Limed: Teaching with a Twist
Season 3, Episode 6 – Deepening Engagement in a First-Year Seminar

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. The first year seminar can be at a tough space to create meaningful connections with students. Adam Keul joins us this month from Plymouth State University to share how he's using elements of democracy in his course and seeks additional ways to deepen engagement. Sophia Abbot, University of Rhode Island, Riley Alkove , first-year Elon economic student, and Annie Kelly University of Cincinnati talk about the opportunities and challenges with co-creating alongside students and models for building community within educational contexts. Enjoy the show. I'm Matt Wittstein. Hi Adam. Welcome to the show. I'm so excited to have you here. We're going to talk about how you are democratizing your classroom, but before we get there, I would love to know just a little bit about yourself for our audience, introduce yourself, where you're from, anything else you'd like to share.

Adam Keul (01:22):

Thanks a lot for having me, Matt, and I'm excited to be here. So I'm Dr. Adam Keul. I am the director of the Tourism and Hospitality Management Programs at Plymouth State University in lovely Plymouth, New Hampshire. I've been here for almost 10 years. I'm a tourism geographer. I teach about how the world is produced and how tourism reflects that. I teach other courses in geography and other courses in tourism. Today I'm here to discuss specifically the freshman seminar style course that I teach that is called Tackling a Wicked Problem.

Matt Wittstein (01:56):

That sounds like a really cool course. I think about wicked problems. It makes me think of some folks in our design thinking office of how do we approach even figuring out what the problem is before we try to solve the problem. So tell me a little bit more about this class and is everyone's freshman class tackling a wicked problem or is that just your version of the class?

Adam Keul (02:15):

All the first year students have to take it. They all have the same course number. Each of the sections have a different wicked problem and of course say wicked problem is a social problem that is complicated and possibly impossible to solve. And so it gives us a way to talk about an issue, but to develop some thinking skills along the way so the students know going into it, they get to choose which Wicked Problem course to take. They all have a wicked problem. Some of 'em might be human trafficking or food insecurity, and mine is about over tourism. It's called tourism sustainability.

Matt Wittstein (02:52):

So tell me a little bit more about your classroom. Who are your students? Presumably they're all first year students. What are their backgrounds? What are their capability levels? How would you describe the folks that you're teaching?

Adam Keul (03:03):

They are all first year students. I actually designed my schedule so that my class is their very, very first college class. So I have it to start on Monday morning because I kind of want it to be the very first

introduction to college to them. Our student body is almost all 18. They are essentially all from New England and about half are from New Hampshire. They're all the same social class backgrounds. They all have to live on campus for the first two years. So most of them are living on their own and in a dorm for the first time, I have maybe one commuter, there's about 25 people in the class. They're all dealing with the freedom and the commitments that are all brand new at the same time. And even though of course they have a lot of similarities, they're really discovering their differences too. New England is not very demographically diverse, but of course groups of people are going to be very diverse within the way they look at the world and their experience. And so I try to show them that diversity is not just a demographic thing. One of the things that I really hope to get out of it is to give them a sense of solidarity with each other because they're all going through it at the same time.

Matt Wittstein (04:15):

So what are some of the strategies that you've used to create that sort of community, that solidarity across your students?

Adam Keul (04:22):

The first thing is that within the first 10 minutes I go through what I just said, y'all need to realize that you're all really similar and you're in the same boat and that I always say college is important social time in your life, so you need to make friends. My goal is to overturn, I think some of the fears that they have about college and the discomfort that they're all feeling to try to show them that, Hey, I'm a person. I'm not here to come down on you or be hard on you adhere to get you to just take responsibility for your stuff. And I try to make a fairly laid back environment so that they feel comfortable. One of the things I've learned when I was on a job search, one of the candidates had this great approach to teaching. He said, I try to convince them that this is a low stakes environment. And I'm like, yes, exactly. Especially because you have all of this in common with each other. You're not going to ever likely be in a situation where you have so much in common with everybody else in the room and therefore there's not a lot on the line for you to say something in class and make a mistake. So I try to make it that kind of comfortable environment and remind them that that's going on here.

Matt Wittstein (05:33):

So I want to get more into sort of your teaching challenges. We've talked a little bit offline and I understand you sort of democratize some aspects of your class. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Adam Keul (05:44):

Some of this course has some built in elements that go across all the sections where the students are supposed to take the reins on the project. It's a project based final project kind of course. And so that's built in technically to all of the sections. But I try to create a democratic space and sometimes that is more of a theoretical thing than a real thing, but the way I do it is just to allow them to choose what we do for the first three quarters of the class until we're just doing the final project stuff. They get to vote on what we talk about or what we do. Not every class, but at least half of them, we're going to have these votes and the way that it works is everybody gets a little piece of paper, they're just going to write their choice on, they don't write their name, so it's anonymous.

(06:31):

There's a PowerPoint and it says, here are the four choices. Then they're going to choose one of 'em. I go and collect them and count 'em really quick, and then I take a minute to kind of turn my brain in that direction and then run with it. I set the choices. I think it's an important thing to realize that the person who writes the ballot ultimately still has all the power they're choosing from the things that I write. And so the choices are generally a discussion that's more of a lecture, a lecture about being in college or a talk about our individual habits of mind. So all of the courses are required to cover our official habits of mind. Our habits of mind are integrated thinking, purposeful communication, self-directed learning and problem solving. Habit of mind is just a general way of thinking. It's basically like a thinking tool.

(07:19):

So we're going to either talk about habits of mind, we're going to talk about being in college or we're going to talk about tourism and sustainability. So not all of them are on every vote, but those are the lecture things that are going to be on there. And then the other things that are going to be on there are particular videos or films about topics. Sometimes it's work on stuff. For this class when it's midterm exam time, I sometimes will put one on there that says work on other coursework because this is a four credit course. It's a hundred minutes. If they're struggling and have something important coming up, I would rather them spend their time in this class working on that. Another thing that shows up on the votes is called sit in a circle and talk about how college is going, which is just that I put a list of thought provoking questions and then we sit in a circle and talk about how it's going. Sometimes they just put some kind of random interesting research stuff that I've done on there, but the idea is that I'm hoping at least that they can kind of get a sense of how they feel, what their experience is right now and what they need and vote based on that.

Matt Wittstein (08:25):

With that format for you, what's going really well and what do you perceive as the challenges that you're coming up against?

Adam Keul (08:32):

What's going well is that it definitely keeps it fresh in the sense that we're not doing the same thing every day. We're going back and forth between the three different areas that the course covers. It gives me flexibility and it gives them flexibility. If the vibe is, man, everybody's tired of being here, it allows me to react to that and to make the ballot of have options so that we can go where the wind is blowing in a way. And I think that that's worked really well. Every day that we vote, the last one says it's whatever. From the beginning, I've said to myself, if I get lots of nobody cares what we do, then this is the failure. And I would say generally in a class with 18 people who show up, I might get one and generally speaking it's usually like seven for a, seven for B, and then the others there tends to be two that are pretty close and one of 'em that wins.

(09:28):

So to me, that seems like reading the room to some extent. The challenge with it is that my whole point about doing that is to illustrate the power that they have to influence it. I want to take it beyond just, Hey, you can vote what I talk about today because the point is that they're supposed to be engaged with it too, and I want 'em throughout the class to kind of learn how they have responsibility for what they're going to do here. It's supposed to be a deeper sense of responsibility with the ability to impact the outcome. People show up and they vote and then that's it. So they don't necessarily ask questions or respond to questions or engage with each other, engage during the class, even though I'm doing my best to make it comfortable for them to do that.

Matt Wittstein (10:15):

Can I ask if you sort of imagined that perfectly connected situation, what that would actually look like?

Adam Keul (10:21):

A lot of it comes from the way that college classrooms or portrayed on TV and in Hollywood, even in a big classroom, the faculty member knows the names and there's like 150 that's unreasonable, but it's kind of like people are asking questions to me and I'm responding and they're kind of talking to each other about the topics and they're not afraid to raise their hand and it gets to a point where it's leading a discussion on the worst days. It just becomes a one-way street, and that's not why people come to my university. I would like to create an environment that it's more of a discussion and they're open instead of what I always call the too cool for school attitude. I'm trying to kickstart that you're here, you're paying way too much money for this. You need to be involved in it.

Matt Wittstein (11:09):

And so as we sort of wrap up here, I imagine our panel's probably going to be interested in knowing the extents of your comfort zone. Are there any practices, any pedagogies that you're like, Ooh, I don't know if I would want to try that, that you're apprehensive about or are you really excited and willing to try anything?

Adam Keul (11:27):

I'm pretty much willing to try whatever I know though what I can do well and what I struggle with. I don't mind going head on against something that I'm challenged with. It's kind of a cliche thing, but I really do have a difficult time remembering everyone's names with two weeks left in the semester. I generally know their names, but early on I don't generally hit it with Socratic method and call them out by name and say, what do think I can do that later on for the students who are my majors and I know better. I think I would be comfortable doing that. I just haven't really practiced it very much. I am comfortable and commonly am asking questions, especially if we have a reading where I'm asking open-ended questions, which sometimes works. I actually have the ringtone on my phone open often so that I can play the cricket sound.

(12:19):

If I ask a question and it's just silence, I'll play the crickets thing, which is just a funny little tip for anybody. It breaks the ice a little bit when that happens, I do tend to ask questions and get crickets. I've always wanted to get better at that. Those are mostly the kinds of things that I do. I'm comfortable like moving the chairs around to kind of flatten the hierarchy of it, sit on the same level. That's all fine with me. I would love any more tips on how to make it more engaged. There's a very builtin problem with this whole idea is that it isn't democratic, right? I am actually in charge and often they want me to be in charge. They don't want to decide what we're going to do. It comes into play a lot more further down the line when they're doing their projects, they have to decide the rubric for grading it.

(13:08):

They would much rather me just give 'em a bullet point list of exactly what to do. I think that part of it is that we get told so much as faculty about how students want to be involved and want to take the reins themselves, but a lot of 'em don't mind at all or prefer listening and taking direction. Sometimes I say, yes, it's democratic, but I'm a benevolent dictator in the long run. Ultimately I have to write down your grade and decide how you did. So perhaps that's the challenge with it. It's a contradiction in itself to

begin with any way to just make it more engaged and them taking responsibility for what they're doing here.

Matt Wittstein (13:46):

Adam, I can really relate to a lot of the things that you shared and I can't wait to take this to our panel and see what they say. See what ideas they have to help you make your class a little more engaging.

Adam Keul (13:55):

Will thanks a lot for having me and thanks for giving me a chance to devote some time to think about it.

Matt Wittstein (14:11):

Hi Riley. Hi Annie. Hi Sophia. Welcome to our show. I am so excited to have you here. We're going to talk about Adam Keul's general education first year class, but before we get there, I want you to introduce yourselves to our audience. And what I would love to know as you introduce yourself is what is one strategy that's been successful for you in terms of quickly getting to know a new person or a new group of people?

Riley Alkove (14:36):

Hey, I'm Riley Alkove. I am a student at Elon University. I am a freshman and I'm studying economics. And for me, when I think about the strategy that I employ the most for trying to get to know somebody quickly is just trying find common ground. So whether that be an outdoor sports like skiing or an academic thing, like a class we took together, I feel like finding something that we both have done or relate to can really spiral a conversation in a new and engaging way that lets me get to know somebody.

Annie Kelly (15:08):

Hello everyone. My name is Annie Kelly. I am a assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati within the College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies and within my role I have the honor and joy of overseeing a first year seminar course that serves first year students and oversee a team of approximately 48 instructors to deliver the course. So how I would get to know someone quickly is I really pull from the tenets of appreciative advising. So I'm a course director for the Office of Appreciative Education at Atlantic University for one of their academies. And appreciative advising is all about drawing out a strength-based approach of working with others, working with students, but it could also relate to your personal life too. Within each of those six phases, there's a set of behaviors and a set of questions. So the first phase is the disarm phase and it's my favorite phase.

(15:57):

It's how do you pull someone in immediately and ask really good questions to break the ice and start building community with them. So off the bat, I would just say an initial question that comes to mind that I like to ask students is what is the highlight of your day so far? I think that could be a really great intro to what is going on in your life. Maybe you don't have a highlight or maybe something else is going on, but a great intro to do a pulse check and go from there and towards a deeper conversation and a deeper dive into their life story.

Sophia Abbot (16:25):

Hi everyone. I'm Sophia Abbot. I'm a faculty development specialist at the University of Rhode Island and my specialty is in SoTL, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. So I work with faculty and

graduate students here at URI to help them study their own teaching practices and think about how to become the teachers they want to be. I have a background in co-creation and student faculty partnerships or pedagogical partnerships. It's something that I participated in as an undergraduate and then continued doing in different ways all the way through graduate school and in different faculty development positions. So in terms of strategies to get to know someone, I feel blessed in that I have an easy time remembering people's names. But one thing that sticks with me when I'm being first introduced to somebody is I tend to associate a person with a fun fact or first thing that they share about themselves. If it's Annie at the University of Cincinnati or it's Riley in economics, I put little facts together and start stringing together a sense of who a person is from what they first share. And for me it's also an encouragement to be fully present as I'm listening to people introduce themselves to really sort of try to imbibe who they are and how they describe themselves.

Matt Wittstein (17:35):

I appreciate all those answers. So I want to share our conversation with Dr. Adam Keul from Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. He is a professor of tourism and hospitality management and he teaches in their sort of first seminar a course called Tackling Wicked Problems where each section has a different problem that they face. The problems are often possibly insurmountable, but it really makes students begin thinking about how critical thinking and problem solving can have real world impact. And so one of the things he does in his class is he sort of democratizes it by allowing students to vote on the modality or the topic that they might talk about and giving them some agency there. His big question is he really wants to be more engaging with his students. He thought making this shift to having them vote on everything would have this sort of Hollywood like transformation of his classroom and he'd be standing on chairs and they'd be reciting, oh, captain, my captain to him.

(18:35):

But in reality we sort of know that teaching doesn't unfold exactly that way, but he still feels like it didn't hit the goals that he was looking for. So before we get to the students as partners piece of democratizing the classroom and co-creation with students in that, I really want to start with just the basics of how do you form strong relationships with a new group of students or Riley as a student, how do you develop a strong relationship with your faculty member, especially as a brand new college student? Do you have strong relationships with any particular faculty yet?

Riley Alkove (19:11):

Yeah, I mean I would say I have quite a few strong relationships with faculty members. I think the thing to note the most about trying to make that connection is both having the ability to have the space, the willingness to be able to share in a space like a classroom setting, but also having that be a very low barrier to entry. I think a lot of the times when students and faculty try and get to know each other, there's a lot of I guess demand there. I remember in my core curriculum class we had to share a poem that we've written about who we are as individuals and share that to the class. Thoughts like that are very nice, but it felt like a high barrier to entry comparatively to maybe what do you like to do in your free time? I think you need to find that balance of asking and pulling from people's experience and also making it pretty easy to engage for students.

Sophia Abbot (20:06):

One thing that I do in my classes that is so simple and easy is I send every student a pre-course survey where I just ask them a little bit about why they're taking the class, what I might want to know or benefit from knowing about them as students, what some of their goals are for being students at the

institution, and those are a great way to just start to get a sense of who the students in the class are. And then the other small thing I do is I make sure that everyone has a table tent with their name on it. So even when I'm not sure of what a student's name is, they've got their name in front of them. There's studies about this as well that just using students' names, even though they have the table tent, they know that it's there. Hearing your name is such a nice moment of recognition and feeling seen that even that shows a sort of amount of effort and sense of getting to know one another and it helps the other students use each other's names as well because I think that's a really important part of being in a classroom is getting to know each other and your classmates.

Annie Kelly (21:00):

One of my favorite ways of getting to know students and for them to get to know one another because again, underscoring Sophia, you're such an important point, I'm going to be their teacher for the semester and maybe I'll teach another class. It'll be wonderful. But I'm hopeful that they will also have their own community of peers even after the class. And so hopefully my relationship with them continues. That does my goal, but also the goal is for them to connect with one another. So my example is a assignment called a Lifeline assignment. Has anyone heard of this or has anyone done it? I see some heads shaking. No, I'm happy to provide this assignment description. The key to this is modeling it. So presenting your lifeline first. So when I say lifeline, the assignment description is create a slide deck or video or any sort of imagery of your choosing to articulate your life story leading up to this moment.

(21:49):

And there's some particular parameters around that too. So you can say, I think I give, create a minimum of seven slides and several events that have been really important to you. Think about the people that have shaped who you are. And then I spin it because our first year seminar is really focused on career education and career development. So University of Cincinnati is the founder of cooperative education. So any good first year seminar is going to embody the ethos of campus, and so we want to embody that ethos. So bending that assignment to focus on the lifeline is to share your life story and also add in what have been those career influences. What do you hope to do after you graduate and what has really influenced you in that particular career trajectory? So it can hold this really important twofold experience, which is one, having students reflect on their life story and sharing that with the instructor and with their peers.

(22:41):

But then two, helping them really critically think about what they want to get from their college experience, what's influenced in their academic or major or career pathways. And then as the instructor, I use that to guide the entire rest of the semester. So I have little index cards of each of my students' names that I write down and I make shorthand notes and I post them in my office so that way if something comes across my desk, a unique involvement, opportunity, a job, something I can follow up with them at the rest of class. That lifeline assignment is a foundation for what we discuss in class and really tailoring the class based on those life experiences and being aware of the student's stories too, and they really appreciate getting to know one another and it's always a highlight of the course evaluation.

Matt Wittstein (23:24):

I want to go back to what RI said about the lower barriers to entry. I think about that a lot in terms of just course participation and having an engaged classroom. What are some evidence-based strategies for creating that open environment where we can get to the level that we can share that very personal

poetry with a class, because it's hard to do that on day one in a really great class in a semester you might be able to do something like that by the end. So are there any practices that we sort of know work well for not just establishing a relationship but actually deepening that relationship? Especially with a group,

Sophia Abbot (24:00):

One of the first things I think of is just the value of varying how students are having opportunities to interact with one another. Large group discussions can be a great way to see everyone, to hear everybody, particularly if you're thoughtful about how you facilitate and make space for all of the students in the class. But also having small group spaces for students to get to know one another on a more personal level. Having those contexts for them to have more private conversations that you're not necessarily as the instructor listening in on all the time can be really helpful. I had a professor actually who had students group up and were these sort of support network teams for the whole semester. And so she had us as groups determine our group name, determine our group logo, determine our group song. We were branding ourselves as a team. And so not only were we having discussions about the course content, which was higher education theory, but we were also having these conversations about how to be successful in graduate school, how to navigate higher education and general, how we were turning the work in this class into work that could serve us in future publications and scholarship. And those are moments that were important to facilitate for the instructor were so meaningful as students to just have those spaces to get to know people in a really deeper way.

Matt Wittstein (25:14):

Annie, as you were talking, I was thinking about how very often we think that it should just be very natural to know who your students are and identify when something pops up that, oh, I should reach out to so-and-so because that's what they need. But you talked about actively taking notes about your students based on their presentations and their assignments. Have you found other ways to deepen that engagement and can we maybe set some realistic goals and boundaries on what level should we know each one of our many students that we have?

Annie Kelly (25:49):

That is a great question and I think it also is an opportunity for the instructor to reflect on their pedagogy and what they really want to prioritize in the classroom. And for me as an example, that's always relationships with my students. I think the foundation of relationship building and community is the precursor to student learning and then thereby retention and student success at the university. And as we know with research, the number one indicator of student success and retention is sense of belonging and connection. So I think that's just such an important component of the class and it's something I value. So it would be a great reflection for an instructor to say what do they value and how could they either scale up something like a lifeline activity such as being able to do that in class one day for 20 minutes, having students physically draw out, present to one another, turn that in so you can have some sort of semblance or an idea.

(26:41):

One of my other colleagues does something really interesting. I'm Michael, I'm going to give you a shout out. He does participation cards. So for the introverted students in class, he has everyone have an index card and they write down their thoughts and comments throughout class. So if they're not willing to share or don't want to engage, that's okay. Just being able to write that and then turn that in at the end of class as a way to fulfill their participation points to meet the needs of students, to allow an

opportunity for also the instructor, then to get a chance to know their mind and what they're thinking. And it's just a quick flip through the index card to really analyze and see where students are.

Riley Alkove (27:17):

I like that idea and what you just said there because personally I am a verbal learner and a verbal speaker, so I love to speak in class and to engage with people verbally. And I think a really important note that you just mentioned is that having different mediums of interacting and to share who you are with the classroom with your teacher, whether that's being able to physically write something or to say it, I think having the option of doing one or the other, whatever is more comfortable to you really helps. Again, we talked about having a low barrier to entry and helps you get to know people on a more personal level without having to force somebody to do something that they're not comfortable with beyond just even sharing, which is uncomfortable in and of itself.

Annie Kelly (28:00):

I think that's such a great point, Riley. In terms of going back to just creating an initial culture and environment, the first few classes, you're just setting those expectations that you'll be sharing. You don't want to encourage people to overshare. You want to establish a trusting community first. And I would love to share with you all this really great framework from my colleagues at University of South Carolina. They created this really interesting framework and the image of a tree related to community building. So I'll share this article with you all. It's open access, it's on insights for college transitions that gets on substack, and they wrote an article called A Model for Community Building. And so if you can envision a tree, they did this tree metaphor where the roots of the tree focus in on as you're building class community, focus on introductions like low stakes things, just like you said, getting to know you name activities and then the trunk of the tree going up is check-in.

(28:55):

So having consistent check-ins with your student each class. So for instance, the first five minutes of my course, my peer instructor facilitates this actually, but they have a random question that they ask the students to discuss whether in pairs or small groups and a few folks share out just to do a pulse check of what's going on, whether it's an event going on in the world, whether it's an event going on campus or just an overall, how are you feeling today? And then the branches of it is we're getting, so we're moving from the intros roots to the check-ins. We're constantly building a community and then we can to the more the higher order things. So Riley, this would more be your poetry example maybe towards the end of the semester where it's focusing in on those higher level tasks, which are group projects for their active learning strategies that are more complex discussions beyond the classroom type of an activities engagement.

(29:42):

So I just want to give a shout out. I thought that was a really neat visual representation and giving some of those concrete and specific examples on what could building community look like. But Riley, I'm more curious too. I think that some of my instructors, we also talk about what is authentic community like too. So we don't want to just, let's do these icebreakers and name games. And some students also just roll their eyes like, oh gosh, it's another name game. So obviously articulating the purpose, but what have you seen work really well with authentic community building in the classroom? Or if you haven't seen it, what would be your ideal classroom environment to walk into?

Riley Alkove (30:18):

Yeah, it's really interesting to note that because a lot of the times these sort of classroom icebreakers can feel very overly structured. I had a group communications class that I just recently took where we were supposed to form teams and created, Sophia sort of mentioned earlier a team name. We did a team celebration and I think it felt sort of fake and kind of forced, but some things that I felt really did work were focusing in on small group communication and having an experience to relate over that we all enjoyed. An example for this is one my core class, we went out to the ropes course here at Yale University. We did team building exercises and we did low ropes games and stuff. We were moving outside, so we had something that we could sort of relate over or a goal that we had to accomplish together. It was not too structured to where we could have those interactions along the side of our overall goal. And I felt things like that really felt fun and engaging to me.

Matt Wittstein (31:18):

So I want to shift our conversation to sort of the other half of Adam's question is he's using this element of democratizing his class and it has some elements of co-creation, but it's not full blown letting go of the ropes and letting the students decide exactly what we're going to talk about. And just as an entry point to that conversation. Sophia, I was wondering if maybe you could share with us some of the basics of why students as partners is a good practice for educators to explore.

Sophia Abbot (31:51):

Yeah, definitely. I love students as partners work. I love co-creation students as partners is defined as opportunities for students and instructors to engage together in co-creating something often that can look like co-creating an element of the course, thinking together about what the final assignment rubric contains. What does good work look like in this class or what does good work on this assignment mean? It might look like larger scale projects where people are working co-curricularly on research together or redesigning course curriculum or redesigning a whole course program thinking together about what is the business major going to look like in order to fit the needs of students in this generation and this sort of work context. There's many levels of this work that can happen. Some of the benefits of the work are really significant in that as you were saying Annie, about how important belonging connection is.

(32:44):

These are opportunities where students are getting to really embrace the agency they have in the classroom and in higher education, recognizing that their voices matter, recognizing that they have expertise and experiences that they can bring to these spaces. That's different from what instructors have. Often instructors have not necessarily been students at the institution that they're teaching at, and certainly if they have, it was not as recent as the students who are in their class. And so the context of what they understand teaching and learning to look like and what students' needs are, what students' career goals are, et cetera, is all really different. And so bringing folks into deeper conversations with one another is a really powerful way to align expectations, align learning, and help students recognize the power of them in shaping what their education looks like. Another benefit of co-creation of students as partners work in general that we've found at larger scales is things like it's great for retention, it's great for developing these deeper relationships for students, finding mentors for students, developing critical thinking skills and collaboration skills, skills of having civic and democratic conversation and dialogue that are things that will last them far beyond the context of their university experience, but into the job market, into the careers that they go.

(33:58):

One of the challenges is so much of it is happening in these co-curricular spaces, and so it's often a limited experience, a limited number of students who get to benefit from these kinds of things. That's why co-creation in the classroom and having these whole class experiences of students thinking critically together and with their professor about what their classroom can and should look like are really powerful ways of giving students those same benefits or access to those same benefits and access to similar kinds of experiences without the limits that a co-curricular experience might bring.

Matt Wittstein (34:28):

So we talked a little bit earlier about barriers to participation and engagement for students. What do you all see as some of the barriers to trying co-creation out in a classroom? And Riley, I'm also really curious, what would it look like if a professor came up to you and said, Hey, help me write the syllabus?

Riley Alkove (34:47):

Yeah, I mean my first reaction to that is that would be scary. I think it would be interesting and fun and I think it's a good idea, but I would be like, I don't know what to do. I don't think I can do that. That would be my reaction. And I think the approach to solving that is not so much, Hey, let me write the syllabus more. What sort of things would you maybe like to see on the syllabus that I read, which you kind of get into difficult situations there because it's like, oh, now it just feels like you're asking my input. It doesn't feel like it's actually any sort of meaningful or tangible thing that I'm trying to tell you. So that's kind of where I feel like you get into tricky situations where it's like, well, I don't want to write your course forward, but I also don't want to give you information that I feel like is going out the window.

Annie Kelly (35:29):

I know that's such a hard thing because I would just write a syllabus about Taylor Swift or Ghost Storytelling if I could just throw everything out the window. Ideally it would be a combination of two of my favorite things, which are those components. I'm actually going to do this on Tuesday. So Riley and Sophia, I would love your feedback on this. So this is perfect timing. So the class that I'm going to be teaching this spring semester is a first year seminar course, but it's going to be a differentiated student population. So I'm going to really, really have to create a custom curriculum for this group because in the fall semester I taught psychology pre-med students, and so I had a whole cohort of them and I could personalize it to meet their needs. This group is going to be all diverse majors and it's going to be a combination of new students.

(36:14):

So first semester students that some of them are transfers, some of them are new, and then some of the students are also going to be students who did not pass the course in the fall and are taking it again in the spring. So it's going to be completely what do these students want from this course? So here's my initial idea, and I would love your feedback on it, is that in their student info sheet survey, I was going to explain the course learning outcomes again for me because I would deviate to Taylor Swift or go storytelling for the entire class, and that's not the learning outcomes of the course unfortunately. I'm going to map out some different components such as these are some topics related to these outcomes, these are some topics, can you rank in order your most important things that you want to get out of this course? And then at some point too, I want to say, what are you an expert in regarding these topics? Because if they're coming up in the semester, I want to pull you in somehow and maybe we do some sort of canvas expert assignment or something like that where we can pull from people's strengths or various experiences. What would be your ideas on how to create meaningful co-constructed curriculum based on that population? And that example?

Sophia Abbot (37:20):

I really love the idea of integrating some of that information gathering into that first initial survey and starting to get a sense of what students are interested in and what's bringing them to the space, whether that's a negative experience or a requirement or because they have a particular interest and desire to learn about your course topic. I think one thing that I've seen worked really well in interviews with instructors who have done co-creation in their classes. Many of them will have the first several weeks to even a whole half the semester sort of mapped out already, and then scaffold in over time more examples of co-creation or practices of it so that students are sort of building up a foundation together of understanding about the course content and the course goals. But then the professor can sort of open it up and say, alright, in two weeks the syllabus is blank and we're going to think together about what are our passions, what do we want to learn about and study together, and how would you like to take leadership in moving forward?

(38:20):

And I think Riley, that helps a little bit with that fear of like, well, what do I know about this topic? You're the one who knows this content. You're the one who has a PhD in it. Why should I be creating your syllabus for you? But rather it's an opportunity for the students and the instructor to be in conversation together about ways that the course content and topic is applicable in students' lives in a variety of ways, and to make space for the passions that students might then sort of recognize and bring to their classroom.

Annie Kelly (38:49):

Oh my gosh, Sophia, you have just said such a great example. I'm so excited to implement that. I specifically love the idea of having some sort of structure in place, like a few weeks mapped out, and then particularly share with students how their voice is going to be integrated into the co-construction components of later weeks. As an example, as Riley as you shared too, it can be intimidating and I think it would also be a great opportunity for me to share just my teaching style and why this is a part of the co-construction component, why this course in this section is really special and needs to meet the unique needs of the students, that this is a class for them and truly designed by them, and I think those power dynamics that are difficult, so being able to try to deconstruct what those power dynamics are, I don't think that we can ever get rid of them. I think there'll always be that power dynamics between teacher and student, putting my post-structuralist hat on and my foco and power dynamics and power and language discourse. But Riley, what do you think about that? Have you had a faculty member that you feel like you could really turn to for further support? That's done a really great job of eradicating some of those power dynamics and whether it was co-creation or not, and how did they do that?

Riley Alkove (40:01):

Yeah, yeah. I really love that idea of how you're talking about how you can add the choice aspect of the class later on in the course. I think especially when you're talking about doing it before the class, most kids, especially even me as a student, I'm probably not going to answer a survey, but if I'm in class and you're like, Hey, what can we do tomorrow to make that fun? I think that's something I would love to do. An example I really have of somebody who did a great job of that is actually a class I'm taking right now, which is a archeology and media course, and it's really interesting because it's showing the concepts of traditional archeology through analyzing film and what is accurate and what is inaccurate about that. Having us students bring films that we enjoy as pop culture fans to the faculty member.

(40:48):

It's really interesting because what really drove this course is our teacher's passion for archeology, and you could really see that I feel like just going in with a lot of passion and being like, Hey, I want to know what you guys know about this topic and this is how I feel about it. She gets in there and she's like, I showed Indiana, Indiana Jones, and she's like, oh, I don't like this. That's basically a YouTube video I would watch on archeologists reviews, pop culture movies, something like that where you just come in with a lot of passion and you're able to be like, this is our topic. Tell me what you like about that and I'll show you what's inaccurate, what's not accurate, what's fun about that. I think that's what I like.

Matt Wittstein (41:24):

I hear the inherent risk involved with something like that. So what happens when you bring a topic or a film that me as the instructor, I'm just not prepared for and I only have a couple days to figure it out. Should I be letting go of that much control to rebalance some of these power dynamics or are there sort of mediating strategies to make that work?

Sophia Abbot (41:50):

I think one thing that you can do is leverage the expertise that students are bringing, leverage the passion that they're bringing. Some great examples that I've seen is a professor sort of opens up their class for determining topics in the second half, but they're also asking students in groups to co-facilitate the classes coming up. So they're selecting a topic they're passionate about and they're responsible for helping lead the discussion, bringing in the sources that students and the professor will be reviewing. And there are a couple great results from doing things like this. One is that students are developing their own expertise and becoming sort of resident experts on a particular topic. And so even if the instructor doesn't have a background in Indiana Jones for example, and doesn't particularly have the time or energy to delve deep into the Indiana Jones universe in order to be a good representative of sort of analyzing those films, students can do that and students having practiced this along the way already from the previous six weeks of the course or whatever it is, are then able to apply those skills as resident experts in the class and be these sort of leaders for their classmates.

(42:57):

And you can share lots of different materials with students to help them in that process. You can have one-on-one conversations with groups to ensure that the classroom is still having rigorous discussions, having thoughtful and content relevant discussions, but there are things like there's an active learning library online that's this great resource and reference that you could turn students to if they're not sure how to go about facilitating class discussion or facilitating engagement. There's sources that you can help point students to or turn to the librarians at your institution so that you are connecting them with your campus resources. There's all sorts of supports on campus that can be partners with you in addition to your students to ensure that you're not the sole person responsible for responding to the ideas that students are bringing, not students tell you things and then you do it for them. It's a together process.

Annie Kelly (43:45):

I do have a question, and it would be for Sophia and then Riley of course, feel free to chime in too, which is thinking about the co-creation component, and I'm just thinking about the first year student particularly and what does developmentally appropriate ways of co-constructing look like in a first year class versus a capstone course or even a midco collegiate course, but what would be some of your key differences between that first semester, first year seminar type course and a later course for students to take?

Sophia Abbot (44:17):

That's a great question. One thing that I love in first year contexts, and I think Adam Keul is sort of doing this in his class and the way that he's attending to the hidden curriculum of college or thinking about how college works is making space for students to further rip back the veil of the hidden curriculum in your classroom. And so maybe co-creation doesn't look like determining and co-writing the entire final assessment, but it might look like co-writing the rubric for that assessment. And so then you can have a deep conversation with students about how do we determine what quality looks like in a women and gender studies course, for example, or your final project is going to be an essay. What does good writing look like? How do we define it? And that's an opportunity for you to share some of your expertise around good writing in your field, in your discipline and defining that for students.

(45:09):

But it's also an opportunity for students to be in conversation with you about that and to start to question, why does it look this way? Why are they expectations the way they are? Why does history often rely on essays as a final assignment? Are there other ways to engage in historical thinking that look a little bit different and could that be an acceptable part of how we're defining quality in this class or how the final assignment is structured? Having those kinds of conversations as an instructor, you can then take those conversations into a rubric. I've done that in the past and I've actually used Hypothesis, which is a open annotation tool to have students then in class we're writing on the board collectively what we think the rubric should look like. I turn that into a formatted rubric and then students use hypothesis to comment on it and have more back and forth to clarify expectations and make sure that we're all on the same page about it. So that can be a really intro level way of thinking about co-creation. Whereas in these final Capstone courses, you can do a lot with content because students have started to develop a sense of identity within your discipline potentially, and students are sort of capping off what it means to be a scientist, what it means to be a chemist, for example, and can start delving deeper into those concepts and taking more leadership roles in the class around them.

Matt Wittstein (46:22):

Riley, you have any thoughts on developmentally co-creation as a first year student versus what you envision for yourself as a graduating senior someday?

Riley Alkove (46:31):

I mean, I definitely just think the room for student participation within that was going to grow. It's something that I'm excited for as a student. I feel like when you're a first year student, there are just courses that it fuels as if you're taking, because those are the courses that you have to take as a first year student and you don't have a lot of say in how those go. I think we can change that narrative to a certain extent, but there's always ultimately going to be more choice as a student within the higher realms of education, and that's something I'm definitely excited for as I go through my years as a college student.

Sophia Abbot (47:05):

That actually makes me think of something else that I love about the first year context, which is that you are embedded in a bunch of different disciplines and a bunch of different classes, and most of your classes are interdisciplinary because students are coming from all different contexts to take introductory courses. I think that can be a really powerful thing. You can leverage that burgeoning identity as an economics major. For example, O'Reilly become the class economist, and to bring in examples from the

other courses you're taking and to put those in conversation with students coming from radically different backgrounds, whether that's the biologist or the marine studies major, those can be really cool fruitful spaces. And then as you get to these more specific classes later on and you have classes where you're in a group where everyone's sort of sharing an economics identity for example, then you're sort of leveraging your identities in a different way.

Riley Alkove (47:56):

The opportunity to do that as a freshman is really unique because I am seeing that within my courses as I talk about, I guess maybe social sciences in a core class, I realize realized how some of the social issues we're talking about affect things economically, and that's where I can kind of find interest in other topics. So while it feels like kind of a burden to have to write essays about history, if I can look at it through an economic perspective as an economic student, it actually brings a whole new interest to that. And I think you sort of lose that as you get into the later years of schooling. So I think it's something that's definitely worth appreciating, especially when you're kind of feeling burdened by the amount of core curriculum classes you have to do. I have to write this essay or whatever.

Matt Wittstein (48:44):

Riley, Annie, and Sophia, thank you so much for this conversation. I really enjoyed it and I can't wait to share some of this advice with Dr. Keul.

Sophia Abbot (48:53):

Thanks for having us. Yeah, thank you so much for having us.

Riley Alkove (48:56):

Thank you for having me, guys. It's been a pleasure. Yeah.

Matt Wittstein (49:09):

Hi Adam. Welcome back to the show.

Adam Keul (49:11):

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Matt Wittstein (49:13):

So I took your context and your questions about using elements of democracy and your tackling a wicked problem course and how to get to know your students a little bit better and reframed it for our panel around a conversation about co-creation and developing positive relationships with our students. Riley Alcove, a first year economic student from Elon University, Annie Kelly, assistant professor and director of first year seminars at the University of Cincinnati, and Sophia Abbot, faculty development specialist at the University of Rhode Island talked about barriers to connection, reasons to co-create, and some of the student development pieces. I think you've already been thoughtful about. These are first year students at a fairly big transition in their lives and are learning the skills that they need to develop expertise. The conversation began with icebreaking strategies. Riley emphasized finding common ground through shared experiences or interests while Annie highlighted the importance of disarming students with positive open questions like, what's the best part of your day so far?

(50:09):

Sophia advocated for using name tents and learning fun facts about students. Noting that regularly using names helps create a sense of belonging for everyone in the class. While finding the right icebreaker is personal. Remember that building trust takes a little bit of time. Other suggested approaches included pre-class crafting assignments that reveal student perspectives and offering multiple participation pathways to reduce anxiety. When discussing relationship building, Riley cautioned that some learning activities and icebreakers can feel artificial. This raises questions about how authentic students might find practices like voting on activities and topics. The panel explored co-creation challenges in first year seminars with Sophia suggesting starting small, for instance, having students help define quality standards before creating a rubric. Rather than redesigning an entire syllabus, she explained that co-creation supports belongingness, validates lived experiences, and helps align learning with student values. Riley's perspective on co-creation was particularly insightful while hesitant about co-creating syllabi or lesson plans, he stressed that student input needs to feel meaningful rather than performative.

(51:16):

He also expressed a preference for in-class discussions over surveys, highlighting the importance of choosing appropriate engagement methods. Your voting system is one approach to co-creation, but there's potential to expand student agency Further, this could involve shifting power dynamics to give students a little more control through gradually increasing agency or autonomy. It could involve revealing hidden curriculum elements like distinguishing between proficiency and mastery, or it could involve moving from, I have to do this to actual intrinsic motivation. While we didn't have a clear solution to get that Hollywood professor vibe, I don't think students actually recite poetry on desks outside of film. I think the conversation reminded me that building relationships and connection first will enhance learning later. So it's okay to actually set aside time to do that connecting. So the question I have for you now is how will you expand your democratic practices to deepen co-creation opportunities and get to know your students a little bit better?

Adam Keul (52:13):

Thanks for all of those great ideas. It gives me a lot to think about for sure. I think the point of connecting the idea of democracy to co-creation. That's the fundamental of what we imagine as democracy anyway. And so giving more opportunities to create collectively is going to give them the reins a lot more deciding what we do one day after another. So I really like the idea of having their input on ways to do assessment. I think that the idea of having a name board or a name tag is one of those really simple solutions that I was hoping to get out of this. Something that's practical and doable. It might be a bit awkward, but at the same time, I'm willing to make it a little bit awkward. Any building, any kind of relationship can be a little bit awkward. So I think that's a great idea and I think I can find ways to give agency that are broader than just the voting. And I feel like when people take things up collectively to work together on things that does make that change from, we have to do this to that intrinsically motivated because by the end it becomes theirs and not just theirs in the sense of, I wrote this paper or we've created this project, but more this was our class.

Matt Wittstein (53:26):

So one of the unique opportunities I think you have in your class is you kind of do a little bit of how to college, which might lend itself well to, Hey, what topic would you want to talk about? You could probably take almost anything they could imagine and create some sort of presentation discussion, active learning activity around that. But then you have this more disciplinary sustainable tourism piece, which actually requires them to think a little bit more critically and develop some of those habits of mind that you talked about previously. So how do you see sort of scaffolding opportunities like maybe

using your voting system? How do you see scaffolding that across these sort of different units within your class?

Adam Keul (54:07):

The great thing about the topic of tourism sustainability is we can talk about anywhere in the world, and after doing this for a while, it's easy for me to get a sense of what places students are generally interested in. There's probably five or six places that a great percentage of the students want to learn about, and so giving them the power to learn about those particular places. So not only choosing what we do or what mode we learn in, but like, Hey, where do you want to learn about? I can see opening up some control to them in that manner just because maybe they're going to go on a trip there, or they did go on a trip there, or they have relatives from there. It allows us to look at the place that they want, but still look at the critical issues around sustainability and inequality and things like that. I think that gives me some direction for sure. The good news is, like you said, it is a fairly wide open class, so we can do that not only with regard to sustainable tourism, but also with regard to, Hey, what has your experience been like on campus? Right? Let's talk about having a roommate. Let's talk about getting used to the dorm food and stuff like that.

Matt Wittstein (55:13):

So to kind of wrap this up, I know you're looking for that Hollywood professor situation, that charismatic sage on the stage. What's one small change that you think you might make in the upcoming semesters that would maybe help you get that level of connection to your students?

Adam Keul (55:31):

It's funny that I said that because I wonder if I really do want that. The scenes and movies that remind me of that are scenes that are with a large class and the faculty member knows them by name, which that's unreasonable. It's Hollywood very much there. But the idea of me knowing every person by name, where they're from, because that's one thing I always remember. I think having that basic info and facts about them completely straight in my head, whether it's through name tags or me calling them out until I know who they are or I have some nickname for them, me putting more effort and thought into that each semester can make that situation more real and more likely. I'm not expecting them to respond like the students in movies do, but at least I can call 'em out by name. They'll know that I'm talking to them specifically and not just the general you.

Matt Wittstein (56:26):

Well, Adam, I really appreciate you bringing your class and your context to our show. I hope you're able to be that movie star teacher someday, and I look forward to seeing what you do with this.

Adam Keul (56:36):

Thanks a lot for having me. I really appreciate the chance just to get these ideas in and let 'em marinate and to get the perspectives of other people who work on this all day and students who I don't have to give a grade to.

Matt Wittstein (56:58):

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