



Episode 4: Live with Ken Alford: Seeing Instructors As People, Not Just Textbook Reciters and Question Writers

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. 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 on Faculty Focus Live, we have a special guest. I'm excited to introduce Ken Alford, who has done numerous seminars and 20-Minute Mentors for Magna Publications. He's a presenter at the

Teaching Professor Conference, and is on the advisory board for the Teaching Professor Conference. So let's start off by letting us know who you are and how you became an instructor.

Ken Alford 00:42

Well, my name is Ken Alford, I served just about 30 years in the United States Army as an officer, and retired as a colonel in 2008. And along the way, while serving as an Army officer, I had the wonderful opportunity of teaching twice at the United States Military Academy at West Point. There I taught computer science and software engineering and information systems engineering, those kinds of topics. Then I also had the opportunity when I made Colonel to be reassigned at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. And there was made the department chair of the Strategic Leadership Department and had an opportunity to teach behavioral science and those kinds of topics. And when it was time to retire from the army, I looked around and wanted to continue teaching because I really liked working with college students. And I was hired at Brigham Young University in the department of church history and doctrine. And now I teach a variety of different classes.

Tierney King 01:44

So, it's I mean, it's obviously changed a little bit since you first started, especially in this past year, right?

Ken Alford 01:51

Oh, my goodness. I started teaching, actually, as an undergraduate teaching assistant for a required course at Brigham Young University in the 1970s. And then I taught for the first time at West Point in the late 80s. And now continue teaching today. So I've dipped my teaching finger into several decades, and things have really changed over the decades, students have changed. But I think the change that has happened since March 2020, has just accelerated the entire process. I've never seen change as much as has occurred within the last 12 months. And it has been really an interesting thing to experience, not all pleasant but at the same time, not all bad, either.

Tierney King 02:34

You're well-versed instructor, I'm sure that you give a lot of people advice and tips. And from this past year, did you come up with any advice or tips to kind of motivate your colleagues or peers throughout this past year and continuing into this next year?

Ken Alford 02:52

Well, I would note that I have been teaching asynchronous, I've been teaching fully online, since the pandemic has hit because of some health situations in my family here. Not with me, but with others that I may mention in a minute. But the big thing that I've tried to share with other professors is to just be optimistic, be positive. You know, there's been a lot of gloom and doom in this period. And everybody has to decide if that glass is half full or half empty. And in from where I sit, it's always better if the glass is not only half full, but more than half full. And so I've just tried to preach optimism to fellow faculty, friends, as well as my students. And I guess, I would note that I think it's important always to watch each other teach. But I think it's really important to watch each other teach online. I've appreciated the faculty colleagues that have let me kind of lurk in the corner on their Zoom screen, as they're teaching, because I've learned a lot of ways to deal with questions, to encourage discussion, to use breakout rooms, just some very clever things that teachers have done that, quite frankly, hadn't occurred to me to do. And I've been able to take some of those and modify them and others to, you know, ask for permission to just borrow them wholesale. But that's been very helpful. The other thing that I have shared as people have contacted me is just recognize when you're teaching online, if electronics are involved, it's not a question of if it's going to goof up, it's a question of when it's going to goof up and how bad the goof up is going to be. And how difficult will it be to recover? And so when things have goofed up, fortunately, being asynchronous, when mine goofs up, I just stop recording and do it again. But if you're teaching a synchronous class online, for example, then you're bound to have little glitches and snags and just roll with the punches. Just you know, just make it fun—students understand. And it's nothing to get him to get upset about. One fun thing that that I've shared with several people that I'm happy to share now, is at the beginning of the pandemic, I really missed just being associated with students, there's just an energy that comes off students from that age group, and I just really, really get charged up being with them. And I was missing that. So I was trying to decide how can I kind of duplicate it since I'm completely online? A majority of my students are closely approaching the majority, I will never see them live in the entire semester. And so I thought, what can I do and I hit upon the idea of, you know, cold calling, kind of like many businesses do. And so I have students post a “Me in 30 seconds” video that kind of explains a little bit about them. And I do the same and my teaching assistants do the same. But I found things in those videos that it was very easy to kind of extend the conversation. So my university gives us access to student phone numbers, so we can contact them. So I just cold called them and said, “Hi, this is this is Professor Alford. I saw such and such in your video or you used to live, you mentioned that you lived in Indianapolis, I used to work at Fort Harrison. Where did you live?” And I just get to know them. And it's just been, it's been fun. I don't know how else to explain. I just got a note yesterday, in fact, from a teacher that had heard the cold calling idea. And she said that she had called three students from each of her four sections over the course of a couple of days. And her comment was, I'm hooked. I'm just going to make this part of my class, it was so much fun. And it's really been exciting, because then when you do have contact with the students during the semester, if they're asking questions, or have a problem with the exam, or whatever it might be, you've had that contact with them. And it's just been fun. I also make a point of reaching out and calling all the

students that seem to be struggling, and not all of them will answer their phone, quite frankly. But those that do, we've had several students say, you know, it gave me an encouragement to actually get caught up.

Tierney King 07:11

I was gonna ask for cold calling students, kind of what is their response? Just because I know a lot of students aren't really big into answering phone calls, you know, they're more into text messaging and emailing. And so what is their response to a teacher calling them?

Ken Alford 07:27

Well, I would also add that some students I have texted if they don't answer the phone, I'll just send them a quick text and say, "Hi, this is Professor Alford, I saw your 'Me in 30 seconds video,'" or "I saw a post on the discussion board, and I just wanted to comment on it," and then I just share something little, and then invite them to give me a call if they'd like to follow up. Students reactions are varied as you would expect. Probably the most common responses, "No way!" But many of the students have just sent a quick email afterwards and just commented how nice it was to actually talk to a professor which prior to March 2020, we just took so much for granted.

Tierney King 08:10

So students are, I mean, a lot are having a tough time, some weren't prepared to be online, and what kind of tips or encouragement have you implemented in your class to help them through this?

Ken Alford 08:24

My experience, and other professors I'm sure have had different experience, but my experience is, I've seen students kind of migrate, for lack of a better word, to kind of both ends of the grading spectrum. Last semester, for example, I had more students earn an A than in any previous semester. And unfortunately, I also had more students that I flunked than in any previous semester. They just, there's been kind of a migration out of the middle, if I could phrase it that way. I teach about 200 students a semester. And, they've just kind of moved out of the middle. The C student has been a vanishing breed over the over the pandemic, students have been moving to these in an F and A's and B's. And so because of that, I think it's incumbent on teachers to recognize that if you're teaching, especially online, you don't have attention of the students like you do in a classroom. It's just the reality, there's nothing you can do about it. And so it's just important to tell students anything important many times, many ways. So I use announcements, email, sometimes texts, sometimes phone calls, as well as videos, as well as posting slideshows as well as, you know, putting information on the webpage. Because you can't assume that just simply saying something once in one place, students will get the message. I've learned in this pandemic they won't. The other thing that I've really learned from students is that it's especially important in this kind of environment to front-load the relevance, meaning that let them know where we're going, and why we're going and how we're going to get to where we're going. And tell them up front. And I've thought that's been important for many years, but I think it's especially important now. The other thing, the other tips I've taken from students is that students are reacting to this in a variety of ways. So I've actually tried to give them a little bit more freedom. In some of the assignments, for example, I have up to 2% available in extra credit in a course, they can't go above 2%, but they can earn up to 2%. But I've added several options where they get to kind of pick their adventure if you like.

And all they have to do, just send me a note and clear it with me, I just make sure it's going to be something related to the class, but then they get to do something that they're interested in. And then we have an opportunity to post, and share if it is appropriate, with other students with their permission. And there have been some very clever things done, things that would not have been done in a normal classroom environment. So you know what, I've also kind of done the same thing with discussion boards. I'll have a couple of set topics that they can comment on each unit. But I've added an additional one for every unit that says, if there's a question you've got, if it's something related to this unit, please post your question, and then share with us some initial research you did and try to answer your own question. So it ends up being a little bit more work than just commenting on the regular question. But it's that's also been very interesting. And students have raised some great questions that I just wouldn't have thought of. And those have been some of the best discussion board threads that we've had.

Tierney King 11:40

A lot of teachers have been saying how, you know, students are very, very tech savvy. And so being thrown into this world, it's not totally new to them. And when you're implementing all these new things, like you said, technology fails and it's just a matter of when. A lot of instructors say how students will help them out with different technology. What have you learned from your students, or have they provided you things like feedback that you've learned throughout this?

Ken Alford 12:08

I've learned some small tips and tricks from students. For example, you can go in zoom, you can go from one shared screen directly to another shared screen without going back to the main screen with you being the full picture. And it was in front of me all the time as an option, I just hadn't paid attention to it. And it was a student that actually showed me how to do that. And it's a tip I use now in almost every single video that I that I record so, so absolutely, keep your eyes and ears open for things that students can share. I think one of the things that that students have helped me see is it's just important to be seen. It's too easy to be invisible when it's an online class. And I've got some wonderful teaching assistants and between them and myself, we try to make sure that we reach out in some way to everybody and by name, not just, you know, the mass mailing kind of stuff. And it's just, it's just important. Something else that I've learned from students is that I think almost every professor went through the same logic, and that is, oh, hey, we're going online. So students aren't going to need to travel to class, therefore, I get X more time, I can assign them things to do. And in talking to students during the pandemic, their workload for the same amount of credit went up significantly over the course of the pandemic. And so as a result, what I did was, I didn't want to be part of that problem. And so I have a semester long project. And I actually lowered the number of hours I required during the pandemic for that project. They still do it. But I lowered it because of that increased workload, I was hearing this just universally from students that the workload was just significantly increased, which, surprised me and seemed kind of counterintuitive initially. And so that's a couple of tips and tricks and things I've modified based on. Hopefully, meeting student needs a little better.

Tierney King 14:10

So you're definitely your storyteller. How have you kept that kind of storytelling knack and element into your online classes?

Ken Alford 14:19

Well, one tiny little thing I do—it's good to be the professor in an online course when you're recording because you get to set the set the schedule and agenda—I've added something at the beginning of classes. And I actually started this before the pandemic, but I've enlarged it a little bit during the pandemic. And that is, it's easy for students to see, as I mentioned, I first started teaching university peers in the 70s and then had been teaching in the 80s, 90s and now into the 20s. So I I'm down the road of life a lot further than my students. And so one thing I've been able to share is I include a life tip, I just call it a life tip that at the beginning of each lesson and quite frankly it has nothing to do with the course material. It's just some common sense things I've learned along the way. And I, I think it's just a way, you know, to try and connect. And it does let me share a little bit of a story of why I've included that and why I think it's important in their life if they might want to consider this. One of the life tips, for example is be optimistic. I share that directly with the students. Another one is get enough sleep. Students universally have a problem with that. But I think we remember stories more than information, and if we can share information through a story, it's a double win.

One thing I've done I'm my situation with a pandemic has been a little bit different than many people's. My wife has carcinoid cancer, she's been fighting that for 11 years and, and in September of 2020, my son-in-law, my oldest daughter's husband, who lives nearby to us, was diagnosed with a tumor in his back, they removed it, fused his vertebrae, but then the next day, they told him he had leukemia. And so for the last several months, he's been in a struggling for his life and still is, quite frankly, fighting this leukemia. And so there are periods when we have our grandkids and those kinds of things. And so rather than hide that from the students, I decided to share that experience and tell that story, just briefly. In each video, I do just to kind of give them an update. But to share that story, and let them know that you know, life happens to everybody. And sometimes things happen that we don't pick. But we get to choose how we deal with them. And I've got to tell you, the most interesting thing has happened. By doing that, I've had an exceptional number of students actually reach back and just offer their love and concern and support and interest. And I've also connected with students and had contact with them that I just wouldn't have had, if I hadn't done that. For example, one student contacted me and said, "Can we meet on Zoom?" So we met on Zoom. And he said, "I've been struggling a little bit, you probably noticed." And I had and he said, "I heard your comments about your son-in-law." And he said, "Can I share something with you?" And I said, "You bet." And he said, "Well, my father just died two weeks ago from COVID." And that's information that was so helpful in understanding his situation. And we could then work out some things, and I never would have received that information. So I guess I would, I would just say it's helpful, especially in an online environment, now, with the pandemic, but as we come out of the pandemic, I think this lesson goes forward that it's just helpful. If students see you, you know, as a person, it's not just the professor with all the exam questions. Because we're all in this human drama together. And I think the more we can connect with each other, just the better it is. And so that's something that's come out of the pandemic that I will carry forward. I think it's important that we share with each other as much as students are comfortable and as faculty are comfortable, but I just, I think anything we can do to, to keep each other as people and not just, you know, textbook reciters and question writers is just helpful.

Tierney King 18:37

That's amazing. And I think that students just appreciate that it's a, it's a hard time for so many students, and a lot of them keep that hidden. And like you said, they become invisible, because they don't feel like they need to share their story. And so when you offer them some insight into your own life, I think that's really important because it opens up a window or a door for them to be like, "Hey, I can relate to that," and especially now with everything that's happening. So that's truly amazing. And I guess, just overall, and we'll kind of end on that on that note, but overall, just any things that you've seen or that you just want to touch on or talk about and share with the teaching world.

Ken Alford 19:23

I think as a closing thought I would just say that, you know, this is such a wonderful profession. I just, to be honest, I just pinch myself that I get to do this and somebody is actually willing to pay me to have a great time with the rising you know, wonderful generation. It's the fact that I get to do this professionally is just, again, I just have to pinch myself to realize that you know, we actually get to do this. This is a wonderful thing. And then there are challenges as there are with everything. But I would just, I guess, end with the thought that just always look on the bright side and recognize that every cloud has a silver lining and that this is this is really a wonderful opportunity to work with these really amazing students. And what a choice opportunity that is. I'm just so grateful to be able to do it and just appreciate this time to talk to you. Thanks.

Tierney King 20:25

Thanks for joining us on Faculty Focus Live. To hear more from Ken Alford and other seminars and programs he's recorded, check out this week's episode description.