This transcript was exported on May 05, 2026.

From Fortnite to Future Careers - Esports with Dr. Katrina Lewis

One-to-One Podcast, Learning Technology Center

Season 3, Episode 9

Brian Bates:

Hey everyone. I'm Brian Bates and I trust Google Maps without questioning it. Left on.

Linda DeYounge:

I'm Linda DeYounge and I honor ironically use the Kahoot! Music at parties.

Brian Bates:

And this is the one-to-one podcast brought to you by the Learning Technology Center. Well, hey Linda, welcome back to the One-to-One Podcast. This is our final episode of the season. And just thinking back, we've had some awesome topics this year, haven't we?

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah, we really have. This has been an incredibly rewarding season. Did you have some highlights from the season yourself?

Brian Bates:

Yeah, I think I always enjoy anytime we have our voices episodes. And we've traditionally done the fall episode where we interview educators at IUTC at our annual conference, but then this year stepped it up and added a student voices episode, which I thought was fantastic. So I think those two really stood out to me. I'm sure I probably just stole one of yours, but what about your thought? What episodes stuck out to you?

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah, I mean, I always enjoy hearing from people who are in the schools doing the work. So Student Voices one and two, parts one and two were very rewarding for me and a personal passion project of mine. But then also hearing from the tech directors about the mentorship program. They're so important for our schools. And I also really enjoyed hearing from ... Honestly, I really enjoyed hearing from Ben with 3D printing because I feel like that's a hot and very needed topic. And it's a great start to get a 101 on 3D printing. So I thought that was also a great one.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I really liked when we had Amanda Bickerstaff on. I know she also keynoted our AI virtual conference in January. I thought it was an outstanding kind of precursor to that. So I thought that was a great ... It's hard to ... Now that I'm thinking about more of them, and I even loved our conversations we have with Monica Burns.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I'm pretty soon I'm just going to name every single one of them. So I guess at

Linda DeYounge:

Some point is Brian's favorite.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. Everyone's my favorite.

Linda DeYounge:

So to end our season, we are going to be talking about a topic that I personally really love, which is eSports. And for those who aren't familiar with eSports and are listening in today, eSports are kind of a ... It refers to playing video games or other types of games in organized teams or individually. Sometimes that means they're playing competitively. And it's like a super popular way to compete and connect with others. And we're going to dig really deep into this episode. But before we get into our interview, Brian, I wanted to know, do you personally game? And if you do, what are some of your favorite games to play?

Brian Bates:

I do. I can remember back ... I still remember Christmas morning the day I got the original Nintendo.

Linda DeYounge:

Great choice.

Brian Bates:

Love Nintendo. I skipped over a few and went to the Nintendo 64. And I swear, I would give anything if I could get my old Nintendo 64 back in all the games. I want to buy a refurbished one, but I'm kind of cautious of being scammed or something like that. But I have always really, really loved playing video games. And currently I play on an Xbox. I play the traditional sports games. My friends and I play the college football, do a little bit of the Call of Duty stuff. And then there's some other games that I like to play too. Probably a little known one. I get a lot of relaxation from Farming Simulator.

Just a fun little creative type sandbox thing and just nice for relaxation. How about yourself?

Linda DeYounge:

Oh, you know me. I love a game and I do game quite a bit. Me and my husband both do, which fun fact, my husband actually founded his eSports team in college. Our college did not have an esports club until he founded it with some of his friends. That's awesome. Esports goes way back for me. My first advice was I think maybe a PlayStation two, and I played a lot of dance dance revolution because I had the floor mat. And so I played a lot of dance dance revolution. And then I also played a ton of Pokemon games on my Nintendo D ... No, not the DS, the one that was like a square and it flipped up. I don't remember what that one was called. But I used to play a ton of Pokemon games. And then now I mostly play on Steam. I like PC and I have a Steam Deck.

And so I love playing puzzle games. I like playing co-op games, anything where you build something. I really liked Animal Crossing because you could build and create and do cool things with it, but also some more mainstream games like Ballers Gate three or I guess just your standard fair of action games. So I'm kind of all over the place. I really like gaming. It's super fun. And I try to play games at least once a week and just kind of reconnect with them. So it's a good time.

Brian Bates:

That's awesome. Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

So let's go ahead and get into one of our favorite segments that we do, which is News You Can Use. We like News You Can Use. And this is our segment where we look at the most recent headlines that kind of talk about today's topic and things that kind of made us pause and stop for a minute and think about, that's really interesting. So before we get into the news segment, I wanted to know if you are familiar with the video game Doom.

Brian Bates:

I am. As I mentioned before, as a Nintendo 64 player, I know that they had a Doom 64. I also, I think I might've shared it with you before. I used to get Doom and Duke Newcomb mixed up, and I don't know why, because they're nowhere near the same game. But yes, I am very familiar. I've played the video game Doom. I am very familiar with that video game, but I'm interested as to see how this relates to the news.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah. So for our listeners who don't know what Doom is, it's kind of a classic first person shooter. It launched in 1993, and the game mixes things like maze levels, hidden areas, strategic gameplay. And I think one of the most noticeable things about the game is that players had to juggle eight different weapons to defeat enemies at the time. So it was kind of that toggling on and off certain weapons, which was kind of like groundbreaking at the time. By today's standards, this game is pretty simple, but at the time Doom was pretty groundbreaking. So I found an article and I found this to be wild. This blew my mind. So there's an Australian company called Cortical Labs, and they have done something that sounds like it's out of a science fiction book. They have taught lab grown human brain cells to play the video game doom.

And how they do this is they grow the brain cells in a lab and then they place them on computer chips that can send and receive electronic signals. And by training this system, they can encourage the cells, the brain cells, to send signals that control the game, which essentially allows the cells to play the game.

And of course people are like, "Yeah, but how well does it play the game?" It's not quite as skilled as your best human players who have practiced and they're like experts at doom, but they found that it actually performs better than your average game player. So Brian, what's your first reaction to this?

Brian Bates:

My first reaction was, that's what I was going to say, is like, okay, so is it just like the equivalency of like a toddler picking up the controller and matching buttons? Yeah. But it doesn't sound like it. It sounds like there's actually some, I don't want to use the ... I don't know if the term thought is the correct one to put, but there is some reason for why it does what it does.That's insane. It does sound very, very science fictiony, very futuristic.

Linda DeYounge:

I know.

Brian Bates:

That's crazy.

Linda DeYounge:

It really is because obviously these are just disembodied cells. They're just sitting on a computer chip, but what they're starting to notice with this is that we could start to fuse biology and technology in ways that could produce major breakthroughs for us, both in the health industry and in the technology industry. So this system that they have set up really demonstrates that they can do computing that can make real time decisions and adapt to environments and uncertain environments because in Dune, Doom is not a game where it's very scripted. You're running around and things happen, but you do have to react to what's happening around you. And so this could really open new possibilities for improving technologies that blend biology and technology, things like robotic arms or assistive devices that respond to the body's natural electrical signals to send information to the technology. So yeah, I mean, I just think this is going to be totally revolutionary, very much a breakthrough.

Brian Bates:

Yeah, that's amazing. And that was my first thought was like, okay, so what's the purpose? But that does make sense where you take in a situation where you've got these assistive technologies and removing the barrier between the human and the technology and having it be real time and reactive. And I think that's really, really amazing to think about.

Linda DeYounge:

I know. And a little scary, if I'm being honest.

Brian Bates:

Just a little bit. Yeah, just a little bit. I mean, anytime you're talking about growing brain cells and having it play a video game, you have my attention. Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

It's so true. But also you have my attention in a way that I'm just a little bit frightened because it's like, well, if we can build brain cells and computer chips in a lab, what does this mean? Are we going to start building sentient computer chips that have real brain cells? It's very interesting to think about.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I think unfortunately when it comes to technology and science and where all these types of stories that we have, we tend to say, "Wow, this is really cool." And I think about like AI, we do the same thing with AI. Wow, this is really cool. But then unfortunately our next thought goes to, "Ooh, but what about this? " Or, "What if we use it for this purpose instead?" And then so it does make you a little cautious of like, "Okay, what's the opposite of this? We're using this for let's say assistive technology or whether it's helping eventually people recover from traumatic brain injuries or things like that, but what's the alternative and how can this be used in maybe a negative way?" So it's very natural, I think, for that thought to pop up.

Linda DeYounge:

Yep, I would agree. I think that that's totally where we get the genre sci-fi is thinking about all the ways that this could possibly go well. How can this go wrong?

Brian Bates:

How can this go wrong?

Linda DeYounge:

Well, if you are interested in reading this very bizarre article yourself, we'll have it linked down in the show notes so you can read about the doom playing brain cells on a computer chip, but let's go ahead and get into our interview today.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. The good news is you don't have to have a lab grown brain cell to listen to our interview today. That's true. So it's exciting. We are joined today by Dr. Katrina Lewis. She's an expert in esports and how they connect with pro- social learning environments and providing collaborative problem-based learning in an alternative setting to traditional classrooms. So if you're ready, Linda, let's go ahead and jump into today's episode. Dr. Katrina Lewis is a nationally recognized educator, researcher, and strategist with more than 25 years of experience in K-12 innovation, educational technology, and academic esports. A former teacher and director of technology, she focuses on helping schools design learning environments where students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. She currently serves as the innovation and impact strategist at Meteor Education, where she leads national work around pro- social learning design and AI-informed classroom strategies. Dr. Lewis is also the founder and president of the Tennessee Academic Esports League, where she champions eSports as a powerful tool for belonging, teamwork, and career exploration in STEM and CTE pathways.

Katrina, welcome to our podcast.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah. Katrina, thanks so much for joining us today. And our listeners know that we always like to start off by getting to know our guests a little bit with a game. This is a little way to learn more about you. So a little bit on topic today. Katrina, are you familiar with Mario Kart?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

I am familiar with Mario Kart. Yes, I sure am.

Linda DeYounge:

It's a great game. It's a great way to lose all your friends, but you know in the game that you can get power ups that you can use to help you get ahead of the competitors, like mushrooms to go fast or stars to become invisible. And I decided that the game that we would play today is called Power Up. So I'm going to give you some classic kind of school and classroom scenarios, and you're going to invent a power up that you could use to help you with those. The power up can be really simple or it can be as fantastical as you want. So for example, I might say you have a stack of essays to grade and your power up might be a huge cup of coffee, or it can be really anything that you can think of. So do you think that you're down to play our power up game today?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Absolutely. This is fun.

Linda DeYounge:

I'm so glad to hear that. So let's go ahead and get started with the first one. So you're trying to get students engaged on a Monday morning. What's your power up?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Getting students engaged. How about almost like a sleep power up where I just have the most ... I had 12 hours of sleep last night, and so I'm able to go faster and get the students super excited.

Linda DeYounge:

Ooh, I like that a lot because we know Mondays are always a very sleepy time. That's right. We're recording this on a Monday too, so honestly, we could use that right now. Yeah.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

I know. And I feel like it needs a sound like

Brian Bates:

Something.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Perfect.

Linda DeYounge:

Perfect sound. Whatever

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

That may be.

Linda DeYounge:

All right. Number two, you have back-to-back meetings all day.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Okay. Back-to-back meetings all day. I have a power up of cloning myself. Yeah. So I can take breaks, but still be at the meetings.

Linda DeYounge:

That's a good one. I

Brian Bates:

Like that.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah, I do too. I think we all kind of want at least one clone, as long as they're not a nefarious clone.

Brian Bates:

Yes, sure.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Exactly. Exactly. We get to decide how that clone interacts with others. Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

Yes. Agreed. Agreed. All right. How about this one? Your classroom suddenly doubles in size with the number of students that you have.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

I need that clone power up back. Doubles in size. Okay. I have almost like a inspector gadget power up where I have arms and prongs, right? So I can help all the students and be everywhere and provide support to everyone.

Brian Bates:

I like that. I like that. That's good.

Linda DeYounge:

Like a Doc Ox situation.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yes, exactly.

Linda DeYounge:

Yes. That's a good one. I like that one a lot.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

I aged myself with Inspector Gadget there, I

Linda DeYounge:

Think, right? Oh. I used to watch Inspector Gadget.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Now the song's

Linda DeYounge:

In my hug. Inspector Gadget.

Brian Bates:

Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

See? All right. How about your computer crashes while you're teaching a lesson? What do you use for a power up?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Okay. I would use a Matrix Power Up. Almost like in the Matrix where they download all the information and you just know what to do. So it's like Matrix Power Up and then I just know how to fix it.

Linda DeYounge:

Oh, that's great.That'd be helpful. I would like that just in my normal life when my break at home.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Every day. Every day.

Linda DeYounge:

I'm like, why is this happening? All right. And then the final one, kind of in line with your own pro- social environment idea here, which we'll get into in today's interview, but you want your classroom to be more playful, involve more play. What PowerUp do you use?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

More playful. I turn into a Minecraft character and operate like one around my classroom, and it's just automatically playful and interactive and fun. I don't know. Yeah.

Brian Bates:

That's cool. I like that

Linda DeYounge:

One. I agree. Minecraft.

Brian Bates:

My daughter would love that one, actually. Yes.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

It's like a Minecraft Power Up, right? Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

So good.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

And I think for the listeners, they need to know I did not know these questions beforehand.

Linda DeYounge:

This

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Is true.

Brian Bates:

Yes.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. I must have, in my inner workings, had a power up in me to be able to answer these.

Linda DeYounge:

No, you did great. That is the end of PowerUp. So you successfully completed our game today. Thank you so much for playing. I enjoyed your answers. They were all really great.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I think I say this every single podcast, but Linda comes up with the best games at the very beginning. I don't come up with them because I could not be so creative, but-

Linda DeYounge:

I am a game girlie.

Brian Bates:

Yes.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Well, honestly, that is, I mean, super impressive that you came up with that. And I think that could be used in classrooms or even for professional development. It was

Linda DeYounge:

Awesome. I agree. Listeners, use that in your classroom this week. Try it out.

Brian Bates:

Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

That's right.

Brian Bates:

Well, I mean, as you can see, we're big fan of games and gaming and things like that. So today we're excited to dive into the idea of pro- social learning and then later connect those ideas with your work in esports. So I guess kind of just to kick us off here a little bit, through your work at Meteor Education, you helped schools design pro- social environments that put collaboration, empathy, and teamwork at the center. So how would you explain the core idea of pro- social learning to our listeners?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, for the listeners, just kind of starting out, if pro- social is something, a new terminology for you, I highly recommend visiting the meteoreducation.com website because we do a lot of research around pro- social. And even though I've only been at meteor for a little over a year, about a year and a half, I have seen the ins and outs of the research that goes on. And meteor education works very closely with the University of Missouri, specifically with a researcher. Her name is Dr. Christie Bergen, and she is absolutely phenomenal. She actually has a book out on pro- social, does a lot of research. And so one of Christie or Dr. Bergin's podcast that I listened to says or challenges listeners to think of pro- social, but think of it as the opposite. We always say, "Oh, that student's anti-social." And so we think of that as kind of something that's negative or them being anti-social.

And so if you think of it as the opposite of that, I think it really kind of answers itself that pro- social is really helping our students learn with and through each other and not necessarily in isolation. And students really don't, they don't automatically show up to our classrooms knowing how to collaborate in meaningful ways that's going to make a difference in their learning. And so I think those behaviors have to be kind of taught and modeled and supported through our environment. And so that's kind of the work that I do. And what are we bringing into our environments that could potentially help support pro-social activities in the classroom?

Brian Bates:

Yeah, I love that. You think about the number of times, and I'm guilty of this myself as a former classroom teacher is, "Hey, we're going to work on this project together." Maybe it's even just an activity. It's not a multi-day project, but we say, "Okay, you're going to work in partners or work in groups." Do you ever take the time to show them, model for them what a good partner, good group work, what it looks like, what it should look like and how it should work as opposed to just tell them to get started and hope for the best. So I love that idea.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Exactly. I think we forget that, how important modeling really is for our students and we forget that they don't know. They may not have experienced it before. Yeah.

Linda DeYounge:

So kind of along those lines, we're used to that traditional classroom model of the rows and everyone's kind of working maybe sometimes in collaboration, but sometimes in isolation as well. If we were to step outside of that model and step into a classroom that's truly like the ideal pro- social space, can you kind of make this real and tactile to the listeners about what does that space feel like? What's the energy in that room and what do student interactions look like? How do they change when the environment is designed for that pro- social collaboration?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Sure. So I think back to my childhood and the classrooms that I grew up in and which classrooms or which teachers do I remember and what do I remember them for? And when I think back to the classrooms that were in traditional rows, as you will, the classrooms seemed kind of quiet, kind of controlled, very individual. We were all kind of just working on our own work, our own answers, maybe taking a test, whatever it may be. But the classrooms that I remember are ones like biology, band. I was a band kid all the way through college actually, where it was very interactive, very social. And when you walk into those classrooms, I feel like the energy just kind of shifted and you knew you were walking into a classroom where you were going to be interacting with others and it was just so dynamic and you hear conversation, but the conversation is maybe around a dissection or something you're doing in biology, but it's purposeful and it's hands-on and you see collaboration and movement and all kinds of things happening and learning kind of together with one another.

So something else that I think is really important about pro- social is the learning is you're kind of learning from each other, right? So everybody brings a different experience in with them and you're learning through each other. Whereas in those traditional rows, you're not really collaborating with one another and learning through each other. So I think there's a lot of problem solving involved, a lot of conversation. I think it allows students to take more risks perhaps, maybe do something that they wouldn't do usually on their own. So it opens up the classroom for a lot more opportunity for students.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah, absolutely. I also think a lot about that idea of like the hands-on classroom and designing ... I think sometimes people think of social learning environments like we're designing a gamified classroom and that certainly can be a social experiment and a social way to engage your classroom, but it doesn't have to be gamified. It can also just be purposeful activities that are like simulations of some sort or hands-on in some meaningful way that promote that kind of collaboration, getting students up, getting students

talking to each other. And I think that that is ... You can definitely feel that when you walk into a classroom where that kind of purposeful learning is happening, even if it's not quiet, sometimes it's very loud.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Exactly. And I remember thinking, even in my student teaching, I was always so fearful of the principal walking in or my observing teacher walking in and it was going to be noisy. And I knew it was purposeful, but the sign of a good classroom or a controlled classroom is quiet. And I think we have to rethink that. And even as administrators, what really does a pro- social classroom look like and what is its purpose? And what does it look like when you go in? What are you feeling? What are you seeing?

Brian Bates:

Yeah. You mentioned a minute ago the idea of taking risks and a big part of pro- social learning is giving students a spot where they can take those risks. So in a situation, in a world that we have now where students are terrified of being wrong or saying something wrong, or even just maybe even speaking up and answering a question because it's not cool to be smart, why is it so critical that we design spaces where they can fail and iterate together and take those risks together?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. And this concept I don't think is anything new. We've talked for years about failing forward and learning from what we're doing in the classroom. But I often think about taking risks. I think back to elementary school and do you remember when we would have like round robin reading

And they would call on you to read? I remember being so scared and I would count the paragraphs, like count the students in front of me and count the paragraphs because that's the paragraph that I had to read. And what if I made a mistake or didn't know a word and I would count ahead. So I wasn't listening to what was going on because I was so worried about what if I make a mistake and somebody laughs at me. And so I was very fearful of that. And I think that happens a lot in classrooms, but when we're creating pro- social experiences for students, we want to create this kind of foundation where students feel safe, they feel engaged. And so when we talk about safety in schools today, which is a very hot topic on the side of physical safety, on the side of mental safety, and we have to talk about those together and navigate both of those things together.

And both are extremely, extremely important. So in the top of everyone's mind, of course. So we definitely don't want students operating in fear. We don't want them thinking like I was like, "What if I say the wrong thing? What if I look stupid?" It's just the worst. And I think some of us maybe from my generation have even brought that into adult work life and I know I have and sometimes I kind of fear, "What if I speak up and it's not the right thing?" So creating that safe environment is so important. And I think we'll talk, hopefully we'll touch on this a little bit more about how to create that environment, why it's so important, and not only creating it in the classroom, but how can students take what they've learned from that and that safety and bring it into their home life or into their work life.

So I think it's those transferable skills as well that make pro- social engagement so wonderful and so needed.

Brian Bates:

You unlocked a memory from my childhood that I hadn't thought of in I don't know how long. And when you talked about the round-robin reading, and I just was thinking about the time when you'd look ahead

and you'd be like, "Oh, this is a short paragraph." And then you'd get there and the teacher would say, "Okay, Brian, it's your turn. Oh, and can you also read the chart or the table?" And you're like, "No, I had it. "

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

No, that wasn't my part.

Brian Bates:

I know, right? That's so

Linda DeYounge:

Funny. I immediately knew, Brian, that you were the type of person that counted the paragraphs ahead. I was like, "Oh, Brian definitely used to do that. "

Brian Bates:

Absolutely.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah. That seems very unbranded. It was scary.

Brian Bates:

Yeah, you're absolutely right. But you are right because there's that feeling of, and you're not listening to what else is happening. So you're not even learning from what everybody else is reading and you're focusing so much on if I get the, how do I say this word to the point where you might not even be really paying attention to what you're reading because you're so focused on I have to say this one word correctly and I'm going to be thinking about it the whole time.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Linda DeYounge:

So we talked a little bit here about this idea of collective learning and students working together to learn from each other, but also to engage with the material, the curriculum of the class. But right now in our current model of education, it still is often focused on the individual, the individual's learning, especially with high stakes testing and standardized testing being so focused on that individual model. So how can we balance that, yes, students need to be able to perform on their own, they need to be able to articulate the material on their own, but also kind of this pro- social model where it's like, no, the student's success is reliant on each other. It's reliant on the collective whole. So how do we find that balance between the two?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah, this is a big question. And I think as educators, we all kind of have a different potentially perspective on engagement on how we test students, how we know that they know what they've

learned. And for me, and this is just my opinion, I think standardized testing is just one way to see what a student has learned. It's just one capture of a school year or a moment and what a student has potentially learned. And I think we can take a lot from the workforce. So a lot of companies are now hiring, not just for the knowledge that a person has or a student has, but for how do they collaborate with others?That internal working is almost just as important. And especially in this age of AI, we can get information so quickly that how do you sift through that information? How do you decipher information and how do you work with others on that?

So I think I hope that we're kind of shifting that a little bit, but I also think about when students are working together and if, let's go back to biology. So if you're dissecting something, we're actually working together and learning from one another. So I feel like it actually strengthens what an individual then outputs on a standardized test because you always learn more when you're teaching someone else, right? So instead of just getting that information, you might be giving that information and then therefore potentially able to score higher on a standardized test. I also know in terms of college that there are several universities around our country that they're not requiring ACT scores anymore. They're going off portfolios, what is a student built? What does the student know? Interviews, internships, things like that. So I think it's shifting, but I just really like to think about it as just one snapshot, one small snapshot of what a student knows.

And I'll tell you, and I'm not embarrassed to say this, I have my doctorate in education, I've been in what, 24 years of school now and my ACT score I think was like a 21.

I hated testing. I was not good at it. I panicked. I thought they were tricking me with the questions. And so I think that has to play into some of this as well. And I'm a prime example of that.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah. I think that that's a really good perspective to remember as well about like, what is the world kind of moving towards in the workplace, in even individual life. And I mean, World Economic Forum, Forbes are a couple places you can go to look at the kind of forecast on jobs, but it's all over the place. You can literally visit any place that does forecasts on jobs. And the top skills that employees are looking for now are not necessarily those hard skills of you know everything about the knowledge of the job, the actual tasks of the job. A lot of it are those kind of soft skills of creativity, problem solving, collaboration, being able to pivot those types of things. And so as we see that become more and more prevalent in the workplace, sometimes it can feel like, are we keeping up with that trend in the classroom too?

Or are we kind of preparing students for environments where they're not, those aren't really authentic to the environments that they're going to be experiencing?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

That's exactly right. And I think maybe perhaps, I don't want to say more professional development needs to happen because none of us like to be professionally developed, but maybe more purposeful, more purposeful, more meaningful around like the World Economic Forum, what we're teaching to, and not just teaching to those skills, but to those soft skills, as you mentioned. Yeah.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. And like as you mentioned, the idea of if they have these soft skills and they have opportunity to practice those soft skills and build on those soft skills while they're in the educational environment, that helps them with just more meaningful learning activities as opposed to just doing the activity, doing the worksheet, reading by themselves. If they're teaching and working with another person, like you

mentioned before, that's just another opportunity for them to learn that content even more. So it makes more sense there for that.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. Yeah.

Brian Bates:

Well, I want to shift a little bit to one of your other passions, and that's the esports part of what you do. As we mentioned before, you are the founder of the Tennessee Academic Esports League, providing opportunities for students in Tennessee to compete in organized esports activities. So our question, I guess for this is then how can eSports act as a platform for pro- social environments like we've been talking about?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. So to me, esports is actually one of the most natural examples of a pro- social environment that we have in education today. If you have done any kind of research on e-sports or even seen e-sports in action, you know it is full of teamwork, communication, shared goals, you have coaching, you have students working together. And so it is just kind of naturally this environment and not only that, but if you take that environment and connect it back to things that we're already doing in STEM and CTE, then you've just kind of leveled up, if you will. Powered up? You powered up, yes. What's happening in the classroom naturally? So not only that, but you're helping branch to your earlier question about safety and belonging, you're branching into that as well and creating this community of students and helping them to feel safe, helping them to take risks.

And if you think about just a game itself, growing up in the '80s, all the games that I played were if you fall off the cliff, that's it. And hopefully you have another life and you get to play, but you always were kind of taking risks and failing, but failing forward and learning from that and learning how to pass that next level. So I think that's really important and the problem solving side of things is really important. So my ultimate goal is to help support students across the state of Tennessee, not only in an organized gaming structure, but to really focus on those pro- social aspects in the classroom. That to me is so important and I think everything else can kind of come after that. So working alongside with CTE and STEM across the state is imperative to bringing all of that together.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. And I think that in that setting, you're taking ... One of the things that's always brought up in education is meeting students where they're at. And if you take something like a game that they're probably going to be playing at home anyways, and you bring it into the school setting and provide them the structure and support to be on a team and practice those soft skills like Linda was mentioning, and talk about all those different things that go along with the pro- social learning, it's just a perfect way to blend in the things that they're doing with learning how to take risks and do those different things in a low-risk, high-reward scenario.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

That's right. Exactly right.

Linda DeYounge:

Well, I'm a huge gamer. I game a lot and I love games. I play a lot of video games at home and sometimes I think about those students who we call like the forgotten middle who are maybe kind of like I was too. They're not in sports, they're not necessarily even in the club system, but they really love to game and they find a lot of purpose in gaming. And I'm curious to kind of like explore how in your experience with eSports, you've seen this provide a sense of belonging for these students who are otherwise untethered to the educational environment or the learning experience and how that can help them to shift their identity or think differently about themselves. So I'd love to hear your experience with that.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. So growing up, I was not an athlete besides track. I guess I could be ... I was in track in middle school and part of high school, but I was in band. And so I had kind of my people and had belonging through music and through band and choir. And so for the students that are not athletic or musical or in theater or whatever it may be, esports really gives them a place. And I think what's interesting is if you look at some of the data behind the different generations. So for instance, our students today are Gen Alpha and Gen Alphas consider themselves gamers, whether ... I mean, that's kind of how they identify, whether they game with puzzle games or are competitive. I mean, we've got students in our classrooms that are competitive. They're actually pro gamers. Some of them are actually winning money and very skilled in what they do.

And so I think what's really cool about that eSports space is they can come in and students from all different walks can be together. In fact, you could have somebody from the football team on the esports team, somebody from band, somebody who's not involved in anything, and you can bring them all together. And another interesting aspect of eSports is you may even get students on an eSports team who aren't gamers at all.

And what I mean by that is you could have a student as a part of an eSports team that just wants to be a shoutcaster, just wants to be on that side of things. Or maybe they want to be on the graphic design. They want to run the social media for the team. They want to help with the management of the computers and learn about maybe they're planning on going into cybersecurity or something like that. So I think there's just a lot to be said for what can come out of eSports and how students can really feel included, as well as helping them to explore different career paths outside of even being a gamer. So it impacts them both socially, mentally, physically, in every way possible.

Linda DeYounge:

Yeah. I think this is a really poignant thing to notice as well. I was seeing the same thing in the classroom when I was a teacher, is that you're starting to see a lot of students who are kind of exploring with lots of different interests and identities. I felt like when I went to school, there was very much like, oh, those are the anime kids, those are the gamer kids, those are the athletes, these are the band kids. And by the end of my teaching career, I was starting to see students who were on the football team who were like, "I love anime." And students who were maybe in band also playing pro sports, pro esports. And so students are really exploring as the internet becomes more and more ... It exposes you to more of those interests and it allows you to get in these kind of niche communities online and explore those parts of yourselves.

I think that they're becoming more and more accessible in the classroom setting too. Kids are willing to step out on a limb and say, "Yeah, I'm going to join that team. Why not? I enjoy this and I'll find a way to engage with it. "

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Well, and something too, to go off your point, what's really interesting when we talk about pro- social and just social skills themselves, a lot of educators today will say, "Well, our students aren't social anymore." And I think I argue with that because I think they are social just in a potentially different way and esports gives students your anti-social, if you will, a different way of communicating with one another. So if you have a chat going on during a game, they can be typing to one another. If they want, they can turn audio on and be talking to one another. And for them, it's not as risky and they feel comfortable doing it that way. Whereas if they didn't have that opportunity, they may not be talking with other students at all. So it's really interesting to see kind of all the different aspects of eSports and what it can do for students.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I think that it's an awesome opportunity for all students. It's not just focusing on or promoted to one particular group or type of students. And as Linda was mentioning, talking about the forgotten middle students, thinking about the outside perspective of eSports now, not just the students themselves that are looking at getting into it, but there's often a stigma around eSports and other types of gaming environments like that, maybe it's not serious, just another way for students to be playing around and being on screens and things like that. So what would you say or how have you confronted those misconceptions of it? It's not really a serious thing. It's just a bunch of kids sitting around playing video games.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. I mean, I hear it every single day. I hear it from educators. I hear it from parents. I hear it from superintendents, curriculum directors. And honestly, when I hear that, like, "Oh, we don't need our students on screens anymore than they already are. " That's valid. Of course, it's valid, but I kind of take it on as a challenge. How can we see eSports beyond just students on a screen gaming? And this goes back to that connection to CTE and STEM. If we're already teaching, let's say computer science in a classroom, how could we bring together eSports and computer science to potentially follow a pathway for students, certify them in high school within computer science and move them into a job or onto college? And when we frame it that way, that changes the conversation from students that are just gaming into, "Oh, wow, they can get a job from this.

" So it's been long talked about. It's not necessarily a new concept, but integrating it into the classroom and really wrapping curriculum around it and certifying students, that is something that is still, I think, being built across the country and we're seeing it happen though, especially here in 2026, it's finally being talked about.

Brian Bates:

Yeah, I think that's great. And that's one thing that we are seeing more and more, it's popping up more and more across the country is the screen time movement. And so being the champion for the positive that comes out of it. And it's not just a bunch of kids sitting around at games, but there's lessons to be learned. There's more to it. There's the career pathways that come out of this. I think that that's a really, really important thing. And I bet that's probably one of the biggest challenges I would imagine in your role is just kind of combating the naysayers.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah, it is. But again, I kind of take it on as a challenge. And I think something that ... Well, when the Tennessee Academic Esports League started in 2020, it's now six years later, and we're still in our infancy. And I used to kind of get down on the fact that, "Why isn't the state coming together? Why don't we have more schools?" And I would always think, "Oh, we're behind." And now I look at it very differently. We're not behind. We're just in a perfect situation right now to jump in with the connection to STEM and CTE and start from there. Start with curriculum, start from where we see other states are at, but it's so much more informed and researched now, and I think we can make better decisions as a state. So I take it as opportunity.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. Sorry, Linda, I don't mean to keep beating this, but that's- You're fine. I personally, I can tell you that several years ago, I wasn't necessarily against eSports, but I didn't see the connection. And it was when a teacher, I was hosting a webinar and a teacher was talking about a curriculum that they use and talking about how you don't have to play a video game to turn this into a career. If you like the idea of organizing events, there's a career as an event coordinator for eSports. There's a career in the technology side of setting up and making sure devices are connected and ready to go. There's a career in broadcasting, in the shout casting, and you can go into those paths and I was like, "Oh." And they talked about how there's high school curriculum that actually focuses around all the different types of careers you could do, even if you don't have any interest in picking up a controller at all or a mouse and keyboard for that matter.

I think it's really cool that the more you learn about eSports and how impactful it can be in the career aspect of things, the more you have to just go with it. You have to at least give it a shot.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Well, and I would even challenge the listeners to just go out and do a ... You can use ChatGPT or Google, whatever you prefer, but just do a search for current esports jobs that are out there and you're going to find thousands of jobs that are open. And there are skills within eSports that we don't have enough students studying or going into to fill these jobs. It's kind of like what we were talking about STEM forever and we need all these STEM openings and we need to fill these jobs and eSports is part of that.

Linda DeYounge:

So I mean, I'm all on board. I feel like I've been on board for a while with eSports. And part of that is because I engage in eSports itself and esports communities. So I see all the opportunities that people have and I see how people make careers out of the things that they do in the gaming world. But for those of us who are in a school right now, and if you're listening, if you're an administrator, an educator, and you want to start exploring, maybe starting an eSports team at your school, or you want to start with some pro- social designed learning in your classroom, where would you recommend someone who doesn't have much experience in this to start?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yes. So I think a lot of people want to start with the finished product and in the minds of educators, I think a finished product is this huge room with lights and devices and students gaming, and ultimately that's what they picture. And I think that's a great goal, but starting with that, I think is a little unrealistic because we have to kind of create this organically within our schools. And so what I would recommend

first is to come down kind of from the clouds on what this environment should look like and think about the needs within your own community. So what are the workforce needs and what could we be training to for those needs? I think some research needs to be done, and I think there are some trusted organizations out there that schools can talk with. One of those being the Interstate Scholastic Esports Alliance, so ISEA for short, but it's a nationwide coalition of educator-led scholastic esports organizations.

So Tennessee Academic Esports League is a part of this alliance, and it is built up of just super passionate educators that a school can trust and ask questions to. And it's really hard when you're starting with eSports, because if you go to Google or you go to ChatGPT or wherever, you're going to get a lot back in terms of how to start an esports team and call on this company and go check out this curriculum. And how do you know what's good? What is trusted out there? So I would highly recommend starting with the ISEA, reaching out to them, finding your statewide organization through ISEA and seeing where to start. But in terms of a pro- social environment, another place to start would be some of your pathways. So let's take cybersecurity, for instance. If you have a cybersecurity CTE pathway in your district, we can play off of that.

And what I mean is, instead of going out and looking for esports specific funding, why not look for funding within cybersecurity or another pathway that you already have that's going to lead to certifications and lead to students obtaining jobs or moving into college? So if we look through that, funding opens up. If we look through it through CTE or STEM, and then that way you can create a pro-social dual learning space where maybe during the day it's used as cybersecurity or a cybersecurity lab or robotics lab or whatever it may be, but you've got these kind of souped up machines that allow themselves to be used during the day and then after school can be used as esports competitive machines. Why not create these dual purpose spaces? And I always think with how fast technology is moving and growing and how fast we're having to kind of design our spaces and redesign our spaces, why not create a pro- social space that in five years could be used as something else if need be.

And then you've invested in furniture and in machines that can be dual purpose or be really reflective of a pro- social space.

Brian Bates:

Well, we like to start with games and we like to end with a challenge. So what we like to do with our guests is we give them a challenge, a scenario that may come up in a school or a classroom somewhere, and give them a little bit of time to kind of think about what the response would be. So do you think you're up for a challenge here? I

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Am up for a challenge. I like these challenges.

Brian Bates:

Okay. So what I'll do is I'll read you our scenario that we came up with and we're going to give you about 30 seconds to come up with how you would approach a solution to this challenge. We also encourage our listeners to take that break to also think about what would they do if they were in the scenario. So here is our scenario for this episode. A middle school recently launched an esports club because students were excited about it and participation has grown quickly, but the staff advisor is running into a few challenges. Right now, the club feels very focused on winning. A small group of highly skilled players dominate the team. Newer players feel intimidated and some students who tried the club once haven't

come back. There's also been moments of frustration and negative comments during matches, which has made the advisor worry about the tone and culture of the group.

School's leadership still believes esports can be a great opportunity for students, especially those who don't connect with the traditional sports or extracurriculars, but they're not sure how to structure the program so it builds teamwork, belonging, and positive social interaction instead of just competition. So again, we're going to give about a 30 second break here, let you come up with your solution to this and we encourage our listeners to come up with theirs as well.

And we're back. So Katrina, what are your thoughts on this scenario here?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Well, my first thoughts are this is a very real scenario happening in schools right now, happening today. And I love that you mentioned middle school because a lot of times we think of eSports in high schools and where they're competitive and esports really can start in elementary school. So I love that you framed it with that, with the middle school. But I think in terms of helping this advisor out and helping this school out, I almost think we need to, as a team, press pause for gaming, right? Press pause for a moment because I think we need to come back together and identify what our ecosystem looks like in terms of esports and gaming. It sounds like, and I would have a lot of questions for the school, but it sounds like this advisor set out to create a competitive team and that eSports is all about the competitive nature, which is great.

And in a lot of states, it is considered competitive. It's considered a statewide sport, but I think we can be looking at esports in several different categories. So a lot of schools that I work with have this competitive side to them. And think about that as kind of your varsity team, if you will, within any traditional sport, basketball, football, whatever it may be. But you might have students that are not varsity level, maybe they're JV level. Maybe we need to create a space for students that are at JV level, but that are also in it just to socialize and have fun. And I think back to my days in band where I was super serious. In fact, I majored in music in college and ended up changing to elementary education, but I was super serious about band. But then you had your other students that they were serious, they wanted to compete for their chair, but they knew they weren't going on to college or otherwise in music.

And then you had students that were in, they wanted to socialize, have fun, play an instrument, whatever it may be. And I think we need to think about esports in that way as well and how can we include students that are not necessarily in it for

That competitive side of things. I think going back to that generation alpha and how our gen Alpha students actually characterize themselves as gamers, I think gamer can be identified in a number of different ways and it can be characterized as that competitive gamer, kind of like what we're talking about here, but it could also It has to be a student that just likes to watch people game. It could be a student that wants to create games. It could be where they just want to play some puzzle games and not be competitive. So I think we need to come back and define what esports is and means to our students while looking outside in what our industry needs, as well as our community itself for this particular middle school. Also, what is their high school doing and what is their elementary school doing? I think that's going to be really important to create this entire ecosystem within this school and district.

Brian Bates:

Yeah. I love that idea because we've been talking quite a bit today about how eSports brings everybody in and it doesn't matter who you are, you're all welcome. But then we turn around and be like, "Oh, well, but we want to be competitive." Yeah, we want everybody to come, but we also really want to win and

things like that. And you're absolutely right about the JV versus varsity thing. It's like, shouldn't you be developing your players? And the people who aren't maybe the most skilled, you have a situation where they can build skills and maybe become part of the competitive team at some point. It just makes perfect sense. And I think that's a great thing that maybe gets overlooked sometimes when the headsets go on, I guess.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Yeah. I mean, you've made me think so much back to band now, and I know I keep referencing it, but when you think back to it, you had students that just went to band and played their instrument and maybe performed at the holiday, Christmas, whatever it may be. But then you had other students that were taking private lessons, other students that were competing at the state level and got involved in other things, yet you still had all the students coming together in a structured way during the school day to play and have fun. And so I think maybe we can think about it that way as well. Same with traditional sports. You have students that have to have personal coaches. You might have like volleyball, for instance, you might have students at the club level. So I think we can really learn from other activities and sports out there and how to really organize eSports.

Linda DeYounge:

Awesome. Well, Katrina, thank you so, so much for sitting down with us today. This has been an awesome conversation. If people want to find you or find out more about you, I know that you're on LinkedIn and they can find you there by looking up Dr. Katrina Lewis. But also I have heard from a little birdie that you have a book coming out soon. So would you like to speak to anything on that?

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

I would. Thank you so much. Yes. I have a book coming out in June. It's called The Purposeful Path. And this book is all about pro- social innovation, not just spaces, but pro- social innovation, what that looks like in schools and how we can work with leaders around that. The book is really through the lens of eSports and takes into consideration my late husband, who he passed away, it'll be four years coming up here this summer, but built his own esports arena within his district. And how did he kind of see through a different lens? How did he work with the superintendent, the curriculum director? How did he work with his board of education to get this concept of, oh, it's kids just playing games, all the way to that it's really this purposeful path for students. And so that is the name of the book, The Purposeful Path.

And there's a website too, the purposefulpathedu.com. And if you want to sign up there and get information about the book and when it's coming out and order early, that would be amazing. So thank you so much for sharing that.

Linda DeYounge:

Absolutely. And we'll include all of that in the show notes as well so people can find that link and also find you if they want to connect with you on LinkedIn. But yeah, Katrina, thank you so, so much for all of your insights today for talking about what for me is a very fun topic. And I'm sure Brian feels the same. Yeah,

Brian Bates:

Absolutely.

Linda DeYounge:

And so I think we're going to go ahead and sign off for now, but thank you again for sitting down with us one to one.

Dr. Katrina Lewis:

Thank you. So much. Thank you.

Linda DeYounge:

Well, summer is on the horizon and the LTC has so many events for you to dive into. We have summit on June 16th and 17th for our IT school staff members in Urbana, Illinois. We also have CS + AI PD week, and that's an awesome way for CS or STEM educators to learn and connect. That's happening June 15th through 18th in Springfield, Illinois. But you can check out all of our summer offerings at ltcilllinois.org.

Brian Bates:

And it's hard to believe, but IETC is already sneaking up on us this fall. Join us for our largest ed tech conference that we host in November 11th through 13th in Springfield. You can view more about IETC at ltcilinois.org/iETC.

Linda DeYounge:

And of course, don't miss season four. We're going to be back with even more ed tech to cover. Consider subscribing or following the One-to-One Podcast on YouTube or Spotify so you can stay up to date with new releases.

Brian Bates:

And have a great summer and we will see you back in the fall.