

Bonni: [00:00:00] After yesterday I couldn't wait to come back today. These words were said by a student participating in one of the events put on by the first year experience program at California State University Chico under the leadership of Dr. Thia Wolf. On today's episode prepare to be inspired.

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Bonni: [00:00:29] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:01:01] I'm thrilled to be welcoming to the episode today Dr. Thia Wolf. She's a professor of English and the Director of the first year experience program at California State University Chico where she has worked since 1989. Prior to her appointment in the first year experience program she coordinated a variety of writing programs including the first year composition program and the writing across the disciplines program.

Bonni: [00:01:30] Since 2006 she has been collaborating with faculty in several disciplines to embed public dimensions and first year classes. Her publications have focused on collaborative learning and on public sphere pedagogy. Thia, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Thia: [00:01:48] Thank you.

Bonni: [00:01:48] I know we were connected by the person who runs your faculty development but I'd love to know a little bit more about you that maybe your bio doesn't tell us what something that we should maybe know about your background or just your life or your interests what you're passionate about that maybe doesn't show up in that bio.

Thia: [00:02:07] Well let's see. I'm deeply interested in working with students in nontraditional settings and in a nontraditional way. And I don't know that when I was at an earlier place in my career I could have expressed it quite like that. I just knew that a classroom wasn't enough and that semesters kind of drove me crazy because of the time limits that always felt artificial. You know what the work that I do now has very much allowed me to work with students in different ways from the more traditional ways. I worked with students up until I took their first year experience drop.

Bonni: [00:02:53] It is one of those things that you don't realize is going to be so distinctly different until you're in it and then you think wait a minute this semester seems like it should be over. I mean the Senza and then other times you think wait what is this 15 week thing. I don't actually know what our year. Do you. Are you arranged by terms or by some masters that CSU.

Thia: [00:03:12] We're we're on a semester or so 15 weeks of classes and a week of finals. I almost never felt that the end of the semester made sense. And I and I remember you know year after year semester after semester saying goodbye to students I frequently taught students who were in education programs. I was in the English department and I was not necessarily going to see them again and I'd feel B-raf as they left and I I felt very invested in them.

Thia: [00:03:44] I didn't realize that I was longing to see students develop across multiple years that didn't occur to me until I started having those experiences where I watched students really for their entire university trajectory and that's an area of development actually almost nobody gets to see in our culture because we send our students off to college and they want to get away from their parents usually.

Thia: [00:04:14] You know it's a time for them to develop independence but the parents don't get to see the full trajectory of development and faculty usually don't either. Most faculty are going to know students in their junior and senior years as they are majors but they're not going to see that student from the time they're 18 until they're 22 or 23. The majority of our entering students are traditionally age. So most of the students I work with are 18 years old when they come to us.

Bonni: [00:04:47] One of the things that's been fun but I didn't really realize it until you said it I teach a lot of introductory courses and then I will teach some electives So I actually get to see that. And then what's so fun for me is that we're

a small enough school that I am able to stay connected with so many of them after they graduate and I get to meet their babies and to see them when they end up sometimes heading life's crises and sometimes that comes up in a career context and sometimes it's just life but it is that yearning because it does feel so much more rewarding in terms of the meaning and the significance of what we are so fortunate to get to do.

Thia: [00:05:29] You know that's really true. CSU Chico where I work is a mid-sized public institution. So between 16000 and 17000 students and you know it's easy not to stay connected not to see students in a second semester.

Bonni: [00:05:47] Tell me about that and when you first transitioned into leading this first year experience.

Thia: [00:05:54] So the way that I became the first year experience director was that I was serving as the coordinator for students who were placed in the writing program that was in a program adjacent to the regular writing course. And the students were in a writing workshop that helped them get through the course. We did not have standard remedial coursework. Instead we placed all students in the first year writing course.

Thia: [00:06:26] But if students scored below a certain score on an entrance exam they were placed in these small workshops of about 10 students and there was a student leader in each workshop and they worked on their papers for their writing class so they got extra time and extra support. So I'd been put in charge of that program and I was sitting in on a lot of these 10 person workshops to try to understand what that was like and how it looks from the student's point of view.

Thia: [00:06:57] And I'd often get there early so I'd hear the students saying to each other you know I'm in the history class and I don't know why I have to take history again. And it's I don't like it any better than in high school or you know me going to do these labs. I have to chew this cracker a really long time and I don't know what it's about or they're making me do all this reading and I'm not really doing it. And as I listened to students this this constant thematic of not understanding what was happening to them really became very important to me and I felt we have to do better.

Thia: [00:07:41] Students need to have an experience when they come to college that allows them to distinguish what happened in high school from where they are now in their schooling and development and that gives them a

sense that education is for the rest of their lives. It's to help them not just get through this class or the next class but it's to help them do things in the world. So. When the first year experience position came open I applied for it and it actually the original position. I remember this well I was in an office with a computer but no printer and some pencils but no pencil sharpener and some books that the last director had left on the shelf and that was really kind of it.

Thia: [00:08:31] It was sort of a big room and I sat in there and the job I'd been given was primarily to look at review and revise. The first year seminar which was an introduction to college life kind of course. So that was where I started. And on my boss's recommendation I work for the dean of undergraduate education Bill Loker and he suggested I read the new presidents speeches as they had been recorded on the Web site you said this guy's you know interesting he's he has a vision for the university with a strong civic heart to it and take a look at it and see what you think.

Thia: [00:09:15] So I read those speeches. They were by Paul Zingg. And I came away from them pretty inspired to think about student development as thinkers who could do important work in communities where they live. And I took that enthusiasm to colleagues in the English Department Chris Fox and angels when Vicki and we agreed that we would pilot a civic literacies course that students could earn the first year writing credit for. So we were writing this course and we thought it was really great.

Thia: [00:09:53] And then I remember one day we were sitting in Chris and Jill's backyard and and Jill turned to me and said Why will the students want to do this. We think this is fun but why will they think it's fun. And the three of us developed this preview of what it would be like to go public with work you were doing in school. So we constructed a town hall meeting and in five sections of the English class which was the number that the three of us were teaching. We embedded this town hall and students did all the usual reading and writing and research that they would do in any introductory English class.

Thia: [00:10:33] They did focus on community and civic participation and then they went live at this town hall with their research and they talked with each other across sections. They spoke with consultants who were faculty we had a couple of community members and that was the first town hall meeting that was in the fall of 2006.

Thia: [00:10:55] And although I went on working on the first year seminar for quite a while that was really the beginning of a path for me and for the program for

the first year experience program at my university. And more and more what we've done over the years is worked with faculty in a variety of required or desired first year courses to create a more engaging dimension to the curriculum by adding this public piece.

Thia: [00:11:27] And we've we've since created what we call the Chico Great Debate where students take over downtown government buildings for a day and do all kinds of really interesting things run a civic Expo which is an interactive research fair on public issues of importance. They they do debates. They present information in panels. They give speeches. This is done in the big open air city Plaza. The city council chambers the students stand in front of the chambers where their council members are usually seated. They take over parts of the old Municipal Building and the new City Hall. They participate in facilitated discussion groups.

Thia: [00:12:14] The great debate on our campus. We run it every semester. It will take place next week and there will also be a voter's forum to help students begin to imagine themselves as voters. So our two are two large scale events are the Town Hall and the great debate.

Bonni: [00:12:32] Before you start to describe those to me one of the things I wanted to make sure that you and I framed together is for people who are listening who they're listening but they feel very alone in their own institution there isn't something like the kind of great work that you're doing where it's more synergistic. And I guess I would like people to be thinking about as they hear your story as some of what you have to share.

Bonni: [00:12:57] I mean some of what you've already said is just magnificent and is so inspiring. But also we'll be sharing ways that people might be able to take smaller components of it and do it in a class do it in and find ways to open up the public's fear within someone's own class. So I love hearing your inspiration but I also don't want it to be too intimidating for people when they're listening to you.

Thia: [00:13:20] Sure. Yeah. OK.

Bonni: [00:13:22] Yeah. So tell me a little bit about this. It's coming up next week. The Chico Great Debate and really preparing them for the event. What's been going on before this upcoming event next week.

Thia: [00:13:36] The Great Debate is imbedded in the required oral communication classes so students have been developing speeches or presentation or debates they've been doing research and they've been practicing presenting that information in a variety of ways. But one of the things that changed in the course when the department decided to adopt this model was the the speeches and the debates whatever it is the particular course teaches.

Thia: [00:14:09] They all start with a public issue. So there's an umbrella topic. This time it's issues in higher education and students find sub topics of interest to them and they develop their oral work and their written work around that issue. So it's inquiry based work. But the students know from the beginning that they're going to go public with the work that they do over the years. We've seen a lot of different versions of this.

Thia: [00:14:39] I worked with a philosophy teacher who didn't want to develop something large he didn't want to develop something beyond his own class. He wanted to give students a public experience after they had gone into the Chico community and explored some problems they found there. I remember one student group that did research on people in the community who were homeless who had pets. And they went into that research really thinking there was an ethical problem with that and that the pets were probably suffering and they found exactly the opposite. They found that the pets were better cared for that they were at the heart of the lives of the people who own them and that they were cherished and they were really given what they needed.

Thia: [00:15:33] And I remember when they presented at this they gave up a public event where they had sent out invitations to various community groups and faculty and they presented this information and you know they educated the room. I mean very few people in the room had understood this and they had they really had the same kind of bias that the students had when they started and the students direct research and their that they're reading and they're talking to people in the community really kind of shifted the room and how the room felt about that issue.

Thia: [00:16:10] So the students had done a variety of kinds of investigations of local issues and then presented them at this term and event. And you know worked to enlighten other people in the community about what they had found. There was also an icon professor who for a number of years did something called the economic solutions. Oh I can't think of the exact name of it but it was a two night event the students from his class came both nights. They

heard each other present. Community members came in. They talked about current economic problems. And this started actually during the economic downturn.

Thia: [00:16:58] But then at the end of the evening people sat around tables having dessert with the students who had presented and thinking about how those problems manifested locally and what could be done about it.

Bonni: [00:17:13] That sounds really powerful.

Thia: [00:17:15] It was amazing. I remember sitting with two students one evening. It was the second night and they said one of the students said when I got up this morning I wanted to come here. So that was based on the night before her experience the night before I got up this morning I wanted to come here and the student next to her said that's exactly what I felt. Actually those two students came to work for me for a while.

Bonni: [00:17:39] The other large event that you put on actually happened a few weeks ago and that's the town hall meeting. And does that one connect with the same topics of the great debate or is this something entirely different.

Thia: [00:17:52] The town hall meeting is in the required American government class. It's particularly wonderful but it's there it started out in English but it moved to Political Science in 2009 and it's wonderful because students have just taken American government in high school and they don't want to turn around and take it again. The vast majority of students who take the class really are not coming in with the attitude that this is going to be anything new. So the town hall is embedded in several sections of that course. And students wind up in this public venue. There are usually 16 different topics the students help to select those and they go into breakout rooms and then into smaller roundtables based on the topic that they've chosen.

Thia: [00:18:46] So for example mental health issues in the military climate change LGBTQ issues whatever the students find most important as a pressing public issue those are the topics that rise to the top of the list and become the topic through the town hall and then the students study policy around those issues because that's what the American government course helps them to look at and how it is that everyday citizens can effect policy. And they they work to deepen their understanding both of the issues and of potential policy solutions during the town hall.

Bonni: [00:19:31] One of the things that I see as I look at the various ways that you serve students is just your strength in holistic thinking or what is often called systems thinking what can you share with me about some of the courses that students take as they are considering this whole big transition from high school to college and some of the work that you do in partnering with the people that teach those classes.

Thia: [00:19:56] I noticed and I'm certainly only one of thousands and thousands of people who've notice that the curriculum for first year students at the university looks a lot like the curriculum in high school. So they take English. They take math. They take lab science. They take American history. They take American government and they carry into these courses.

Thia: [00:20:21] The idea that it's still like high school I would say it sends the not ready for primetime message. You know that you're you're not coming in quite ready to do all the real stuff. And the most interesting stuff. And if the courses turn out to be interesting that's a big bonus. And that's what we're trying to do is increase how interesting those classes are. So I've been privileged to work with the English department on our campus the political science department the communications studies department. There are several sustainability courses I work with.

Thia: [00:21:01] We actually had an event last night where we took a sustainability course that's an entry level course. Three sections of it and we brought in a group of community consultants to sit down and have conversations with students about the sustainability issues that they were studying. And then I also at work on an interdisciplinary project where we pulled together two required classes usually Englishes one of them.

Thia: [00:21:31] But you know I've got a class for instance where English is paired with science and those faculty redesign the standalone courses into a single course and make it project based. So I've been able to work with faculty in a lighty of places on campus multicultural and gender studies. They participate in that project. I work with the business college and they have a combined introduction to business and math course where the students build the business. They learn everything they're supposed to learn in the course by building a business.

Thia: [00:22:08] Then they go public by sharing their business plans with local business leaders. And there is a really nifty story that comes out of last year's share out there were students who developed a project where you could buy a

teach a T-shirt they had designed and when you purchase that part of your money would go immediately to buy a support kit for someone who was homeless. And that support kit would go to one of the local shelters.

Thia: [00:22:38] So it might have a toothbrush and toothpaste and socks in it. They had different kits and they have steadily been working ever since day. I heard from them last week they were meeting with a local foundation to get this thing off the ground people. It was the winner of the business the public business competition and there are several people interested in investing in it. So you know that's like that's a beautiful success story where the students learned what they needed to do well as business students and at the same time they had this big heart for people in the community and wanted to do something with their expertise that would benefit others. And I was really happy about that.

Bonni: [00:23:21] On prior episodes in fact I think every episode there's at least some discussion around pedagogy and this is the first time I've ever spoke with anyone that shares a bit about public sphere pedagogy that the first time I've heard that phrase that way what can you tell me about that form of a teaching approach.

Thia: [00:23:40] Well you know how public sphere pedagogy gets described kind of depends on who you talk to different people I've worked with used different theoretical frameworks to explain why it matters. I'll tell you why I think it matters to first year student Vincent Tinto argued the sociologist who studied why students leave college. He argued that students need rites of passage and they need them well before graduation. They need to have experiences that help them realize that their identity is shifting into something at least approximating adulthood.

Thia: [00:24:23] So I would argue that these experiences give students a different view of themselves. And when we ask them to do research and writing and reading in college even though we're asking them to do this in more sophisticated sophisticated ways than they did it in high school they don't necessarily feel a powerful motivation to do that work and they don't necessarily feel that the work has a great deal to do with them and who they are becoming.

Thia: [00:25:01] So when they go public with the work they have to stand by it and really remarkable things happen and we have a lot of student writing we've read over the years that we were. They reflect on these experiences and they write things like. Now I know why my parents like to have these kinds of

conversation. Now I see what research is for oh I thought that my peers were kind of lazy and didn't want to do anything in the world. But now I see there are lots of people like me who are interested in something important or now I see that even though as a person alone I can't make a difference. I can make a difference with other people who care about these things.

Thia: [00:25:52] So there's you know this new way of seeing the cell and this is where I think we've missed the boat so often is that we don't give students opportunities to experience and reflect on how the curriculum is part of them and they are affecting it. I think the curriculum feels to many of them separate from themselves. And I just think that's deadly.

Bonni: [00:26:23] How does mentoring come into play in all of your approaches for the first year experience program?

Thia: [00:26:30] The project I spoke about earlier the into interdisciplinary classes have embedded mentors. Those are project based courses and the special room that was built for them have no front so faculty can't lecture. They redesign the Corps. They can flip the classroom they can put lectures online but in the in the classroom space everything is designed so that it's easiest for students to get into groups of 10 to 12 and work together.

Thia: [00:26:59] So we use that space for a learning community experience in a larger enrolled course. The enrollments are 100 but the students work in groups of 10 to 12 with an embedded mentor and their mentor is not a tutor. The mentor is a successful college student who's trained to help students develop some successful college student practices and also to be interested in them and provide them with some emotional support and some mirroring. That's our largest and most intentional mentoring program we do sometimes provide students support faculty doing public sphere work helping take students out into the community and so on.

Bonni: [00:27:46] What have I not asked you about the first year experience program or just anything else that you want to make sure that we have a chance to share before we get to the recommendations segment.

Thia: [00:27:55] What I'd most like to convey about the first year experience program as we've worked on it on this campus is that the student landscape is rich. There's a curriculum in the first year. Most of the students are going to be involved in. And we know where they're going to be involved. We know they'll be in English. We know they'll be an American government and so on.

Thia: [00:28:24] These are arenas where thinking about pedagogy differently imagining that these courses whether you're working with other faculty or teaching one of these courses all on your own imagining that that course that required course can be the beginning of the student saying to himself or herself I am so glad I came to college. Isn't this something that I get to do the making these courses stand out by creating ways for students to participate and to become members of larger publics. I think that that opportunity is actually constantly there. We just have to imagine that and ask ourselves how we can help to make that happen.

Bonni: [00:29:19] My recommendation for today's episode is very related to what you just said and that is as we think about how we might create these opportunities for students to participate in a public sphere is to visit the link that we'll be teachinginhighered.com/101 because it's the hundred and first episode and on that link will be a link to your Public Sphere Eedagogy Toolkit. And people can learn about some of the tools you use for creating the town hall meetings, the great debate you have some resources here around assessment as well and just to take a look and think about in one of your classes that you teach how you might create this kind of a public sphere.

Bonni: [00:30:07] And I have yet to report on this because it has yet to happen. But I am doing just that in my consumer behavior classes where they're going to be doing poster sessions. Thanks to Doug McKee's recommendation from Yale and they're going to be sharing some aspect of research that they conducted during the semester. And there will be some business professionals coming in and it's going to be more of an informal type of. I have, I don't want to say a mixer but I'm actually having to teach the students how to do that what is a poster session so I'm not going to present. No you're not going to present people are going to walk around and come and talk to you and you'll informally and but you still have to dress professionally because you want to make a good impression. And so it's just been fun to teach them a little bit. But I have yet to know how it will actually go and I'll be taking a look at more of your pedagogy toolkit and see if there's any tools I can incorporate before we actually have our final experiment at the end of our semester.

Thia: [00:31:02] Hearing you say that when I hear people talk about this kind of work I always get really excited. My whole body lifted up in my chair. It just makes such a difference to students they feel taken seriously and they see themselves differently. That's that's wonderful. I would like to hear how your project goes.

Bonni: [00:31:20] Oh I'll definitely let you know. Thanks for the encouragement. And what do you have to recommend for people today.

Thia: [00:31:25] Well you know actually because my my projects are very dialogue focused I wind up having lots of conversations with students at a variety of levels having a variety of experiences and I've become really interested in this separation between students and the curriculum and our lack of assignments or ways of working with students in classes that help to address that separation.

Thia: [00:31:57] I've become really sold on the idea that we should ask students to tell us their stories about themselves in our classes and not just in an English class not just in a history class but in a science class. The story of what it is to be me in this class I think we could learn a lot about students understanding of what's relevant and exciting. And a lot about their confusions regarding what it is we're asking them to learn. If we would ask for those stories. So that's my recommendation.

Bonni: [00:32:33] Thank you so much and I really appreciate you accepting the invitation to be on the show. And you're so inspirational it's just great. And I encourage everyone again to go check out your Web site because it will help. I think with putting some of these things into practice whether someone listening is from a larger institution they could consider some of the cross-disciplinary work that you're doing and just how powerful that is or whether you're just talking about taking an idea and putting it into one of your classes so thank you so much for investing your time in the Teaching in Higher Ed community.

Thia: [00:33:05] Thank you. Thank you for talking with me.

Bonni: [00:33:09] What an amazing amount of inspiration I'm taking away from the conversation with Thia and what an amazing amount of inspiration I take away from getting to be connected with so many of you. If you have yet to connect on Twitter there are always some great conversations happening up there with members of the teaching and higher ed community. And you can connect with me @Bonni208, would love to hear from you on Twitter. And if you have any feedback about the show upcoming guests or topics you'd like to see be presented. You can do that at teachinginhighered.com/feedback. And if you have yet to subscribe to the weekly updates doing that will just get you a single e-mail each week with all the show notes and all the links in it and an

article about teaching or productivity on most weeks and you can do that at teaching and higher red dot com slash subscribe.

Bonni: [00:34:03] We started a Slack channel and are having some conversations up there if you're already on the slack platform and would like to connect with us. Just send me an email or you can do that at teachinginhighered.com/feedback. That's an easy way to link to my e-mail address and would love to get you added up on Slack you can have the conversations there.

Bonni: [00:34:23] Thanks so much for listening and here's to 101 episodes times 2 3 4 who knows how far we'll keep going. Thanks so much for listening. You are such a great community to be a part of. See you next time.

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