**ENGAGE, 19th January 2018**

**A guided conversation with Peter Felten and Meredith Piatt, led by Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka**

*“We teach as if we only have heads, but also there are bodies and hearts”*

The discussion was introduced by clarifying key terms in US education for ‘engagement’.

Peter and Meredith both felt that ‘engaged learning’ or ‘engagement’ was the most popular term in the US, with ‘engagement’ signifying all strands of the learning journey in which students were active participants. ‘Partnership’ on the other hand, had a slightly narrower meaning – a ‘slice of engagement’; a particular project, perhaps, in co-design or co-research/inquiry.

**What does engagement mean?**

Peter defined a key component of engagement as ‘learning that is meaningful from a student perspective’. Engaged learning prompts students to take ownership over their own learning. Yet it doesn’t necessarily have to feel good when the student is in the midst of an engaged learning experience. What it should do, though, is be designed to instil a student mind-set that makes them ‘feel like I can learn something’.

Meredith talked about student engagement as a two-way street that dynamically involves both students and academic staff. When she was a new undergraduate, she admitted she didn’t know that she was participating in something that was designed to be co-creation until it was described more explicitly as co-creation and emphasised that this was designed to be purposeful engaged learning.

**Belonging**

Peter remarked that the sense of belonging in students was not equally distributed in HE. He referred to the term ‘belonging uncertainty’ (Walton & Cohen, 2007) to explain how many students may question their belonging in new social and academic settings, especially when they are targeted by stigma, negative stereotypes and implicit/unconscious biases in education practices. Peter felt that to convey this sense of belonging, staff needed to convey high expectations of all of their students, no matter what their background or learning journey so far. A primary role of staff is to figure out how to help every student feel a sense of academic empowerment – a finding echoed in Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka’s PhD initial research.

In particular, Elon’s honour code represents core values that aim to bring a community together and initiate a sense of belonging: “honesty, integrity, responsibility, trust”.

**Preparing for engagement**

Meredith suggested that staff and institutions can do things to prepare students for engaging actively, and what better way than through the medium of the smart phone. She stressed the value of pre-course engagement with students, such as posting articles online, and establishing an online discussion group, before the even module or course had started. This would hopefully begin to create a sense of community, dialogue and excitement. This type of media should be central to the learning conversation. She even suggested course trailers, like movie trailers, to give glimpses of the ‘upcoming’ course, and get students motivated and engaged from the outset.

Peter suggested that, to check if a course was genuinely designed with engaged learning in mind was, a litmus test was to ask, ‘Could this course run without students?”.

**Social norming: Embedding engaged learning in everyday university life**

Peter believes that for universities to enact engaged learning authentically, staff and student interactions and relationships need to be normalised so that they don’t become ‘forced’ engagement, but are an organic part of everyday life. For example, Peter cited a university in Virginia, Hampton-Sydney College, where many staff sit in the courtyard in rocking chairs during their ‘office hours’ to encourage visibility, dialogue and openness with their students. First year students would get used to seeing this from day one, and not question it as a unique practice or one-off initiative.

Other factors that were integral to embed engaged learning into university life was by making powerful initiatives non-optional at Elon University. If there is evidence that an initiative works, then make it a required element of the student’s learning journey, for example, service or work-based learning.

Also, he suggests incentivising and rewarding staff for enacting engaged learning good practice.

Finally, Peter believes that the strongest influence on students is other students, so he encourages peer-to-peer work. From this perspective, staff should be stepping back to ask themselves: when are the times that the students need us the most and when should they be working and learning primarily with their peers?

Some of the audience members’ questions probed the resources Elon has to be able to accomplish such impressive results (e.g small classes – max 33, and high student fees) and how effective such engagement would be for large lectures of 100+. Furthermore, how would you accommodate different learning styles into engaged learning? ‘Extreme’ engaged learning exercises, such as roleplaying, should perhaps be offered as optional courses as this type of course may be anxiety-provoking for some students.

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