



A Thread Gone Viral: Last Night, A Professor Walked Into A Night Class...

SPEAKERS

Tierney King, Liz Norell

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. So today, we have Liz Norell who is a yoga teacher, life coach, and a political science professor at a Tennessee local community college. So the other day, you posted a thread on Twitter about a night class that you were teaching, and you're currently up to 795,000 views, which is amazing! And so your conversation in these multiple tweets included a ton of elements. So you use a liquid syllabus, you have an enthusiasm that just exudes off you when you write and in person, and then you implement ungrading and a ton of icebreakers. But before we kind of dive into all of these elements, kind of give me a brief summary of the thread. And then why you think it went viral?

Liz Norell 01:01

Yeah, so this class that I was writing about in the Twitter thread is a night class that's happening, not at the community college where I teach, so it's at a university across town. They have a nice professor who, for whatever reason, and I'm not even really sure what it is, was not able to teach this semester. And so they asked me if I would come teach this class. And I was really excited because I taught a lot of night classes earlier in my career. And I took a lot of my classes as a student. And as a night owl, my brain just really works well, in that 5:30 to eight o'clock slot. So I was super excited. I also love teaching classes once a week, because I feel like the luxury of that time frame just allows us to do some really interesting, deep project-based learning in class, where we're not chopping it up multiple times a week. So I wanted to tweet about it because I was just so excited to be in a night class. And I had such a great experience with these students, there are 40 students in the class, and I never totally know exactly what I'm going to do in a class until I show up and get a feel for the people in the room. And for whatever reason, the chemistry was just really working well that night and we had a great time. So I honestly have no idea how it went that viral. I had like 500, or something Twitter followers before I tweeted this, and I have earned every single one of those by intentional engagement. And then all of a sudden, like in a 48-hour period, I was just getting dozens of comments, private messages, retweets, it was just mind blowing. And I think perhaps there's something there about the joy of teaching or some of the different ways that I was trying to get students engaged. And I will say most of the feedback that I

got from other Twitter users was really positive. But then there were also a handful of side discussions that we can get into later that I also found to be very valuable in how I think about if I were going to do this again next week, how might I tweak it a little bit.

Tierney King 03:23

And it grew fast. I mean, we were you know, we were following it, and it went from 30,000 to, you know, like 100,000 within an hour. So it was it was fast pace. What were people reaching out to you about most?

Liz Norell 03:37

I think the single most common request I got was to see my syllabus. So the first thing I did was post that on my website so that I could just direct people there, so that they didn't have to reach out just to get a link to that.

Tierney King 03:51

Yeah, and so let's kind of dive into, let's start with your liquid syllabus. What is it? How does it work, and how have you kind of created that over the years?

Liz Norell 04:01

So this is not my idea. Everything I do well, I stole from someone else, as I think all the best teachers do. So the liquid syllabus, the idea behind this is that it is not a static document. It is a living document. And it's usually created in the form of a website. And so my liquid syllabus that I've been doing now for a little over a year, I just created a Google site, which is free, and it doesn't have a pretty URL, but it doesn't need to. The great thing about this, from my perspective, is that it lives outside the LMS. So there are a lot of benefits for that. First of all, it's much more mobile friendly. Our LMS is getting better in terms of mobile friendliness, but it's not as easy as a Google site. If something happens and the LMS goes down or the single sign on goes down, students can still get to it if they've bookmarked it and I hope they have. And it's also much easier to change and adapt as I need to. So if I'm getting a lot of student questions about something, if I changed it in a syllabus document, no one would ever look at it again. But if the syllabus is living on a website, you know, I can post something in the LMS, but I can also add that language to the syllabus, in a way that when students are going back to check on something, that new language can be there, and it can clarify it. So that's the idea behind the liquid syllabus. I will say, this institution required me to write a Word document syllabus, and I did it like all good higher educators and students, I did it the night before it was due. And it was pretty late that night when I was putting it together, and I knew what it was gonna say, but the actual drafting of it, I hadn't written a night class syllabus in a while. And I remember before I went to bed that night, I tweeted something about how the syllabus was like kind of extra punchy, and it really is pretty extra punchy. I expected to feel pretty cringy about it the next day, but I stand by that syllabus - I'm really proud of it.

Tierney King 06:11

And your liquid one, you know, you have a whole bunch of images, and it's very interactive. Did that come through in this one that you made on Word document? Were you able to kind of achieve that?

Liz Norell 06:23

Yeah, so there's not as much graphically there. But as I was writing it, I kind of divided the word syllabus into like, you know, the first part is all of the stuff the university makes me tell you that you're never going to read. So like, what are the learning outcomes? And, you know, what are the prerequisites? And so that's section one, is all of the stuff you have to know. Section two is all the stuff you actually want to know. So am I going to be a jerk about grading? The answer is no. What are our assignments? And then there's the kind of calendar of what I imagined we might do, subject to change, because it will always change. But between each of those three parts, I inserted a little something like breaking the fourth wall in theater. And in one of them I said, "You know, I'm just so glad you're here. And you might be thinking like, 'Why are you saying this, you don't even know who I am yet.' And the answer is, there's only one of you and I get to meet that person, and I'm excited about it." And then the other one is, the other kind of interlude in the syllabus is about the time that I went to visit Independence Hall for the first time, and just like completely lost my political science mind over the Independence Hall, and then the Constitution Center. And at the Constitution Center they have Signers' Hall, which is where they have life-sized bronze statues of everyone at the Constitutional Convention. And so I took a selfie with like every single one of them. And I promised students in my syllabus that if they asked me about it, it would absolutely show those photos.

Tierney King 08:04

And then also included in your syllabus is kind of how you go about grading, which is this ungrading way. Kind of explain, you know, how you use that in your classroom, and then the students response to that.

Liz Norell 08:18

So ungrading is something that we're hearing more and more about in education phases. I first became aware of it several years ago when one of my colleagues in sociology told me about it. And my immediate reaction was, I thought, there's literally no way that students will do any work if I take away the grades - which is what people who use ungrading practices often hear. But then I read Kevin Gannon's book, "A Radical Hope: Teaching Manifesto," and then Susan Blum's edited volume on grading came out a little over a year ago, and reading both of those and experiencing the pandemic really changed my mindset to think about how to, you know, I don't say traditional because grading is not that traditional, actually, but how mainstream grading practices are harmful. They're inequitable, they generally are rewarding behavior, or compliance, or ability to perform in certain ways, like on a test or on a paper, but they're not actually reflecting, often, if ever, the quality of learning. And if my job as a higher educator is to teach people then why am I assigning a grade based on something that I can't ever really know? So I have a video on YouTube that's called, Why I think grades are stupid. But I tell students that learning is change in your mind, and I am not able to actually see that. I can see indicators of that, and some of the work you do, but I don't actually know. And some of that may just be personality. So extroverted students may perform learning better than people who are shy or who are divergent, or who come from a different cultural background. But that doesn't mean they haven't learned. So the way I use ungrading is I asked students, you know, I give them a set of expectations like this is what I expect you to complete this semester. And so there's a project that takes the place of a final exam, and then there are a series of kind of learning expectations. And I would expect someone who hopes to get an A would do about 25 of those over our semester together. But at the end of the midterm and final, I'm going to ask you to count how many you've done, reflect on how much time and

thought you've put into those, how engaged you've been with your classmates in person or online, and then give yourself a grade. And tell me why you think that grade makes sense. And I'm going to take that grade from the Google Form, or the Microsoft form, and I'm going to drop it into Banner, into the system that we use to report grades. So students decide their own grades. And this is, you asked about how students respond to this, it's about 50/50, excitement and terror. And it kind of depends on the personality of the students. So I know as a student, I would have been very uncomfortable with this, because I'm a very good student. Like, give me a set of instructions, and I will do it. And I will do it quickly and well and move on. But when I have to be in charge of what I'm doing, then that's harder for me. And it's because I've spent so much of my life in systems that just told me what to do. So as an adult, when I want to learn something new, I don't have a syllabus, I don't have someone to tell me how to do it, and it's taken me this long, you know, 46 years old, it's taken me this long to figure out how to become a student of something without an expert to guide me. And so my hope is that by the end of the semester, and I've largely seen this born out, students really embrace this, because they find, you know, contrary to my own expectations, they do more work because they care, because they're interested, and they're not doing it for a grade, they're doing it because it sounds cool. So the students who are most hesitant at first, are generally the like, honors students, who are just chasing gold stars, as I was. And so I do provide for students who want more structure, I will give them like, here, do these three things this week. And if you just need someone to tell you, here's what you do, and if you decide you don't want to do one of them, then just do something different from this set of options. And about the second or third week of the semester students get it. They see that I'm not tricking them, that I'm not gonna pull the rug out from underneath them. I do not change grades to a lower grade ever. So if a student fills out their self-evaluation and gives themselves an A, and I have seen no evidence of engagement or learning, I am not going to say, I don't know if you've earned that, because I don't know if they've earned that. But I will sometimes reach out to a student and say, okay, I asked you to do these two things plus 25 learning activities. You did 27. But you gave yourself a B. Talk me through why you thought that was the right. And those are the grades that I ended up changing, and it's to go up. And it's again, usually honors students, often women. And so I will just kind of check in and say, you've done more than I expected. Why does that not feel like enough? And I just want to say about that, that while there are some gender and cultural differences and how people evaluate themselves, to me, this is a really, really good skill to have. Of being able to look at what you've done, and take some ownership over claiming that. Because when you go and get a job in the real world, as we always like to talk about, no one's gonna give you a grade. But you do need to be able to state confidently what you can do if you want to get promotions and get a better job and continue to progress in your career. And the way education is set up right now does not teach you how to self-advocate. So this is another unintended but delightful consequence of the ungrading.

Tierney King 14:47

And you have a whole bunch of resources too, you have stats from previous semesters when you did use grading and then when you didn't and lots of things that you compare it with and that's all on your site, which we'll provide the link to. But I know that you can deep dive into this way more. So I just want to put that out there is that there are so many more resources that you include for this. And so that's just an overall synopsis. And then in your thread, you put in all of these icebreakers. And I think, you know, icebreakers are something that people always are trying to use, and they want to use and sometimes they just aren't successful because students just don't want to engage with it. I'm not a huge

fan of icebreakers. So, kind of take us through, you know, the icebreakers that you used and what was successful and what wasn't?

Liz Norell 15:35

I have done a lot of reading on engagement strategies, and also the things we misunderstand about connection. So I think we all innately know that we want to be connected to other people, and especially first-generation students, students of color, students who perhaps come from backgrounds or cultures that have not emphasized the value of higher education, they go into a classroom, and they're looking for evidence that they don't belong. And so on the first day of class, I never want to death march through the syllabus, I just don't - you can read it. If you have questions, you can ask. I wanted to spend our time communicating a message of care and belonging to every person in the classroom. And so that requires a very different approach. What we know from the research on happiness and social connection is that, like, I'm thinking about Brené Brown, I'm thinking about Laurie Santos in the Happiness Lab podcast. We know that, even though introverts like you and I, and other people, may feel really uncomfortable having a conversation with a stranger, there's this huge dopamine rush that comes when you do it. There's this one particular episode of the Happiness Lab called Mistakenly Seeking Solitude, and it's all this research that clever psychologists have done, where they've engineered random conversations. Like on trains when people are commuting, or airplanes. And it turns out that they make people much happier than sitting and reading a book or listening to headphones, even though we all think like, oh, gosh, please don't put me on a plane next to a talker, right? That's our worst nightmare. But then when you start talking to someone, it feels really connective. And we just don't really have great tools, especially post-pandemic, to help each other, and especially our students, make those awkward first steps into conversation. So with that backdrop, the icebreakers that I talk about, I think every college professor sort of has this instinct to like, let's go around the room and tell me your name and what your major is, and one interesting thing about yourself. And my students have told me for years, "Please, just don't make me do that. I've already done it five times this week. Please don't do that." And so I wanted to have some kind of way for us to make at least one connection with another person that was not, you know, tell me your name and your major. So I use a trick that I learned from a kindergarten teacher that I worked with at a community college, her name is Rebecca Aslinger, and she used to teach elementary school and now she teaches education at the community college level. And my best advice to everyone listening is go find yourself a kindergarten teacher, and steal all their tricks. Because even though we'd like to think that college students are so much more mature, and they are, but the things that kindergarten teachers do are fun. So here's what I did, I asked my students to all stand up. And we were in a pretty big room with a very large kind of aisle down the middle of two sets of tables. And so I asked them all to kind of migrate to the middle of the room or the front or the back where there was lots of space, and just kind of, you know, stretch around a little explore the space, and that I would tell them to stop and give them instructions. And they all looked at me like it was an alien, which I expected. And they kind of shuffled and it always sort of happens that then people kind of start doing like a conga line and a circle. And so I'll say stop, turn 90 degrees and go in the, you know, other direction to try to prevent this from just being like a follow the leader situation. And then after about 20 or 30 seconds, I'll say stop and ask them to find someone near them and give them a high five, which is a pretty safe physical contact for most people. And then just introduce yourself to whoever you just high-fived. And I've done this in lots of classes lots of times as introductions or if we're going to discuss something, but if the class feels more introverted, I'll have

them do this. I just want to say that some of the conversations I had with the Twitter thread with people were saying things like, this is my literal worst nightmare. And if someone did this on my first night of class, I would walk out the door and never come back. And that's why I think it's important if you're going to do something like this to message that it's okay to opt out. It's also okay, if you don't like to stand to just, you know, immediately sit down as soon as you give a high five, because we're going to spend a couple of minutes talking to someone. I also invite students, if they want, if they're kind of overwhelmed by the ambient noise of 40 students having 20 conversations, they can go out in the hall, or, you know, take a walk or, you know, do something different. And so, I like to try to make it a little bit more accessible for people with different sensibilities in those kinds of ways. So I did that. And then the next thing I did, which is also something I learned from my elementary teacher, Rebecca Aslinger, is, I sort of made two poles in the room, the front and the back. And I asked students to sort themselves on three questions. So the first one was, if you live on campus, come over here. If you don't, go over there. And some of my students, because this is the night class, and it's standard time, so it gets dark early, some of my students had told me in advance that they are planning to drive to the building, so they wouldn't have to walk home in the dark. And so I chose this question because I wanted them to talk. So I had the people who live on campus, just kind of talk to each other. And many of them found that they were in the same dorm so they can walk back to class together or drive over together. That was very intentional. The people who live off campus, they talked about, like, what does their family life look like outside of college, because, you know, some of them are high school students in dual enrollment, and some of them are adult students with kids and families to take care of. The next thing we did, I was just looking for something kind of very non-threatening. So I said, if you like to play video games, go here. And if you don't go here, and if you're somewhere in the middle, huddle up. And so then the gamers in the back were talking about kinds of games they liked. And the non-gamers at the front, were like, well, but I actually do really like you know, whatever app they're playing with on their phone now. And so that was really fun, right? And everybody sat back down. We also know from the research, so from Susan Hrach's book about minding bodies, and Annie Murphy Paul's book about the extended mind, they tell us that movement like this kind of stimulates thinking, creative thinking. And so immediately after we did this kind of moving around exercise, I gave them a break and told them to go for a walk, go outside, get some fresh air, the rooms a little warm now, so go and decompress, and then we're gonna come back, and we're gonna try to come up with ideas for what we might use this time together, because you could have taken an online class, all of the sections of this American government class are online except for this night, and you chose to come to a night class instead of an online class. So how do you want to use this time together in a way that's going to feel meaningful for you? And that was the bulk of the remainder of our conversation.

Tierney King 23:14

That's pretty awesome, just because, I mean, most of us dread icebreakers and everything. But you also kind of coaxed them into it, you know, you didn't start off with this. And I had read that in the thread, you waited until you thought the energy was right, you know? You kind of built up the excitement in the room and everyone so that they were a little bit more comfortable. So it wasn't just right off the bat, let's introduce ourselves, which I think is important, too.

Liz Norell 23:42

Yeah, and this is, again, the benefit of a night class. So if I had a 50 minute class, it's really hard to build trust before we move into that kind of activity. But in a night class, that's two and a half hours, you know, we probably talked for 30 or 45 minutes before I asked them to do this. And in that time, I was, you know, explaining ungrading, and asking them to tell me what they thought about that. And I was passing out snacks, because I always bring snacks to class. And the reason is that some of our students may not have anything to eat all day. And there's, you know, there's a food pantry on campus, but they may feel ashamed asking for it. So I just bring lots of snacks, and you can take as much as you want. And it's totally normal, and no one's going to notice. And maybe that's the thing that you get to eat today. And so I bring lots of snacks to class. And so we had talked about the snacks and like what should I be shopping for, and so we sort of established this atmosphere of trust and care. So that then when I asked them to stand up there, they're kind of buying in a little bit. They're kind of curious, like, what is she going to do now?

Tierney King 24:50

And then kind of just lastly, you had said, you know, there are all these side comments and discussions from this thread and all of the things that you included. What were those discussions? What might have surprised you? Take me through that.

Liz Norell 25:04

Yeah, so there are two kinds of clusters. Well, there's one cluster that I'm gonna talk about, and it's everything having to do with inclusion - inclusion, and accessibility. A lot of people who have different kinds of like, not obvious disabilities, and I want to say I'm one of those people. So I have several different invisible disabilities, and so I'm mindful of this. But everybody's different, and especially under the neurodivergent umbrella, this shows up completely different depending on who you are in your context. And so, you know, there are several people who said, for example, that my use of the word brainstorming can be really triggering for some people in that neurodivergent community and they offered an alternative. I'm still kind of thinking through what I want to do with that feedback. But if you may have noticed that earlier, I did not say that, I said, we were going to come up with some ideas. Another thread was about, you know, the forced social interaction and the overwhelming nature of that. And you know how even if I give people the option to opt-out, it doesn't really feel optional. And I get that, and I appreciate that. And I am always open to feedback on how I can do better on being inclusive. But I will also say that I disclose disabilities to students very, very early. So before we did that, and I also have language in the syllabus that says that, you know, even if you don't have an official diagnosis, or official accommodations from the accessibility office, I will do just about anything that I can do to make this more accessible for you. And so I had three different students stay after class to say, you know, I haven't gone through the process of getting accommodations, but you know, there's a water fountain in the lobby, and it makes noise, and before class, it was really bothering me, can I wear noise cancelling headphones. Of course you can, why wouldn't you? You know, someone else told me that the sound of people eating is very hard for her. And so, you know, trying to figure out how to accommodate that while also having snacks. And, you know, my suggestion, and we haven't quite figured this out yet, but my suggestion was, we'll have snacks at the beginning of class and during the break, and then you can take some to leave. So it's not happening while class is happening. Because I think, you know, these are reasonable things to ask for. And I don't need you to go through the expense

or the time to get tested and get an official diagnosis for that. So I think a lot of those side conversations were really, really helpful for me, and hopefully, to show that this work never ends.

Tierney King 27:51

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