

PodBites Episode 2: Building a Bigger Tent

Adam Barger: [00:00:00] Welcome to POD Bytes, a project of the Centering Centers podcast from POD Network. I'm Adam Barger from the studio for Teaching and Learning Innovation at William and Mary. If you have five minutes, I have five bite-sized pieces of advice. Today's topic, building a bigger Tent. Today's guest is Betsy Barre, assistant Provost and Executive Director at Wake Forest Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

Thank you for being here, Betsy.

Betsy Barre: Happy to be here.

Adam Barger: We really appreciate your time. Uh, are you ready to give us some bite-sized advice?

Betsy Barre: I think I am, let's see if I can do it within these minutes. Uh,

Adam Barger: alright, I'm starting the timer Bite number one. Number one

Betsy Barre: now. All right, let's go. So, I am interested in this question for a number of reasons.

First, I'm interested in it, uh, building a bigger tent for the people that we bring into our program. So many of us are interested in moving beyond the usual su. And growing our [00:01:00] reach. But I'm also really interested in creating an environment that's a little less hostile to disagreement in about pedagogy that I think is something that we're pretty used to seeing.

So the first piece of advice I would give is to excise the word training from your vocabulary and replace it with something like workshops, seminar, learning, opportunity, enrichment, or maybe even just education. And that's because training is deductive and top down and assumes we have the answers and that we're just trying to fill their heads.

And I think faculty that's. That's contrary to the way they've been trained. They like to raise questions. They like to sort of think about challenging the status quo, and that's

why they hate those trainings that they get, um, that are for compliance reasons. And we don't wanna be in that bucket where we might read some resentment against the work that we're doing.

So that's the first piece of advice.

Adam Barger: So Bite one is don't say training.

Betsy Barre: That's right. Don't use the word training.

Adam Barger: Alright, bite number two. Two.

Betsy Barre: So related to that, uh, I think that whenever possible you should frame the learning [00:02:00] opportunities that you're creating in your center as opportunities for inquiry.

And so by that I mean design your workshops in a way that you are. Asking and pursuing questions rather than sort of sharing conclusions and trying to get people to agree with conclusions. So that's not to say that you can't share evidence, um, that's part of the process. But when you're sharing that evidence about what we know from the research, you should share that evidence as.

Part of the process of inquiry. So encourage them to share, discuss, to question the evidence, to share their own evidence. And really this makes the, the learner or your faculty member part of the process as we know, which is good for teaching, gives them some autonomy and it welcomes disagreement, right?

So we wanna welcome that so you don't have to choose between different groups of faculty on controversial issues of who's gonna be like, well, I know the teaching center's on my side, so I'm gonna hang out with them. But the other group says, uh, the teaching center's opposed to this view, so I'm not even gonna show up.

Adam Barger: I like this inquiry mindset. Uh, tip Betsy, because we work [00:03:00] interdisciplinarity, right? Mm-hmm. So like we want, uh, to have an interdisciplinary approach and this allows us to kind of explore together, uh, no matter what, uh, perspective folks are coming from, what discipline they're coming from. So I think that's a really good one.

Bite number three, bite number three.

Betsy Barre: Number three, which is related, you kind of set me up here, Adam, which is great, is that one way that we can, um, build a bigger tent with people who have different views, and particularly from different disciplines, is to actually design programs that are disciplinary based.

So we know the research is clear that interdisciplinary. Programs and learning communities are important and powerful, and I agree with that. But sometimes it can be really useful to develop programs where peers are teaching their peers within their discipline, because that, first of all, gives them leadership opportunities.

It allows more depth in the conversations, but also there's a little less conflict and suspicion. Sometimes it takes so much time to get through that conflict and suspicion of like, you're a business faculty, you're a STEM faculty. I'm not sure if I trust your [00:04:00] epistemological frameworks. So I think leaning into.

Disciplinary based programs as part of your portfolio can be important for building a bigger tent.

Adam Barger: Yeah, I love that one too. We, we, uh, here at William and Mary try to go to the departments as an option. So we'll put out some options and say, if you want us to come to you, here's some topics that we can come and, uh, maybe be part of your departmental meeting, which also offers a bit of a different kind of space 'cause you're working with colleagues who, who know each other.

So that's really great. Uh, by number four. Number four. Number four.

Betsy Barre: Okay. So bite number four is that I would say instead of just welcoming disagreements, so you know, if somebody has a critique, you allow it to happen. I actually wanna go a step further and say that we should design for disagreement, that we should be explicitly encouraging people to disagree.

So this one. For me. Do you wanna say something, Adam? Sorry. No, I

Adam Barger: say look out this, this is getting this exciting.

Betsy Barre: All right. Sorry. Yes. Okay. So, so for me, this is not just strategic, it's not just about [00:05:00] bringing in people and then trying to like turn them to you, which I think, frankly, you know, that sometimes might happen, but it's because I'm deeply committed to a view that it's only through disagreement that we actually get.

Better views that we actually learn where our own biases are, where our misunderstandings of the literature are. And so I actually think we should design our programs to elicit their disagreement. So just like sometimes we do in class, we'll say, okay, here's a view. How would you disagree with this? What would be an argument against this?

And get our faculty to actually start to think critically about pedagogy, because that's gonna help them think about pedagogy. And it's also maybe gonna help all of us come to a better and more accurate view of how we should teach.

Adam Barger: So are you saying here, Betsy, that you, you want folks, uh, to kind of steel man their arguments?

Um,

Betsy Barre: yeah. Steel man has a recline there. Yes.

Adam Barger: Yes. Try to poke holes, you know, whatever. And that's part of a healthy, it kind of goes back to your inquiry point.

Betsy Barre: Yeah, that's right. Right. It's a part and it's not, it doesn't, it doesn't need to be hostile of course, but it is certainly thinking through, okay, what else do [00:06:00] we need to know?

How would we test that theory? Um, and I, and I often say at Wake Forest that I love when people disagree about pedagogy. 'cause it means they're thinking about pedagogy. And so to me that's a way of engaging in important ways and they're thinking more deeply about it. So that I actually designed my programs when possible to make space for challenging views that are presented, which also welcomes in people who happen to have the view that they don't.

That is different from the view being presented 'cause they feel welcomed.

Adam Barger: Well, I, I disagree with you there. I'm just kidding.

Betsy Barre: I love it. Love it. We don't have time in one minute. That's the problem. This is not a venue for inquiry.

Adam Barger: This is not the venue. All right. Bite number five. Bite bite number five.

Betsy Barre: Okay. This one's a little long, so probably I'll get cut off. But, um, uh, as an ethicist, this one's really important to me, which is, um, and the Broadway, I would say this is. Stop making every pedagogical choice that we make a referendum on somebody's character. Um, stop turning our debates about [00:07:00] pedagogy into moral critique or sort of extreme moral judgment.

Um, and I think there's a kind of oversimplified view of morality that comes into that or another way. A sort of label that I would give to this is that we should make room for moral tolerance. Um, that we should respect moral disagreement in our cohort. So not just with our faculty, but also among educational developers.

Uh, so, and that's because I think sometimes when we think about disagreement, we're like, yeah, we're fine with disagreement when it's disagreement about empirical facts. But sometimes we think when it's a moral issue, we should be more certain and we should have more clarity about morality. And so anybody who.

Disagrees with a particular pedagogical practice that has what we would see as immoral implications. We want to shut debate down, but I would argue as an ethicist, that's where we actually want it to begin. Uh, and that's because, uh, you know, moral dilemmas are dilemmas for a reason. They're really complex and they're rarely about figuring out what's right and what's [00:08:00] wrong and or, or to motivate you to do what's right and wrong.

It's actually about weighing goods. So we think a lot of things are good and valuable, but then they compete with one another. And that's particularly true in the classroom where we have multiple human beings who are studying with us, which means they're all going to have different needs that are gonna conflict with one another.

And so sometimes we all value the same things, but we weigh. Those things differently, and I think it's super important for us to make room for people who will disagree with us about their moral choices. That's not to say we shouldn't talk about morality. That's not to say you have to be a relativist, but it's to say we want to welcome.

Those who disagree with us about moral conclusions in the classroom. 'cause it might make our moral views better. That's the only way we can get to moral truth in my view. But again, that's not a one minute, that's not gonna be a one minute conversation, but it

Adam Barger: was so good. We gave you a little bit of bonus.

Betsy Barre: Thank you.

Adam Barger: Yeah, you earned it. Uh, these are great bite-sized tips for, for building a bigger tent if you'd be so kind for the good folks at POD [00:09:00] network. Can you run down the list one more time? One to five, building a bigger tent.

Betsy Barre: Absolutely. So one, avoid the word training whenever possible. Two. Frame all your programs as opportunities for inquiry.

Three, develop disciplinary based programs. Four, design for disagreements, and five tolerate, and maybe even embrace moral disagreement.

Adam Barger: That's fantastic. Thank you. Betsy Berry from Wake Forest University.

Betsy Barre: Thank you Adam.

Adam Barger: And thank you dear listener for tuning into this edition of POD Bytes from Centering Centers.

We'll talk to you soon.