Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:07] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. I'm recording this while I sit at the roll-top desk I inherited from my father a few years ago. I'm in my living room at home, where I do most of my work now. Sometimes when the sun is out, I'll move to the back deck. I'm thankful I have a job I can do at home, in a quiet home, in which to do that job. And well, I'm thankful for good Wi-Fi, too. I'm aware that not all of our students are experiencing conditions quite so conducive to teaching and learning. Many of our students are feeling displaced and anxious. Some have limited access to computers and internet, and others are busy caring for family members, young and old. During this season of Leading Lines, we're exploring the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education. A big part of that impact lands on our students. As I thought about potential guests who could speak to the student experience during this crisis, Robin DeRosa, was at the top of my list.

[1:06] Robin is the director of Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative, or Open CoLab at Plymouth State University, a public liberal arts institution that's part of the university system of New Hampshire. I followed Robin's work in open education for several years, and I interviewed her for my recent book. She's one of the most thoughtful and compassionate educators I know, and I was grateful that she would spend an hour of her time talking with me for the podcast. Robin brought along her colleague, Martha Burtis, now a learning and teaching developer at the Open CoLab and formerly at the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington. Robin and Martha talked about the challenges our students are facing during this crisis and the ways that they and their colleagues are helping to respond to those challenges. They also offered some useful advice for faculty and institutions planning ahead for an uncertain summer and fall. I think you'll appreciate our conversation. (music)

Derek: [2:07] Thanks Robin and Martha for being on Leading Lines this week during this strange and busy time. I appreciate you taking a little time to chat with us today.

Robin DeRosa: [2:16] Happy to be here.

Martha Burtis: [2:18] Definitely.

Derek: [2:19] Let's start. I've started asking this kind of first question of our guests. And I think it's still important during even crisis times. Can each of you tell us about a time when you realized you wanted to be an educator? And Robin, maybe we'll start with you so we know whose voice goes with whose name.

Robin: [2:40] Yeah. And it actually it's a nice time to ask that question and remember why we're here. I guess for me, I knew I wanted to be involved in education from the time I was pretty little. And school for me growing up was, I think, kind of an escape from parts of my life that weren't quite as fulfilling, as a seven-year-old. And I just had a lot of teachers who, even though I think I felt distinctly un-special in my life, who convinced me that I was special. Mr. Crump of the fourth grade was a good example of that. And I think from the time I was young, I just responded to the fact that the classroom was an environment where students were developing a sense of who they were. And that good teachers could help them do that in a way that was nurturing. And so from the time I was young, I don't think I thought I wanted to be a teacher, necessarily. I think I wanted to be a student as long as I could. And once I timed out on that, the only other way to stay part of that feeling was maybe to teach.

Derek: [3:56] Yeah. Yeah, that's really sweet. Martha, how about you?

Martha: [4:02] So yeah, I definitely don't think as a young person, I ever even kind of entertained education as a career choice. My mom was a college professor, so I grew up kind of witnessing firsthand a lot of what that looked like. And it was not, I don't think it was remotely on my radar. I had a really traumatic four years in high school. I went to a kind of pressure cooker intense magnet school. And by the time I went away to college, had almost no confidence in my abilities, as a student. And what changed for me, was going away to a small college, to Mary Washington, actually, where I used to work and having a really profound relationship with a number of faculty who just helped me to feel confident about myself again and helped me to realize how much I loved the work of learning. And so similarly though to Robin, even at that point, I wanted to be a college professor then, but not

because I really cared about teaching. I just wanted to learn and think and talk to people. And I know, I mean, I'm technically not a college professor. I kind of fell into teaching as a sideline, doing ed tech and faculty development about ten years ago. And now after doing it the last ten years, it is such a profoundly important part of who I am, That I feel like my kind of circuitous route, getting here is part of what helps me to understand why I do what I do and why I feel like it matters so much to me to reach students.

Derek: [5:50] And let me use that as a segue to ask you a little bit about what you do now, each of you, because I think the, these interests that you've described of wanting to help people find their identities, find their confidence, grow and develop and learn. I see that in your work now. Can you say a little bit about kind of Plymouth State and the roles that you guys play there?

Robin: [6:12] Oh gosh. Yeah, I can say a little bit about it because just thinking about it actually does bring me joy. So we work in the Open Learning and Teaching Collaborative. We call it the Open CoLab at Plymouth State, which is a small rural public university in New Hampshire. And I think the beauty of the work that Martha and I do, and we just have a small staff of four of us and then a whole bunch of affiliates who work with us in the CoLab. But the beauty of what we do is that we really all four of us, have very distinct jobs with very different titles, but we all do all the things. It's really the first time, Derek, that I have been part. I mean, I've always been team-based I think, in my approach to thinking about education. But this is an authentic team. We all do kind of all the things. So we all do catering orders, we all do advising, we all do faculty development, we all do curriculum design. So we are sort of a teaching and learning center. But really what brings us together is innovative pedagogy. And by innovative, I mean I think willing to rethink pedagogy at all times, especially when our students suggest that something could be better. So we have an Interdisciplinary Studies Program of customized majors that runs out of our CoLab. And then we also do a traditional professional development for faculty and staff. We partner pretty closely with academic technologies. So we run a lot of pedagogy driven technology initiatives through, through our lab. So I kind of spoke for both of us because we both technically, I'm the director. Martha is a learning designer. We also have Hannah, who's an advisor, and Matthew, who runs our interdisciplinary studies program. But we have one giant brain basically between the four of us.

Derek: [8:11] Yeah. Can you tell us about maybe a project or two from pre-coronavirus days that might give us a flavor of some of the work that you do at CoLab?

Robin: [8:21] Yeah, maybe I'll give one. And then ask Martha to give one because she is directing some pretty cool things, with students in particular. But we've been really involved in the CoLab with open education. So we've worked on a USNH, which is the University System in New Hampshire Initiative across our four institutions to bring more faculty to the table on open educational resources. But we've also helped to found the New Hampshire Open Education Public Consortium, which is really an advocacy group for open and public infrastructures and teachings. So everything from OER to open pedagogy to open access to research. So that's really exciting because it includes both the University System of New Hampshire and the community college system of New Hampshire. So that's a project that our CoLab has really been invested in.

Martha: [9:16] I can, yeah, I can speak about probably a kind of smaller scale project that I've been involved and that's just been really kind of meaningful to me. When I, when I came to PSU last summer, I think Robin had already been in conversation with some folks there about a kind of a workshop in the fall to talk about alternative assessment or ungrading. And so she asked me to join in on planning that. And we did this workshop last fall, and this is a topic that's really near and dear to me because it's something that I started really experimenting with and doing about halfway into my ten years of teaching, really under the guidance of Jesse Stommel, my former colleague at Mary Washington, who really inspired me to dive into it and it just shifted my thinking so intensely about teaching, about my relationship with my courses and my students. And so being able to share that. So I joke sometimes that at Mary Washington, I sometimes felt like I had to I couldn't come out and admit that I was an ungrader. Like it felt like this big secret I had to keep, which isn't really fair. I don't think anybody at Mary Washington really cared that Martha Burtis was an ungrader? It had more to do with having been there as long as I had been, and wearing as many hats as I had and feeling still a certain amount of imposter syndrome. Working at your alma mater and not being sure how your, your colleagues, some of whom were your professors, are going to feel about this radical practice. So it was just really great for me to be able to authentically share that with faculty at PSU. And I was blown away by having a pretty large group of people, attend that workshop who were so interested and engaged in the topic, and asked such great questions and immediately tried to take pieces of it and experiment with it and explore it. And so, so I knew that I kind of wanted to do something with that. I wanted to capture something out of what, what came of that workshop and create something that would be useful to people, all, not just at PSU, but at other institutions who I think are more and more coming to terms with the idea that we need to rethink our relationship with

grades and with the conversation we have with students about grades. And it was actually a call with Jesse. I brainstormed a little bit with him and he said, you know, you could put together another set of resources or links or tools or a website with information for people. But I think what people really need when they're grappling with new practices is community and connection. And so I think finding a way to, you know, finding a way to really forefront that would be useful.

[12:10] And so last November or December, we just kind of put a call out on Twitter and invited people to share their thoughts in short form about grading and ungrading, their experiences with both how it impacted them as teachers and learners, what worked and what didn't work. And we just got such varied and personal and really meaningful pieces from people, this spring in January, I kind of lightly edited those and ordered them, and I handed them over to a student who works for us who's getting an Interdisciplinary Studies major with a focus in part in graphic design. And she took the whole thing and I said, I just want you to illustrate this. I want you to take these and make them into something like, an object that we can share with people, either physically or digitally. And she did exactly, I mean, on the on the one hand, she did exactly what I had in mind, but she also just blew it out of the water. And so we have this little pamphlet that we have made available about ungrading. And it's just the voices and stories of people in short-form talking about, about grades. And at the end we link to some resources and tools. But for me, that kind of project, being able to kind of of explore a topic like that, from so many different directions with different voices, everything from workshops to tools, but also to community. And conversation. That's exactly why I love working at the open CoLab, being able to work on projects like that.

Derek: [13:46] That's fantastic, that's fantastic. I, I know I will often describe teaching at Vanderbilt as a community endeavor. At a research university, we're often quite siloed in our disciplinary fields. But teaching is something that can cross those boundaries pretty easily. And certainly, I know from my work that the more we can kind of gather teachers together to share, to collaborate, the more rewarding the work is, the more effective the work is. Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about, there's a podcast from Joseph Fink, that I've been listening to that's new, he calls it, "Our Plague Year," which is just a beautiful collection of essays of people kind of grappling with the challenges of living through a pandemic and the social distancing and social isolation that they're experiencing, economic struggles. And as I've shared with you, we're kind of focusing on, on kind of higher education's response to the current situation in this batch of episodes of Leading Lines. And I

thought about, you know, folks I know who understand students really deeply and have powerful connections with students and deep compassion for students. And so Robin, you came to mind and Robert invited Martha along to this conversation. So I'd like to kind of talk about kind of where we are now. And I'll start with the students. What challenges are our students facing during this period of remote learning, remote teaching, general uncertainty, and social distancing? What are the challenges, either kind of technical or otherwise, that you see students encountering right now?

Robin: [15:28] Yeah, I mean, it's almost I don't want to say that, it actually is overwhelming to me to have confronted what I've confronted through my students' eyes over the last month or so. And I think those of us who teach, particularly at public institutions and we serve a lot of, of rural students, a lot of first-generation college students. But anyone who teaches in a, in a place like that, I think realized the full weight of precarity, the moment this virus really hit, and particularly the moment states started shutting down, which of course, like in the CoLab, we were very active proponents of social distancing and shutting things down, including the library where we all work. But that being said, within 24 hours of the state shutting down, I started hearing from my students. Not one question, Derek, was about, how can I get into Moodle or I feel these Zoom calls are overwhelming. They were hungry almost immediately. They couldn't pay their rent almost immediately. They had trouble with co-pays for all sorts of medications. They were homeless because they had homes, but they didn't know if they should go back to them because they had a mom who was going through chemotherapy. And it wasn't safe for them to go back home or they went home and their parents were out of work and their baby sister was out of child care. And now they actually had to feed their baby sister and deal with parts of the childcare responsibilities. So overnight, the work that I think a lot of us have done in the CoLab to bring basic needs to the forefront of academia was just like completely amplified. And I immediately started working, not on my day job, which was really how to support faculty in the quote, unquote pivot to online. But I started working on finding housing and getting cash to students. It wasn't probably for two or three weeks, almost like just maybe the last week that I've really started talking more to my students about, hey, how's remote learning going? And all of those conversations have been about connectivity, almost like where are the Wi-Fi hotspots? How can we get you broadband in your rural community? You don't have a device and it's hard to do this, say on your phone.

[18:16] Now with faculty, it's a different story. I've been talking much more about the

challenges for students with synchronous learning and what tools they can use and how to, above all else, be flexible. But honestly, for our students, and I would imagine for people who teach at more elite institutions, it's actually in some ways even worse because the students who are falling into the margins are that much less visible. Can you say that much less visible? They're more invisible. And so it's probably much easier to say, hey, like 94% of my students are doing great with this online pivot. And I've really seen what everybody's always talked about, which is that higher ed is the great unjust sorter of, of students based on privilege. And I think this has just absolutely hit that home for me and my students have been truly devastated. And that's not to say that lots of them aren't excelling in the, in this new reality. Overall, I would say the challenge was, even for someone like me, who worked on this all the time, I was overwhelmed by our, you know, we, there was an article in The New York Times just a few days ago about a town just 15 minutes south of Plymouth State. The town is just devastated by the closure of a big company in the town. And talk about the number of parents who worked there this sort of way that that town, that company was generating our local economy. You know, as a public institution, we are knit into the fabric of our region. And these collapses economically in the region are our students collapses and also the collapses of our part-time and contingent faculty and our staff, many of whom have already been laid off because of the budget troubles. So, wow. It's very, very hard.

Martha: [20:20] It's incredible how something like this brings into focus kind of issues and things we've talked about for years, not hypothetically, but in more abstract terms, sometimes. I think we have an increasing awareness on our campuses about the need to address basic needs for students and be aware that we have students who are struggling with basic needs. But I think, you know, for some people that's, and until you encounter a student who's actually going through that, that can be something you care about, but are not having to experience or deal with firsthand. And I would say that this shift, unless you are completely blind and not looking at what's in front of you, has brought into stark focus. At a school like ours, at least, the number of students we have who are, are vulnerable and precarious. And like Robin said, you know, whether or not they're getting their readings done, and whether or not they're getting the appropriate help on their writing assignment like that's just so far down the list of, of what they need to be taking care of right now.

Robin: [21:33] But I'm thinking, tell me what you think about this. I'm thinking of the public institution. And this maybe comes a lot from the fact that I've been working the last few

years with our community colleges, which inspire me so much. But when I see my students with these needs rising, instead of thinking, hey, education has to come second after these basic needs. I start thinking, this is the role of public institutions and public colleges and universities. So, you know, we made our, our ice hockey arena into a what do you call it, spillover? What's the word? Hospital.

Martha: [22:13] Overflow?

Robin: [22:14] Overflow. Hospital, right, for emergency COVID.

Martha: [22:17] And to be clear, we didn't do it, Robin. (laughs)

Derek: [22:21] You guys said you do everything at the CoLab.

Robin: [22:24] We do everything at the CoLab.

Martha: [22:25] Last weekend, we created an overflow. (jokingly) Other amazing people did that.

Robin: [22:32] Other amazing, amazing people, at Plymouth State and Speare Hospital have been putting that together. But I think that's just sort of a symbolic way of thinking about the role of colleges and universities in public crises, but also in publics in general. I would like to see us, instead of thinking, oh gosh, we can see now how childcare is more of a problem for, for students, or how transportation becomes a problem or housing insecurity. What if our public colleges and universities, taking a page from community colleges, which have always tried, even with their lack of funding, to do a good job with this. To say, it's not just about openly licensing our, our vaccine research, right? It's also about thinking about how we can integrate with our communities all the time. So that when pandemics hit, the first place you think to go is your college or university, right? Not just for drive-through testing facilities or research, but as kind of a hub for,for the social and public good. And it wraps in, I mean, most of the things we all teach are connected up in some way with how our publics function. So I've really thought about, instead of saying, oh, you know, who cares about your Zoom class? Instead to think, yes, we may need to set content aside a little bit, as we deal with these basic needs. But this is also the work of academia in a public institution in particular, like we, we don't have a public to serve, if a pandemic wipes out our demographic, right? We are all caught up in this stuff and the questions about Medicare for all, and the post office and free

college. These are all the same question to me, and I'd like to see our responses. Think about that before we think about how do you transition your physics class online.

Martha: [24:36] I think that one of the things that occurs to me as I listen to Robin talk about that, the way in which our students understand us as public, as public institutions. And what that means. Like, I think if you asked most college students, what's the difference between a public university college and a private university college? They would say, well, private colleges and universities cost more. Right? To them, and that's totally understandable in practical terms, that's their experience of that difference and they should be aware of that. But if you really want, how many of our students really understand that public colleges and universities are a public good and that they are part of that public good. By being a part of our community, they have an opportunity to be part of that public good and to help shape the universities' goodness. I love the idea of make, of for-fronting that in our conversations with our students.

Robin: [25:35] That's why open education has been helpful. Like a lot of our faculty who've been dealing with open pedagogy really did well in this transition, in a lot of ways because they saw their students as contributors to this Knowledge Commons. And they saw a pandemic as a, as a, as a public need, right? That there's a need here. I have students who are contributors. What are the connections here? How do I involve my students? The biggest complaint I heard from students in his pivot is that it was really hard to get their mind around some book report that had no connection to the fact that we are literally living in something we've only seen in the movies, up until now. So for people who kind of brought the, the challenge into the classroom, you have to be sensitive about that, of course, because, you know, it's very traumatizing for a lot of students depending on what they're dealing with, including deaths of, of family members or their own illnesses. But seeing our students as part of the people who generate public response to public problems is. especially in things like open science, right? This is how we built the next generation of publicly engaged citizen scientists.

Derek: [26:57] So a couple of follow-ups that occur to me, one is, is there, there is a lot of conversation or has been around kind of access to higher education for students from a variety of backgrounds. And, and unfortunately, we've also heard kind of the part two of that conversation, which it's not just about getting them into college, but it's helping them thrive and succeed and finish. And that's what I'm hearing from you is that that you have students that that have ongoing needs and challenges. And I guess one of the questions I would

have is, Robin used the term overwhelming. And I, and I do think it can be overwhelming for faculty to think about what their students are facing and what they're struggling with right now. And you've talked about some ways to respond to that already. But do you have other advice for faculty who are, who are maybe feeling themselves, emotionally overwhelmed or facing their own needs and challenges for, for kind of managing this, this very hard time with our students.

Robin: [27:58] Yeah, and this may not exactly be what faculty want right now because I think what we want, often times, is for somebody to give us a tool, or an answer that will make this easier. And I don't think what I'm about to say makes anything easy, but I think what we need is a framework and a mindset, rather than a solution. So in the CoLab, we've been tossing around ideas for useful frameworks that will not be too esoteric. You know, that will give you a way to design and respond. And I think what I'm landing on, we've been short handing it, calling it ACE, but to think about adaptability, connection, and equity. And lead with this mindset so that when you're developing now, as opposed to before, when you could sort of develop a course that had a kind of stability. We now need to think a little bit more about dynamic courses, courses that are a little bit more emergent and a little bit more pliable so that because we don't know what's coming for fall, we don't even know what's coming up for next spring. And we want to be able to not only change modalities, but adjust to whatever realities are on the ground. So adaptability. But I think lots of online learning now tends to be sort of a self-paced, personalized, competency-based structures. And a lot of times it doesn't match up with the pedagogies of some of our really student-centered institutions. So like at Plymouth State, we have a very sort of collaborative ethos, lots of group work, lots of project-based learning is kind of what we're known for. And so we don't want to move online and lose that by picking up some LMS oriented shell that students can flexibly move through at their own pace. So that's that second piece, which is connection. Keep in mind, how are you going to design to get your students connected with their communities, connected with one another, collaborating together? And the last is equity. You may not as a faculty member, be able to solve this satisfactorily, if you just look at your own course, you may need to insist on institutional conversations about connectivity, about devices, about the digital divide, so that your school can sort of pool its resources a bit to deal with some of those larger challenges. But I think the idea here is if you can adopt a framework that's simple and think of one or two things inside each of those frameworks that you can do on the ground in your own practices. That's the way we go forward because we don't have at most of our institutions, massive teams of instructional

designers ready to solve this for you. Faculty are going to be the ones who are going to have to manage this. And so to do that, we need to develop a sense of confidence about decision-making on your own. And for me, that framework has been a confidence booster as I sorted through all the different tools and options that I have with students.

Derek: [31:13] Yeah, I'm, I'm really drawn to your term, adaptability. I had a Twitter poll last week, I was trying to find a word to describe the kinds of courses we need to plan for, especially for the fall with all the uncertainties around that in terms of, you know, will we be on campus, will we be online? Will be some of both? Will some of our students be on campus and some not? Will we be on campus, but socially distancing in really unusual ways? And so trying to think about kind of how we can prepare courses that are ready to, to adapt to whatever may come. Adaptable was the popular choice.

Robin: [31:50] Well, there you go.

Derek: [31:53] Yeah, resilient was another one that folks liked, but, I'm really drawn to adaptable because it talks about not just the modalities, right? But even as you were saying, the content and the kinds of conversations we have with students that may need to change in face of a changing world.

Robin: [32:08] A great way to think about adaptability is through emergence, I think, which amazingly was a pedagogy that we had been espousing in the CoLab before COVID-19, which makes me feel confident about deploying it during COVID-19 because emergence is a great way to involve your students in decision-making. And at the top of the show, you had said something about I thought of talking to you, Robin, because you're known for, you know, centering students. But really what that is, is listening to students. It's not magic and it's not actually sophisticated. But listening to students is a great way to do course design. And emergence allows you to continue to listen to students and to build around their needs. And that's something I think that will be great for us after pandemic. But if it can move the needle a little bit on helping professors who sort of weren't thinking about teaching us dialogic, I think that will be very helpful. And again, moving to pedagogies that were already mission central for you before is the way to go. We don't want our pandemic pedagogy to alienate us from who we wanted to be before this.

Derek: [33:31] Martha, you're teaching right now, right?

Martha: [33:33] I am, yup.

Derek: [33:34] Can you say a little bit about how you've approached this, this semester?

Martha: [33:40] So the class that I'm teaching, it's the first time I've taught it, is our Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies. And it is the course in which our students create their major. So they spend a pretty significant portion of the semester sort of researching the different disciplines and fields that they want to bring together. Understanding what's offered at PSU in those different disciplines and fields and figuring out how to put that together in some kind of coherent program that they can finish in the time that they've allotted for themselves. And that check some boxes in terms of what the institution expects a major to be. And when we went away for spring break, they were, about half a week after spring break was the deadline for them to get their applications in. Because we have to then forward those onto a faculty council that reviews them and approves them or sends them back for revision. So we wanted to make sure we put that deadline in so there would be time in the semester for all of that to happen. So in some ways, it's kind of a perfect class to have to adapt because there was already a really clear, a clear break point in the semester right around when all of this happened around a major, the only really major high-stakes assignment in the class, which is, and by the way, it's a pass, no pass class. So really it's like you gotta get this done. The rest of the semester, what I had planned and what the class covers is diving a little bit further into some of the ideas around open education and interdisciplinarity and different tools that they can use to sort of bind their work together as they go forward now taking these different classes. So I kind of pretty quickly made the decision that for this semester, the only thing that was going to matter was getting this application done. Because those other things we can address in other ways with students, they come back and take a seminar later and we can, you know, build some more of that stuff in at that time. But really the application is kind of a, if they don't complete that, they can't successfully, you know, major in interdisciplinary studies. So, so for me, making that shift made a lot of sense. And not surprisingly, going into spring break, I was pretty confident that more than half of the students were going to meet that deadline. I ended up pushing the deadline back by a week. And there were still some students who struggled and dealing with helping them remotely while they are dealing with everything else. In, in putting together this application, which is a pretty kind of complex thing to wrap your head around. There's a lot of moving pieces, there's a lot of things you gotta keep an eye on. It was challenging and I knew that was going to be challenging enough

for us. And it's worked out exactly as I thought it would, which is, you know, the vast majority of students are done. And then there's a few who are really struggling. And, and now I have the time to devote to really help them figure out how to get this in before the end of the term.

[37:07] One of the things, though, that I think really set me up for being able to successfully make this pivot. And it's, you know, I've taught online a number of years, digital storytelling at Mary Washington. And so I'm pretty comfortable and confident with online teaching. For me, like I understand what I need to do in order to, to feel successful. And because of how I teach that class, or have taught that class in the past, I build, I build a pretty robust website for that class, when I'm teaching it, that really lays out on a kind of week-by-week basis the work of the class, the expectations of the class. I've really had to learn how to practice architecting that online so that it's clear, so it's coherent, so students can find what they're looking for. And so when I started teaching this class in the spring, I did the exact same thing, even though it was a face to face class. So like one of the lessons that I think maybe that I would impart from this for faculty in, in building adaptable classes is to operate from the expectation that you will need to have that online presence. That will help you in your face-to-face class, if we end up doing face-to-face, it will be hugely helpful. Just building that site requires you to architect it in a particular, requires you to wrap your head around the structure of the course, the rhythm of the course, the path that you want to set for the course in ways that can be really helpful from kind of an instructional design standpoint. And then in the, in the situation where you would have to pivot and switch to online, you've got that foundation set, in a place where students already are expecting to go and have already built some patterns of behavior around that. If I was going to do anything differently, I would have built in some kind of communication tool, as well. So in DS106, in the past, we've used Twitter, we've used Slack for online communication.

Derek: [39:10] DS106 is the?

Martha: [39:10] Sorry, the digital storytelling class.

Derek: [39:13] I know what it is, but I wanted to make sure our listeners knew.

Martha: [39:16] So we've used those tools in the past. I wish that we had had something like that for this class, this term. It just didn't really occur to me that we would need it. Now, I know. I would've used maybe Microsoft Teams, which is something that we have at PSU or

something similar, to just be prepared for that when and if it happens.

Robin: [39:33] And we do openly license all of our syllabi out of that program and all of the resources that we'll mention. So if folks want to get a sense, because like Martha said, we use that kind of architecture even when we're expecting a class to be fully face-to-face. And it really helped us a lot when we came to, needing to move online quickly.

Derek: [40:00] Yeah. Yeah, I've thought about that. So I often teach a first-year writing seminar in the math department. And we have a course blog and we have a pretty robust kind of, I think what you would describe as kind of an architecture there. I have, I have tools, I have a schedule, I have links, I have resources. And so and we don't have a communication piece. I've thought about using Twitter with that course, but haven't. And I can see why that would be really helpful to have this kind of other way to connect at the ready. But I'll just say that I feel like if I had to take that course online, my students were already learning online, in some ways in that course. So if I needed to ramp that up and do more of that, we had already started developing those skills.

Martha: [40:48] If there's one thing I've heard a lot from my students in the last few weeks, it's that they are completely overwhelmed by their email. Just just completely overwhelmed.

Robin: [40:56] Or ignoring it, those are the two options.

Martha: [41:00] I think they get so overwhelmed, they ignore it. I think that's just kind of, I understand that I've had that experience too. Just when you have that that volume of information coming at you and it all feels high-stake. You just want to turn it off.

Robin: [41:16] One thing I've been thinking about as we keep talking about online, is as we look ahead to fall, spring 2040, whatever, I think I wish we would spend a little more time talking about what we mean when we say online. Because there's a very big difference between doing everything sort of digitally, right? You can actually like, one of my classes that my daughter is taking in high school is, I would call it more digital in the sense that they just sort of email back and forth their work to the teacher and that's perfectly fine. It's working for them. Other classes are sort of connecting, connected inside a closed environment, like they're Zooming synchronously or they're using the LMS, whether it's, you know, Canvas or Moodle or whatever. But in the past before COVID, I would've suggested that online is a

much bigger world than that, right? With these sort of connected learning affordances. So that instead of just being kind of a sad replica, a sad two-dimensional replica of your face-to-face classroom, you can actually get these three-dimensional portals that pull you into connection with places and people that you couldn't have connected with in your classroom. So I do wish that when we talked about online, and that's where I get in my ACE framework, to the piece of connection in the center. It's not just about that connected feeling that's really important for students in an unsure time, collaboration, and community. But it's also about connected learning. And all of the lessons we've been learning for the last five or ten years in our pedagogies about connected learning and what role we hope those play if we do continue remote learning. And also what role those play in some of the pedagogies that small liberal arts colleges excel at. Project-based learning and group work. What are the ways that we can continue those, right? Applied learning, experiential learning, internships. The internet actually offers some really amazing potential for that kind of work. And I'd love to see just in small corners, not a heavy lift, but in small corners that individual faculty spend some time thinking about the portal that's offered to you by the internet, I think your students will feel less like they're marking time until they get back to real school and more like, oh, this has really been a useful, if not something we want to do permanently, a very useful way of studying for a semester or two.

Martha: [44:01] I think just listening to you talk, Robin, and I'm just thinking a little bit about my experience and sort of adapting my class. I think one of the things that this entire situation kind of calls into question or maybe brings into focus, is our, sometimes our need in higher-ed, our inclination in higher-ed to fetishize what a course is, and to fetishize what our vision of our course is, to the point where anything that erodes that feels like it's undermining who we are, what our work is, how we matter to the institution, how our course matters to the institution, and what we think our students experience should be. And I think that that's something we need. I think we're going to have to grapple with almost at an institutional level because the reality is, so talking about my class, I basically cut off the last five weeks of content, which was going to be sort of self-directed by students. It wasn't heavy content, but it was, you know, different modules that I wanted them to work on that I think would have been a lot of fun and they would have gotten a lot out of. On the one hand, you can look at that and say, well, Martha, you know, if you are able to just, you know, cut all of that, then maybe that just never mattered. And my response to that, I think, would be that in this context, in this situation during COVID-19, it didn't matter if the course had continued face-to-face for the rest of the semester, it would have mattered. And so recognizing that

what, how our courses matter depend on the context in which we're teaching them, depend on the context in which our students are experiencing and living them. And that it's okay in certain situations to pull back and to recast what, what it is we want to do. And to let go of this idea that a course is something that was scribed on stone and it isn't, right? And it gets back to Robin's point about emergence and seeing courses as emergent and collaborative with our students, as opposed to a course we set and must continue to the end in order to mark at the end that we have been successful.

Derek: [46:16] Sure, sure. And I think of the other use of the word course, right? If you're in a boat and you're setting a course to somewhere, right? And a storm comes up like you're going to change your course, right? Like that's what you have to do.

Robin: [46:30] It also, it also makes me think about the word pivot that everybody's using to describe this moment. And basically, what it is, is let's pivot, just not pivot at all. And it's like if you're going to pivot, then let's pivot. Why not?

Derek: [46:49] So I have a couple of follow-up questions and these are a couple of details that you mentioned earlier that I wanted to circle back to. So Martha, you mentioned your students are kind of submitting these proposals about their Interdisciplinary Studies plans. Are you seeing any of those students develop plans that are, are kind of shaped entirely by or partially by what they're going through right now? Are they changing their plans based on the current situation?

Martha: [47:19] That's a great question. I don't think that I've seen that. They were pretty far along when this when, when, when this happened. And to be clear, we kind of, we kind of encourage that students shouldn't take this class unless they have an idea of what they want this to be. I do have one student, though, and I haven't talked to her about this specifically, who had planned on being pre-med, and she had done all the research about what she needed for med school, course sequences she needed and like when I left her at spring break, she was still working on that. When she got back to me after spring break, she said, it was a couple of weeks later. She had to take a little bit of a break, but she said I've decided, she did her whole application. She submitted it, but she said, "but I really decided that I don't want to be a medical doctor. I want to be, I want to go into medical research and so I'm going to switch my major to cellular and molecular biology." So she's not staying in IDS, which is fine. Like I'm happy she found her right home and she did her application, which is great. But I do wonder and I at some point, if I see her again, I will ask

her whether or not this experience actually shifted her thinking about that.

Robin: [48:30] But one of the cool things about our program, which is endlessly cool, Derek, is, is that we actually encourage our students to change and update their programs all the time. So many times we have seniors with programs who modify their contracts. So they'll shift a couple of classes, maybe even modify the title. And basically the idea is, as life happens to you and you think more about where you're headed after college and you take new things and learn new things, your major should keep up with you and rather than you fitting yourself into your major. So I hope and expect that many of our IDS majors, as the landscape around COVID shifts, research and scholarship that their contracts, because we do have lots of health related contracts and social work-related contracts and all sorts of things that are going to be intimately tied to COVID in the future. So I think we will see lots of those shifts. And really what, what we love in IDS is this idea of both an emergent major and a major predicated sometimes on backwards design. The idea that you should choose a major and then take it, seems to me much less intelligent than the idea that you take some things and then look for coherence backwards. So I think the, the way the structure of the whole major works, is very compatible with people living through things they never expected to live through originally, and therefore changing what they want to study.

Derek: [50:10] So my last question is very, very pragmatic. I wanted to follow up with your comment about your rural students who are having just access issues. Could you say a little more practically what that means for them and what some of the steps have been to try to help with those issues?

Robin: [50:33] Sure, so many of our students don't have Wi-Fi at home. And there are two main reasons for that. One, is they can't afford it, and the other is they actually don't have the option for it because broadband doesn't necessarily go to their house. And there's actually plenty of places even right down the street from me where you can't even get a cell signal and use data. So the affordability and the access, are, you know, two sides of a similar coin. So the school has done a few things, we sort of immediately put up when all the buildings closed and our library closed, we put up Wi-Fi hotspots. But part of what that really means is, here are some parking lots where you can go. And first of all, now you need a car or you're going to sit in the rain and like do your Moodle Assignment. So that's great in certain kinds of emergencies but not in others. The other thing is that lots of the carriers have introduced pretty generous deals where people can get connectivity if they're students and they couldn't afford it before. The problem with that, is that it's, it's very individual. So

basically what we did as an institution is we put up a list, if you have spectrum, you call this number. If you have this, do that. And it's just one, as Martha alluded to, I think at another time, scratch that. So the problem with the list of connectivity options is, is it's another thing that students with a million things to deal with have to do. I don't think it's a problem, necessarily given the challenges, you know, what better option did we have at this point? But if we are going to continue this through summer and especially fall, it's incumbent on institutions to take care of those issues. We cannot expect students who don't have access to the internet, to do remote learning, or we can just do correspondence school. And you know what? I have no problem with that except we may not have a US post office by the time we get there, but the, the challenges for students have been absolutely enormous with that. And I think it's even things you don't think about, like, let's say a student has a laptop and connectivity and they go home. But now they're 12-year-old brother has to Zoom for school, and the 12-year-old brother does not have a laptop. So now they have to use both the Wi-Fi connection and the laptop at a certain time. So, however you swing it, you'll find more issues than you could, could think about when people haven't adequately planned for this. So I think institutions and faculty need to push for this. Faculty need to say, if you want me to teach an online class, basically, I need to understand what my students' options are going to look like. And driving to a parking lot with a car that you may or may not have with the insurance that you can no longer afford to pay for in gas, you can no longer afford to put in your car, is not a solution.

Derek: [53:51] Well thank you, both of you, again, I appreciate you taking the time today and I know our listeners will appreciate your perspectives and ideas not only on the current situation, but looking ahead to 2040, I think you said, Robin.

Robin: [54:12] I won't be here, but I hope the podcast lives on, Derek.

Derek: [54:15] Me too. We do try to focus on the future of educational technology here on the podcast, it seems more uncertain than ever, but I really do appreciate the comments about, especially, the adaptability and the connection and the equity. I think that's a useful framework for faculty and other instructors to, to keep in mind as we start planning for the rest of this year. So again, thank you. It was really great talking with you today. (music)

Robin: [54:40] Thanks, Derek.

Martha: [54:41] Thanks a lot.

Derek: [54:44] That was Robin DeRosa, director the Open Learning Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University, and her colleague Martha Burtis, Learning and Teaching Developer at the Open CoLab. Thanks so much to Robin and Martha for taking time to speak with me during this very busy spring term. As you heard in the interview, I was struck by the framework Robin and Martha are using as they help faculty plan for the summer and fall. If we can design our courses for adaptability, connection, and equity we'll be in a much better position to support our students through these uncertain times, whether we're teaching in person or online, or some strange combination of the two. Robin and Martha shared some practical approaches to this kind of course design. And if you're interested in more, I would encourage you to visit the links in the show notes to learn about their work and that of the open CoLab. You'll find those show notes for this and every other episode of Leading Lines on our website, leadinglinespod.com. We'd love to hear your thoughts on higher education's move to online instruction and how both faculty and institutions can better meet their students' needs. You can reach us via email at leadinglinespod@vanderbilt.edu or on Twitter @leadinglinespod. Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and the Jean and Alexander Heard libraries. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes whenever we publish them. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and be safe. (music)