

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 195 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, I welcome back to the show Robin DeRosa. Today's conversation focuses on interdisciplinary studies and Robin's hope for the future of education.

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Bonni: [00:00:28] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating and learning. We also share ways to improve our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:55] I'm excited to be welcoming back to the show today Robin DeRosa. And if you listened to the last episode you know that we have so much we can learn from her about open education. And on today's show, she's going to extend that conversation to talk about interdisciplinary studies and some of her hopes around what's possible through higher education.

Bonni: [00:01:19] Her current research and her advocacy work focuses on open education and just how universities can innovate in order to bring down costs for students increase interdisciplinary collaboration and refocus the academic world on strengthening the public good. She's a professor at Plymouth State University that's part of the University System of New Hampshire. She's the chair of the Interdisciplinary Studies program there. She's also an editor for Hybrid Pedagogy an open access peer reviewed journal that combines the strands of critical pedagogy and digital pedagogy to arrive at the best social and civil uses for technology and new media in education. Robin, welcome back to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Robin: [00:02:08] It's like I never left, Bonni. Thank you.

Bonni: [00:02:09] It's like you never left. I am excited. Today we're going to have

perhaps even a broader conversation than the last time we talked although you are such a holistic thinker. But let's start out I want to get some of my curiosity satisfied of your work on interdisciplinary studies. And you did mention in the last episode that you started out, I believe in English.

Robin: [00:02:34] Yes. My PhD is in early American literature.

Bonni: [00:02:36] How do we go from early American literature to now really advocating for more thinking around interdisciplinary work?

Robin: [00:02:43] Well early American literature is actually already a pretty interdisciplinary field simply because there wasn't a lot of literature in early America. So a lot of the work I was dealing with were historical documents so I was always sort of skirting kind of history departments and English departments. But then my real interest in the work was always about contemporary tourism and the way that we talk about the American past.

Robin: [00:03:08] So I was kind of like Museum Studies and American studies. And so I think I'd always you know valued working at the intersection of different epistemologies and different fields. So for a long time here at Plymouth States where I'm a professor I had been involved in our Interdisciplinary Studies program. It's been here since 1974, which on the one hand is impressive but also on the other hand was not super uncommon right in the 70s that was like sort of the first big rise of of Interdisciplinary Studies programs.

Robin: [00:03:41] But the program was very tiny. I would probably also say marginal, in the sense that from 1974 to 2014 we averaged about 10 students per year total in the major. And if you're a professor at a small regional university that's actually not super shocking like we have a bunch of programs that you know get by with 10 students per year.

Robin: [00:04:05] But it was it was small and most of us who participated in it did it kind of as a side service gig. You know we would show up to one meeting a month and kind of steward the program and other than that we lived in our main departments.

Robin: [00:04:21] But in 2014, the program was growing a little bit. I had started teaching some core courses in the program that were new around an introduction to interdisciplinary theory and we were getting some more students and I made a pitch to the university to pull me over full time in a line to work on interdisciplinary studies.

Robin: [00:04:43] And that ended up happening and at the same time as I was getting that new gig I was having these sort of epiphanies that have now been documented for the world to see- these epiphanies about pedagogy - that were really about how do we connect students out in the world through technologies and also how do we make higher education more accessible to learners by rethinking the structures of our programs in particular.

Robin: [00:05:14] So I started retooling the program structurally and curricularly and we just exploded in our growth. So we went from 10 students in 2014 to 125 students today where we're one of the larger majors on the campus. Sometimes that sounds interesting like, "Oh tell me how you did that? Because I want to scale because we need bodies," and it's not really that kind of story.

Robin: [00:05:39] First of all, we don't bring in a ton of new enrollments because people hear about this and they want to come do this program first of all you talk to any high school senior and you say, "Do you want a major in interdisciplinary studies?" And they say "I've never heard of that And no; I want a job. That doesn't directly line up with a job." What we really are doing kind of amazingly is retaining students who I think otherwise would have dropped out of the university or probably more likely college.

Robin: [00:06:10] So the program is an interesting mix I think of learning how to work across fields which of course is very popular right now. Interdisciplinary is a buzzword, a marketable buzzword in higher ed. It's also a buzzword in the market, right? People want people who can work across domains. But beyond that we actually sort of populate that with learning from inside that field, right. So you can say you want to work with people from across different fields but how- what are the challenges you're going to encounter and how do you actually do that work?

Robin: [00:06:45] So part of our program is about sort of doing the real work of interdisciplinary theorizing and learning the skills that accompany doing interdisciplinary work. But the other piece of the program now is really about empowering learners and that happened because in order to do these interdisciplinary programs, students have to propose a major they have to construct it in a customized sort of major approach.

Robin: [00:07:15] And what I started realizing was we always thought that was about interdisciplinary and of course it is but really just the powerful exercise of asking students to craft their own majors was such a wonderful partner to this

open pedagogy world that I was learning about in which students would contribute to their own textbooks and write non disposable you know contribute non disposable work into the comments and ask for feedback on it.

Robin: [00:07:45] All of those things kind of came together in this perfect storm of a program that just had so much coherence in my mind. And the other piece besides that sort of interdisciplinary and that student agency and empowerment is this access issue - what do we need to do in this program to figure out why students are not completing college?

Robin: [00:08:09] We're talking about a four year public universities might have anywhere from like a 35 percent retention rate you know up to you know oh gosh you're amazing you are in the 60s or 70s, right. So what's the issue there? And how can we build a program that specifically ameliorate some of those barriers to completion? So some of the small things we do - you know we've got like right outside my office door is a satellite food pantry.

Robin: [00:08:40] We've got gas cards and a child care sort of co-op system. We've got military support networks that help with students who are paying for college through the G.I. Bill. All the little pieces that contribute to students finding college to be ultimately inaccessible over the long term. We use only openly licensed learning materials so all OERs in our classes.

Robin: [00:09:07] So that stuff. That building of access. But also curricularly like how do you do that as an academic? Like a lot of faculty I think say well that's super cool but that's not really my job. It's like, "Student life people do that and I teach physics," or whatever. It's like, "You know, dude, you don't teach physics if they can't get into a class. You know like if they're not even at your table you can't teach them physics."

Robin: [00:09:34] So we had that sense that this is an academic issue getting students into the table and keeping them with us. But curricularly, it's also been really interesting to think about how we can make college more accessible especially for those who are having trouble completing.

Robin: [00:09:51] And one of the things that's really unique about our program - and people who do interdisciplinary studies will recognize this - in the 70s we kind of got a bad rap nationally for being kind of a bailout program.

Robin: [00:10:04] "You couldn't finish this real major so at the end you can customize some silly you know light major and we'll call it interdisciplinary studies

and you can graduate." At Plymouth, we even have a term for that - this bailout degree.

Robin: [00:10:18] But really when you think about it a student gets to say senior year and they've taken a robust say nursing program and they've gotten all Bs and Cs while for example caring for their sister who has cancer and they are the sole caregiver of that sister. And I'm also talking here... This is a real student. And I'm talking about a student who was 19, you know 20 years old, sole caregiver of her sister and putting herself through college finds herself at the end of junior year not getting an 80 in a course which prevents her from completing her nursing degree.

Robin: [00:10:58] The options that are available to her all require her to add extra years on to college. We're talking in New Hampshire, like that because she twenty five thousand dollars. You know. Explain to me how this student is going to pay that when she can't afford a 50 dollar textbook it's part of what's contributing to her failing grades in some classes is that she can't afford her learning materials.

Robin: [00:11:22] So I started looking at all this thinking you know these students are not failures. They've done well. They've taken classes they see for example that they're not going to hit a certain career goal.

Robin: [00:11:36] We need to take the interoperable parts their course work and reconfigure that. Put it into a new shape and add some new pieces to it and create from there a new major. And maybe they can graduate in a semester with that new major.

Robin: [00:11:52] And when you think about you know lots people listening to the show they were researchers we write books when you write a book and you research that's exactly what you do right. You assemble all the pieces and as you're finishing you're learning that's when you kind of understand what this book is going to be. And you might put on your introduction and your conclusion and retool it and got kind of backwards design towards building college majors is brilliant. It's been serving our students beautifully. They get jobs they go to graduate school they're doing wonderful work. These are not failures or students who are bailing out.

Robin: [00:12:27] So this program is just totally inspired me to think, "Gosh if we watch and learn from students more we can build systems and programs and institutions that do a better job of supporting them rather than just making it

harder at every turn for them to get through." So it's a pretty cool program I think not just in its interdisciplinary but in that kind of flexibility that it's offering to student learners.

Bonni: [00:12:55] It sounds amazing to me and I'm going to admit that I've just always been fascinated by the idea of interdisciplinary studies. The most recent example I mean it's from a while back but Paul Blowers from the University of Arizona was on episode 179. He teaches in STEM courses and just is such a inspiration in terms of active learning but one of the minor things he said was that he starts every class out with a current news story.

Bonni: [00:13:21] And this one really struck me because that was the Legionnaires' disease outbreak at Disneyland. He's thinking about that in terms of the science behind why the disease was transmitted. And I mean I'd read somewhere that it's something to do with cooling things the misting and things that they have there but like I didn't think about the science it was just like, "Oh yeah. I could see how that would pass stuff around," but it's just still with me today because I think about it from a operational standpoint, a marketing standpoint because that's going to get out into the news and all that but then I just love that idea.

Bonni: [00:14:02] My first inclination wasn't to bring this science in but just if we could teach our students and quite frankly teach ourselves how to think more of that way. The reason I bring it up is I know that I probably have such a childlike understanding of what it is.

Bonni: [00:14:18] So if you're just talking to your everyday Professor we've got our disciplines and you wanted to just tell us what our first step could be because I'm sure we have all kinds of misconceptions- what would a first step be to develop ourselves into being better interdisciplinary if we've never had that experience before?

Robin: [00:14:37] Well I think the first is to be suspicious of the use of the term it as a buzzword to raise revenues. And I am not - let me just put this out here to the world - Are you listening? I am not opposed to raising revenue. So I'm all about - it's great we need to raise revenues. And I think I think less maybe about revenues and financial sustainability of our higher ed institutions. So I get that.

Robin: [00:15:03] But the term interdisciplinary is wielded now as kind of a hail Mary. Like if we do this because when you look at things like you know "the top 10 things employers are looking for now" it tends to pop up in those in those

ways for good reason right. Most people's careers once you graduate and you go anywhere other than into academia that the work we do in the world does not conform to the academic disciplines. But I would say one of the most helpful things that we can do is we can start learning some of the ways that interdisciplinarians talk about working across epistemologies.

Robin: [00:15:46] So for example even just understanding - right - that if people come into a room to do a project, if they are coming from different epistemological perspectives they may not really have consensus on sort of how you're even looking at the world.

Robin: [00:16:05] And one of the little exercises we do at the beginning of our first class before my students are interdisciplinarians - right? They come usually because they love something in particular and we talk you know from those areas and we say like, "How do you know what's true in your field?"

Robin: [00:16:21] So the scientists, you know the natural scientists for example, answer that question really differently than the literary critics you know so what counts as true? You know you can argue two completely conflicting things about Moby Dick and they may both be true, right because you can quote on quote prove them in your literary analysis by offering quote unquote evidence. Right?

Robin: [00:16:45] But the evidence and proof in literary studies is very different than what counts as evidence and proofs say in meteorology. So helping students to understand that you can work in multidisciplinary ways where people just bring different skills to the table and offer different kinds of information. But you can also try to really integrate that more in interdisciplinary ways.

Robin: [00:17:11] But that usually means wrestling out some really hard stuff about how we're approaching the projects in particular. So I think learning your terms is helpful multi multidisciplinary sometimes interdisciplinary studies from pioneers like Allen Repko we talk about that as a fruit bowl you know there's an apple in there and some papayas and some grapes. And those are all the different disciplines but they retain their unique properties. Whereas interdisciplinary studies is more like a smoothie where you take those different disciplines and you blend them together because you're trying to integrate and get something new.

Robin: [00:17:49] And then we can also think about transdisciplinary which is not

so much the transcendence of disciplines but the linking of academic disciplines into the communities of practice in the world that aren't organized around the academy. And I think just helping people elevate their vocabularies and using more precise language and really resisting just the "it's interdisciplinary." Why? Because we say it is and it's going to bring revenues that it's the thing to do. But instead recognizing you've got to make a real commitment because universities are organized around disciplinary silos. So if you really want to work across them, we're going to have to start seeing some structural changes. And faculty are going to have to get a little educated on what the challenges will be when we try to do that.

Bonni: [00:18:42] I know this is going to put tons of pressure on you. But I'm going to ask if there's a fruit analogy for the transdisciplinary because there was a fruit analogy for the first two.

Robin: [00:18:53] All right let me think, so we've got to see. And those are not my fruit analogies right. So Allen Repko, you need to come out with a transdisciplinary fruit analogy. Moti Nissani, too. He's the other scholar who talks. He has a whole sort of essay about the fruit analogies. Transdisciplinary I guess would be like some kind of pear toss as a fruit analogy because there's no such thing as a pear toss you know like an egg toss.

Robin: [00:19:21] So let me just think for a minute. One thing you have to resist is that sort of missionary zeal right. Like I would bring you the fruits of the academy right because it's really more dialogic right. It's the folks you know who are in practice bringing what they know to bear with the academics bringing their expertise from the disciplines- which is really I think so much about the ethos of the open as well especially open access to research right is the idea that if the academy is not in dialogue with the world that encompasses it, then what are we?

Robin: [00:19:54] Whenever people say like, "When students get into the real world," I just want to go, "Where do you think they are now?" So it would be great if we could design structures that reflected the fact that universities are in the real world and totally shaped by the month.

Robin: [00:20:13] So that's a kind of the transdisciplinary piece, right? And one of the things I love about the work that students do in our interdisciplinary studies program is that they're always assessed and that's a complex word in our program because we don't have regular grades and we do things differently but they're assessed on impact. They're asked to think about what's the impact

of this work on you? On local communities? On broader communities? On the field? In what ways does or could this work matter?

Bonni: [00:20:44] I know that there's a lot we can be inspired by you with. But what are some other institutions or people we should look into in terms of finding more sources for inspiration and guidance?

Robin: [00:20:54] Oh gosh there's there's so many neat places out there. I mean in my own work I've always been inspired by what they do out at Evergreen because of the fact that there are public institutions as well where you know it's actually just very hard to be innovative from within inside public institutions for a whole host of reasons.

Robin: [00:21:13] Private colleges I think do lots of interesting things but I'm more interested in the ones that don't necessarily have the massive endowments with which they can create some satellite lab for their innovative work. So places like Prescott College out in Arizona which their tagline is something like, "For the environment and social justice."

Robin: [00:21:39] And they are like really a fully interdisciplinary approach to learning so they have their GrandCanyon semester basically where like that's what you do. You go in the canyon and what are you going to do that while you're going to do arts you're going to do science you're going to do writing - you're going to - in fact you're not even going to really think about these in siloed ways, right? These experiences will be so integrated.

Robin: [00:22:04] And they use place a lot, I think to help students overcome the silos. And remember we're overcoming silos here but we're not overcoming disciplines right. Like it's still great to have disciplinary knowledge. That's kind of the beautiful thing that we have to offer in the academy expertise.

Robin: [00:22:24] I think PhDs - like these are fabulous, right? But the PhD I think anyone who has one will recognize it as a highly unnatural state. You know, we are most useful I think as PhDs when our students can take our expertise and make those sticky connections to other things, right?

Robin: [00:22:43] That's what the world really needs. It doesn't necessarily need, you know this very very narrow one particular expert. So I think places like that use place for example as a way of overcoming those silos. You know Prescott is a great example.

Bonni: [00:23:02] You mentioned Gardner Campbell and he talks about a trip that he took with his students that I'm not even remembering where it was but I just remembered the song but he talked about and just him describing it like it really does transform the experience into just a memory that they'll never forget. And when you're able to do that for students I mean just life changing kind of stuff when you're able to "get into the real world."

Robin: [00:23:29] Yeah and I just think there's so many ways to do that, right? There's obviously going in the Grand Canyon for a semester is amazing and I would highly recommend it, right? Why would you not if you had the ability? But you know it takes a certain amount of privilege to to find yourself in a situation in which you can do some immersive semester like that. Study abroad might be another great example.

Robin: [00:23:55] But even in small ways, most of my students or many of my students, are working and some of them are working full time in jobs that are really not careers, they're jobs but oftentimes they may have a small thread of connection you know to something they ultimately want to do later. So the question of, "OK so you've got all these hours you know of the weeks spent in this place that you're working. When we design a project for your capstone experience here, can we somehow link it to the real work that you're that you're doing? What are the ways that you can take your perspective and improve something about the situation there using your academic background and your disciplinary knowledge that you've amassed from these different areas?"

Robin: [00:24:42] That even, I find it can be pretty thrilling for students who have not been encouraged to see what they experience in their daily lives as relevance. It's one of the other things I love about our program is that we have a student now she's come back after a long career in the military. She was I think 26 years in the military and now she's coming back to do her Bachelor's.

Robin: [00:25:06] And we were able to look a lot of her leadership experience in the military and map those to curricular experiences to give her credit and then design a major around the kind of knowledge that she was bringing in. Right so we sort of interrupt that idea that everything that the academy offers is like offered out.

Robin: [00:25:30] It's also that people come into the academy with all sorts of experiences that can shape how we learn and then that stuff that we learn can go back out and influence those communities. So I think that's always been happening. Lots of educators believe in that.

Robin: [00:25:50] But how many times do we build structures that really facilitate that happening and and versus how often is that just kind of a lucky thing that you sort of managed to squeak out through a bunch of institutional structures that did their best to make that painful for you?

Bonni: [00:26:06] And that with particularly with veterans that I've worked with what they need the most help with is - I mean I would describe it, the best way I can think of is a literal translation of the language of what skills or how skills are described in the military to how skills are described in the workforce.

Bonni: [00:26:26] And yet if we try to fit them into this perfect little academic thing so many times the words and vocabulary that we use in academia don't translate really well and so then we're asking them to do a double translation and not fitting what they really need.

Robin: [00:26:42] That's right. And that's why I think- I mean this is so you know such a crazy idea in academia- but that's why I think like all majors you know obviously I'm just being a little facetious here about all majors should be customized so that students have to go through the process of figuring that out and they should all be customized at the end.

Robin: [00:27:04] Right, after you've got all your pieces and you could really make a case about how these fit together. And also at that point you kind of know maybe a little bit better what your next step is going to be and you can shape that stuff to move you. I mean it's how so many of us live our lives all the time. But you know the college major, "Come in when you're 18. Know exactly what you want to do. Follow the path that is preset for you even though you don't necessarily understand why or how any of it matters. Then graduate and then be perplexed why you can't find a job." You know it's like a weird way to design a society I think or an educated society.

Bonni: [00:27:48] Paths that were designed decades ago and aren't keeping up with what's relevant.

Robin: [00:27:54] Yeah. Cathy Davidson's new book is I think quite brilliant on all of this because she's saying it's basically time now for us to rethink the university and you know some of that is about technology because of our technological age or whatever. But really it's just overdue right in terms of historically like when was our last refiguring of education particularly in the US.

Bonni: [00:28:17] I'm glad you mentioned that because we haven't talked about her book for a while and she was on the show to talk about it so I will link to both those things in the show notes so people can get their history right out of it. She did a really good job - I'm still thinking about the grades in the meat packing industry, it just has stayed with me.

Robin: [00:28:38] Exactly I just read an article the other day where someone was saying you know we use the same terminology on our vegetables as we use for our students. And I was like, "Yeah, there's a whole book about that, right?"

Bonni: [00:28:50] It had never occurred to me. And then if it had occurred to me which it didn't I would never would have known that it wasn't even good enough for them, they didn't think it was granular.

Robin: [00:29:03] Passable for meat, but barely.

Bonni: [00:29:07] Well this is the time in the show where we each get to give some recommendations. And since we are coming up on for some people not everyone but for some people little bit of a break. Or maybe if people are like me a time for catch up which I tend to be tempted to try to do that through through many of the seasons.

Bonni: [00:29:23] But there's a wonderful post from last year from Kevin Gannon in the Chronicle of Higher Education How to escape Grading Jail. And we need to have a lot more conversations about grading so I'm going to sort of skip that part of it. But if you just want a little bit of just how do I get a little bit more of a handle on this. He's got just a wonderful post from awhile back. How to Escape Grading Jail. And as I said lots more we could talk about grading on future episodes that could just be the rest of this year's episodes and would probably only be starting the conversation.

Robin: [00:29:53] Kevin is so great.

Bonni: [00:29:55] What is your recommendation today?

Robin: [00:29:58] Ok so my recommendation today really takes us in a different direction which for me is South. So I'm always looking for off the grid kind of vacations even though my house is actually like more or less off the grid.

Robin: [00:30:14] We're a family that likes to camp and we're also a family that you know in the past has not had any money. Now that we have some we are

also very, very frugal so I have a little vacation tip for people who do find that they are able to take a spring break and have the ability to travel which is dry Tortugas National Park in the U.S. off the coast of Key West in Florida.

Robin: [00:30:41] And this place is such a little gem that even if you never go there you can Google it. But if you can get yourself or if you're from near the Keys of Florida this would be incredible because it's a little pricey to get out on the ferry. And I can't remember how long it took. But you know like an hour, two hours, three hours - something. It's not right there.

Robin: [00:31:02] You take the ferry out for like I don't know a hundred bucks or something. But once you're there you can camp for - I feel like it was about three dollars a night and this place is the most magical unplugged place on the planet. I am not a big fan of unplugging. Suppose that will surprise absolutely no one in your audience who knows me.

Robin: [00:31:25] But there was something really really magical and special. I'm a big fan of the National Parks and hope we save them from whatever is about to befall them. But this is absolutely my favorite national park in the U.S. So I would encourage people to check it out and maybe put it on a bucket list.

Bonni: [00:31:41] I have never heard of it before. It looks spectacular.

Robin: [00:31:44] I know right. Dry tortugas I believe dry because it doesn't actually have besides all of the water around it it doesn't have water and Tortuga it's for turtles but it's got an amazing civil war fort that actually held. Well no I'm not going to start with my history lesson and that's that's more that you need. But when you Google it you will be impressed. It has history it has culture. It's absolutely tropically beautiful.

Bonni: [00:32:12] It looks spectacular I am looking at it right now. It is amazing.

Robin: [00:32:15] Yeah I definitely recommend it. The thing is if you can't go there you could also just get like a really nice screensaver or whatever like for your computer. It would be a momentary vacation from our hectic plugged in worlds.

Bonni: [00:32:30] It looks heavenly. Well it has been so fun having you back on the show and get to have these conversations. And I am just so looking forward to continuing to learn from you and just admire your work so much. Thank you for today's conversation.

Robin: [00:32:42] Thank you Bonni. I love your show. I was so happy to be here.

Bonni: [00:32:47] My thanks once again to Robin DeRosa for joining me today on Teaching in Higher Ed what a great conversation and I just look forward to more in the future and thanks to all of you for listening.

Bonni: [00:33:00] If this is one of your first times listening to the podcast you might be interested in the weekly updates. This is an email you can subscribe to that has all the links of the great stuff that Robin and I spoke about that week's show notes and also an article about teaching or productivity written by me.

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