

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] Today on episode number 207 the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Wendy Purcell shares about rethinking higher education.

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**Bonni:** [00:00:21] Hello and 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 learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:48] I'm so thankful to past guest Teresa Chahine for introducing me to today's guest and that is Wendy Purcell. She's an academic and thought leader and she joined Harvard University as a visiting scientist in 2016 to explore disruption in global higher education with an emphasis on sustainability leadership and governance for societal transformation. Wendy was president of a UK public research university from 2007 to 2015 establishing its enterprise vision and anchor status taking it to the top 1 percent of global universities and number one. Green UK university. Wendy consults widely for business and global universities on trends in higher education and the leadership governance challenges there in having set up educational partnerships across five continents. Wendy, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**Wendy:** [00:01:50] Thanks very much. Good to be here Bonni.

**Bonni:** [00:01:52] It's lovely to be talking to you today and I thought we'd start with something pretty broad that I know you talk about a lot and that is this tension between how our universities are primarily structured today and what really could be a vision for what they could look like to better support lifelong learning.

**Wendy:** [00:02:12] Yeah I'm really interested in how universities were the kind of ivory tower to be separated from society so that we could really deeply engage

in these pure thoughts of pure thinking and I'm not saying that there isn't a case for that, but I think you're seeing universities now needing to become much more connected to the society that we serve so becoming a real anchor institution that is open and porous and is available for other institutions to work with in partnership.

**Wendy:** [00:02:49] So I really want to see universities move from this ivory tower to becoming a connected institution. That's really important to us in terms of delivering on our economic competitiveness, but also on social inclusion agenda, the sustainability kind of development goals so that we have real relevance as opposed to being separate.

**Bonni:** [00:03:13] What does lifelong learning look like that is really in contrast to how we tend to approach things today? What would a picture for an individual look like of being better plugged into those opportunities?

**Wendy:** [00:03:28] Yeah, I think that's a really interesting question. Someone was saying to me recently that if you look about 20, 30, 40 years down the line, the idea that you would finish your education in your early 20s - we are just going to laugh about that. And we began to think, how did they cope? How could they know everything they needed to know by the time they were 21 or 22?

**Wendy:** [00:03:50] And this idea that we continue to build our skills sets, build our competencies, our attributes, our wisdom really is something that we work on throughout life. And I think at the moment, our education system is very much, and this is globally, is very much geared up for that one off undergraduate maybe followed up with a postgraduate and then you're done. The idea that you would want to up-skill, re-scale, re-present yourself across your lifespan maybe into your 80s or 90s and then think that we're going to live to 150 years of age. Really? Are you going to be all done on the education front when you're 20? I don't think so.

**Wendy:** [00:04:35] So the idea that people will be able to move careers, to have that agility to respond to the technological disruptions, the sociological disruptions, the things that are really impacting on our world. We are going to need to be learning throughout our life. And that I think will be formal learning and certificates and so on, but also the ability just to dial in and say "I'm going to a meeting. I've got to do so and so. I really want to just upscale and polish my thinking."

**Wendy:** [00:05:09] So the idea that you really will be learning throughout your life

and I think that's where we need to as universities really respond much more powerfully to what we're hearing from business, from the professions, from the health community, from the Entrepreneurship community and really serve their needs in a way that I don't think were doing as well as we could right now.

**Bonni:** [00:05:33] One of the other tensions that I see us having is looking at education as something that this is for me, as an individual, and forgetting about the part that we can play in terms of a social justice agenda. And I wonder if you might speak to that and some of the ways that you've seen that come into play?

**Wendy:** [00:05:54] For me, higher education and education generally is a societal good. And I think as we have got into this market place, marketization of particularly higher educations we're seeing it presented as a premium on lifetime earnings and therefore a personal good that you should pay for yourself. Whereas if you look at the delivery back to society from an educated population you have better health outcomes, you have better family outcomes, you have lower crime, you have, particularly with women you have this phenomenal economic contribution that they're able to make from an equality point of view.

**Wendy:** [00:08:41] So higher education for me and education generally I think is a social good. It's something that we shouldn't see as a personal, taxable benefit. It should be something that we see as a societal good that we in society invest in through our own taxes and recognize that broader contribution that education is making to peace, to justice, to wellbeing.

**Wendy:** [00:09:04] I think it's a very powerful thing and it's a message that's getting lost at the moment around this marketisation of treating higher education as a business and starting to look at business principles as opposed to seeing it as this societal fabric and something that's key to our social justice agenda.

**Bonni:** [00:09:22] Talk about the role of social networks in a model that might support a better way of thinking about this lifelong learning approach.

**Wendy:** [00:09:30] Yeah, this is really interesting. I think we're finding out now that there's a kind of truism that they say that every abundance creates a scarcity and we now have this explosion of accessible content. I mean, when I think about my own education, I used to have to go to a physical building and pull out a physical book and access content or go into a session with faculty and sit

at their feet while they shared their wisdom with me.

**Wendy:** [00:09:55] Now, I can pull that up with the press a button. So content is freely available and the scarcity that's emerging is the scarcity of human relationships. So the thing that makes an education experience very powerful is the humanity, the human to human connections. And I think what we're seeing now is this need for people to connect as peers.

**Wendy:** [00:10:19] So the evidence shows us that peer to peer learning is incredibly powerful; peer to peer behaviors are hugely influential on how people learn. So accessing that kind of wisdom of the crowd, if you like, is very important. And I think if we can connect people, maybe through technology, don't see technology as a barrier but connecting them very powerfully one with another really helps us to help those individuals learn and feel that they are part of a big learning community, which means they are much more likely to participate throughout their life.

**Wendy:** [00:10:54] It's something that is fun, is enjoyable and is a sort of communal activity. I think too often we've seen learning as a separate, solar activity- a bit like the Ivory Tower University and Ivory Tower students - separate learning - something for their own good. And now we're seeing this is much more of a social learning space.

**Wendy:** [00:11:13] And that's what employers are telling us, they actually want people- yes you've got facts and have got knowledge but they want people who can work in teams, they want people who can lead global teams, they want people who have high emotional intelligence, they want people who can really engage on an unknown unknown problem and bring back the creativity of others around them and release that and solve the problem.

**Wendy:** [00:11:37] And so I think as universities, and actually all the way through into schools, we need to be thinking how do we better craft the learning experience such that we do enable peers, students to work with other students, students to work with people outside the institution to work on real life problems.

**Bonni:** [00:11:53] Just this last Saturday, I finished a doctoral class that I teach a couple of times a year. And it's always one of those things that's hard for me because we tend to start out immediately with points of tension because the way that I see the role of a teacher, these are educators by the way, and the way that they - I don't know that they can articulate this, but they certainly have this like you're going to tell me things, you're going to have rules you're going to

give me, you're going to be very clear and linear and precise and everything is going to be really laid out well. And that doesn't help.

**Bonni:** [00:12:23] So we just celebrated our Saturday and I got to be fueled just by - I know it's really hard to alter people's view of teaching and what a teacher, what does that even mean? But I have really changed to the very beginning of that class just giving them places to explore.

**Wendy:** [00:12:38] You're reminding me one of my favorite quotes actually which is that "education is the kindling of a flame, not the feeling of a vessel" by Socrates. Really for me, it is that. It's not about fire hosing content down to your students from this pedestal of faculty. It's very much being a partner with them. I don't see students as customers. I don't see us engaged in a transactional relationship. I see us as faculty and students, as partners in the learning journey which is a transformational journey.

**Wendy:** [00:13:14] I think the very best education should transform you, it should challenge you, it should provoke you into actions and to close the gap from knowing to doing. It should be a transformational experience. And that's where in my classes and my experience over the many years. I love to see that when students get it, when they are really piecing together pieces of information that may not have been put together before, where they're innovating in real time. And they are transformed by that as opposed to classes where they're just sitting and they're not really present. That I'm there, they're there but neither of us are really there.

**Wendy:** [00:13:54] We really need to think about students as partners in their education and actually they're bringing so much into the classroom, the energy that students bring into the classroom, the questions, the curiosity that they bring is a real energy to help us move subjects forward, move research forward, that discovery.

**Wendy:** [00:14:16] I love being able to say to students "We don't know that yet. It's not known yet. Maybe this is a space for you to go find out."

**Bonni:** [00:14:22] I was thinking as you were sharing about your background in science that there are- I'm going to use an either or argument here and then the next question I'm going to ask you is going to be how do we stop doing that.

**Bonni:** [00:14:32] It seems like there's two ways to teach science. You know as if I'm going to pour into this vessel that you described or one that ignites a flame

because surely there's a lot we know about science but there's so much more we don't know and then really trying to equip people for that.

**Wendy:** [00:14:46] Yeah I mean I totally agree with you and I'll come back to your either or. Because is one of my real "bugbears" in the both the sciences and in higher education. When I first started teaching early in the sciences it would be there are two kidneys, one is here and one is there. You can see people just glazing over. Whereas if you start to really engage in the pathology and the applied sciences I really think then they will just learn so much because of that curiosity and their interest in discovery.

**Wendy:** [00:15:16] If you start with a whole board full of algorithms and equations and barriers to learning then they just really switch off. And I've seen the same in engineering where some young men actually who had very little education learn vast amounts of high level engineering because they were putting a car together and they were starting to work through the applied sciences, the applied engineering and really pickup on that curiosity and keep that flame kindled and really encouraged.

**Wendy:** [00:15:48] But to go back to either or, I do see this a lot. If I think about higher education, I can't remember how many conferences I've been at with university presidents sitting there talking about is it the end of the campus? You know, should we just go digital? It's an either or debate when actually what we really need is a both and debate.

**Wendy:** [00:16:07] So we start talking about the role of the campus, the learning community, the engagement so that you can have that plus you know the way in which digital and digital technologies can support learning, can allow people to go back over material, can allow them to spin an enzyme in three dimensions and look at active sites and really empower the learner to visualise things. I think now, with the new technologies around Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality there are just phenomenal things coming down the track.

**Wendy:** [00:16:35] Now, you can already train medics through the hands of an expert surgeon in real time. They can be actually investing their own time but being guided by virtual and augmented reality through the hands of an expert surgeon who's been doing this surgery maybe thousands of times. Just imagine that compared to the old days of medical school training and watching watching the dissection for five rows back. I mean c'mon this is a both and debate about what we do best together in person and bringing that humanity back into the classroom. And what we do supported by technology both and,

not either or.

**Bonni:** [00:17:12] Too many times when I have colleagues hear about some kind of new technology, virtual reality or augmented reality what have you. They'll come back with a pretty apathetic or maybe pessimistic attitude. Why would you want to do that? And I have the same question I just placed an emphasis on the different words. Why? Why would you want to do that? Like I don't yet have the imagination that can see well enough to see a lot of different possibilities but I'm intrigued by how could I ignite my imagination a little bit more so that I could be more creative.

**Bonni:** [00:17:45] I know that for some of these technologies, I just don't - One of the ones that a past guest has talked about is how you can instead of a QR code that just brings up a link, instead it's a movie poster or a work of art or something like that that's so much more visually appealing to look at. And when he was on the show he was talking about a few applications and I thought like that's all I can come up with, the examples he gave me and maybe one more because my friend tried it at work.

**Bonni:** [00:18:09] But I like to just play around with those ideas and have them as possibilities in my mind and then they will come up you know if I'm keeping an open mind about what's possible and what creative ways of having this sort of this database of possible ways to do it. Including, I feel the same way about 3D printers, I'm a business and management professor but I know there's got to be some incredible way to use a 3D printer in my teaching. I just haven't figured out what it is yet. But I just I still love wrestling with those things and trying to keep my imagination open. That's why I'm so honored to get to speak to people like you because you helped me do that.

**Wendy:** [00:18:47] I love all of that, I love all the newness. I wish I was still 12 or 13 with it all to come because I feel I'm going to miss out on some of it. And I have a 3D printed necklace for example. But someone saying to you that you'll be able to kind of walk into your home and think do I want it to look New Age? Do I want it to be [another decorating style] - And just flick a switch and your interior will completely change because everything will be there for you to kind of project onto the walls. The best style, or different fabrics. I just love the idea that we will be able to customize our own surroundings.

**Wendy:** [00:19:14] And I think that is something that in the classroom is customizing the student journey to keep them at that level of igniting their curiosity, supporting them with the knowledge and skills and then really being

there as a kind of curator of information, but also then a guide for that learning journey. I just think that, to me, is a much more powerful experience as a teacher than having me read my lecture notes out to students as they write my lecture notes down. And at the end of the year they write them back to me and that sort of transaction. The idea that you're in there as a creative teaching professional as faculty really guiding these new minds to reach heights that you can only dream of is just a wonderful, wonderful career path. But also, it's the sense that you are supporting transformation of people and through people transformation of society at large with all of the interconnected, complex problems that we have at the moment with environment and geopolitical instabilities and inequalities and so on. But these are the people that are going to solve those problems. And you have this moment with them throughout their lives to really touch them in different ways, to help them become educated and make great choices for humanity. What a privilege.

**Bonni:** [00:20:58] Could you share about the tension of either or between access and outcomes?

**Wendy:** [00:21:04] Yeah, this is something that exercises me. I was a first generation student so called in the sense that my my parents came to the UK from Ireland and neither of them had formal education. And they saw education as very much a transformation. I think that's probably where my kind of deep love of education comes from. And what I see now is people saying we've got to get students from poorer backgrounds into universities, into colleges. But, they haven't adapted their offer to recognise that the students that are coming in supremely bright, really innovative have a different experience to a traditional student that they've been built as institutions to deliver.

**Wendy:** [00:21:57] So they're focusing on access and tables of who they've got in from which neighbourhoods and so on. But I must say that when I came to the U.S. a couple of years ago, I was genuinely shocked to see the outcomes in terms of retention and the graduation rates compared to what I have been used to in Europe and the UK.

**Wendy:** [00:22:22] So, the focus for me was why are we talking about how many people were getting in when actually these people are not progressing in these institutions and they're not delivering on their human potential. And therefore it tells me that we as institutions are not getting it right. I have had a genuine privilege to be alongside some great educators in the US who are doing phenomenal work to redesign and represent the curriculum such that the



students are enabled to realise their potential and that is very very important work.

**Wendy:** [00:23:06] So I think we have to focus, yes, on reaching out to students who are underrepresented in our institutions but let's make sure we give them a great experience so that they do get to uplift those talents in society because we have to change the organization to make sure that we are accommodating their particular learning needs and not have them fail at the very first hurdle because that is benching so much of our human talent and wasting it. And they have shown, in terms of research, that a partial experience of higher education is almost worse than none at all.

**Wendy:** [00:23:46] So it means that you haven't started your career, you haven't got a job going and you have clocked up debts because you've had this experience of higher education but you have nothing to show for that, you don't have a credential, you don't have a qualification. So it really is a bad deal for students, unless we focus, as many now enlightened institutions are, is focussing on outcomes, is focussing on making sure they are delivering to enable those students to lift up their very special talents and take them through such that they do graduate.

**Bonni:** [00:24:22] It was very sobering for me the other day looking at some data. And I will try to find it and put it in the show notes if I can. I know I've been naive thinking oh if we can just get degrees in the hands of people of color, then that is a way that we can help lift all... What is the expression? Lift all boats.

**Wendy:** [00:24:41] Lift all boats.

**Bonni:** [00:24:41] Yes. And yet the data would support that that is actually not in fact true, that that might get them to what the equivalent would be like for a high school education for a white person. So just looking at those disparities and that it is not as simplistic as oh I just need to get you a bachelor's or I need to get a master's but it's far more systems wide that we need to look at these things. I know one of the things you talk about is a special obligation that we in higher education have to address some of these monumental challenges. You talk about climate issues and human disparities and also your involvement with the United Nations. So could you tie the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with some of our special challenges in higher education? And I believe you also have a quote from Jeffrey Sachs that could come into play here as well.

**Wendy:** [00:25:36] Yeah I love what Sachs has said and he did talk about the importance of universities partnering, this connected university, partnering with business and civil society to take on these grand challenges. And I think, that to me shows this connected relevant university. I just came off a call actually, I'm speaking at the high level political forum and New York in July around universities sustainable development and actually the focus is around student engagement. So how might we best engage our students to be these agents of change to deliver on this Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals? And that's really what we're looking at is how do we practice and develop our universities such that they put at the heart of their vision and mission, that academic vision and mission delivery against the STGs?

**Wendy:** [00:26:37] And I think that actually activating our student body is the way in which we are going to launch those global citizens to be empowered to create the kind of solutions that we need for the STG agenda. And so for me, they are interdependent, interconnected between the STGs and what universities do today.

**Bonni:** [00:27:02] I am excited to write up the show notes for today's episode because you have left us with so much more than I know we have time to talk about today. But for people who want to go click on some of the articles that Wendy sent over, including one that we didn't really touch on hardly at all and that's some of the mega trends in higher education that I found fascinating. Those show notes will be available at [teachinginhighered.com/207](http://teachinginhighered.com/207).

**Bonni:** [00:27:26] Now is the time in the show where we get to shift gears a little bit and talk about something completely different or maybe not quite completely different. This is the recommendations portion of the show. And I wanted to talk about a podcast which I have mentioned on the show I think maybe at least twice before. But a wonderful episode of the podcast called Pod Save the People came out. It was in between their seasons. It was like a encapsulating their first year and they titled it Year Gone By.

**Bonni:** [00:27:55] And if you're not familiar with Pod Save the People, it's from an organizer and activist DeRay McKesson. He explores news, culture, social justice and politics. And he does this through deep conversations with guests every week and then probably my favorite part about the show is he brings together three others, Brittany Packnett, Sam Sinyangwe and Clint Smith (who's been on teaching and higher ed before and read his poetry) - I'll have to put a link to that in the show notes as well.

**Bonni:** [00:28:27] And they talk about the week's news and what is unique about them, if you're not familiar with the podcast, is that they are all African-American. And so they share the news from their unique perspectives. And I really like that because I do listen to a lot of news during the week. And yet this they'll bring things to light or they'll have an analysis that is a different way of looking at that and they just do such a nice job.

**Bonni:** [00:28:49] So this episode specifically was each one of them talked about a news story that they had shared during the past year and gave an update or just said why they think it's still so important. And I loved getting to hear Clint read some more of his poems from his book, he's just such a brilliant poet. And they just reflected, it was just it was like a cornucopia. So if you've never listened to the podcast before, that would be a perfect one to start with because you could kind of hear some of the things that they talked about during last year and then maybe add it to your podcast que as well. So Wendy, I'm going to pass it over to you for your recommendations.

**Wendy:** [00:29:24] Thank you. Yeah I'll definitely check it out. Sounds great. Well I have two, one is actually reading at the moment. A friend of mine, Nina suggested- she emailed me very excited saying this is a great book, you've got to get it. And I did the one click order.

**Wendy:** [00:29:41] It's called Educated: A memoir by Tara Westover, published this year, February I think by Random House. As I'm halfway through, it's a really raw, personal memoir about her life but it's showing this transformational journey that she has to becoming someone who ends up getting a Ph.D. from Cambridge University after going to Brigham Young University. But she's home schooled, her life is as a fundamentalist kind of Mormon and the challenges she has, but this flame of wanting to know more and moved down a kind of path of education. But what it costs her becoming isolated really different from her family and her background. It reminded me a little bit of the film Educating Rita where she's moving from becoming a hairdresser going through an open university and then becoming a graduate and how about separate from her life. I think there are some strands that remind me of that but I'm really enjoying the book. I understand Bonni that you've already read it, so no spoiler alerts please. So I'm enjoying it. I'm savoring it. So Educated: A memoir by Tara Westover would be one I would genuinely recommend to people.

**Wendy:** [00:31:10] My second one was a web site where I find myself visiting almost daily and it's called World Time Buddy. It is this time converter, because I'm working at the moment between Boston and London doing a lot of work in

Bulgaria and also in Amsterdam. When I was doing some work for Sydney and now we're planning a big project with Thailand. So on line time converter you know I have all these different dates and times of if it's this time in Boston it must be this time in Bangkok... so I'm finding myself scheduling. I'm thinking you know this global citizenship that I talk about, I'm living it. I'm getting up at 5 am to have calls with colleagues in Bulgaria and these are people who have become deep friends, some of whom I've never met but we've had these Skype calls, student calls.

**Wendy:** [00:32:08] So World Time Buddy really helps you organize your life if you are like me, a global citizen so that's one that I enjoy. And it has saved me many early mornings and late nights getting scheduling right.

**Bonni:** [00:32:24] Wendy, it's been such an honor having you on the podcast and getting to know you and thank you for all the work too that you put into preparing for the episode because I'm going to have a lot of resources to post. It's almost like you set it up with yourself thinking of you as a teacher because you've provided us with a real flame to ignite our curiosity about a number of these areas and now you've given us lots of places to explore further as we become more interested. It's really great to be connected with you. It's an honor to have you here. And thanks for investing part of your day and actually clearly part of other days into really teaching the in Higher Ed audience.

**Wendy:** [00:33:03] Thank you very much. Once a Professor, always ready with a handout. So I'm hoping that those resources are helpful to people. And very much thank you to you for including me in this series. I appreciate that very much.

**Bonni:** [00:33:18] Before we get off the line, would do you like to look at the list of quotes that you prepared and see if there's one that we missed that you'd like to close on?

**Wendy:** [00:33:24] Yeah I have one that I use a lot. I'm used it all through when I was the univeristy president and I use it now. And it's this sense of- kind of goes back to the discussion that we had earlier about what you do as a teacher is igniting and supporting and it is by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. And it talks about "if you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

**Wendy:** [00:33:58] And for me, it kind of captures that sense of if you ignite

people's imagination about what tomorrow could look like, then they will do extraordinary things rather than just telling them to do certain things. I mean I think it goes to leadership. It goes to teaching, it goes to a lot of other things. But for me, it's a very evocative quote of how I've led, how I've taught and I like it very much.

**Bonni:** [00:34:32] Wendy Purcell, thank you for being here.

**Wendy:** [00:34:34] Thank you.

**Bonni:** [00:34:39] Thanks once again to Wendy Purcell for joining me on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. And if you'd like to access the show notes for today's episode, they'll be good. It'll be at [teachinginhighered.com/207](http://teachinginhighered.com/207)

**Bonni:** [00:34:54] And if you don't want to remember to do that every week, you'll just get a single email from me in your inbox and it'll also have with it an article about teaching productivity and you can subscribe to that weekly update at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe). I hope you'll consider doing that and if you have yet to rate or review the show, that's a great way to get other people to learn about it and just grow our community even more. You can do that using whatever service it is you use to listen to the show. Thank you so much for listening and see you next time.

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