



What If You Had a Higher Ed Magic Wand? ✨

SPEAKERS:

Linda Ellington, Katherine Panciera, Flower Darby, Tierney King

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. This episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference. Join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach with nationally recognized teaching and learning presenters. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Today, we're going to talk about a few topics that have really been vital for educators these past few years and will be for the future. We'll talk about promoting student mental health, infusing humor in your teaching and within student learning, and the importance of belonging for both students and faculty - feeling like you're part of the group. This is actually a little mashup from last year's Teaching Professor Online Conference, and this year, we'll have even more new content for the Teaching Professor Online Conference that you can watch at your own pace. So to start, Katherine Panciera will focus on promoting student mental health, and what you can do to make students feel safe and heard by implementing some small strategies.

Katherine Panciera 01:04

I think you also have to show you care. And part of that is showing you care about the student, the academics, yes, but also about the person behind that student. So I joke to my students that they're not just academic robots, they are people. But not all instructors see them that way, and that you care about their actual issues, right? And that's something that we don't always do the best. And then ensure your policies align with your perspective. So if you think about policies that we have, think about attendance policies. Do you want your students to come when they're sick? Do you want them to come to class when they're in a mental health spiral? With participation, what can participation look like, right? Are there ways that they could participate without turning on their camera, without using their voice online if they're not comfortable with that? And then with late work, is rigidity worth the pain? So I had a student who revealed to me that they had someone who they really cared about in the ICU, and could they possibly turn their assignment in late and I said, "I wish you told me this four days ago so you wouldn't have had to be worrying about this for four days." Now, that's my perspective. You may not feel the same way on these, but these are policies that we need to think about when we're thinking about supporting students, especially around mental health. So on day one, I tell my students, just as you can't do your best academically if you broke your leg, you can't do your best academically if you're struggling with your mental health. And I say, please feel free to reach out to me or contact someone at

the Wellness Center if things start to go poorly. They know that I'm not a mental health professional, but they also know that I've had my own struggles. And sometimes coming to someone who feels like a safe person is easier than going to a stranger at our Wellness Center. I also have created space in my office so that my office is physically a space that feels supportive for them and their mental health. So I always stock tissues in my office. I have chocolate, beyond chocolate. I have snacks. I have this banner that shows that I'm a visible LGBTQIA ally. And then I have a beanbag and a throw. So I've had a student who's just been in crisis mode, maybe they can't get into the Wellness Center right away, and they plop down on the beanbag and watch a movie for an hour. And sometimes being that space is what's needed. So these have all helped build relationships, I also create space for communication. And so this is in Teams, in Slack email, I always respond to assignments in our learning management system of Canvas, especially if there's something that where they explicitly mentioned mental health, or poor work life balance. And then I also share my phone number. I know not everyone is comfortable doing this. I teach at a school where most of my classes are 20 students or less. In the past three years, I've been sharing this with students, I've had three of them use it to - two for text and one for a phone call, all of which have been incredibly appropriate for the situation. So this is not something that's been abused, although, I do understand that that will not be comfortable for everyone. So the next thing that I do is I check in with my students. So I asked you at the start which squiggle you were today. This is part of an exercise that I do regularly in my classrooms. So I call it kind of a temperature check. I show a slide early in class. This is a slideshow in Google that's called "What 'blank' are you today?" And it's 20 to 30 slides that just have these pictures. And I ask them which one are you today? They can respond in chat, they can respond by holding up a number and so I can see okay, we've got a lot of nines today. What does that mean for us? And so sometimes we probe a little bit deeper into it. But I think the really important thing if you're going to do a temperature check is that if you see everyone's doing poorly, if you see like on this, these ducks over here, everyone is duck nine. That to me indicates a problem. And we either need to learn more about what is happening with that, what is contributing to that. And maybe that means today is not a good day to do a deep learning day, today is a day to do maybe something I was thinking about for later in the term that was more a Q&A about my tech industry experience or something like that. I have reflections in Canvas that my students do mostly on a weekly basis. And usually, there's a couple reading questions, and then what I call a mental health check or getting to know your question. So sometimes it's explicitly a mental health check. Like, what did you do to take care of yourself this week? Sometimes it's more getting to know you, but getting to know you outside of the classroom, getting to know that human behind the academic robot. So here I have, what's one interesting thing that you learned this week, unrelated to class, and how did you learn it? And then I always have this question that says, "Anything else you'd like to share?" And this, to me, has been revolutionary. So sometimes students will be like, I watched this movie, and it was horrible. But it was hilarious. And I think you'd like it because... Sometimes I have students who use it in place of where I would think an email would be reasonable. Like, I want you to know it's week eight of our 10 week term, I'm really struggling. My grandma just died. I don't need anything right now. I just wanted you to know. So these are things where an email would be perfectly acceptable, but sometimes a student doesn't want to take that extra step. And by asking that anything else question, they have a space where they're already talking to me, they're already in dialogue with me. And they can just throw it in there. It's not any extra work for them. And so this, for me has been absolutely critical in both getting to know my students and getting my students to communicate with me and understanding where they're at.

Tierney King 06:59

Another important aspect that Linda Ellington talks about is how you can bring applicable and appropriate humor into teaching and learning in higher ed. She explains that the academic world can be static, but it doesn't have to be. By using curiosity, creativity, and imagination, you can harness the power of humor as a tool for your teaching.

Linda Ellington 07:19

Now, curiosity and research, the power of it is problem solving, right? If we can be curious and ask, What if? How does this, do this, right? Be curious, get that little brain juice going on curiosity. Because there's a little part back there that says, Oh, I liked this stuff. Okay. So what we want to do is look at four ways to kind of look at the power of curiosity, just generate lots of ideas before we even evaluate anything, such as brainstorming, right? And then ask problems as questions to generate rich information. Before we get answers, we have to ask questions, but we have to ask questions that are the right questions to see if we can get the right answer. But we have to ask problems as questions. And that can also be a what if or how did this not do this? And then don't don't judge. You know, sometimes it's really hard for the human being to defer judgment and suspend judgment. Sometimes it's really difficult. And we need to just grab hold of that, be disciplined about that. And just hold your tongue as my grandmother would say, right? And then focus on Yes. "Yes, and..." I would encourage you not to say, "Yes, but..." because you just took away the power of Yes. So when you say "Yes, and... what if we did it this way?" "Yes, and... I don't delete the word. And I've done this with workshops as well with colleagues. And it's mind blowing when they get to focus on Yes. And they'll say "Yes, but..." so we practice a lot in that type of environment. So curiosity is also amplified, as I said, by asking questions. So here's the here's the what if...what if, right? And then here's an example. If you held the higher ed magic wand, if you held it in your higher educational institution, where would you start to create a very pervasive humor climate, whether face-to-face, virtual conference room, Zoom, here, and so forth? This is another way to use this slide and create a conversation, a debate, a learning moment. Talk about where in our institutions, and when in our institutions, right? Because we're the leaders, we're the learners, we're the teachers, right? Where can we start? Where can we start? Or if it's already started, how do we enhance that start, right? To get pervasive through the, whatever control we have in the university, different, you know, disciplines, etc, etc. So this is a fun, fun activity. Give yourself and higher ed, a magic wand and what would you do? What would your colleague do? Where would they start? And it's usually not the same place. So it's the what ifs. I write stories for little children, I publish children's books. And when I read to them, I read them in libraries, in lower economic cities around Florida and Georgia. And we go to and I go to the library, and the library sometimes has this little bus and they go get the children who don't always have transportation. So we talk about, you know, what if, oh, what if you were? What if because you are? You're so smart. What if...and so great way to even deal with the K-12. And then 20, and on and on. Okay? Creativity, we all know, this is not new. But it's the possibilities that come from creativity. And we call it creative inquiry. Okay. Creating possibilities out there is beyond awesome, right? When you give yourself permission to be creative, and say, "Linda, I give myself permission to be creative this morning. Now, what do I do?" Maybe I just think, maybe I ponder, maybe I, you know, look at comic books. I look at Calvin and Hobbes, because they're funny, and I can use some of the stories in those comic books for teaching a lesson. So use even those kinds of permission to be creative. And don't be too too big for our britches, my grandmother, again, to think

that we can't use comic books back in the day, right? The right comic books, they have to have the right message and be very kind and very, you know, positive. But give yourself permission to do that. Because we all know, we all know that the shelf life knowledge today is two to three years. And so what we're teaching today, what we're learning today, four or five, six years from now, it will either be a dinosaur, or it will be technology changed, right? So kind of remember that when you're being creative, and you're doing the possibilities, creative inquiry, what we come up with is only going to have shelf life of two to three years in today's world because it's on rapid speed.

Tierney King 13:16

As you circulate these ideas of curiosity, creativity and humor in the classroom, we're also going to focus on the importance of belonging for both student and faculty success. Flower Darby asks the question, "What does it feel like when you're part of a group?" And then explains how this can influence your teaching, your students success, your success as an instructor, and overall sense of belonging.

Flower Darby 13:40

My current book project, actually, I have two book projects. But the current book project is about emotion science. And here's the big takeaway from the research that I have done on this book. That is, when we feel bad, we can't learn as effectively. We cannot engage cognitively. We cannot process information, retain it and store it. And when we feel good, that benefits our learning. Feeling like we belong, we feel good. It's going to promote better learning. Feeling like we are not part of the group feels bad. It's going to shut down learning. And as educators today, there is much that we can do to help our students feel like they belong. And it's not just about warm, fuzzy feeling good. It's about better learning and academic achievement. So stay tuned. So during the pandemic, I came across this idea called collective effervescence. And essentially, it's what we were missing with all of our isolation, with all of our fear and uncertainty. And this is a fabulous phrase, right, where you are encouraged to try saying it: collective effervescence. It's really fun. I have to practice it. So what this is, is it's a phrase coined by sociologist Emile Durkheim, to represent the synchrony we feel when we are together when we are in communication. And in connection with other people, we are absolutely wired for connection, and all that isolation caused a depletion in that collective effervescence. I read about this concept in this article by Adam Grant. He's a well known organizational psychologist. And he was arguing that what has happened is all that cut off, that lack of the spontaneous social connections, was dampening our engagement. Our motivation was leading to increased depression and anxiety. And he makes the point in this article that in societies where people pursue happiness, socially, that there are increases in emotional well being. And these kinds of factors, people feel less lonely, they report feeling less lonely. But in societies where we pursue happiness individually, we don't see those gains, we don't see improvements in depression, anxiety, or loneliness. And, you know, I've thought a lot about this in the United States, we're pretty well known for our rugged individualism. And I'm going to encourage us today to think about pursuing happiness socially, with our students, with our colleagues, because we know that that is what's going to lift us out of this slump. I'm going to come at it from a social and emotional angle today, that when we are pursuing well being together, that everybody is going to benefit and be more engaged and be more productive, whether it's learning or teaching or research, whatever it might be. So the way that we pursue happiness socially, according to Grant is by connecting, caring and contributing to the group to the well being of people. And what we know from the research is that feeling connected boosts our well being when we don't feel connected. We know

that feeling connected boosts learning - this is in the literature. Like I said, it's not just warm, fuzzy, let's get together and sing Kumbaya. This is, no really, this benefits our students' academic achievement, persistence, and success. So today, we're going to look at strategies to extend belonging. I'll explain more about that in a few minutes. Because that is how we're going to cultivate the well being that is helping our students feel like they belong. And why are we going to do this? Why are we going to extend this effort? Why are we going to maybe think about new things that we can do? Well, it's because we love our students, and we want them to succeed. You would not be here at this event, if you didn't care deeply about your students and their success. But it's again, this kind of select collective societal problem, this fundamental human need. Psychologist Abraham Maslow identified this, that we want to feel like we belong. And as emerged in the chatbox comments earlier, it is about feeling seen for who we are, accepted for who we are, it's about feeling understood. And you know, I often get asked, What about if I'm a real strong introvert? Well, I'm married to one. So I have that experience too. And people say if I'm an introvert, maybe I don't want to feel seen and connected. I will grant you, maybe you need a little bit less of the social connection. But I will argue that you still want to feel accepted for who you are. You want to be respected for your personal preferences and the way that you are wired. And that's where I'm going. We want to extend belonging to our students, no matter who they are, no matter the personality, their preferences, their identities. We want all of our students to feel like they belong so that they can thrive in our classes. And when we do that, it's going to increase our well being as well because they're going to feed their energy back to us.

Tierney King 18:37

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