Live with Wendy Trevor: Overcoming Student Distaste for Collaborative Group Work Online
Speakers: Tierney King, Wendy Trevor

Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. 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. This week's episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in-person or virtually to pursue your passion for teaching. So today we're gonna talk about collaborative group work online with Wendy Trevor. But before we dive right into it, let's kind of get to know you, and how you got into the teaching world.

Wendy Trevor 00:36
Okay, great Tierney. Well, I'm an associate professor of English ar Maria college, and I went to England and received my PhD and my MA in English literature, and specialization in British early modern drama. And so that's really how I got involved in teaching. I enjoyed working with students as a TA, and it was really energizing. And so when I came back to the states, I looked for a job where I could, you know, teach students and work with them. I thought it was really beneficial to engage with young students and get their perspectives. I learn so much when I'm with my students, and I just enjoy it so much - it's not like work.

Tierney King 01:17
Very cool. I'm sure you've learned a lot about your students this year, especially going online. And one of those things is you kind of learn that there's a distaste for that collaborative group work online. So let's talk about that and kind of where do you think that stems from in students? Why do they have that distaste?

Wendy Trevor 01:34
So I think it stems from, because students really, a lot of times, are product focused. So therefore they're worried about their GPA, they're worried about the grade and whatever assignment they're doing, rather than process focused. And so that's kind of where faculty and students come up and brush up against each other, because we really, really want to invest in the process and get them there. So, and rightly so, they're concerned about their grades. I don't want to discount that. When it comes to group work, I think it's less about what they might learn from the process, and really more

concerned that their control of their grade is now in the hands of others, right? So it's those other people who they don't know very well, and they don't know their quality of their work. And also, I think students have a sense of fairness, a really strong sense of fairness, and it bothers them. And they've told me this before, where team members free ride and sort of will get a grade based on the work they've done and having not put anything into it. And so there's those two things I think that are really informing their distaste to it, but I think you can bring them around. And I think that that's the positive, you know? They're smart. And they want to learn and so they're eager. So I think there's always opportunity there. And I found I've changed my approach over time with group learning based on their feedback.

Tierney King 02:46
Yeah. And kind of take us take us into that. You said they know about, you know, this fairness. They have an innate knowledge about this fairness. So, you know, how do you create online group work that's strategic, and fosters that community and engagement, the positivity and fairness, all at the same time? So let us know how you how you do it. What's the what's the magic behind it?

Wendy Trevor 03:08
Lots of trial and error, but I think I've got some of it down. And of course, I'll also say this, every class is a different dynamic. So you do have to sort of take a look at how things are going in the class at the beginning, especially if it's online, they've got to know each other a little bit, how are they engaging in the discussion, but I think one of the most important things, and some feedback I got from many students in creating that online group work, is to realize that the instructor presence still needs to be maintained. So you can't give them the work and say, "Okay, now go off, you're on your own." I spoke to a group of graduate students of mine a few years ago, and they said what they didn't like was the way they were given a project and then set off on their own, because they didn't know how to manage it, they didn't know where to start, they didn't know if something happened, who they could go. So I think you're a facilitator on the side, and I think it's really hard, though, for a faculty member to stay in that position, you know, to stay in that lane. So you're engaged, but you're watching. And so I encourage students. They have to do the discussions with each other online in a separate group and it begins also with us designing the tasks that can be divided up. So setting appropriate group numbers, even strategically selecting students for groups, that actually can be pretty tricky. But some faculty will allow students to self select, and that can work. But what I found was students tend to gravitate toward those students they actually know who are doing really well in the course, you know, they can see their group discussions, and so everybody wants to work with them, or they work with their friends. And that actually sort of diminishes the whole reason for doing this group work, you know. In my view, what I want them to do is to learn about other perspectives, people they don't know, think about the value in sharing those views with each other, those perspectives. And so I tend to do it a little differently. And I mean, one instance I had that worked really, really well was where I paired

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students who were not the students who are really these high achieving students. They were students who were maybe less engaged or more reticent, and discussions and things like that, because I think the higher achievers, sometimes when I've had them in groups with students who were less engaged, those less engaged students just disengage more. And it turns out the project is that of the higher achieving students. So I really had good success with grouping students who were not as active, not as engaged, not necessarily A students, and they, through prompts, - I had to be more active watching and observing their interactions - But I found that what was really interesting, a student who had been very much disengaged, was actually stepping up and taking leadership and really enjoyed that. And I thought, this is fantastic! And I saw all of them becoming a little bit more, you know, engaged, because they recognize who those other people were, and that they weren't the ones leading the discussions all the time. And it was really, it was fantastic. And the one student, she really became a leader, so then she was more active in the discussions after this project. So it had this knock-on effect that I thought, I really need to be intentional each semester with how I'm making these groups up. So I don't make the groups up first. I get to know a little about the students, and then you know, then look at the groups, but also, I think about how I organize the students. So there's a guidance document that talks about, you know, netiquette, but it also talks about how the rubrics are going to work, and how to ensure that all voices actually end up in that final project, so they're given consideration. I try to really stress the value of engaging with other opinions. But I also give them some troubleshooting: What happens if somebody doesn't engage? What happens if they say they're going to do part of it, and they're not going to do a part of it? And that's where the sticking point is so that I address that in the rubric. And so then I create it, and I share the rubric, and I do create the rubric at the outset - it emphasizes the process. So I have less problems with students saying, "Well, you know, she didn't do this. And now it's going to impact my grade." I grade each student individually, and with less weight to the overall project in the end, and more on the participation and the contributions they make and the representation of the voices in the final document, this is where students are graded rather than grading as a group. And you can really see when I tell them that if I'm telling them in a live, you know, synchronous lecture, you can just see, or face-to-face in a classroom, they just breathe a sigh of relief, because they really are getting that control back over their grade. And then there's that sense of fairness, I'm addressing that as well. And I think that reaffirms the importance of engaging with the process for them. They really like that. They also like me being there, but they mostly are concerned about that grade. And now I'm watching them engage with consensus building and negotiating when they don't agree about what should go on the final project. Those are skills that are really so beneficial, you know, in the workplace, but in life, and because my grading rubric has changed, they're really engaging with that. And I really found that this works better for me. And I know, people will say, "Well, they've spent so much time in the project that should be a really major part of the grade." But I think what I'm trying to get out of it, my objectives are more, you know, aligned with, yes, that's important, but here are all the other things that I value, and I think you'll value too and you'll learn to value as students as you work through this.

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And I think it seems to work because they actually tell me they enjoy it, which is, which is fantastic. You love that when students like the work that they've done.

Tierney King 08:27
So for timing wise, you said, you know, you get to know your students first and then you make these groups. So, do you employ a whole bunch of group work throughout or just one kind of group project? How do you structure that?

Wendy Trevor 08:42
Yeah, so we start off with just regular discussions, the discussion board that you have, and they introduce each other that first week. And then I really just give them a long enough time in a project, I think that's really important. That's probably one of the key things as well is make sure you're not saying, "Okay, you have a project that's due in two weeks. Now, let's get going." So you give them enough time, you know, a month to work on this. And then you give them some minor milestones. So you don't want to organize everything for them, so I say, "By this date, you should have met your first time. Talk about your interest in the question that has been posted that you're going to, you know, contribute to the Wiki. And then by this date, you should have divided up the work." And so I just given them a, you know, sort of the bare bones of structure, and then let them work it out. But I give them enough time so that they're building and they have time to do that and get to know each other and do a good job. And also have time where they can go off by themselves and work on their bit, bring it back, and then have everybody share what they've done and give them some feedback about it. And, you know, I have to say I have not had any sense where I've observed negative, you know, negative feedback. People are very collegial. And I think it's because you're setting those expectations at the outset. And you also record it in a video. So I also have a video that says, "This is what peer review work is," and at the end of it, I have a fantastic image of this horse with a bird on the back of it and it says, "You know, we all work together and you know, together we're stronger. And everybody is a part of this process. We may be very different, but we all have something to gain." And you know, the horse is swimming through water and taking the bird with him. So they laugh; they all say you're really funny Wendy, but I think the thing is they get they get it, right? And they can always revert back to that video or the printed guidance at any time during the process and they know I'm there. You got to stay with it. It's not like you can just go off and say, "Alright, now you're done. You got a month, I'll see you in a month." And when you hand it in, I'll grad that. That's scary. That's scary to me, you know.

Tierney King 10:30
What kind of group projects do you use that have been successful for you?

Wendy Trevor 10:35

Now, because I'm an early modernist, my projects are a little bit different than most people. So we've had, we did a Wiki, and the Wiki is nice. And so we do a feminist analysis of a text, you know, they break it down, I give them a question. And then they break that down. And that's been really, really fun. We've done a critical, close reading of a text. They can do any critical approach, and some will do feminist, some will do psychoanalytic Marxist, or one particular one that I think was really interesting and worked really well, and it talks about talents, student talents, was because my specialty, early modern plays, we looked at representation of witches in early modern plays. And you know, they're all plays, and you know, they're 16/17th century. And you wonder what you can gain from that. And these were students who were not English majors. They were from a range of majors, and they were able to take the play, and they were able to think about their interests, and explored areas such as persistence, social norms, community, what community means and deviance, social order and hierarchies, and stigma, disability, scapegoating, all of those things that are really still relevant today. And they sort of can, they can go wherever they want with this question. And so you find students with criminal justice, psychology, education, health-related, and you can see that on the discussion where they're talking about each other, their interests, and they're branching off. And they're each contributing something really important. If you think about teams in the workplace, they're put together because people have specific talents. And you see that in this type of a project, because they were actually all focusing on little different areas. And then when it comes together, they were sharing that they really got to see the benefits of other perspectives. And I think they all have to read critically. So I know, you know, people say, "Oh, English literature in the humanities, but all of these projects, reading critically and closely, sharing information, collegial working, listening to others, build those skills, but also that negotiation and consensus. "Okay, you wrote six pages, we only have this much space, we've got to cut some of yours, so how do we do that?" And those kind of skills, they've been really effective, I think.

Tierney King 12:48
So I know that fostering those real world skills into the projects that resemble the real world is super important. And I guess, what would you say to other instructors for just little things that they can do with different projects to implement those types of skills so that the students can, you know, gain some both insight in their education, and then both when they go out to the real world?

Wendy Trevor 13:12
I think the key is sharing at the beginning of every assignment: your focus, your emphasis, what you're trying to get students to do, and then building that question or whatever assignment it is to make sure they do that. And also, the rubric has to have those those particular elements incorporated into it. But I think sometimes, I had a philosophy professor who was a friend of mine, who said, "I'll never do group work." And he said, "You know what, it's too hard, and I can't even think of that." I said, "Think of an individual assignment that you gave, and see if you can build that out where you can actually have

students expand on that to other questions." And then he's like, "Well, okay, I can think about that." I said, "And then from that, you can actually think about how many students could work on that question. And then if then think about your goals, you want them to talk about, you know, to share perspectives to learn from each other, and fill out your rubric with that." So it's always that back redesign, really, what do you want to gain from this? It's the same principle, you know, in online course development, that idea of backward design. And I think, you know, it's funny, he was willing to try that, because it sounded less onerous, right. And also think about your group. I think the most important thing is look at the dynamic of your group. And you kind of see how they're interacting with each other and be intentional about making those assignments for the groups. And it's worth trying, I mean, I was afraid to after everything I heard and I used a rubric that was terrible because it you know, it really privileged just that end product and what the end product looked like. It was a disaster, I will be completely honest with you. And I thought this is awful. I really set my mind to how could I improve this and talk to students and it helped me. And then so between what they were looking for, what I really look for as an educator, and I then I try to put that together and I think I've finally got something that's really working. So it takes time but but I think people shouldn't be afraid. Start out with what an assignment that you actually have used for one student, right, and it's a single assignment, and see what you can do with that.

Tierney King 15:01
I guess lastly, you know, with this transition for the past year that that we've been online, is there anything that you would say is the most important thing that you kind of implemented into this, either your online classes overall or in group work in general that, you know, is just a really good tip or technique or trick that you that you learned this year, as you guys went online?

Wendy Trevor 15:26
When we went online, I mean, I think you have to have a kickoff, a kickoff meeting with everybody, and try to get everybody to come into a synchronous session. Now, I realize that's difficult. But you actually can have a couple of them. Schedule a few, ask the students. I have students do a forum where they can say which date works for them, what time and then we go into a session or Collaborate session, and then I talk about it. You get their fears raised, right? What they are? And then you say, "Now, I'm going to address all those." Because you know what they are, they seem to be always the same. And then you say, "This is how we're going to first." and they say, "Oh, okay," and then you start just talking about it. And you get really good conversations. And I think getting everybody into one of those sessions is really important. So you can address all the concerns. And you can say, "John, you know, I noticed you haven't said anything. You know, what do you think about this? What do you think about doing a group project, now that I've explained what it's gonna look like? Are there any questions you have, or things that you're worried about or concerned about?"Aand you may have something else that may rise up, you know, they may be concerned about the question or you know, that they've been

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assigned to, or something like that. And so you can address that, and then you're sending everybody off with this really positive vibe, you know, about doing this work. And I think that's really, you can make them energized about it, and you get energized too, and it doesn't have to feel so alone. And you know, it could be 15 or 20 minutes, a couple of asynchronous sessions, and then also have something recorded for them. But I think that helps you to really see where they're going. I like to see their faces, right and see how they're feeling because I used to when we were face-to-face, I could see them go, "Okay, so I'm going to be - my grade is in my hands. Okay." That kind of thing. So I think that's really helpful for you. And that, you know, you can get that in the moment.

Tierney King 17:00
And then one more thing, just last to add, for your group work, what's kind of your structure for, you know, you said, you'd like to see their faces, their expressions, what's your take on if their video should be showing, if they should have a profile picture? How do you kind of get that emotional relationship with them?

Wendy Trevor 17:21
That's actually been a problem. Many people, many faculty, have talked to me about this year's students who don't want to be on camera. So beforehand, I say, "Please pick a session where you're willing to be on camera so we can all get to know each other better that way." And so they can plan, too, so it's not just one session, they're actually being involved in picking what session they want to come to. And then they know the expectation is that we want to be online. Sometimes, you know, something may fail and then I've said to someone, "Can you do me a favor and just put up a picture of yourself then, so we can see that?" And you know, I think I've had a student or two who had to call in and things like that. And I said, "Okay, so send me a picture. And then I can put that up." So when you're talking you know, we can see you for the most part. Students don't mind being on camera if they know that's the expectation and if they are able to choose when they can do that. Because you know, they may be at home, they may have children that are running around, they may not want you to, you know, see where they are. It gives them time to plan that you know that situation they feel comfortable. And I think that's important.

Tierney King 18:19
Thank you so much for being on the Faculty Focus Live podcast and just kind of you know, sharing your your techniques for this group work online.
Wendy Trevor 18:28
Thank you so much Tierney.
Tierney King 18:32
For more information on products related to collaborative group work online, please check out our resources in the episode description.