

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 3, Episode 1 – Intersection of Civil Discourse and the First Amendment

Matt Wittstein (00:00:10):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. Welcome to our third season of Limed: Teaching with a Twist. I'm sure you're all well aware as we enter the fall 2024 semester that there are a few upcoming elections happening around the world. To kick off this season, I asked Israel Balderas, assistant professor of journalism at Elon University, to share some of his plans to embed student-centered discourse in his media law and ethics course, a requirement for all School of Communications students. Our panel included Miriam Lipsky from the University of Miami, Tim McCarthy from Harvard University, and Natalie Peeples a junior psychology student at Elon University. The panel talks about setting expectations in a course and they provide several tips and techniques to allow students to engage both safely and bravely. A brief note, the recordings for this episode were conducted over eight days during which political events in the United States were exceptionally dynamic. Just prior to recording our introductory segment, there was an assassination attempt on Donald Trump. Prior to interviewing our panel, Joe Biden dropped out of the race and when concluding with Dr. Balderas, Kamala Harris was only the presumptive democratic candidate. We typically try not to date our episodes, but it seemed important to acknowledge how quickly the election was changing and how that is likely to be a challenge and opportunity in our teaching and learning conversations. I hope you enjoy this episode. I'm Matt Wittstein.

(00:01:45):

Today I'm joined by Israel Balderas and I am so excited to hear about his ideas for engaging his students in civil discourse in his media law courses. Israel, welcome to the podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself for our audience?

Israel Balderas (00:02:01):

Oh, absolutely, and thank you very much Matt for having me here on this podcast. I'm excited to talk about what we do in the classroom. My name is Israel Balderas. I am an assistant professor of journalism at the School of Communications at Elon University. Prior to coming here to Elon University, I taught at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida, and then prior to that I had an actually prior career. I was a former broadcast television anchor reporter and I'm also a First Amendment lawyer. So for me, what's been fun about coming into the classroom and away from the newsroom is to bring that wealth of experience and now try to incorporate it in a way that is engaging.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:40):

Before we get into your classroom setting, I want to know a little bit more about how you are integrating some of your experience as a lawyer and a journalist into your teaching of journalism as a profession.

Israel Balderas (00:02:51):

It's interesting because for the longest time I was focused on teaching television reporting. That was my background. I was an anchor, I was a reporter. I worked both at the local level, I worked at the national level for many years. I worked as a political reporter in Washington DC and so my focus was teaching journalism, but now at Elon University, I came here to specifically teach media law and ethics. Now, that's unique for Elon because in many universities they separate the two. There's the media law and

then there's the ethics, and sometimes ethics is communication ethics. It could be applied ethics. Here it's both. It's an idea of you have the right to say something, but should you say it, and now what I focus on a lot is how do I make media law relevant to students beyond journalism? Because here at the School of Communication we have five majors. As you can imagine. Those types of students and those types of majors are quite different, not just in how they learn, but in how they also receive the information and then talk about it. My challenge has been to make sure that everything is not just journalism centric, but if I can't make it relevant to, for example, a major in media analytics, then I'm losing that student. What I've tried to do in media law and ethics is to say, this applies to you as this major and here's why.

Matt Wittstein (00:04:15):

What have been some of your strategies to do that? With some of the non-dualism majors,

Israel Balderas (00:04:19):

I've never had the same syllabus from one semester to the other, and the reason for that is that I would argue predominantly since 2016, First Amendment law, one of those topics where things are happening in the news today, they're impacting this major this way today, take copyright, take privacy. There's always an article out there talking about how this is being impacted today and specifically when we talk about speech on campus, that topic has exploded. So for me, I try to make it very relevant in that I tell my students, I'm teaching you not just what's happening today, but this is how your industry is going to be impacted in the next year, two years, three years because of this topic. A good example of that is copyright. Copyright has been changing dramatically in the way we look at what does it mean to own an intellectual property? What does it mean to have fair use in that copyright and certainly in a digital world. For a lot of my students, specifically communication designs and media analytics, we have to talk about what's going on in the digital world in order for them to understand how First Amendment law impacts the work they're going to be doing, not just now, but in the next three to five years.

Matt Wittstein (00:05:34):

You shared a little bit about your media law and ethics course. Can you tell us a little bit more about that context? How many students are there? Is it a required course? Where are they within their programs? Do they like the course or do they not like the course?

Israel Balderas (00:05:48):

Oh my. That would take an entire podcast. When you ask, do they like the course or they do not like the course, so media Law and Ethics is a 4,000 level course. It's a required of all School of Comm majors, so we're talking about 1200, 1300 students that have to take media law and ethics as a required course. Because it is a 4,000 level course, it's difficult as it's, and students will tell you it's one of the courses that scares them the most because they know it's hard to begin with. But the next level is do you want to take this course with Professor Balderas and I have the reputation that I am one of the hardest professors in the School of Communications, and the reason for that is that I teach to the level of what we have here in the School of Communication, which is Communication Fellows.

(00:06:31):

Communication Fellows are students who come into the school, they get a scholarship because of high grades, and what we tell them is we are going to offer you courses that are going to challenge you that are going to be high academic standards, and that's the way their program is from their first year through their fourth year, by the time they get to me. Immediate law and ethics, in my opinion, is one of

those courses where it is vitally important that you learn this material, not just memorization, but that you understand critically about why it is that in our society, the First Amendment is still first among many, and that is that when we talk about the five rights of the First Amendment, speech, religion, press, right, to petition your government against, redress the right to gather, to assemble, this is really at the heart of what makes us a free society and for us to understand the responsibility and the rights that we have in a free society, we really have to understand why the First Amendment matters, but in a way that it's relevant, it's relevant to students today, it's relevant to their majors.

(00:07:31):

So for me, I have a very high bar and I have requirement of students when it comes to reading, when it comes to homework, when it comes to application, I have created a course where I take Bloom's Taxonomy to heart, and what I mean by Bloom's Taxonomy, it's a model of how do we teach our students. At the base level of that model is we want our students to learn through memorization, but as we move up through that model, it's analysis, it's critical thinking, it's application, and so for example, my final exam is three hours long and it's not memorization, it's hypotheticals, it's situation based. You have to make argumentation, you have to apply the law, and students are typing at two hours and 59 minutes. It's that reputation that students know about my class that when they come in, they know there's going to be a lot of requirement on their part and they have to engage in the material with that in mind, because it is a required course, it's 33 students, so normally I teach two sections of media law and ethics, so I have roughly 66 students taking my course and I try my darnest to make sure that I know each one of my students.

(00:08:36):

I try to memorize their names, their majors, what they care about because of the material that I teach and the difficulties that come with teaching controversial topics like what can you say in a free society? The first thing I do is I build a relationship with my students so that they feel like their voice matters.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:55):

So you bring up that you have to teach some controversial topics. We also are sort of at a tenuous time here in the United States approaching a election that should be pretty well contested between the candidates, so I would love to learn about what your planning for the upcoming semester and some of your thoughts on how you're going to get your students to engage with that material.

Israel Balderas (00:09:17):

Right now I'm working on a paper that is set to be published in 2025. It's a special addition to a journal that within my profession we adhere to. It's called Communications Law and Policy Journal. It's sponsored by AJMC, which is an organization made up of college professors that teach in the area of communications and journalism, and the title of my paper is called Bridging Divides through Critical Discourse, media Law, pedagogy Reimagined, and the special addition of this journal asked the following, do we need to rethink how we teach media law and ethics at a time when we see increasing polarized society in America today? I would say since the 2016 election, we have been more tribal in our politics, whether it is at the local level or at the national level, you're on the right or you're on the left, and there was a time when there was a big middle, the middle class, the people who sort of could understand both sides of politics.

(00:10:20):

Over the last few years, that middle has been shrinking more and more. The data shows that people are more prone to believe their party, whether it's a Republican or Democrat party. Already students are

coming into the classroom with that same polarization, sentiments that are plaguing American society in general. So now let's talk about media law and ethics because we are teaching complex, socially impactful issues like what does it mean to have free speech? Is hate speech protected? What about threatening speech? What about speech that leads to insurrection? What about privacy regulation? What does it mean to have privacy, especially in the digital world? What about emerging technologies? How should the government regulate things like ai? So you combine those two together, a polarized society and complex issues, and so therefore individuals that span various demographics, they come in and they're struggling to engage with the material. My challenge is to say, rather than me just lecture on this material, how do I make sure that I create an environment where we can have student-centered, engaged, focused learning so that students cannot just only engage the material, but they can really be challenged to think about the material we're talking about.

Matt Wittstein (00:11:40):

And so what are your initial thoughts on how you're going to create that environment?

Israel Balderas (00:11:45):

One of the things that I've been talking more and more is this idea that I'm not just teaching First Amendment law, but that rather my driving purpose. What is my why is to teach civil discourse in the classroom? I use First Amendment material as the content to teach civil discourse. For me, this idea of adopting a student driven, critically oriented discussion model, I want to make sure I'm teaching students to embrace what I call the positive tension of critical discourse. What is positive tension? So positive tension for me is this idea that we are going to have topics in the classroom that are going to be challenging for students for a long time, especially at universities. We've talked about safe spaces and creating spaces for students that they feel safe, that they feel welcome in the classroom, but the problem is that the things that I'm teaching take a topic like hate speech.

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The topic in and of itself is not safe. It's going to create tension, but that tension is a good thing for students, so therefore instead of a safe space, we call it a brave space, and that was a term that was coined by two professors, Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens. They were talking about this idea that when you have a brave space, a brave space is one where you're going to have this deliberate discussions, these concepts where we're going to really struggle with the material, where we're going to have diverse points of views, and at the end of the day, it's about the pedagogy. It's not about the right or wrong, but it's about the exchange of ideas. It's about perspective taking from others, being willing to be respectful in many ways, being empathic about other points of views and then being able to walk away feeling like you really learn not just the material, but you learn from others.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:30):

As I share some of this out with our panel, what are you hoping to learn from their experience and expertise?

Israel Balderas (00:13:37):

What I would love to learn from others, two things. One, I think certainly we've been challenged since 2020 to find out how much can we push students and challenge students to grow and to help them become a better version of the profession that we are teaching them. What I want to hear from them is number one, their experience since 2020, have you found students to engage with the material in the

classroom? Have they disengaged? I think the data bores out that students have been disengaged for the last three or four years. What are some of the techniques that you are using both pedagogically and relationally to bring those students back into a way that they're excited about being here in the classroom environment? The other thing too that I would love to hear from professors, what kind of structure are you creating in the classroom that creates accountability?

(00:14:29):

And what I mean by that is in the spring, many of the colleagues that I talked to talked about how absenteeism was increasing dramatically, and it wasn't just right around the time of the semester ending, but it was throughout the semester, more and more across majors, across disciplines, students were not coming to class, and so there's been this debate whether or not we should have policies in place that require students to come to class, that if they do not come to class, then that would lead to their grades suffering. Because of that, a lot of the policies that we implemented because of Covid gave flexibility to students to choose whether or not to come to class. And I'd be curious to know from our panelists, do you think that was the right policy then, and do you think that policy still works? How much accountability do we put into our classroom so that students know that they have to come to class, they have to engage with the material, and learning requires them to be active participants in that material.

Matt Wittstein (00:15:28):

As you're thinking about the upcoming semester, are you having any things that you're worried about in engaging students in that type of discourse?

Israel Balderas (00:15:35):

Certainly the presidential election is a concern for me. It should be said that we are recording this interview. A couple of days out from when there was an assassination attempt on the Republican candidate here in the United States, Donald Trump, he was at a rally on Saturday and a 20-year-old attempted to assassinate a presidential candidate. If prior to this event, we would say that our society is quite polarized. I think it's fair to say that. Now this really raises the bar on that concern. People have said things like, there's something wrong with the soul of America. President Biden, who is the Democratic candidate, even he came out and said, all of us now face a time of testing. He said, there's no place for violence in America. He said, we cannot allow this violence to be normalized. That's in 2024. I covered Donald Trump in 2016. I was working as a television reporter in Florida, and I remember covering both he and Hillary Clinton.

(00:16:37):

I remember going to these rallies and with Donald Trump, you'd have 20,000 people showing up to these rallies with Hillary Clinton, 500, 600. What he would do is he would get the crowd going and he would say, you all ready for this? And the crowd knew what was coming. They're like, yeah, yeah, yeah. And then he would turn around and all the journalists were in the middle of what was like a pen right in the middle of the 20,000 people attending. In previous years, you'd have the media standing all the way in the back, not with Trump. With Trump. He would put you right in the middle of 20,000 people and he would say, it's their fault. The media is lying to you. And they would turn around and they would start yelling and screaming, but he did it on purpose. That was part of his shtick.

(00:17:22):

It was an us versus them. It's their fault. They're lying to you. The lying media, the fake news. I've got videos that I show my students of what it was like to cover Donald Trump out on the campaign trail with people yelling and screaming eight years later. If we're now at a place where people are saying there's

something wrong with the soul of America, what concerns me is that a polarized tribalistic society is now going to be more agitated, it's going to be more defensive, is going to be quite hostile to hearing from the other. The other happens to be a human being. So one of my concerns here at Elon University is we're in a bubble. We face a difficult time in our politics, but we can't be afraid to try to engage with that difficulty. So in one way, I've got hostility coming in, but I need to be able to have what Martin Luther King call love and empathy going out. And I think what I'm anticipating is to have difficult conversations to create these brave spaces to call people in, not call people out, and to make sure that when it comes to media law and ethics, our goal should not be to silence or shame students for problematic views. Our goal is to create these opportunities for growth and understanding and not shy away from what's happening in the media landscape.

Matt Wittstein (00:18:47):

Israel, I want to thank you for sharing your context and your ideas with us. I can't wait to take some of this to our panel and see what they say about it.

Israel Balderas (00:18:54):

Well, thank you very much for having me here, and I look forward to hearing some more great ideas.

Matt Wittstein (00:19:10):

Hi Miriam. Hi Natalie. Hi, Tim. I am so excited to have you here. I had a cool conversation with Israel Balderas, one of my colleagues at Elon University about having more civil discourse in his media law and ethics course. Before we get to that conversation, I want you to introduce yourselves to our audience, and in doing so, share your name, title, where you're coming from, and what does it mean to you to win a culture war when inevitably that means somebody loses a culture war.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:19:38):

Hi, so I'm Miriam Lipsky. I'm the director of the Platform for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, affectionately known as Petal at the University of Miami. That's like our Center for Teaching and Learning. I also lead our programs on intergroup dialogue. I teach an undergraduate course called Creating Belonging through Dialogue that I teach with a partner, and then we also have a program on intergroup dialogue for faculty and for graduate students. In thinking about the framework of intergroup dialogue and your question about winning the culture wars, I want to turn that on its head a little bit. One of the things we always talk about with our students and intergroup dialogue is the difference between dialogue and debate. In a debate, one side is going to win, one side is going to lose, and framing a discussion in that way means that someone is going to walk away being told that they're wrong, they lost their opinion, their feelings, their thoughts are incorrect.

(00:20:34):

Whereas when you have a dialogue, you're seeking to understand where the other person is coming from. In a dialogue there is no winner and loser. It's about understanding the other person's ideas, how they've come to those ideas and thoughts and feelings around a particular issue. In doing so, a lot of times you find some common ground. So when I have a chance to explain my views and you're actually listening, and then vice versa, there's real opportunity for me to understand where you're coming from and to say, I may not agree with you. I may not hold the same views as you, but I understand based on your background, your family, your culture, your religion, your deeply held beliefs, how you could think that and now I understand you better. I don't have to agree or disagree. No one is winning and losing,

but I think when you can truly have a dialogue like that with people with whom you disagree, everyone comes out in rich.

Natalie Peeples (00:21:35):

I am Natalie Peeples. I am a rising junior at Elon University, so I'm a student here participating in research. I very much agree with what Miriam just said in response to your question concerning culture wars, I think that it should be more focused on the discussion that people can have and being able to learn from each other. I think that with the culture war, it becomes more about fighting than it does about the issue at hand, and when it comes to fighting, it becomes something where people do not feel comfortable sharing what they believe. People do not feel comfortable listening to one another because they feel like they're being targeted. And so the entire idea of a culture war and who wins that is to me basically just who is the loudest person and who is able to stick to their ground, which is not the way that I think it should go. I think that it is a lot better to be able to have those discussions, be able to learn from each other and like Miriam was saying, focusing on talking about it, focusing on being able to understand one another rather than fighting over an issue that everybody has stake in and everybody's interested in.

Tim McCarthy (00:22:37):

Hi everyone. Great to be with all of you and Matt, thanks for that great question. My name is Tim McCarthy and I teach on the faculty at Harvard University. I have a joint appointment in our graduate school of education and at the Kennedy School of Government, and I'm a historian of social movements, and so I teach a bunch of different kinds of courses on social change and the dynamics of social change within the realm of history and politics. It's an interesting question about the culture wars. I should just say right up front that I'm a pacifist and I loathe wars, so I'm not someone who enjoys a war and that goes for the language of war. So I think both of the level of the actual fighting that happens in wars and also the rhetorical or linguistic battles that we use words to wage, those things are distasteful to me in a general sense.

(00:23:21):

And I absolutely agree with both Miriam and Natalie that this idea of intergroup dialogue across lines of difference as a way to think about how we can seek to understand how we can ask questions of one another to understand that those differences, to unearth the things that may separate us or make us disagree with one another and to listen and to ask questions and all those things are vital. And I actually think that colleges and universities actually play a crucial and maybe even a unique role in fostering those kinds of contexts in our classrooms and outside of them where we can actually do more of that work so that we can understand how we can live together, not just to tolerate one another, but to actually embrace one another and coexist in a peaceful and generative way. That said, I think we're living in a world filled with conflict, some of it quite violent and certainly rooted in not just disagreement but discrimination, abuses of power and these kinds of things.

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For me, it's a both and situation that it's fine and important and I would actually lead with the project of trying to understand and to listen and question and these kinds of things. But at the end of the day, we also live in a world where there are people who are hellbent on taking people's rights away, on taking away protections that have been legally and legislatively put into place in order to make sure that people who are different, who are not seen as being part of the norm where other in some way are actually protected in a world from the kind of violence, rhetorical or otherwise, that we see so much in

the culture. And so I think that the culture wars are just a reality that we're living within and that the dialogue approach to things is I think a really important antidote to that, to lower the temperature and the volume as Natalie said, but also at the same time we're living within that reality that requires us, I think to fight and to fight in a way that roots whatever we're saying in our value system that presents to the world, this is why I believe what I believe, not just this is how loud I can say it, and to try to then use that values-based argumentation as a way of maybe debate and disagreement as a way to persuade as many people as possible that your moral system is a better way to live as a vision for a multicultural society that's rooted as much in disagreement and difference as it is in agreement and understanding.

Matt Wittstein (00:25:38):

Well, I can tell from those responses that we're going to have a really lively conversation today. So as I said, I recently interviewed one of my colleagues, Israel Balderas, who's an assistant professor of journalism here at Elon. He is a First amendment lawyer, and previously he was a political journalist based out of Washington DC and he teaches a media law and ethics course, which is an upper level required course for all communications majors. He really wants to engage students in critical discourse discussion-based pedagogy in his class, and he has some great ideas on how to do that. But our goal today is to sort of give some ideas of how you might engage from a starting point students in those conversations and get them to build some of the skills and knowledge bases that they would need to have what you all described as dialogue instead of sort of that culture war mentality where somebody has to win. What I want to lead off with is just real quickly, what is one strategy that you use personally to reframe a tense conversation or debate style?

Tim McCarthy (00:26:44):

One of the things that I think gets in the way of productive conversations is the kind of emotional fervor that people feel deeply and also voice in various ways when they're feeling heated and where they're feeling like someone isn't understanding them either willfully or not. And so I think naming the emotional location that we're in and that we're existing within in any given moment is really important. I talk about this in my course on brave communication as developing a keen sense of emotional articulacy, the ability to say, this is why I am angry, or this is why I'm afraid. I'm feeling not understood or not seen. And I think too often we don't name that elephant in the room, that we allow those emotions to actually take over the situation without actually acknowledging the truth of their existence. And this is on all sides of these.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:27:33):

I would also say that sometimes it's important to set the stage early on in the course. So in my courses I always do community agreements at the beginning of the semester the first day, and in a small course we co-create those, but I know things that I definitely want to be on there around confidentiality and how much space people are taking up and how we're going to respect each other and treat each other and things like that. So if the students don't mention those, I will say something like, oh, in past semester students had suggested this. What do you all think of that? And everyone usually goes, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, we want to be respectful of everyone. Usually they come to this themselves and a much larger class. I know faculty who will hand out a list of kind of community agreements and say, can we all agree to these? When you've set that stage at the beginning, then when things get really heated, you have something to refer back to if people are not reacting to each other or being respectful in the way that everyone had agreed to on the first day. So I think that that's a really helpful strategy that can

avoid those situations where things are just mushrooming out of control and it makes it much easier when you have something you can refer back to.

Natalie Peeples (00:28:44):

I very much agree with what Miriam was just saying. It is extremely important to set clear expectations in a classroom. As a psychology student, we talk a lot about things like labeling emotions in our conversations and discussing things in that sort of way, and if you don't first set the expectations for the ability to do that in your classroom, students are not going to engage in that. They're not going to feel as though that's what you want them to do. Through my experience, I have seen that when my professors are examples of that and when they are the ones who are also labeling their emotions, it makes it a lot easier for the students to be able to engage in those conversations as well. And then in terms of how to reshape the kind of civil discourse that we're having and to make sure that it's not so much of a fight, I think it's very important to not place blame on the person that you're communicating with.

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I think that you definitely can have disagreements and you can obviously have differing beliefs and differing expectations of what you want to come out of the conversation, but I think that having a conversation and setting it as a conversation is imperative to being able to understand each other and work through it. If you place blame on the person, that's when they begin to feel targeted and at that point it just becomes a fight between people and it's no longer civil discourse, just like a list of setting expectations and then being able to label your emotions, being able to label where you're coming from. Setting that as an example as a professor is huge. And then also don't place blame on the people that you're communicating with.

Matt Wittstein (00:30:07):

As we're coming into this recording, president Biden has just dropped out of the election and Kamala Harris is the presumptive nominee for the Democratic party at this point, and we are approaching what is expected to be a pretty contentious election season for a lot of us in our academic settings. You all started talking a little bit about how to set the stage in sort of the beginning of the course. I want to get in a little bit more to that is how do we progress students from that early stage of it being safe and comfortable to starting to push those barriers a little bit and getting to the sense of how hard can we actually push our students?

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:30:42):

I appreciate, Matt, that you've framed it as a continuum that you start off maybe a little easier and then you want to get to the point where you can discuss more difficult topics. And I feel like that's where a lot of classroom dialogues go south is when faculty, the second day of class want to bring up this really difficult topic and students are not yet prepared and they haven't developed those relationships and haven't gotten to know each other. But I think you also have to be very purposeful in doing activities in your class where students are talking about themselves and are sharing things and they're lighter than the heavier topics that you hope to get into. It's definitely a continuum and you have to build to get there. And I've had situations where faculty that have said to me, oh, I asked these tough questions in class and no one says anything, students don't even respond.

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And I'm thinking, well, but have you set the stage? Have you built to that point or is it kind of this bomb that goes off all of a sudden I'm asking this tough question and we haven't had a chance to warm up to

get there. And I will say one other thing along those lines, every single class session, I start off with an icebreaker just to get students talking and they're talking about what I did this weekend or what my favorite ice cream is, or I mean it's something irrelevant to the course, but it gets everybody speaking. It's so simple, but in some way it really warms them up and it gets them to know each other too, which is helpful.

Natalie Peeples (00:32:08):

I think that it is super important for professors to let the students know them. I know that a lot of times professors focus on students getting to know each other, but if the authority figure in the room is not someone that they feel comfortable with, it's going to be a lot more difficult to get them engaged.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:32:25):

Natalie, can I just ask you a question about that? As a professor, if my views are very different than yours perhaps, and I've expressed those as the professor, I'm asking you as a student, would you feel less comfortable sharing your views in my class or would you feel like I might give you a lower grade or think of you negatively if your views are different than mine? Because that's something that I struggle with all the time, how much of my own opinions do I divulge? Because if a student thinks, oh, Dr. Lipsky thinks completely differently about this than me, I'm not going to discuss it. I don't want to shut them down as a student, I would really like to know how you feel about that.

Natalie Peeples (00:33:05):

I think that it is a hard thing to manage as a student. I have had professors who have disagreed with me on certain ideas, certain thoughts, certain beliefs at the beginning. It does sometimes feel like it could lead to them grading me differently, them treating me differently. In those situations where I felt that way, it often started out in the classroom of them not starting with the little things like how you were talking about earlier with starting out your class with an icebreaker, starting off with these very mundane things that are not related to the course content. That is really important. And I think that when professors do that and they engage in the icebreakers themselves, they engage in these sorts of things, that is a big step. And then also when students are sharing things in that sort of way, being able to agree with them, being able to disagree with them on those small things.

(00:33:51):

If someone says, I'm really into dance, it always makes me feel super comfortable and I'm super awesome at dance, and then having the professor say, well, I'm really glad that you're really into dance, but I don't think I could be a good dancer. Being able to begin the class and the classroom setting with the professor actively responding to students in a way that does not make them scared to be themselves, that is a really big depth to getting them to be able to feel comfortable. And when my professors have done that, when I find out that beliefs maybe don't perfectly align with mine, or when other classmates find out that the professor doesn't perfectly align with them, they're still very comfortable with expressing themselves, we're able to have open conversations because we know even if they don't relate to me in this sort of way, they're going to be able to communicate with me and accept me for what I'm saying and I can do the same for them.

Tim McCarthy (00:34:37):

One of the things that I really love about what's emerging in this conversation is this idea of what people model. And I think that that's really important because we can kind of see how we're showing up and

what we're saying and what we're not saying. And that is increasingly the case over time. And I think modeling that behavior is really important and it gets back to what you do right away, right? Modeling that kind of community accountability or the community trust building that takes place not I think always with an imposed set of rules and norms or guardrails that the professor comes in with. One of the things that I do at the beginning of every class, and sometimes I'll do it in a word cloud that's visual if it's a bigger class or I'll do it with index cards in a smaller seminar, but I do this thing called needs and gifts where they ask students, what do you need from this classroom community in order to thrive?

(00:35:26):

And then what are you going to give to this classroom community so that everyone else thrives? And so that we together can thrive and we put a list together of all the needs and all of the gifts, every single person including me and the teaching assistants, if there are them, put that up and we create this document that we actually post on our canvas site and that we circulate in print form and that we sometimes create visuals of so that students can really see and we can remind each other of what we should be modeling based on what we agreed at the very beginning. So that's something, and so modeling and reminding ourselves, Hey, remember eight weeks ago we did this thing and we said this. We're not doing that right now. Let's get back to it. And so it actually is very helpful in that regard.

(00:36:06):

It's interesting because I know there are big debates about politics in the classroom and sort of identity in the classroom lived experience. I start from the perspective that if my students want to know what I believe about almost anything, they can Google me and find out in 20 seconds about which political campaigns I've worked on, who I've given money to, where I've done protests, what's happened, quotes from the various issues in the press, stuff I've written and published and spoken about in various ways. I come in saying, look, folks, I'm an open book because you can find all of this on Google, so I'm not going to pretend I don't have views. I'm not going to pretend I'm something I'm not. But what I am going to guarantee and promise to you is I'm not trying to create a whole bunch of mes in this class.

(00:36:44):

That's not the point, and I'm never going to punish anybody in this room because they are or think differently from me, and that's my promise to you. And if you ever feel like I am not living up to that, then you call me out on that publicly in this classroom in front of your peers. And when I do that right at the beginning, it tends to disarm. What happens I think, is that the students who are least likely to be aligned with me on whatever lived experience, politics, whatever, I feel more comfortable and I've had them say that they're like, the fact that you were willing to get up and say that in the first day made me feel like, okay, maybe I can say whatever I want to say in this class and it's true. So I try to be as transparent as possible and I hope opens the door for students to also be transparent and forthcoming about their own perspectives and their own lived experiences and where they kind of enter the classroom, which I think is important for us to try to get a sense of as quickly as possible, even though I think that we become, I think more open, more transparent, more vulnerable, maybe even more brave over time.

(00:37:38):

I do think the sequencing of how we do this is also really important.

Matt Wittstein (00:37:42):

I really like that needs and gifts idea and it reminds me in my class I use a lot of metacognition with some grading pedagogy and I asked them, especially for the higher performing students, how have you enabled others to learn in this classroom? What have you done to contribute to the learning

environment that resonates with me and the needs and gifts as something that we can actively do throughout the semester instead of just a personal reflection? One of the things you pulled into there, Tim, was the idea of accountability in a couple different ways. So one that your students can somehow hold you accountable, but also setting up some of those guidelines. And Miriam, you talked about the course agreements in your courses as sort of a means of setting the stage for that stuff. I'm going to throw this to Natalie. How comfortable is it to hold your peers accountable and how comfortable would it be to call out a professor that does hold some sort of power dynamic over you?

Natalie Peeples (00:38:32):

I think that this is a very interesting question and that it very much depends on the type of student I am part of the honors fellows here. With that comes more interest in academics than some others. With being a part of the honors fellows, I do feel confident in leadership as well as in discussion being open. I think in regards to peers, it's more of a question of the leadership role than it is of calling out your peers. I think that in a classroom setting, talking with your peers in general is what I would consider closest to calling them out is just having an open conversation with them. I think that in classroom settings for some students it is very easy to communicate openly with your peers and make them feel heard and make you feel heard as well. But I think that you have to know how to discuss difficult conversations and difficult topics and not everybody feels comfortable doing that.

(00:39:28):

Not everybody has been raised in a way where they feel like they could have done that. I was very lucky to be raised in a household where we had difficult conversations growing up. I talked about these things with my parents, I talked about these things with adults. I also grew up in a household where adults, yes, they are authority figures, but they are not people that I have to agree with all the time. So in terms of calling out professors or disagreeing with professors, I would feel semi comfortable in doing it. But even myself, if a professor told me, make sure that you can call me out if I am not sticking to my promises as a professor, it would be kind of intimidating to do so. It would take a lot of patience for me to think through these things and then be able to efficiently talk to my professor about calling them out.

(00:40:12):

I don't think that it would be something that I would feel confident being like, oh, that's not what we were doing. And then immediately calling 'em out. It would be something where I would take a lot of time to think about it, and I think that that's something a lot of students would do, but again, I think it does go back to different types of students. Being able to cater to different students is important because not every student is going to feel comfortable calling out a professor. Not every student is comfortable in leading peers, conversing with peers, things like that.

Tim McCarthy (00:40:37):

Natalie, I appreciate that you brought up how you were raised because I was raised as Irish, Italian Catholic working class kid at a table filled with factory workers and educators and union presidents, and the whole idea that you shouldn't talk about politics or religion at the dinner table was literally, that's all we talked about plus sports. And so I think my own kind of temperament when it comes to these things, however generous I try to be is always a little bit like, Hey, it's okay if we have the fight as long as we keep it above board and still can hug each other and break bread. At the end of the day, this language of calling out and I realize I'm the one who introduced it, and so I want to complicate it a little bit. When I say calling out, I do mean a kind of gentle accountability mechanism that I think as professors have to put in place across those power differentials.

(00:41:24):

I think right away I try to signal to my students all the time that I am open to criticism that I'm going to do what I ask them to do and I'm going to try to model as best I can and I may fail, and when I do, when I fall down, please tell me so I can get back up and get right on the path again. One of the things that I assign early on in my course is actually an article by Loretta Ross on Calling in, and she's just written a book about this on calling out culture and so forth. So she talks about a whole bunch of strategies about how you call people in these contentious moments and across lines of difference and power and to try to have more productive conversations and more critical and conversations that seek to understand back to what we were talking about earlier.

(00:42:02):

And so that's one of the things that I think we can do as a classroom community to build not a calling out culture, but this calling in inside these spaces that we're building together. And I think you can do that in lots of ways. I don't necessarily expect every student to say, Hey, McCarthy, you said this yesterday and you're full of crap. You should take that back. Maybe that's what they do, but more often it's a, Hey, can we talk in office hours? Can we have a conversation, me and the student about things that are happening in the class that may not meet their expectations or meet their needs? And how do we have those private conversations that we can then bring into the larger classroom conversation that changes the dynamics? I used to really resist a kind of exit ticket after the class and say to students, pluses and deltas, what worked for you?

(00:42:46):

What'd you like about today's class and what would you like to see more of? And those have been so helpful for me to read them and say, okay, there's a lot that's working, but there's a couple of things I could be doing better and there's one thing in particular I can do better next time. And then leading the class. And I always start class by saying, Hey, loved your exit tickets. Thanks for the intel. I love that you all love the small group conversation on X topic, but I also know you need me to do a little bit better job facilitating when things get hot, so I'm going to try to work on that today. Is that all right? And they say yes, and we proceed and there's something that again, I think we're both modeling, they're modeling holding us accountable and also contributing to the class getting better as it goes along. I'm listening to them and I'm trying to pivot with them and make those changes along the way too. And together we're building something and we're improving something in the process, and I think that that helps to build trust that then opens up more opportunities for students and faculty to be really honest with each other in a way that's generative rather than closing down.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:43:42):

I love that you use the Loretta Ross article. I also use that article, I assign it to my students again as a way of talking about what's the difference between calling in and calling out and getting them to understand that. And then I love the exit ticket idea too. It's a great way to get formative feedback even if a professor doesn't do it for every class, but maybe you do it when you feel like something felt a little off today. Let me do an exit ticket for today's class and see what students are saying. Of course, the really important thing is to let them know that their feedback was heard in the next class. I love that. The other thing I just wanted to follow up on is the ability to build dialogue and conversation skills because some students may not have had this opportunity to really talk about contentious.

(00:44:31):

Some students I have found in my classes are from cultures where you would never speak to the professor, you would never question the professor, you would never talk to another student in class. It is

a one-way professor to student knowledge poured in kind of experience that they've had, and then they find it very difficult when we want them to discuss and have dialogue with others. So providing them with some sort of low stakes experiences early on in the class where they get to discuss something with other students and practice and you give them guidelines like in your discussion, these are the things we want you to focus on and here's things about active listening and things like that to really help them build their skills can be so helpful.

Natalie Peeples (00:45:15):

I also wanted to touch on another aspect of the calling in versus calling out with professors in particular. I've had some courses where my professors outright ask people to engage in conversation during the classroom about what they think is going well, what could change in the course to make it better for the students. And then I've also had professors who have encouraged office hours, which I think is extremely helpful. I think that when you offer things such as office hours, it gives the students one-on-one time to feel comfortable to come to you. And I think if you continue to reiterate that office hours are something that they can come to, they eventually do, but also I think that it's important to have anonymous forms where you can fill out your name if you would like to, but you don't have to fill out a name and you can write feedback.

(00:45:59):

And in that way, that's what I have always felt most comfortable doing because that feels like you can be entirely honest without having the focus all on you. And that is also something that I know has been helpful for some of my peers who have not been raised in the same way as I have and do not feel comfortable speaking out against authority figures. Do not feel comfortable speaking out when they feel uncomfortable. I've had peers who have been raised in households where you don't speak out about these things if you're uncomfortable. That's just the way that it's going to have to be because the authority figure is comfortable in that space. I know that some of these people have indeed appreciated when they've been able to fill out an anonymous form and actually be able to discuss their ideas without feeling pressured.

Tim McCarthy (00:46:38):

Three quick things in response that one is that I totally agree, Natalie, that having anonymous forms of communication in that regard and feedback loops is really, really important because one of the things that I find in those is that actually usually if there's something going wrong, multiple students will mention it, or if there's something that is lacking in some way that they'd like to be added to the course, 10 of them will say it. And so actually it's a collective suggestion and you can kind of present it back in that way. Another thing too that I wanted to just name is that of course when we have diverse classrooms, there are going to be lots of different kinds of students, not just in terms of all the different identity markers and intersections of identity, but in terms of how they're raised and what cultures they come from and context that shape them.

(00:47:23):

And one of the things that I think is important is that this year isn't just the American election that's coming up in November. This is actually the year where the most number of people in the world are voting in democratic elections in the modern history of the world. And so when I look out at my international student body, I realize that oh, half of them are people who are also voting or whose families or countries are voting in that way. And I actually think that's a way to reframe the particularly contentious election that we're in the midst of right now. That seems to be changing dramatically in

unprecedented ways every day to reframe this out, to make it more inclusive that we're actually in a voting year and a year where democracy's on the ballot and on the line in so many places and let's have a bigger conversation about that.

(00:48:09):

The other thing that I want to say about students who are raised in perhaps more deferential context or they're not used to or allowed to talk back to teachers or authority figures, I teach this course on brave communication. One of the things that I find every year is that the students who are most cultivated to be deferential to authority figures and not speak truth to power are the ones who in that class actually become the fiercest communicators. In some ways, the bravest communicators and storytellers, because in some cases they've been waiting for, many of them are women, many of them are ethnic and racial or religious minorities in their home countries. They grew up in non-democratic societies. They've been waiting for a moment to talk about human rights or women's rights or power or these kinds of things. I wouldn't want to always defer to the cultural cultivation that people come in with because sometimes these spaces, our classrooms allow for people to change and transform and to become different versions of themselves which they have been yearning to become.

Matt Wittstein (00:49:05):

You all kind of brought in some of the cultural background playing a role in how students engage in these conversations. And one of the things that it made me think of is that the skills that we're learning in the classroom also need to be transferable outside of the classroom. And when they go back to those cultural settings, they may not have the same engagement opportunities. They may have different rules that they're playing with. So how do you think about building in transferable skills into discourse and dialogue sort of activities?

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:49:35):

That question really resonates with me because it just makes me think about my students in my intergroup dialogue course. Part of the purpose of the course is to build your ability to have difficult dialogues with people who have different ideas. And Thanksgiving for the last eight years or so has been often a very contentious time when you have families gathering together who don't all share the same political belief. I have had numerous students who have come back and said, Thanksgiving and my house is a little tense, but I used my skills from this class and I was able to talk to uncle so-and-so, or grandma or whoever it was, and really have a dialogue and seek to understand where they were coming from so it wasn't just like an argument and this massive fight erupting around the dinner table, but I was using my skills and they worked. So I've just been really happy when that has happened.

Tim McCarthy (00:50:31):

Miriam, I'm laughing because I often joke with my students that we all know there's a crazy cousin at Christmas and sometimes it's us. I joke with the students about that, and actually I time the syllabus from my course, I'm Brave Communication. We teach contentious communication the week before Thanksgiving, and then we teach compassionate communication the week after Thanksgiving before the end of the semester. I designed the course precisely that way, and every year I have multiple students who come back and they're like, oh my God, we were talking about these things last week, and I literally did three of them at dinner on Thursday, and so I'm just laughing because that's just a very tangible way to think about that.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:51:10):

I'll add to that, that we also talk to students about the community that we've created in our classroom to have these conversations because sometimes students have tried to go and have a dialogue with someone, just someone on their hall, in their dorm, whatever. And without that context, without those agreements, without building up those skills on both sides, the conversation doesn't go well. And so we also talk to them about the fact that they need to be cognizant of the setting, who they're talking to, and know that sometimes you are going to say, this person is not worth my time and effort. I'm not going to engage with them. And that's okay because sometimes you can't always have a dialogue and some people are permanently in debate mode and they're trying to win and they're trying to beat you. It's not worth engaging with them if what you want to have is a dialogue and try to understand each other. So we kind of give them that permission to say, I'm not engaging.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:09):

So my next question is that we've seen engagement and disengagement, especially among our students being a little bit more obvious in my teaching setting. I see more absences from class, for example. And so I'm curious, what are the strategies you actually use to engage the disengaged student and how do you assess something like that within a dialogue and discussion based course or learning activity?

Natalie Peeples (00:52:35):

I can offer a little bit. I have not had any experiences with courses that have specifically focused on that. In my courses as a psych major, we don't often get into super civil discourse type conversations. That was something that happened a bit more in high school and definitely in my freshman year as well when I was doing my general education courses. And I think that this kind of goes back to what we were talking about way back at the beginning of labeling and labeling your emotions, labeling your thoughts, labeling where you're coming from. I think that that is one of the skills that I have learned in my courses and that has transferred to my life and communication with others about these sorts of issues is the idea of labeling your thoughts. It's been a lot less in my classes focused on actual civil discourse and has more been focused on soft skills of communication, teamwork and general relationship skills and things like that.

(00:53:31):

And I think that those transfer very nicely over to big discussions of topics like civil discourse and the election that's coming up. It's a very difficult topic to discuss with people, especially as a young woman. It's very difficult to openly discuss it and feel like you're capable of talking about it on a wider scale and feeling like people want to listen to you and hear your thoughts. And so I think that labeling where I come from and why I think the things that I do and why I believe in these things is really important to me because otherwise it just feels like sometimes people don't really care and people don't really listen. So I think that learning how to do that in class with professors, engaging in opportunities for students to talk about where they come from, the things that they believe, I think that's been really helpful because that's allowed me to be able to transfer that to my real life of communicating by labeling my emotions, labeling my thoughts, labeling my beliefs.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (00:54:25):

We have an initiative at the University of Miami to do more dialogue and discussion-based teaching, and one of the methodologies that we're embracing is the Harkness method, which is used at Exeter in New Hampshire. It's now used by a number of other institutions as well, but in the Harkness methods, students in the class are gathered around kind of an oval or lip shave table because it's how spaces arranged matters. In teaching, we've actually purposefully reconfigured some classrooms for this

method, but there is an app called Equity Maps. That app allows a professor or a student that's assigned in class to track who's talking throughout the course throughout the day's dialogue. And so, I mean, you can also do this on paper, but the cool thing about this equity maps app is that at the end it will produce a report that tells you how many times each student spoke and for how long.

(00:55:18):

And so some faculty are actually using this and they'll assign a different student every class to be the tracker, and then at the end of class, they will look at the data with the whole group of students and they can say, look, Tim, you only spoke once today. It would be great if next class we'd love to hear more from you because it's a dialogue class and it's built on everybody sharing their ideas and thoughts. I know a number of people are using that. It's an inexpensive app for the iPad not to be given a plug for a particular app, but in this context of creating accountability in a dialogue class, it's very, very helpful.

Tim McCarthy (00:55:57):

We have a thing called Teach Lee that we use here, and it does the same kind of thing and students have to opt into it, but it's actually quite helpful in terms of who is speaking and how much and all of that. I think anytime we can at least try to get our heads around that, the better off we are. One of the things that I think is interesting is I actually learned in part because everything was disrupted during Covid, right? None of us were expecting this, right? I've never felt more at sea and unprepared to do the work. None of us knew what Zoom was before spring break of 2020 and then all of a sudden we had to teach on Zoom for two years. And so I actually think that that world historical disruption in many ways actually produced some really wonderful produce, some terrible things, but it produced some wonderful reimaginings and rethinking of what we can do in practice as teachers.

(00:56:42):

And one of the things that I found was so important during Covid that has lasted is the need that students have for more connection. My course on leadership and communication is all about all communication. Leadership's about relationships, social movements, all social movements, the social is as important as the movement. When you think about all of these ways in which we come together in classrooms, our communities, the more we can do to foster collective engagement and interaction with one another the better. And so one of the things that I tried to do is create lots of opportunities for students to speak and students to listen, for students to collaborate, for students to lead, and putting them in various situations about like, okay, here you two are going to lead class this week, and have pairs of students or groups of students take over some of the lesson or part of the lesson or maybe even all of the class each week so that everyone gets to do that at least once.

(00:57:34):

Or in my communications class, every single person gets the same amount of minutes of airtime, right? They have a certain number of speeches, a certain number of things that they have to do, but most of the time they're listening to their peers and to the teaching team in that way so that they actually learn deep skills of listening and giving of feedback in addition to the speaking and the communicating and the framing and all the things they're doing when they're talking. I feel like those kinds of collective formations of co-facilitating of group collaboration, of listening and speaking and providing feedback and receiving feedback, all of these things where we play different roles at different times and when we aim for equity in all of this, I think the better off we are because we're building and sustaining and strengthening those relationships which are always at the heart of community.

(00:58:23):

They're also at the heart of social movements and social change and politics and all these other collective formations. And so one of the things that Covid did kind of counterintuitively for me at least, was to feel much more deeply the need to create practices and structures in our classroom communities that allowed people to come back together at a time when we were all being torn apart and where we were really isolated as individuals in this kind of collective experience that we all experienced in different ways. And I will say I think I'm a much better teacher because of Covid, because I had to go through that crucible. We all had to and relearn and unlearn some of the things that we've been doing so that we could do things better, and I feel like the students have risen to that occasion and also taught me a lot about how to be a better member of that learning community.

Natalie Peeples (00:59:13):

I wanted to piggyback off of something that Tim was just talking about with group collaboration growing up, I have always absolutely despised group projects. I never enjoyed them because to me, whenever I was put in a group project, 90 to 95% of the time, I was the one doing the work and nobody else was doing the work. So group projects were never enjoyable for me until I became comfortable with calling in my fellow peers in a different way and being able to act as sort of a leader and organizer of our group projects. So I think that this was just very much a labeling thing of group collaboration as opposed to group projects. Labeling them as different was very interesting to me. I had never heard a professor before call it group collaboration instead of a group project. I think that that's really important because I think group collaboration gives a different connotation and makes me think more of comfort in terms of speaking and leading as well as not everyone's going to be a leader in the group.

(01:00:09):

Some people are going to want to be told what sections to do and they're going to do that section. Some people are not going to be interested at all and you're going to have to push them to continue doing it. And so I think group collaboration is a much better term than group projects and then also going along with group collaboration, having the professors as an overseer. I know that that's been really helpful in terms of if there's ever a problem, having a professor being able to come in and talk to us about what the problem is and not trying to solve the problem for us has been really helpful. I think that that is a good engagement tool for students. Another thing that I wanted to talk about was a bad experience that I had in high school with a teacher. His only rule in the classroom, which was an unspoken rule, but everybody knew it was, do not disagree with me.

(01:00:47):

I'm probably right a hundred percent of the time. That is something that obviously does not get students engaged, and so I think that having expectations but not having the opinion that you are all that in a bag of chips above everybody else and the ultimate authority leader that everybody should pay attention to a hundred percent of the time, and you're always right. That is something that is huge, especially for students in an undergraduate program. They are looking to express themselves. They're looking to find these new ideas and these new experiences. They're looking to challenge themselves and think in different ways, and if you just respond to a new thought that they might've had by saying, no, you're wrong. That's not something that's going to get the student engaged. So making sure that you're not doing that, that's huge. Also, I wrote this down, accommodate, but don't excuse.

(01:01:30):

So I think that having accommodations for classes is huge. I had a professor this past semester who allowed students to be on Zoom and that counted as full presence in the class if they wanted to. He obviously encouraged people to come to class, but if you needed to be on Zoom, you could join at any

time. You didn't have to give him an explanation as to why, but you could be on Zoom, and I think that that is really good for some sorts of classes, but I think that it can sometimes become an excuse or a class such as a discussion-based class like this one was much more lecture-based. So for discussion-based classes, I think it's very important to focus on accommodate, but don't excuse. You want to create these expectations for your students and you want them to be able to know these, and you want to reaffirm these as you go through the class.

(01:02:11):

Don't just say it once and be like, this is my expectation, and then move on. Reaffirm it every time. Reaffirm it when you see something going downhill that you don't like, but don't excuse what they're doing if they are not participating in your class in the way that you want to see. Not everyone is going to be the loudest person in the room. Not everyone is going to raise their hand and answer every question. Not every person is going to want to engage in every discussion. Not everyone is going to want to engage every day, and so accommodating to those students, accommodating to those needs, those differences, that's huge because I think it's a lot about what the student says more so than how much a student says. For me, I really enjoy when professors focus more on grading, on thoughtfulness and openness to listen as well as focus. So if you say something that's completely out of left field and doesn't have to do with what you're talking about in the course, that's obviously going to get points deducted as it should, but grading on thoughtfulness and openness to try new things, to experience different things, to talk to different people, that is a much more beneficial way to get students engaged rather than believing this is a right answer, this is a wrong answer, or I want you to speak the most.

Matt Wittstein (01:03:15):

Well, I want to thank you all for your time. We had an exceptional conversation and I can't wait to share some of this back with Israel.

Natalie Peebles (01:03:23):

Thank you so much for having me. I am very, very grateful and happy to have been here.

Tim McCarthy (01:03:27):

Likewise. It's been a wonderful conversation, wide ranging, and I really appreciate everybody's thoughtfulness, and Matt, thanks for bringing us together for a conversation.

Miriam Glaser Lipsky (01:03:36):

I so appreciate being invited and being part of this conversation. It's been so interesting and enlightening and thanks,

Matt Wittstein (01:03:52):

Israel. It's good to have you back. A lot has changed in the US election landscape since we talked just last week.

Israel Balderas (01:03:58):

It is good to be back and a week feels like a lifetime. I look forward to today's conversation because it'll at least take me back a few days.

Matt Wittstein (01:04:07):

I'm excited to share with you what our panel discussed about discourse in the classroom. We spoke with Miriam Lipsky, director of the University of Miami's Platform for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, or PETAL, Tim McCarthy, a social movement historian that teaches at Harvard University and Natalie Peebles arising junior psychology student already starting a research journey here at Elon. I asked the panelists to introduce themselves while answering what it means to win a culture war when inevitably that means someone loses a culture war. They each shifted the idea of war as a destructive practice toward dialogue and understanding. As I push to ask about how that can be accomplished practically our conversation move towards lots of ideas that I hope you'll be able to use in your classroom and I'll be able to use in mind. So to start, the panel expressed value in setting expectations and guidelines.

(01:04:52):

Early in a course, Miriam talked about community agreements that she often co-create or seeds with ideas to set some structures that support both safety and bravery in the classroom space and using an icebreaker during every single class session to help initiate conversation and build trust. Natalie shared that faculty modeling behavior helped her engage in conversation as well as setting any guidelines or boundaries you might have with students specifically, and Tim shared his practice of asking students to share at the start of classes what needs and gifts they have and will offer to ensure thriving happens in his classroom that day. This sort of transitioned our conversation to talk about Loretta Ross's idea of calling out versus calling in, and I know we talked about that a little bit in our previous conversation. Natalie shared that it's taken her some time to navigate how to actually call classmates into work such as group projects or discussion, and that might be a good reminder that students will have varying levels of skill or comfort with doing that themselves.

(01:05:46):

We also talked about how individual students might have very different upbringings or cultural backgrounds that have different rules of engagement. In terms of speaking up in hierarchies, this sort of leans back into the idea of setting some of those guidelines out loud and at the start of a course and possibly revisiting it to ensure students feel comfortable. The panel agreed that some anonymous feedback that you actually read and respond to is really helpful for creating that relationship with students. Tim uses QR codes to do exit tickets. Then he summarizes that feedback to share with students as one example. This made me wonder a little bit about transferability of discourse skills when ultimately we want students to develop skills useful outside of the classroom where institutional and social rules might be very different. Miriam and Tim talked about structuring some learning topics around Thanksgiving break to give opportunities to practice difficult conversation skills at a dinner table that likely include some diverse opinions.

(01:06:37):

Miriam made a really good point that we need to contextualize to our students all of the work that we're actually putting in to create a space that is safe and brave. You have to ask if homes and workplaces are doing that work as well to foster spaces for critical dialogue like you're trying to create in your classroom. We finished by talking about engagement, disengagement, and assessment. Two apps came up, teach lead and equity maps that allow teachers to track participation and get more detailed data about discussion engagement. Miriam talked about setting up the physical space so it's conducive to engagement. For example, circles allow everyone to see each other, and Tim shared that one of his lessons from COVID was the need to establish and maintain social connection. Natalie ended our conversation with this nugget accommodate don't excuse. Essentially, having clear standards and expectations and accommodations should support students meeting those standards, not excuse them from participation altogether. She reminded us that students are actually looking for opportunities to

express themselves and explore the difficult topics you want to have in your class. I realize this is a lot all at once, but I wonder what's one small chunk that you might add into your course this upcoming semester?

Israel Balderas (01:07:46):

I took some notes while you were talking about what does it mean to reframe the conversations? What does it mean to model behavior? In our previous conversation, I did talk about the fact that it's not that we are trying to have difficult conversations, it's that we don't have that much practice. So I think this idea of modeling behavior is very powerful. And then the other thing, because I want to make it more student-centric versus me-centric is this idea to accommodate students, but not to excuse them to raise the bar, but in a way also understand that each person in the classroom has a particular story. I'm thinking about students for example, who maybe they're introverts, they want to participate, but maybe they don't know how. I want to do more research as to how does this idea to accommodate and to model behavior, strengthen my passion for creating this kind of environment that does challenge students, but they feel empowered, not deflated.

Matt Wittstein (01:08:40):

I'm also curious, I know you're working on some research about using critical discourse in courses and pedagogy. How does some of the advice that our panelists provided align with what you are working on in your own scholarly work?

Israel Balderas (01:08:52):

Let's talk about this idea of the language of the culture war. I think for me, I'm the intersection between First Amendment and civil discourse, right? In First Amendment law. I am not a big believer that we shouldn't use language that is unsafe, that is scary, that makes people uncomfortable because that may be here on campus, but when you go out into the real world, you're not going to find a place to hide away from sort of this very curt language. But civil discourse says we need to have empathy. We need to be curious, we need to be civil, but we also need to have diverse viewpoints and ideas. And so at that intersection, it's ethics. I have the right to say it, but should I think that's the question, and I don't provide an answer because that's not what I want. To me, when someone talks about this idea of the language of culture war, and we got to be careful, we got to think about it.

(01:09:41):

That's not something that appeals to me because where does it end? Take a student and that student says, I come from X background, and that language makes me feel very uncomfortable. If I accommodate that student, am I helping or hurting that student? From my perspective, I would say in the long term, I'm hurting that student because that person needs to work through the uncomfortable mindset that he, she, they are going through, but at the same time being able to understand why they're uncomfortable with that language, whether it's anti L-G-B-T-Q language, whether it's anti-religious language, I would not be so keen to say, let's be careful with the language we use. I would say bring the language, but let's work on the substance, not the rhetoric.

Matt Wittstein (01:10:22):

So as we're entering into what is going to be semester, where current events will throw us lots of curve balls, how are you preparing to adapt for some of those shifts in what's happening around us?

Israel Balderas (01:10:34):

How long do you have in this podcast? When we first did this interview, we had just faced an attempted assassination on a presidential candidate, and then we were looking at an ailing president running for office, and how do we talk about that without being ageist? Now, just a week later, we're talking about an ailing president who has stepped down, who did something courageous. He didn't want to step down, but for the good of his party, the good of the country, he did it right. That was a selfless act, and you can compare that without an opinion, just stating facts with the opposing candidate, and you can have conversations about that. Then you bring in, now the other candidates running for the Democratic ticket. Right now it seems like she's going to be the presumptive nominee, Kamala Harris. She's going to be the first African-American woman who also identifies as Indian, running against someone like President Trump, and the rhetoric will be she's the candidate of tomorrow.

(01:11:21):

He's the candidate of yesterday. And we're also seeing that Donald Trump, the former president, has already started using rhetoric that for some, it could be racist, it could be sort of anti-feminist. Normally you would say, I want to bring in conversations that are going to be uncomfortable, but now I'm saying I'm going to bring in new stories that are going to be uncomfortable, and these are going to be things that are happening out on the campaign trail that we need to have conversations over. We need to have conversations about race. We need to have conversations about what does it mean to have gender identity? What does it mean to have religious beliefs? And so to me, politics serves as the teaching material or the class, and what excites me as a professor is the ability to teach students how to think critically about today, not yesterday, not tomorrow.

(01:12:05):

This is happening right now to be here at Elon University where we don't make small plans anymore. We are a national school. We attract a national audience, and we're at a state that is probably going to have major attention in the political sphere, whether it is that we're a battleground state or whether the vice presidential candidate for the Democratic ticket happens to be our governor. So to me, it's the opportunities to show the kids what their future looks like and to prepare them for that. I get to be part of that, and that is a humbling experience.

Matt Wittstein (01:12:37):

That's fantastic. I'm so encouraged with how you're using current events to actually almost make it easier to approach some of these things from a factual basis, and I wish you the best of luck in the upcoming semester and the upcoming election season. I can't wait to see how your class turns out and how everything else turns out as well.

Israel Balderas (01:12:54):

Thank you very much, and I look forward to the ongoing conversation.

Matt Wittstein (01:13:05):

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

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