



From Concept to Practice: Implementing Liquid Syllabi in Higher Ed

SPEAKERS

Margie Pannell, Tierney King, Frank Plunkett

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in Washington, DC, from June 6 through the 8 where you'll collaborate with other educators, gain innovative teaching solutions and hear bold ideas from some of higher ed's most respected voices. 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. All right, welcome to Faculty Focus Live today, we're going to talk with Margie Pannell and Frank Plunkett about a pilot they conducted on their liquid syllabus. So first, I'm just going to have you both briefly introduce yourselves and let our audience know who you are.

Margie Pannell 00:44

Okay, I guess I'll kick it off. Hi. My name is Margie Pannell. I am the Canvas administrator and instructional designer at Peirce College, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I'm also an adjunct professor of about eight

Frank Plunkett 00:57

Alright, hello. My name is Frank Plunkett. I am an associate professor in the legal studies department at Peirce College. I focus on criminal justice issues. I have been at Peirce for about eight years and in higher ed for about 15 years, following 25 years in law enforcement.

Tierney King 01:11

Awesome. Thank you so much for being here with us today, and so today we're going to talk about a pilot that you both conducted on liquid syllabus. So first, kind of start us off with how you came around this idea of the liquid syllabi, and what kind of encouraged you to kick start this?

Margie Pannell 01:27

Sure, I'd love to. So actually, you kind of inspired us. We listened to the liquid syllabus idea on one of your previous podcasts, and it was about a year ago, and as an instructional designer and adjunct faculty, I am constantly looking for new ways and creative ways to engage our students, and thought this would be the perfect mechanism. So, you know, as instructors, we sometimes struggle with establishing a connection with our students. The liquid syllabus provided that opportunity to interact

with our students prior to the official class actually beginning. So we get to establish that rapport before we even log on to the class.

Tierney King 02:11

I love this. I love when it comes full circle of a episode before. And then you get to implement some of these ideas, because this is the whole reason that we we do this. And then let's talk about the pilot. So, what did it entail, from the setup to the collection of the data, just kind of the overall the pilot and everything.

Margie Pannell 02:31

It was easy to get the pilot started, because faculty were excited about the idea. And to begin the project, I solicited interest in participating in the pilot. And after confirming the participants, I established bimonthly meetings for the team. And in our meetings, we discuss which platform to use the training, the liquid syllabus process, content, frequency of offering the pilot training, targeted courses and the collection of data. So for the platform, in an effort to be fiscally responsible, which we're all trying to do now, especially in education, I researched several platforms and decided that Google Sites was the best choice for us. We're currently already a Google shop, so that choice made the most sense. Also, Google has a robust feature which could help us drive our decision making regarding the success of the pilot. So they have a robust analytic feature that as I was digging deeper into the platform, I realized that their Google Analytics was really something that could really help us determine if this pilot was successful or not. So for training, as I mentioned earlier, men are many of my colleagues were experienced in using Google platform because we're already a Google shop, so training was minimal. I provided a refresher training session on Google Sites, and then I directed participants to view instructions on the Google website and blogs for additional information. So we pretty much did the learning, you know, on our own, and then we came back as a group. So the learning curve was small, and it helped that the platform was very intuitive now for the content, as I mentioned earlier, the team got together bimonthly to determine content and strategies to keep our students engaged while they were visiting our site, my colleague Frank, who is here today, however, I'll let him elaborate on his approach, because he did an awesome, fantastic job. We aim for consistency among our sites to ensure students receive the same information. So a few items included a bio of instructor, instructor hobbies, brief course description, how to access text information, tips for online learning on the learning management system support and IT contact information. So all things that students really once they log into the course, they kind of overlook and don't really, you know, sometimes they don't read the syllabus, and this is information that will support their learning. So that that was pretty much it for how we started the process and how the process evolved as we completed our Google site.

Tierney King 05:14

In addition to, you know, once you've ran the pilot, you've implemented the liquid syllabi into your courses, what information did you retain from student feedback from this pilot, and then, why is this feedback so important for future courses, or for implementing this again in your classes?

Margie Pannell 05:34

So I'll speak to it first, and then I'll let Frank add his input. So the feedback we gathered, we conducted a survey at the end of every session, and we sent it out to our students, and we asked them a series of

questions, and based on that feedback, we were able to gather that the whole process was very helpful for students. It kind of calms a lot of their their anxiety going into a new course, especially for the population we serve. Sometimes they've been out of school for several years. And it also it engaged, not only the students, but the the faculty that participated, because we had to come up with creative ways to keep our students engage along with providing information. So you know, it came full circle for for us

Frank Plunkett 06:26

Sure. And I would add that, you know, we did run the survey over two consecutive sessions so we were able to see from student input, maybe make some tweaks between the sessions. One of the biggest things we had an issue with was with our student outreach. The survey data told us about 60% of students visited the site in session three of the course. This number increased almost 80% in session four. So we had changed the way that we reached out, added some different things. Initially, we just used student emails before the courses opened, so we then provided site links in the second session we did at session four, we also put this information in course announcements at the beginning of the course, so people could if they hadn't seen the email beforehand, as soon as they got in the course, they go, oh, there's a website. I can check this out first, and then they could be more comfortable. We also want to look for additional means to deal with the outreach possibly mass emails through a system that we use at the college. So we wanted to have students have that information ahead of time before they would normally access the course and follow up on a need for better outreach is we had at least one student a survey who had absolutely no clue of what we were talking about in the survey when we asked about the the liquid syllabus. So we continue to look for different ways to reach out to students before courses, so that they they know they have this option, this tool and this helpful thing for them, most of the students did not suggest any real substantive change. We have really good feedback about the websites, some comments about people wanting more information about assignments and course syllabi that's being looked at. However, since these are open Internet websites, we do have some concerns, because they are not locked behind a security LMS, like most of your course material is

Tierney King 08:16

Perfect. Yep, there's pros to cons to everything, right? And then, is there anything specific on your liquid syllabus, and for these links and websites that you use that you saw really effective, whether it's, you know, the content that was on there, whether it was the setup that you did for the menus, or anything like that, that really stuck out, that was just really effective, that you used.

Frank Plunkett 08:38

I could say one thing is about we each did a introductory video, and which is also an important thing when, when you get to the point where you want to know, how should other people do this? The video was very useful, and students were able to get to know their instructor before the course started. So I did one where I introduced myself, went all the way back to, you know, my childhood, and all the way up through my careers, and had the students really have a good feel that, hey, this is another human being just like us, not just, you know, some robot teacher person, but I think that was one thing that that we found was really helpful, and getting it in there, embedded within, within the website. So just like you know, your normal website that you go to, or YouTube or whatever. You just click on it, and boom, there. You can see and learn about your person.

Margie Pannell 09:24

And I think one thing, one approach I took, which and before I talk about my approach, we all we love Frank's video. I mean, I think I watched it twice. I'm like, Okay, I know all about Frank. Now, one approach I took was I tried to make more of a personal connection with my students. So I'm a huge Philadelphia Eagles fan. So my picture, I was decked out in my Eagles gear, and I had my my puppy decked out in his Eagle gear. And, you know, so I intertwined little Philadelphia Eagles trivia, you know, throughout the the website. And students did comment on it, like, Oh yeah, yeah, Philly's not my team. But, you know, it's okay. I tried to approach it from more of a personal aspect. And I think it was, you know, very positive, because I did get feedback. They actually commented. Once they got to class, they're like, oh yeah, we realize that you're an Eagles fan and and homework is due on Sunday, so don't disturb you.

Tierney King 10:26

And I think, you know, making those connections with students before is so important. And if you can use, you know, a liquid syllabus for something like this to do that, it starts you off on the right foot with your students, and engages students right from the start. So kind of circling back from this, are there any changes from the pilot that you will implement in the future and why?

Margie Pannell 10:48

As Frank alluded to, we struggled with how to do the, the original outreach to our students. So we're, we're going to have to regroup and and kind of figured that piece out. But from the foot, for the most part, everything, I mean, we were all very surprised with all the positive feedback we received. Of course, you know, everything can be improved. But at this moment, you know, our faculty kind of just came back, you know, from being on summer break, so we're still, you know, trying to get a meeting together and figure out, Okay, now let's take a look at the larger picture, and what can we do to improve?

Frank Plunkett 11:29

Yeah, there's not a whole lot to add to that, because I actually went through a lot of that information earlier. The surveys really told us it was more about how we reached out. The feedback that we got from students was, was really positive about the sites themselves, where, you know, students actually said, Hey, this was a this was a great thing. I felt much more comfortable with the class. I felt like I really knew my my instructor, before the class even started. So, and we had a number of of statements like that from students. So again, you know, tweaking things, but there's no really, really big issues. Obviously, if you know, the four of us that were involved teach multiple, multiple courses, and we can use this same template for our other courses and just change anything that's specifically content related to that course. And it's going to be a very simple process going forward, because that's all you got to do, is, if there's things that related to that specific course, like the title and the name, the number and stuff like that, great, but most of the introductory stuff and things that we have on there that you know, how do you reach out to me? What do I expect from you? What should you expect from me? All that's going to be the same from course to course. So it's going to be a really great process for us as we continue to move forward.

Tierney King 12:45

And then for, you know, educators who are looking to create their own liquid syllabus or kind of kick start this maybe at their universities, do you have any advice for them? Are there small steps that they can do or take?

Frank Plunkett 12:59

I could dive right into that one, because we, we actually used, and, you know, Margie, Margie came up with this and provided it to us, but we used a training course that's actually in Canvas and readily available to everybody, by Michelle Brocansky-Brock. She's a community college educator. She has a website that's brocansky.com but then there's, of course, some other names to it. So we can add all that, but that Michelle, Michelle's training was excellent. She laid out the background for creating these sites, like, what's the reason for it? Why should you even bother to do this? And she provided step by step instructions for each page that you might put on your liquid syllabus. You know, why is it important to have that introduction? Why is it important to let students know how they can reach out and communicate with you. She's also written several publications about this topic that are also listed on the site. And we also found that if you do an internet search on liquid syllabus, or liquid syllabi, you're going to find a lot of information from other sources. But for us, one of the big things was the collaboration. You know, I wanted to do something like this for many, many years in one of my other teaching stints, I actually had a website that I created which covered information for all the courses I was teaching, not just focused on one. And I always wanted to get back to that at Peirce College, but I never did. But having Margie start this project and getting us all involved was a real motivator and simplified the ability to do it. And certainly, having the tools available is very important. You know, as Margie mentioned multiple times, we use, we use Google products. The Google Sites is really easy to use, but anybody who's going to be involved in it needs to be able to have those tools available. Google Sites are something syllable similar, to be able to create the website, a lot of people that are indicated space already use this. It's a regular thing. So there's lots of training out there as well on the internet on how to even make your website, you need some kind of tool for embedding or creating video. Obviously, YouTube's a great platform, but there's tons of other things out there. A lot of schools, or school districts or whoever already have these tools readily available for them. We use Canvas and Canvas already, you know, built stuff in that could potentially be used in the future, but there's plenty of standalones available. But I really want to emphasize the benefits of the team, working together, collaborating, building upon each other's skills and knowledge. We reviewed each other's sites, we gave each other pointers, and moved along through the process. So having a team, rather than trying to do this all on your own, I think, is probably one of the biggest pluses to try to get this thing done.

Tierney King 15:33

And we will also include the resources that you mentioned in the notes for this episode as well. So we'll have all the links for that as well. And then, I guess, kind of lastly, what is the main takeaway from this pilot? For you both, what are you most proud about from this pilot?

Margie Pannell 15:50

Well, for me, my key takeaway is which I always, I always thought that having a connection with your students was important. But after piloting the liquid syllabi, we have data now that supports that the students, they really need this they really need this connection to their faculty prior to beginning of

course. And you know, like I mentioned earlier, it's, it decreased their anxiety. It gave them more of a positive perception. Going into the course, I found that my students were more connected to me, and therefore connected and cared about the content that I was presenting. So, you know, it was it just, it just came full circle and to be able to really support the idea that students need that connection, not just that academic connection, but that personal connection to help them thrive. You know, really was just, you know, pivotal in in me continuing this liquid syllabus. Now it's no longer a pilot. We were approved to to use it in future sessions. And again, I want to thank Peirce College for allowing me the opportunity to pursue this, you know, because they were like, what, what is what is this? What are you trying to do? And, you know, and they, they put their trust in me and the team, and they just let us run with it, and you know, I'm grateful for that. And you know, being able to represent Peirce College and the students that we serve.

Frank Plunkett 17:27

I think, a takeaway for me, concurring with most of what Margie said, as far as breaking the connections, it's always very important to make those connections, and I try to build the connections in the very first week of the course, which of course, adds to you know what you have to try to accomplish in that first week. But being able to start that connection a week ahead of time makes it so much simpler. Makes people feel that when they walk in the door to classroom. Now, of course, we're doing it all virtually, but when they they come in to our our virtual sessions, or they're chatting with in a discussion asynchronously, whatever, they already feel like the



y know who this person is, and they have a better feel for it. Also, for me, I think maintaining the connections is important, and that seems to be, you know, trouble sometimes, you know, between courses over the summer, ways that maybe we can use similar type of technology to help maintain student connections to our faculty during the interim times and help them to continue to learn in our fields, in our disciplines during those times as well.

Tierney King 18:28

Whether you're driving to work or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For

more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.