

Episode 27: Authentic Learning and the Wisconsin Idea

Season 3, Episode 27

The L&S Exchange Podcast

David Macasaet: [00:00:00] Welcome to the L&S Exchange, a podcast about teaching and learning in the College of Letters and Science at UW-Madison. I'm David Macasaet. Join me and my colleagues from the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative as we explore different aspects of inclusive teaching, feature interviews with instructors, and provide practical advice for educators.

David Macasaet: Today, Exchange Associate Producer Molly Harris visits with Professor Mike Wagner, one of this year's recipients of the Alliant Energy, James R Underkofler Excellence in Teaching Award. We'll learn more about how Mike creates authentic learning experiences that engage and challenge students.

Molly Harris: So welcome Mike to the L&S Exchange.

Mike Wagner: Thanks for having me.

Molly Harris: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role as an instructor here on campus?

Mike Wagner: Sure. I'm a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass [00:01:00] Communication, where I am the William T. Evjue Distinguished Chair for the Wisconsin Idea. I direct the Center for Communication and Civic Renewal, and so I do a lot of research with faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students that try to understand how the relationships that we have in our information ecology—so that's the news we get, the humans we talk to, the social media we consume, the entertainment we get—how that interaction affects what we think is true, what we want from our government and how we participate politically.

Mike Wagner: And then I teach a lot of classes related to those topics. And I also teach some more skills based journalism classes, a large lecture intro to mass communication, and then some graduate seminars as well. So, but all in the general space of politics and the media or media and civic and civil communication, things like that.

Molly Harris: So one topic that we're beginning to explore right now in the Instructional Design Collaborative is what we're calling authentic learning. And so we've taken a pretty broad approach to what [00:02:00] that means, everything from assignments or

courses that feel relevant to students or meet their interests or goals, to also projects that incorporate real world challenges or skills.

Molly Harris: Can I ask you, what does authentic learning mean to you as an instructor?

Mike Wagner: Yeah, I love that question. For me, it is teaching and learning that is in service to the Wisconsin Idea. So it's stuff where we take theoretical knowledge, empirical research that's transparently and rigorously conducted and figuring out based upon the theory and evidence, how can we take that and do something with it outside of the confines of the university?

Mike Wagner: How can that help others make decisions about how they want to live their lives? How can that help others choose to govern themselves? How can that help solve problems that we find to be intractable, hopeless, despair-inducing in some cases, or how does it help us solve problems that bring more joy to people's [00:03:00] lives or more knowledge to the decisions that people make or more efficacy to their participation?

Mike Wagner: And so it's, it's really about taking knowledge and figuring out how to channel it to the community.

Molly Harris: And do you have examples of assignments or things that you've done in your courses that exemplify this authentic learning?

Mike Wagner: Yeah, I think so. I think at a campus level, when I teach public opinion courses, the students come up with their own set of questions that they want to know about how their students are experiencing life on campus.

Mike Wagner: That might range from questions of, do you feel as though you're graded differently based upon your political persuasion, to are you getting trained for jobs that you want, are you experiencing opportunities to meet people different than you and what are you learning from them?

Mike Wagner: And so students will come up with their own questions. They'll go through the IRB approval through human subjects on campus, so that the research they're doing is ethical and can also then later be published on. [00:04:00] They'll draw a sample of students on campus. They'll ask them all of those questions.

Mike Wagner: They'll analyze the results and then they'll put on a press conference where the results are shared. That often gets covered by local news. And then the white paper reports that they write that kind of show the results of the research are then things that we share with, with deans, with college administrators, with student affairs to say, Hey, these are things that we're learning about campus and attitudes.

Mike Wagner: Students have experiences. Students have things students want. We can do something about it. So that's one example that's more campus oriented. Another is more about how we can do research in ways that help staff members for lawmakers communicate with the lawmakers' constituents. And so we'll do work related to best practices of social media communication, where people can, you know, do what lawmakers call credit claiming.

Mike Wagner: So when a lawmaker votes for a bill or leads a bill and it gets passed or saves a local grocery store, or how do you, how do you communicate [00:05:00] those things to the public? And what are the best practices for doing that? And so sometimes we'll engage in classwork that tries to pair students with different people in communities around the state and try to use that to help them communicate good things their representatives are doing or in some cases, you know, nonprofits are doing or those sorts of things.

Molly Harris: Yeah. So it sounds like students are getting to explore some of their interest. And also, you know, with the example of the college campus, this is their life, right? They're getting to explore the world that they're living in, and then also build up skills. For example, writing a press, you know, deliver a press, writing a press release, writing a memo to a lawmaker.

Mike Wagner: Yeah. All those sorts of things, right?

Molly Harris: Yeah. How do students react to these kinds of assignments?

Mike Wagner: At first, you see lots of eyes widening, like, Oh, we're not gonna just write a paper once, turn it in, and never think about it again. Oh, what does that mean? And then, generally though, I find that students are exceptionally excited [00:06:00] to do something that might matter.

Mike Wagner: Where they feel like the results live beyond me and what I do in this particular class and what I turn into canvas six minutes before the assignment is due, right? And so in a journalism class I teach, that's a beginning reporting class, we end each semester with a five week project. So they spend 10 weeks learning the basics of writing different kinds of stories related to breaking news and budgets and interviewing powerful people and all that sort of thing.

Mike Wagner: And then they come up with their own idea for what it is they want to explore as a group. And then we kind of organize the class into a managing editor and a graphics department and a website and reporters and video folks and audio folks. And one of the most fun ones we'd ever, ever did was one where the students were really, you know, maybe tired of hearing me talk about the Wisconsin idea all the time.

Mike Wagner: And so they said, well, we want to do a project that's called why the Wisconsin idea. And what [00:07:00] we want to investigate is whether this is just lip service that faculty and administrators and others just use to talk about because it's such a great sounding thing, or is it actually something that actually matters in communities?

Mike Wagner: And so they investigated different projects that have that Wisconsin Idea phrase tied to them and they wrote stories about them and created a website called Why Wisconsin Idea and had all of these different stories, some video, some audio, some print, some photo essays, some timelines, some interactive graphics, and really concluded, yeah, the stuff that that faculty and staff do with partners across the state seems to help make people's lives better, seems to help connect people to the university, seems to help with our shared understanding of what we owe each other as citizens.

Mike Wagner: And so there was really this really interesting set of stories, but it was also an opportunity for students to provide feedback to different researchers to say, you know, sometimes this work feels extractive to people living in communities around the state. And how can we make sure that while we're engaged in the process of transparent and rigorous [00:08:00] learning, we're not just taking from the people we're studying, but also finding ways to give back.

Molly Harris: Yeah. So how do you prepare students for that kind of group project? If you say, well, at first students are a little maybe apprehensive about this type of work, how do you prepare them for it?

Mike Wagner: I like to prepare them in multiple ways. And so I usually create a pretty thorough document that describes things, that has a frequently asked questions section, so that students can, you know, be aware of.

Mike Wagner: What happens if this problem occurs? What happens if that problem occurs? How real are the first deadlines versus the final deadline? All of those sorts of things. But then it's really a lot of in class conversation. It's a lot of let's brainstorm on the board. Let's talk through how this worked in the past.

Mike Wagner: Let's bring in a student from two semesters ago to zoom in or come into class if they happen to be in town and talk to students about what went well with their [00:09:00] project and what they wish they could do over. And it's really iterative. You know what works in 2016 might not work in 2020 or 2022 or 2025.

Mike Wagner: And so even when I've had things go really well, trying to faithfully replicate it has never gone well. It's always the case that each group is its own living entity and there's always a new thing that comes up. It's why syllabi get so long. It's like, oh, this thing happened that I never anticipated.

Mike Wagner: Let's put in a policy about that. And then 10 years pass and you're like, this is too many policies. Let's take all of these out and start again.

Maria Widmer: Would you like to connect with the latest resources for teaching and learning in the College of Letters and Science? Subscribe to the new monthly newsletter from the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative to receive helpful and inspiring teaching strategies, discussion starters, and stories. Sign up using the link in the show notes or by visiting our website at idc.ls.wisc.edu.

Molly Harris: Is there anything that's happening at this moment, challenges or issues that you're thinking about in your teaching for talking about, you know, 2025 it is now?

Mike Wagner: Yeah, I think right now, you know, so much of what I teach about is related to the news, politics, elections, public opinion, civic engagement.

Mike Wagner: And these things are fraught because we live in a deeply divided country. We have, you know, a divided government, both that, you know, um, at the state level, we have narrow divisions of a unified government at the national level in 2025. And so there's a lot of rhetorical heat around questions of politics and elections and things that are verifiably true versus things that aren't and how we should or shouldn't, or whether we should or shouldn't, you know, monitor and address different kinds of [00:11:00] speech that you might hear in the public square versus on social media versus in the news.

Mike Wagner: And so it's a process of really alerting students to how political something that seems innocuous can get really quickly and thinking about being transparent about your goals and your values and your process so that, if people object to what you're doing, you can share here's what we're, here's what we're trying to do and why we think that's okay.

Mike Wagner: It's not the case that we need everybody to agree with what it is students are trying to do or what we're trying to do as faculty. But at least being able to explain our perspective in a way that doesn't get distorted and, and um, you know, framed in a way that is different than what our, our real goals are for students, which is to help them learn how to do things.

Mike Wagner: So that they can make their own decisions, you know, based on evidence after they leave us.

Molly Harris: So a lot of the examples we've been talking about involve maybe a large project or engaging with the [00:12:00] community on that larger scale. I'm also curious about what authentic learning could look like at a smaller scale.

Molly Harris: So if we think about a course that maybe already has their curriculum set but wants to add a little bit, 10 minutes to a class activity, or add a slide to their lecture. Are there ways that authentic learning can happen on that smaller scale?

Mike Wagner: Well, I think so. And honestly, I think you have to do it on the smaller scale to make it work on the bigger scale.

Mike Wagner: And so I don't think you can, you know, try to do these big community based projects without having a classroom that feels flatter to students, that feels like they have an opportunity to participate. And so just from, you know, doing simple think-pair-share kinds of things, like right now I'm teaching a large lecture class, and so a lot of what we'll do is to say, you know, sit, talk to the person next to you about this question that we've been wrestling with for the last few minutes.

Mike Wagner: Talk for three or four minutes, and when you're done, we'll ask five or six of you to share out what it is you were talking about. And if we do that every class period, if [00:13:00] folks know that it's on them to come and be ready to be engaged even in a room of 300 where you might normally think I'll put my head down, maybe I'll even catch a 20 minute nap in the middle of this lecture, but now it's like, Oh every single class period we're also participating, even if that's just show of hands, right?

Mike Wagner: At some time, tell me how often you do this or that, but I think having students talk with each other is a great way to get that kind of authentic learning going because students are like, like all humans, are creatures of habit and they tend to sit in the same place, even in a large lecture hall.

Mike Wagner: It's to the point where it's almost funny four weeks into class where I can tell who's there and who's not in a 300 person class because of just where they're sitting. And so, we'll do other things. Like, okay, so now, for the last four weeks, we've talked to people who are sitting near you. Now, let's get up, and if your last name is A through L, move two rows forward and talk to somebody, you know, somebody different.

Mike Wagner: And just find ways to expand horizons. I think little things like that in the classroom [00:14:00] can help everybody feel like they're in a community, which I think is important for authentic learning.

Molly Harris: So you've also mentioned that when you teach large courses, you have, as you said, a variety of students in the class.

Molly Harris: How do you tailor your course to, to meet all of their different backgrounds, their interests, their goals?

Mike Wagner: The first thing I do is following advice that I got as a graduate student. We had this seminar that was like the one hour a week in the first semester of your graduate study that was devoted to helping you think about teaching.

Mike Wagner: So we didn't get a lot of help in teaching. But one thing I really remember from that is one of the faculty guest speakers one week saying, most people are going to college for a reason that is very different than the reason you went to college. You're still here, right? You're back in graduate school.

Mike Wagner: You really like doing this particular kind of thing that not many people like to do. And so you have to remember that other people are here for completely different purposes. So the first thing I try [00:15:00] to do is think about who's here because they want to become a major in our department, who's here because it's the one chance they're ever going to get to learn about how mass communication works in their society, who's here because they want to become a more effective social media communicator in their chosen field, who's here because they need a Comm B credit to graduate, right?

Mike Wagner: And what are the different purposes that we can serve that keeps everybody interested and tries to come up with assignments and exams and lectures and discussion sections that feel relevant. And I think it's impossible to do a one size fits all kind of thing, and so I try to do a variety of assignments.

Mike Wagner: I try to telegraph aggressively to students, The reason I'm having you do this is this. It's, it's not busy work. It's because when you have a job, you'll have to get up and give a speech and make a presentation at some point, right? Or when you have a job, you'll have to write a really short memo, and then you'll have to [00:16:00] revise it into a longer proposal.

Mike Wagner: And so we're going to do both of those things, and you'll have to learn how to respond to feedback. And then we'll have another assignment where you respond to feedback from a different grader, because sometimes your boss will change, or who's in charge will change, and you'll have to learn how to do that.

Mike Wagner: And so I almost try to tell students, here is how I think this might matter for you.

Molly Harris: Yes, I'm curious. I know that some instructors might be a little bit hesitant about some of these real world activities. One concern that I've heard is that there's too much content to cover already.

Mike Wagner: Right.

Molly Harris: How would you respond to that?

Mike Wagner: They're not wrong. Uh, I'm our department's, uh, graduate director right now. When I tell the first year students on the first day is that it is more unfair for you to go to graduate school than it's been for anybody else who's ever gone to graduate school, because there's one additional year of knowledge you have to learn that I didn't have to, right? The stuff I had to know to pass my comprehensive exam stopped in 2003.

Mike Wagner: But it's 22 years since 2003, [00:17:00] and so there's always more, and what came before is still important. And so we have to make choices. There are times when I cut readings out of a syllabus, or I cut an assignment, and it just breaks my heart. But sometimes you have to eliminate something you love to do, to try something new, and I think it's worth doing that.

Mike Wagner: But I also think it's completely fair for someone to say, there's content I want them to have and that precludes me from doing this other kind of thing and that, you know, we should all be free to pursue those kinds of pursuits in our work.

Molly Harris: Yeah, I appreciate that perspective. Thanks. When we're talking about engaging students in authentic learning and real world experiences and contributing back to their communities.

Molly Harris: In a lot of our classes at UW Madison, there are TAs involved, and I imagine TAs can be sort of an in between for, for the students. Maybe, often our TAs are younger, more recently have been in [00:18:00] college, and maybe have more of a connection to what's happening in student lives, how do you work with your TAs when you have them?

Mike Wagner: I love the opportunity to have teaching assistants because they are energetic, they're up on the latest things, they're as you, as you say, they're generally closer in age and experience to the undergraduate students. And when our department hosts our graduation ceremony the day before the campus graduation, it's awesome.

Mike Wagner: Always students finding their J202 TA and introducing them to their families, right? It's, it's that person who was their first small room connection on campus that really helped them through a difficult course when they were really getting going in the major. And so it's, we can't do our work without, without TAs.

Mike Wagner: I find it to be kind of a professional apprenticeship. And so I, I treat TAs in a slightly more focused and freedom giving way than I treat my students, but it's the same philosophy. It's this, this idea that I, I [00:19:00] think of research mentoring situations for undergraduates and then teaching help and assistance and research mentorship for, for teaching assistants as kind of a, like a tomato plant situation where, you know, if you're growing a tomato plant, you have like this cone that's a wire cone going around it.

Mike Wagner: And so that the plant is free to grow in a variety of directions. And it's also limited to how far out it can get, right? And so, I want to give TAs freedom when they're grading students in their sections. I want them to have some freedom to say, this is what I think is important about this assignment.

Mike Wagner: But, there's the wire cone that's—we can't have your section have systematically higher grades on everything than all the other sections, right? And so we have to find ways to make sure that we're evaluating students in a comparative way, while also giving you the freedom to learn and grow as a teacher.

Mike Wagner: And so every week in my staff meetings with TAs, when I'm teaching courses that have a lot of TAs, we spend 10 minutes. What went well in your sections? [00:20:00] Why do you think it went well? What didn't go well? Why do you think it didn't go well? Is there anybody who's missed two in a row? And we need to check in on to see if they're having a crisis that we can help them manage.

Mike Wagner: Is there an assignment that students are not understanding? Is it, did I write a bad assignment? That was unclear? Are students too nervous, from my perspective, about what it is they produce and how they produce it. So we're trying to learn all these things, but it's also then signaling to TAs, here's how you manage a class, and that when you have a syllabus, it's not done forever.

Mike Wagner: You've prepped a course, and then you say, oh, this went well, this didn't. I need to change this, alter that. If my goal is to, you know, help students from all different kinds of backgrounds understand something, international students aren't getting this assignment because it's too wrapped up in American pop culture.

Mike Wagner: Or students who aren't going to be majors aren't getting this because it's too reliant upon skills that you only use in industry, you know, and so those things are really places that TAs can help, but it's also good learning for [00:21:00] TAs so that they can learn. Oh, it's never really done. It's, it's just, you've, you've got what you're doing now and you commit to it and then you learn from it and, you know, try to do better next time.

Molly Harris: Well, we've had a pretty wide ranging conversation. Were there things that you were thinking about before coming in that you haven't had the chance to share?

Mike Wagner: You know, one thing I really love about teaching is that it's forever. And so when you have a student, they're your student forever. Even when they're no longer in your class, and even when they eclipse you professionally and are out doing awesome things, you still have a relationship with them.

Mike Wagner: And people will still come back to campus and stop by your office or send an email or ask for a letter of recommendation or share this thing that they're doing that

they first thought about nine years ago in your class. So much of what our students do that's indicative of the value of the courses we teach come later, [00:22:00] right?

Mike Wagner: So much of what we're doing now are training students for jobs that don't exist yet, and they're going to invent them because of their creativity and hard work. So what I really love about teaching is that it never ends. And those relationships last, you know, as long as you're around.

David Macasaet: Now, the Aftershow a conversation with members of the instructional design collaborative, the campus community, and you our listeners, where we raise questions, surface key ideas, and continue the conversation.

David Macasaet: Welcome to the Aftershow everybody. And my name is David Macasaet and I'm here with my colleagues, Jonathan Klein and Molly Harris. Molly, great job on the episode. I really enjoyed learning about Mike and his teaching here on campus. Why don't we start out by thinking about our initial reactions and reflections.

David Macasaet: Did anything jump out to you after listening?

Jonathan Klein: Well, I think for me, this was one of the first times [00:23:00] the Wisconsin Idea has made its way into our podcast. And it got me thinking about that because there are often times where I think the Wisconsin Idea is a really attractive thing for people and I've heard people talk about coming to the institution and finding that to be one of the most unique features of the university—that the work we do here would have a benefit to the broader state.

Jonathan Klein: And at the same time, I can think about that in the abstract as this collective thing that's happening. And what I liked about what Mike was talking about is in his class, he tries to get super concrete with it, even in little ways where he's talking about. When you leave this institution, this will be useful to you in these ways, these really concrete ways.

Jonathan Klein: And I appreciated that small, small way and that really hyper personalized way that he was making the Wisconsin idea real [00:24:00] and taking it from this collective thing that we do to a very personal thing we do.

David Macasaet: I'm glad you bring that up because the group project that Mike talks about really actually helped me feel more rooted in the Wisconsin Idea as a foundational idea that all courses might tie into in some way.

Jonathan Klein: Well, yeah, the simple fact that the Wisconsin Idea exists gives us a way to make nearly every bit of learning that's done authentic.

Molly Harris: David, I also appreciated that Mike explained how his students were maybe a little bit skeptical that the Wisconsin idea is actually carried out at the university, not something that is just spoken about, but that people are actually doing it consistently, and it was really great to hear that the students discovered that it is happening and then also to see how.

Molly Harris: Mike was encouraging it to happen even further in his classroom.
[00:25:00] One question that this brought up for me is how to do authentic learning without it feeling forced.

Jonathan Klein: Or, or feel like it's taking over in a way. We talk to instructors all the time, and I know that in certain contexts, like, even a small change is a big risk.

Jonathan Klein: And it seemed like the thing I admire about what Mike was describing is he has a course design and a context that really allows him to be responsive in the way that takes advantage of those curiosities that naturally emerge from his students. And the other thing that came up as I was trying to re-familiarize myself with some of the that research that I had previously encountered was the simple idea of reflection and the role it plays in learning. And even a small change that might add to the authenticity of a student's work is just [00:26:00] simply, through reflection, giving them the latitude to talk about how whatever course concepts are being discussed impact their lives or their future selves.

David Macasaet: Next month, we'll turn our focus to Professor Patricia Coffey, the other recipient of this year's Alliant Energy James R. Underkofler Excellence in Teaching Award. We'll explore how she brings creativity and dedication to the classroom, inspiring her students and shaping meaningful learning experiences.

David Macasaet: Stay tuned! The Exchange is brought to you by L&S Teaching and Learning Administration, and is produced by the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative. We record this podcast on the UW-Madison campus in Van Hise Hall, which sits atop a ridge overlooking Lake Mendota. It's a beautiful spot, and has a deeper significance, because everything that resides here rests atop ancestral Ho-Chunk land, a place their nation [00:27:00] has called Teejop since time immemorial.