that already plays to my strengths or do I want to go in a direction I've never gone before and potentially have to learn some new things here at the end. But as Kai said, I think giving them as many resources as possible and putting them in conversation and connection with other professors and other students. Yeah,

Matt Wittstein (42:38):

I think there's an opportunity here to also couple that with the reflection of just asking your students at the end of the semester, Hey, how did you take a risk? Why did you take that risk? Did you feel safe doing that? What made you feel safe doing that? And then maybe you can continue that process of learning how to create that safe fail forward environment.

Lina Kuhn (42:58):

Yeah, I was going to say along those lines that I think it will be important for them to articulate why they're doing the projects that they are. So we've been talking about for the capstone, maybe having them put together a pitch of some kind, and Kai can speak to that more because I think that's something that is probably more common in CTA in the cinema department, but having them really justify why they would want to pick something that they don't know as well or that they do know as well, what are going to be the uses of that project moving forward. So that's the transition piece. What do they hope to use the project for in the future will definitely be useful.

Kai Swanson (43:40):

Absolutely. Pitches are a crucial part of all of my classes in cinema, television, arts that I teach. And although I feel like pitching as part of the film production vernacular, I think it expands beyond that and it's an important skillset for any student no matter what career they pursue, to have an understanding of how to be persuasive, but also before investing so much time into a project, knowing this is the project that you want to pursue. Doing preliminary research and making sure that you have a foundation of resources to support you with whatever project you're pursuing and then sharing that passion and sharing that research with a group of people who it's established on the first day are there to support you in the process of making that project. So yeah, I fully agree with that. I think that's a great idea, actually writing that down.

(44:27):

Along with that, I love the idea of having interventions integrated into the course where we just sit down for a few minutes and ask certain questions to everyone. I think I would want to do something along the lines of having give students a survey. I love giving students surveys that are anonymous to where they sit and they feel like they can be honest, this is how I feel about this part of the process, or this is how I'm feeling about this project or this course, having one on the first day of class at the halfway point and then at the end, and then once they've had a moment to reflect and to answer those questions privately, they then open it up to a discussion and then have more time to fill in certain other questions of the survey. So yeah, I really appreciate this feedback and it's providing a lot of ideas that I want to integrate into not just the Capstone course, but I think other courses and also in the intro course as well.

Lina Kuhn (45:21):

I love that approach, Kai. I think that is a really great way to get to that accessibility or availability that they were speaking about, making clear that the students have space to have their ideas that could be anonymous or could not be anonymous, but that way they feel comfortable sharing.

Matt Wittstein (45:43):

I fear that these conversations may have left you with more work and more thoughts about what you might need to do next. So what are your next steps? How are you as sort of a partnership, a collaboration, but also those other collaborators? I know this was a big team that put this together. What are your next steps to make this capstone happen?

Kai Swanson (46:01):

I have been taking extensive notes with all of this feedback we've received, which I really, once again, thank you, Matt. I really appreciate this opportunity and it's on a document that we have shared with our other advisory board members who are part of the minor because it's collaborative and interdisciplinary. We want to make sure that we have other people, not just me as an individual who's going to be teaching the capstone next spring, but I want to make sure that I share all of these ideas, all of these resources with everyone. Because once again, you never know what you're going to learn when a colleague reads something and what they're going to see in that and even maybe even bring up another idea that could be really impactful and making sure that you're keeping your students engaged and that they're getting something from the capstone course.

(46:44):

So I think once sharing those ideas, we'll have a discussion with our advisory board and then from there, start integrating very specific. I know we can't integrate every single little thing, but I think really focusing on three specific goals, and that's something that will come out of the conversation. I'm going to try to integrate into the first year of the class and then once I reflect on the class or the first semester of the class and then integrate whatever I learned from that class, from the feedback that I received from those surveys into the next version of the class and so on and so forth. Those are my next steps at least.

Lina Kuhn (47:15):

I think going back to the connection piece, between the introduction and the capstone classes, we've taught the introductory course twice as an experimental course, and I am teaching it as the first official introductory course in fall 2024. So at the end of that class, that will also be a very good opportunity for

us to maybe ask the students some questions and how should this lead into the capstone? And we can see who is the cohort that we have right now and what do they need specifically from a capstone, and that can help since there's some time in between. The semesters can help maybe shape what comes next.

Matt Wittstein (47:57):

I can honestly say I'm really excited about this course and this minor at my university, and I can't wait to see what some of the products you students and you all come up with as you keep developing this. Thank you both. One more time for sharing everything with us and helping us talk about Capstones on our podcast.

Kai Swanson (48:15):

Thank you, Matt. And thank you to Gianna, Mia, Drew, and Janet for all of your feedback.

Lina Kuhn (48:23):

Thank you for this opportunity and hopefully we have also inspired some other capstone ideas for the people listening.

Matt Wittstein (48:41):

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