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Episode name: Bridging the subject divide

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Transcript

Professor Irene Tracey

Dear listeners, tuning into this next episode of Fire and Wire. I'm delighted to have you here and delighted to be speaking today about a new teaching and learning experience that we've been piloting here at the University of Oxford, and it's called the Vice-Chancellor's Colloquium – Climate.

The aim of the Colloquium – as set out in my inaugural speech – was to equip our students to go forth into whatever careers they're going to progress, to have some understanding of climate and whether, here at the University of Oxford, we could teach them some of the skills that keep them confident in understanding how to handle data, confident in terms of thinking about policy, and how to write, and how to develop a narrative and to communicate through the lens of climate.

I'm joined today by people who've been absolutely integral to the programme, both in the recipient learning end of it, to the teaching end of it – and then to the actual 'making the whole thing happen' end of it.

So, we're joined by Bill Finnegan, who has several roles here. He works in the Sustainability team in Estates, Continuing Education and the Education Department. He works on areas related to climate, education and pedagogies of hope.

We have Erin Adlard, who is a first-year Human Scientist from Hertford College. And to come later, she was part of the winning project team, which we will talk about momentarily – on allotments.

We have Michał Pietrzak, who's from Worcester College and is studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE).

And last, but not least, we have one of the professors and the educators in the teaching side of it. And this is Pablo Mukherjee, who's Professor of Anglophone World-Literature. And he is an English faculty and a fellow at Wolfson College.

So welcome to you all. Great to have you here.

All

Hello, thank you.

Irene Tracey

So, as I said, I set this mission and maybe, Bill, we can start with you – how difficult was it to pull it off at pace?

Bill Finnegan

Yeah, definitely at pace. I mean, it was very exciting to get pulled into it. So, from when it was first said out loud 'the Vice-Chancellor's Colloquium', we had a few months to turn it into a real thing that we started delivering in Week One.

That was just a few months to get all of these ingredients together in a complicated institution. What I was struck by is how people really responded well to this. It felt like something new and fresh when I was talking to the potential keynotes.

They really liked the idea of coming in, responding to a prompt, and having a conversation with someone from a very different discipline and it being different, say, than the typical lecture they might give. And similarly, working with the team at Continuing Education was really rewarding, because we were able to bring in a dynamic young mathematician and a young philosopher that have both engaged with questions.

Irene Tracey

This is Tom and Alice? Shout out if you want to mention their full names and say who they are.

Bill Finnegan

Yes, so Dr Tom Crawford, Department Lecturer and Engagement Lead in the Department for Continuing Education. And Dr Alice Evatt, who plays a role also in Oxford Net Zero and some of the research there. So, they came in and helped us craft, from this interdisciplinary skills perspective, what we thought could be really interesting content for the students to engage with in smaller groups in college sessions.

So, we had our keynotes, we had our college sessions and then the third big ingredient is these projects. So how do we apply this to real world problems? And having smaller groups of students – four or five – again coming with different backgrounds, studying different

subjects in different colleges and different years of study – trying to find some local problem that they could try to address. And it was really exciting to see what they came up with.

Irene Tracey

Yeah, well just kudos and congratulations and **thank you**. Because I think it is the case that within the first few days of advertising, we had over 400 applicants. We only had a spot for 200, because it was the biggest lecture theatre that we could find, and we wanted that in-person experience, didn't we?

But the appetite is there for more. And it was clear to me that, you know, the students have really loved this and the faculty have loved it. So now we've got the happy job of trying to work out how on earth do we roll this out from 200 to 15,000 students!

But those are nice problems to have, and as you mentioned, the format was two weeks. You know, every two weeks you'd have a double sort of lecture, and the dynamism of people from different backgrounds teaching. And then you'd have more problem sets on the off week. And I think that rhythm worked pretty well. Would you say, in terms of workload and how one thought agrees?

Bill Finnegan

Yeah, I think so. I mean, each week again, there'd be a two-hour session, whether that was the lecture where all of the students were present or the college group. And then there was an idea that, you know, an hour or two of additional work, so it wasn't a huge lift, each week, but a commitment to make and to see that through.

And we did have 143 students complete the requirements to get a Certificate of Completion at the end. So that was that was good. Another thing that's maybe worth mentioning about the students is that we've very deliberately, when we had all that expression of interest, when we randomly allocated the places, we actually very deliberately made sure that half of the students came from Social Sciences and Humanities, and the other half came from STEM subjects – so, from Medical Sciences or Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences. We wanted to make sure that there was an interdisciplinary dialogue present throughout.

Irene Tracey

Terrific. Well thank you again. Well, let's turn to the students and hear a little bit from their perspective as to sort of what drew them to the course and want to take this on, on top of what is already a very compressed term with a heavy workload for our students.

And one of the things I'm interested in probing, which we discussed at the celebration at the end of the course, was how much was the draw of it being around climate part of what pulled you there, or was it more about the skilling up? So, Erin please.

Erin Adlard

Yeah. I mean, for me, I do a very interdisciplinary subject kind of in itself. Human Sciences takes from the Life Sciences and Biology, and we do a lot of Social Sciences as well. So, I think for me, the draw **was** climate and being able to, you know, have that focus on a real world, pressing issue and being able to apply all of those interdisciplinary skills onto something specific as climate – and to work with students from other subjects too was a big draw.

Irene Tracey

So, did it meet those expectations?

Erin Adlard

Yeah, definitely. I worked in a group and we had languages and medics and engineers and to hear from so many different disciplines – but all about this problem of climate and all of the different ways you can approach it – was really great.

Irene Tracey

Fantastic. And Michał, how about yourself?

Michał Pietrzak

I'm pretty certain that I would not have joined the Colloquium otherwise. Climate change is something I'm really passionate about. I've done work on climate change before with the UIC and UK Youth Parliament, and I feel that it's an issue that's pressing for absolutely every single generation nowadays. And so, I feel that, there was a huge draw to the Colloquium because of the subject chosen.

Irene Tracey

Maybe I could turn to Pablo because you're on the teaching side of it. And again, thanks to all of you for, you know, coming forward now, you wouldn't normally think of it. The English Faculty, and an English professor, being interested in climate.

Pablo Mukherjee

Well, in my previous institution I'd done some work across divisions and faculties, around climate change and environment. So, when I came to Oxford, one of the first things I look for is, you know, where are the people? And of course, Bill got in touch.

The year I joined I came for your inaugural talk where you mentioned it. And so, you know, my radar was scanning and this seemed to be a perfect way of bringing people together from across the University and to try and – you said teaching, but also actually listening – because a lot of the conversations – I had hours of conversations after the lecture from people, from students, from across the divisions and across the faculty who emailed, who wrote, who brought their own experiences, etc...

So, like you, I share the dream of every Oxford student graduating with a good knowledge and awareness of climate change and what it means in our everyday lives. So that's really, really important for me. And this was a great start to that. And for me, the opportunity to listen to other colleagues, and in particular students, that was the draw. So it was a very easy 'yes'. As soon as Bill wrote, I was like, yeah, sign me up.

Irene Tracey

Well, we got lucky getting you and it's great to have you here in the institution. I think it is fantastic. I'm really pleased to hear about all those conversations, but the actual lecture part itself, I only turned up to see one which was my husband – Myles Allen – doing a lecture with Kate Raworth, and that was great.

As I mentioned, it was Fifth Week, which is normally blues week. People are a bit tired and it was Wednesday night. It was 5pm in the evening, dark, rainy. It was Valentine's night, but the lecture room was packed to the rafters, with this amazing conversation between a physicist and an economist. And it seemed to work really well, that sort of give a bit of your own sort of area of expertise, but then have the conversation.

Pablo Mukherjee

For me, that format is exceptionally good for all these things. So, yeah, he was talking about his work in Brazil and the Amazons and his use of both, satellite technology, but also using indigenous informants on the ground to map forest degradation.

And I was talking about the experience of endogeneity, because my background is thinking about environmental degradation in the long run, over 250, 300 – 400 hundred years. And obviously the particular communities who have great experience in both, adaptation but also, various living with environmental stress every day globally, are the indigenous community.

And so we ended up talking about eco-grief and what it meant, what it means for research. And one of the questions I asked the audience was, for your everyday work that you do in the universities what does it mean to work with grief? And the post-lecture conversation

that I mentioned just now, about 90 percent of people were saying, I can't talk about this. I haven't been able to talk about this, but going into work, doing what we do – obviously in a sense it was a self-selecting audience, they were committed, they were working – but they hadn't factored in how their emotions played in the kinds of research questions they're asking, what their methods are, etc. So weirdly, that turned out to be unexpected. This wasn't planned to be the kind of key thing, so that's what I mean by how conversation opens up.

Irene Tracey

It's fantastic!

Pablo Mukherjee

Well, I think the format is great.

Irene Tracey

Brilliant! Michał if I come back to you. You're obviously a committed climate sort of activist maybe and person who cares passionately and has done a lot. Would you say that this gave you new insights and new understanding? And how do we help this cohort that has done this continue their learning?

Michał Pietrzak

Well, one hundred percent. I've learned something new, I think every single session. And I'm pretty positive I can say the same thing for the rest of the cohort. I think that for the people who are already interested in climate change, I feel like some of the solutions proposed, and the explanations behind the solutions proposed during the lectures, have been immensely useful, both conceptually and practically.

I feel that, for example, carbon capture is really talked about. And, you know, most people look at it as an unsustainable solution because it's so expensive. But in reality, we learned that it's much more sustainable than we think, with the tax carbon credits that were mentioned during the lecture.

When it comes to continuing this sort of work, you get exposed to a lot of opportunities that you didn't know existed beforehand. For example, after the celebration, I've spoken to a few students and a few of the lecturers and I came to know about the Climate Society at Oxford. I also received an email, about the Laidlaw Scholarship program, which is also now focused on Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the UN. I actually had an interview for that yesterday...

Irene Tracey

Fingers crossed!

Michał Pietrzak

Yeah. So I'm pretty sure that simply gathering all these people together and getting the discourse, the conversation going, is definitely a good way of just signposting.

Irene Tracey

There are great reflections there.

And, Erin, I want to come to you because part of this was also about the projects. It was tough to pick, but we had to vote and pick one out of the various finalists for the different projects that they were encouraged to think about in an interdisciplinary way.

Your group won, I love the idea. Why don't you tell us a little bit about it?

Erin Adlard

Yeah. So, [our idea was essentially to make use of Oxford's extensive green space and enhance that green space and students' interaction with it](#). And one thing that came through in so many of the lectures, Pablo's included, was the idea of bridging the gap that's often perceived between humans and nature.

And, yeah, also, sustainable food production and things like that. And we brought all this into the idea of having mini allotments. And hopefully we can get some of those into colleges and things like that.

Irene Tracey

How are you going to use your £500 prize to deliver on this project?

Erin Adlard

Well, a big part of it is constructing these allotments. Potentially using raised beds and things like seeds, tools, etc... And some of it might go into bringing events to the green spaces, ways people can interact with the spaces and talk about things like climate grief and things like that.

Irene Tracey

There's no doubt we've got all these amazing, beautiful green spaces which would be more difficult to put an allotment on. I think several of the colleges, you know, are already doing some programmes around herb gardens and rewilding. Certainly, in the college that I used to run, Merton College, did a great effort in that regard. But there's lots of other bits and bobs of derelict spaces on sports grounds and around by the bins – all sorts of places that we could use and, as you say both for staff and for students, the opportunity to come together across these communities is a real benefit.

The wellbeing benefits are just that toiling the soil is really good as is growing some nice food. Another project was about creating a menu and a recipe book so that students could again cook a lot more vegetarian food and affordable food locally produced. So, all these things are nicely tied together.

So, I look forward to seeing what you're doing. In fact, I've just been at an Open Forum for staff to just ask any questions they want – it's like a town hall – and one of the questions was from a department wanting to do exactly what you've done. So, I was very happy to speak about your project and how we can do this. Good luck with that.

Erin Adlard

Thank you.

Irene Tracey

Erin can I come to this sort of upskilling between, as you say, you're already doing Human Sciences, which is the degree, that is the only degree in fact, that spans all four divisions. So, you're already having to keep skills in many different areas. But, you know, one of the aims for this course was to upskill. Can you tell me whether it met that aim?

Erin Adlard

Yeah. I mean, I think the principle of the upskilling was really important in the British education system specifically. I mean I ended up doing three A-levels and I didn't do Maths beyond like 16, and coming into some of the things I've had to do in my subject – I do a little bit of data and stuff – it was good to kind of get that accessible refresher and on that kind of thing through the Colloquium – and to have it applied to an issue that feels important.

There were elements of media literacy too and I think it's important to refresh those skills throughout your life and have it applied in new ways, which you don't always necessarily get through the subject.

Irene Tracey

No. Absolutely. Good. Michał same for you? Or what are your thoughts?

Michał Pietrzak

I have very similar thoughts. I definitely like the refresher aspect of a lot of these. I personally did A-Level Maths – not too successfully. My Maths skills are definitely needing a refresher! Even the final project at the end, working with multiple different people from multiple different backgrounds, organising everything and producing a strategy and presentation – I feel that in itself is definitely a way to upskill everyone you know.

Irene Tracey

I thank you for that, Pablo. Just on the sort of more teaching side of it, you spoke, you know, really clearly about the importance of having that format where the discussion between you and your vendor works so well, and that that was a net benefit for you as well as for the students. If we're going to roll this out, and it become a core part of what we can offer, how would we do that?

Pablo Mukherjee

Yeah. I mean, so I there's a logistical side to this question isn't there of our rolling out of our rolling up. And one of the things I was just chatting about with Bill while we were waiting to come up here, one of the things that came up organically through this, through this Colloquium, is that to make these connections more embedded with the city of Oxford. I'm almost thinking of this Colloquium as a way of thinking of the city itself as a University space and vice versa.

Partly because to take the example of your allotment, there's vast amounts of existing expertise and experience in guerrilla gardening, in food pathways, in food banking etc. And, you know, one of the first things I do with, particularly my DPhil students who arrive, is to introduce them to these communities who exist around us everywhere.

If we enter into meaningful partnerships with existing, community spaces across the city, that might be a good way of both inviting expertise in and out of the University. And in a way, making it multi conversational. And to kind of think about the logistical problem, by projecting outwards into the city as a space itself.

Irene Tracey

I like that very much because it sort of chimes with my desire to be, you know, very focused on our local impact and our local engagement – good stewards and good citizens, and an

institution within the city as well. And, you know, we're doing lots around that, Alex Betts, who's the Local Global and Engagement Officer, is pushing various aspects. We're doing a lot of policy lab work with the City Council and with others.

So starting to think about again how can we better go out into other places, rather than always have people come to us. So, I love that very much. And I hadn't really thought about that in the context of the Colloquium.

We should take that thinking away and maybe discuss that a little bit more. And it's just great to hear the resounding, it seems, positivity about its success and where we can take it forward and continue thinking about how we can keep your learning going, but also how the next cohorts could be expanded. And, Pablo, I think your idea around getting out there into the community just terrific.

So, thank you all for coming – Pablo, Bill, Erin and Michał. Thank you so much for joining me here on Fire and Wire.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to producing another episode highlighting and spotlighting all the fantastic stuff that's going on at the University of Oxford next term.