# Engaging our students in the classroom and online: Ella Kahu

Deakin Inclusive Education Community of Practice event, 5 July 2019

## Transcript

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Welcome everybody today, to our session on engaging our students in the classroom and online. And we'll be practising engaging our students in this classroom and online.

So thank you to everyone who's joining us at our different campuses. And I think quite a lot of people are phoning in as well. And just a quick reminder, to make sure that you've got your microphones on mute for us, Please

So the first thing I want to do on this really Happy NAIDOC Week is to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians, the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations and their Elders, past, present, and emerging. And also to acknowledge any First Nations people who are joining us today or in the future on the recording.

And a bit of a reminder that we are recording the session today. Mary Dracup, who is our wonderful leader and organiser, has just headed off to Africa. And I suspect that we won't have it up to listen to until she gets back. But it will be there.

I'll encourage everyone to use Slido. We mentioned it before. It's up there on the screen. So you can enter the meeting code number, E122. And add your name to a posting, if you do put a question up. It's just really useful to do that.

If you're not able to do that, and you're at a campus, the facilitators there will pop your question on. And you're welcome to think of questions during the presentation, although I suspect we'll just keep listening really.

Ella is going to speak for around 30 minutes. I've given her absolute permission to go a little bit over. People can send in some questions by Slido. And at the end of Ella's presentation, there'll be a question posed to each of us at our different campus groups. Those of you who are listening from your own phones will need to have a little mini-discussion with yourself.

And post any comments around that question, again, through to the Slido. And then we'll come back after that—look, it depends, five to 10 minutes discussion, for some more time at the end for some discussion.

It sounds as though there's someone with an unmuted microphone out there. Sorry to be a pest, but it really is terrific if you could mute it.

Now, I'd like to introduce Ella. Dr Ella Kahu is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. She's also an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia.

Ella's broad research interests are in social psychology, in particular in higher ed. And her PhD examined the engagement of mature-aged distance students in their transition to uni, with an emphasis on emotional engagement and the role of the family. She's continued to research and publish on student experiences. Her most recent project follows a group of school leavers through their first year at an Australian university.

Ella's conceptual framework of student engagement, developed in 2013 and extended in 2018, is used to inform both research and practice at universities around the world. She's a passionate teacher of first-year students. And in 2018, received two awards from Massey University for teaching excellence. Most recently, she developed and teaches an innovative interdisciplinary course on identity and citizenship to first-year Bachelor of Arts students.

Ella will share with us today her insights on engaging our students in the classroom and online.

ELLA KAHU: Thank you. (Laughter)

No, no. I am a little bit curious because you've all got screens in front of you. There's people in the room here with me. Does that mean you can see me on the screen? Good.

Can I ask that you pretend that you can't see things on the screen while I'm talking. It just makes it easy for me to engage with you if I've got people to see you smiling and nodding. And see, you're doing well already. Thank you for that.

[SPEAKING MAORI]

That was a very brief Maori introduction. For those of you who have been to New Zealand and have seen Maori introduce themselves, it's usually a way longer than that. But I'm on a limited time budget.

What I said was my name is Ella. I'm from England, originally. But I now live in New Zealand. And then I greeted you. And I greeted and paid tribute to the original—traditional owners of this land, without the names because that was beyond me.

And so I wanted to start with that because I think it raises a really important point, that we bring with us who we are to every situation. And that's something that I'm going to talk a little bit about today. So in any situation, our students bring with them who they are.

And they never leave that behind at the door. It never goes away. It changes as they experience their time with us and higher education. But they are bringing with them their multiple identities. So I might—oh, I'm supposed to have this one, aren't I? Here we go. This is a cool room, by the way, team. I'm very impressed with the technology, very impressed with the technology.

But I find it disconcerting that there are people watching. But I can't say hello to people watching. And they're in campuses, and screens, wherever you may be.

So my plan. It's good to have a plan. I'm very good on plans. This is my plan.

So I'm going to talk, first of all, about this framework of student engagement. Mostly because I know lots about it, but mostly because I think that if we're going to talk about principles of good teaching, it's better if they're grounded in some kind of reasoning. So we're not just doing things good or bad, we're doing things good or bad because of reasons that we understand. And if we can understand better the why things work, I think that enables to structure ourselves and to try other things because we can understand the reasoning. And that's why I want to start by that framework of student engagement.

I'm then going to share with you what I consider the three principles of teaching for my own practice. And then I'm going to give you some actual examples from this course, that Merrin mentioned, that I teach at middle distance online course to 300 first-year students each semester. So I'm going to give some extra examples of how I engage my students and the tools that I use to do the kinds of things that the framework of student engagement suggests that we should be doing. So that's the plan.

Everything I do, as I think with most researchers, certainly researchers in the area of education, is embedded in three things: literature, research, and my own practice. So the framework of student engagement was developed as the first part of my PhD. I wanted to study student engagement. And when I went to the literature, I found an awful lot of amazing work, that I couldn't fit together. It was all different things, and all different definitions and understandings.

So the framework was my attempt to sort out the mess, a very quality mess, but messy nonetheless. And then it was developed further from my PhD. So grounded in the literature, built on by my own research, and more literature.

But everything I do is also incredibly embedded within my own experiences as an academic, as a teacher at university. I'm a qualitative researcher. So I am not ashamed to say that who I am informs my research. And my research then informs my practice.

If at any point there's more that you want to know in terms of the literature of my research that sits behind this, there's my email address. Please feel free to contact me. Just flip me an email, say that I was at Deakin. Can you send me a couple of papers on whatever it was that triggered your interest. And I'm really, really happy to send those papers towards you.

So let's start by defining student engagement because we don't. We have a tendency to sit and go, we want to engage our students. We want to be engaging. But we don't often say stop and say, what do we mean by that?

So a couple of things in this definition that I want to draw your attention to. One is engagement in this context is connection to learning, the student's connection to the learning. So it's a very student-centred view of what the student is doing, thinking, and feeling, not just in the classroom, but outside of the classroom, but in relation to their learning.

They can be engaged in the social network of the university. They can be engaged in the governance of the university. But that's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is their engagement with the coursework and the learning, the thing that they came here to university to acquire, the learning.

The other critical thing about the definition is this idea that engagement has three dimensions. There are debates, of course. There are other dimensions that people have proposed. But these are the three primary ones, I think.

And we have a tendency to focus excessively on behaviour engagement, partly I think because it's the easiest thing to see and to measure. You know, whether our students came to class, whether they clicked on a certain link in our learning management system, whether they submitted their assignment. But what students do is very much only part of the picture. How they're feeling about what they're doing and what they're thinking while they're doing the doing is more important.

A really engaged student is interested, and enjoying, and enthusiastic about what they're doing because they have emotional engagement. A really engaged student is thinking, learning, processing, deep processing. So we need to be thinking about all those three dimensions.

They are interactive. And they influence each other. They're not easily separable. You can get students who adjust to being behaviorally engaged. Their learning doesn't seem to be as good. And they're certainly not enjoying it as much.

And to give you a little example of what engagement looks like, there's one of the students from my PhD project: ‘I'm loving my study. I'll be head down and bum up and rather than it being a chore, I just love it. My brain just needs feeding. The more I learn, the more I want to learn. It's like I'm addicted to it almost.’

Isn't that the perfect student? I wish all my students were like that. You can see the behaviour, the bum down, head up. You can see the emotion, loving it. And you can see the cognition, my brain is being fed.

And the other thing that you can see in Melissa here is the spiral that engagement can create. That when a student is engaged, and then they get the positive outcomes the engagement gives, that increases their motivation. And they want to do it again. You get this beautiful, positive spiral.

Of course, any spiral that goes up, can equally go down. And any student, when they're not engaged, so they're not doing the tasks or they're not enjoying it, they then get poor outcomes. They feel bad. And that spirals their motivation down.

Their self-efficacy doesn't increase. Then they get even worse outcomes. And you get a negative spiral, that can often lead to dropping out. And I'll talk more about that in a second.

So this is a rough framework of student engagement. Well, it's my framework of student engagement. There are others out there.

So I'm going to try and use this cool tool, which may or may not work. But I've never tried one before. So we're going to give it a go. Well, now, I can see it on my screen—anyway. OK, here we go.

So this engagement—no. You know what, I'm not because it's too hard for me.

This is engagement, in the centre view, the three dimensions of engagement: the emotional, cognition, and behaviour. It's a flow diagram basically, very simple. Right-hand side is the outcomes. Remembering that the benefits of engagement for our students are not just about acquiring skills, they're also personal growth, social benefits as well, long-term and short-term.

On the left is all of the things that influence whether or not a student is engaged. Now just to be clear, the words and the boxes, this is not an exhaustive list. There are many other concepts that could fit into any one of those sections of the framework. It's just you can't put everything in there. So these are just ones that the literature tells us are important. But it's not—it's not the universe at all.

Absolutely, critically, the institutional—sorry. The institutional influences and the student influences are always intersecting. Whether or not a student is engaged is never just about the student. And it's never just about the teaching. It is always the interplay between those two sets of factors.

And it's really critical to remember that all the time. And remembering who the student is, is different in every case, as we know. They bring with them different identities, different backgrounds, different skills. So that intersection is going to be different for every single student. It makes our task hard.

Someone does have a microphone unmuted. If you could mute it, that would be really useful. Thank you.

A couple other things, those two little double-sided arrows—how am I going to do this? I'll try again. It's very slow.

Now, it’s really going to work. It helps if you press the right button. There we go.

Those two little arrows there and there, that's that spiral. The student is engaged, positive outcomes. The spiral is back to increase their engagement, or not, the next time around.

Now, the critical thing is the fact that this whole process of engagement is embedded within a sociocultural context. Everything that happens around us—the politics, the economics, the social world that we are doing this in—has an impact on the university factors and on the student themselves.

I've just come from the UK, had a couple of weeks over there, where they've just trebled their—not just, recently trebled their fees. Yeah, the student pays the entire cost of higher education now. That has an impact on the institution, and on the student, and therefore on how they engage.

How we see the purpose of university, university being positioned increasingly as all about employability, changes how our students engage, changes how we teach the policies, the curriculum, et cetera, that we are delivering at university. So it's important to remember the entire process is embedded within that context.

When I first did this framework, that grey box in the middle, with the educational interface, didn't exist. And then I did my PhD. And I was doing this with this data from these mature-aged distance students. And it just kept niggling at me that I'd missed something.

And I realised that what I'd missed was that there were other things about the student experience, that are also an intersection between student and university, but which aren't engagement itself, but have an impact on engagement. And the one that I was particularly looking at with those students at the time was emotions.

But I went back after my PhD. And I went back to literature. And I came across this work by Nakata, who is an Indigenous and Aboriginal Australian researcher, who does work with Indigenous students' experiences in higher education.

And he talked about how our students walk through the world with their own culture the entire time. And they live in this dynamic space, at the intersection between who they are and who we are. And I really liked that idea. I liked the thinking that that gave because I think that it highlights, one, that while you transition to university, you don't give away who you came in with. You're always walking through the world and that intersecting space.

So I took his idea of what he called a cultural interface and coined the idea of an educational interface, that this is where the students experience higher education. And active places, they're not passive agents in this. They are actively navigating their way through this world of themselves, intersecting with the university.

And then I went back to the literature. In my own PhD, I realised that there were four sort of elements of the student experience that I could see in the literature and I had seen in my own research students; that were student responses to what was happening to them; that were incredibly important. And they were incredibly important, partly just because you want your students to have good things because we care about them. But also, in terms of engagement, because they changed how students engaged.

And that's those four pathways that you can see highlighted in black there: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being. And each of those, when a student has high self-efficacy, it's easier for them to engage. When the self-efficacy is low, it acts as a barrier to engagement. So the student responses to this situation, they matter because they change the student's engagement.

And I'm going to give you a couple of quotes from my—mostly from the Australian study—that illustrate them at work. Self-efficacy, so this is Bandura's work, a student's belief in their capability to do the thing in front of them at this moment in time. It's not that general belief, not that general self-confidence. It's ‘can I do this essay, this task, participate in this classroom right now.’

And the example from Tony: ‘A two-year-old could do it.’ We hope that's not true at university, but you know. ‘I came to the conclusion I was simply too dumb. And I started questioning whether I should even be at university. And I considered dropping out because I was just too bloody stupid.’ And the power of self-efficacy there, in terms of it being a barrier to engagement, is really, really strong, really evident. Kind of ended with a negative on that one.

This is Alison who'd shown her work to a tutor. ‘I'm excited because it's my first one and he says it's good, like considering I wrote it so fast. I was pretty happy with myself, like I can do this. It was a bit of a reassurance. I can actually be a university student successfully. I'm not just pretending.’

And that's a really important thing—isn't it—for our first year students to establish, that they can be this new thing that they are being, a university student. And if they feel they can be it, then they're more likely to try and be it. And that's what Bandura's self-efficacy theory argues.

Emotions, you do any work with data from students and the emotions just come through. And it's all over the place. The most commonly used metaphor for students when they're describing their first year at university in particular, but I suspect it carries on, is an emotional roller coaster.

As Natasha, that was from my PhD, a mature age student: ‘I've had the highest of highs and the lowest of the lows.’ Exactly the same metaphor from Matthew, a young 17-year-old in an Australian campus—internal student, distance student.

I think it's while I've been preparing this presentation that I want to talk mostly about online students. The thing that I would say is that the student experience isn't that different whether you're in a classroom or at home. There are things that are different. There are dozens of influences, if you think about the framework. But the actual experience of being a student often plays out very much the same. It just has different influences.

And so you can see there that two very, very different students and yet both of them talking about the highs and the lows that they experienced in university, and the speed of the fluctuations. In both these projects, they were interviewed once a week. They'd be, ‘god, I love this. This is fantastic. I'm in the right course. This is just right. Yay.’

And then they'd be like, ‘Oh, I hate this. What am I doing here?’ It would change from time to time. It would change in one class—love that one, hate that one. And those emotions matter. Again, they matter partly because we want our students to be happy, because we're all good people. But they matter because emotions impact on engagement.

So what my research showed, just to give you a little example, was that frustration which is a really common emotion for students often caused—I'm sorry to say—by poor teaching, like course guides that they can't read and instructions that they can't understand, conflicting advice, not being able to find what they need to do the job that they're doing. Frustration is a really big hindrance to engagement. They just, they give up. Because they can't do it because they're just so frustrated.

Anxiety though, a little bit of anxiety, great. Great motivator, a little bit of anxiety. If you're worried about that assignment, maybe you'll actually do it. A lot of anxiety, not so good. So emotions really, really matter. And we need to be thinking about them. And we need our students to be thinking about them. Because they don't expect this. Even though they've had it in other parts of their life, for some reason they don't expect it. And I don't think we talk about it enough. And I think in talking about it, we can help them manage it.

Wellbeing, lots and lots and lots of stuff going on in the student wellbeing sector at the moment because we're worried about the wellbeing, the welfare of our students. We know they suffer incredible stress. There's horrible statistics from Australia, New Zealand—it doesn't matter where you go—on the mental health and wellbeing of our students.

Sienna is a great example. She was talking here about why she chose this university versus any university. And she chose one near her home because she believed it was going to help her have better wellbeing, be less stressed. ‘And therefore, if I'm not in a good space, if I'm not in the space for learning. If I'm stressed, I'm not in the space for learning. How am I going to be getting good grades?’

‘But I know that if I'm not stressed and I'm really happy, it's just easy. Like I'll be so motivated to get good grades here.’ So she knew how it worked. She knew that wellbeing mattered—not just the wellbeing but because of its impact on her ability to engage.

Sadly, it wasn't quite the positive experience that she was expecting. ‘I've just been exhausted.’ This about week 12. ‘All the assessment and the work and just everything's a bit overwhelming. Either I don't sleep because I'm stressing or sleep a lot. I just don't do anything. I don't have the motivation to do my readings.’ And you can see that really direct impact between her wellbeing, her stress, and her engagement. She just can't.

Belonging. I'm doing some work on belonging. I'm doing some writing up of the data that I've got on belonging at the moment. And it's really, really interesting. We talk a lot about belonging, so we kind of know that it's important. I think one of the things that we don't talk enough about is the fact that there's social belonging and then there's academic belonging. And these are different but related things.

So here Felix is talking about friendships, some of that social belonging. But even though you think it's just about being friends, what he makes clear is they matter. Because it allows him to engage in class. Because he's more comfortable now but he's got a friend with him. ‘I'm able to sit in class and listen and learn and engage.’

Academic belonging is also important. This is Alex. ‘I feel like I belong in the course. I find it very easy to understand and interesting. So yeah, I feel like I'm in the right course.’ This is important.

Thinking that you're in the right place, seeing the relevance of what you're doing to yourself and to your goals is a really big facilitator for engagement. If they're doubting that, the likelihood of them engaging and wanting to do the things in front of them, greatly reduced. And I'll talk a bit about that when I talk about the practices.

So there's the framework of engagement. It gives us lots of things to think about at any one time. And of course you can't. But I think it's important to remember that when you're thinking about one thing, to be bearing in mind the others as well.

So I'm going to talk about what I call the three principles. They're not three principles. But I couldn't think of a lighter way of saying it. And they are three things that I think about in my teaching practice based on my research and my experience.

What I'm thinking about is these things. And this is the question that you've got to be thinking about in the end: ‘How does what we do foster engagement in all three dimensions?’ Not just how do we get them to do what they need to do, but how do we get them to be interested and enjoy it. How do we get them to be actually processing the information deeply?

But at the same time, how do the things that we do increase their skills and therefore increase their self-efficacy, give them more confidence that they can do this thing? How does what we do help students manage their emotions? And how can what we do not trigger negative emotions in the way that sometimes it does, and help students manage the negative emotions that they experience?

How can we, as classroom teachers or a support staff, foster both social and academic belonging? How does what we say every day in the classroom change the student's sense of being in that right place? And how can we better support student wellbeing? When it's not going well, what can we do to foster it? When it is going well, what can we do to sustain it?

Because we have, as teachers and as anyone who works in the university, the potential to impact all of these things and thus impact their engagement and thus impact their success and their satisfaction at university. And then if you're at the institutional level, retention and good things like that.

So these are what I'm calling my three principles. Teacher presence, as in being there for your students. And I've got no doubt that the people who come to events like this are already doing this. This is the thing about good teaching and running teaching seminars. Unfortunately, the people who are at these events are usually the ones who are already fully engaged as teachers because that's why they come to teaching events. Because they really care about teaching.

I don't know what it's like at your university, but the colleagues that I'd like to see in a room like this, they're not here. It may not be the same at Deakin. When I say teacher presence, and I'll unpack it in a minute, both academic and affective. The paper that I've just written on the relationship between staff and students, caring. Not just being knowledgeable, caring—caring about their welfare, caring about their success, caring about their learning. Students know. And it matters. It has an impact on their emotions, on their belonging, on those things that we've been talking about.

Firing interest. Interest is one of the most powerful drivers, their interest in what we're doing. And we can do that by connecting their past, present, and future selves. And finally, and I put this last though really it's almost foundational so it should almost come first. But I didn't want to put it first because I think more people do good course design than do teacher presence well. We can debate that one.

But it's so important because when it's not good, it's a barrier. It's not that good course design necessarily engages. But bad course design disengages. And I think that's the critical thing.

And when we're coming to our distance students in particular, these things are even more important. Because they're much harder to do through a screen. That's why it's different.

It's not that these things—these things are the same for face-to-face learning. Similarly for non-traditional students versus traditional students. These things matter for both. They matter for all students.

They're more important for our non-traditional students because of the things that the student brings with them and how that intersects or doesn't intersect comfortably with the university environment. So I don't think the things are different, what we need to be doing. I just think it's more important in different contexts with different groups of students.

Teacher presence, passion and enthusiasm is the most important thing. We know this. And I like this. This is one of my favourite quotes. ‘Their engagement and passion for the subject encourages me to want to go home and study more. Because if they're boring as, I'm going to be like, OK, mustn't be that important. If it's not important to you, then why is it important to me kind of thing.’

And this really highlights that our enthusiasm doesn't matter just in the classroom, in this lecture, or in this video. It matters when they go home. Because it tells them something about the relevance of what they're doing. It links to interest. It makes them feel like this is important, which makes them feel like this is where they want to be. It establishes their academic belonging.

Personal. Now being personal is hard. I don't know about you. I have 200 to 300 students and they're distance students. So I don't even get to know their faces. Not that I'm that good with faces and names anyway. But it's harder. But we can do it. We can do it in a way that makes them think it's personal, even if it's not.

Because it can't be. Because I can't greet each of my 300 distant students online individually. But I can, when they reach out to me or they say something, I can respond personally then. And I can use direct tools and techniques to try and connect individually to people. It's not easy. But it's kind of doable.

Warmth and empathy. That's about that emotional stuff, that caring stuff. The next one is acknowledging anxiety and minimising frustration. This is about the emotional stuff, those negative emotions. We don't talk about it enough.

It is OK to say to your students, ‘You know what, you've got your first ever big assignment coming up. You will be freaking out. And if you're not freaking out, you should be freaking out. Because it's hard.’ It's OK to say that. And it's good to say that.

Because otherwise the freaking out student thinks they're the only one freaking out, especially in distance education. Because they haven't got a buddy next to them who is also obviously freaking out. And even if they are part of a Facebook group for their course, you know who is sharing on the Facebook group? The A students, the ones that are going, ‘I've got three kids and this is really easy.’ And the one who's got one child and is struggling is going, ‘What's wrong with me?’ So we need to normalise these kinds of experiences for our students.

Firing interest. And the way I've talked about this is in terms of past self, current self, and future self. It's a useful sort of framework to be thinking about. How is what we're doing right now related to you and your past in terms of who you are, in terms of your previous experiences, work that you've done, roles that you've had in the past? All of our students, whether they're 17 or 70, have got past selves not only that they bring but are valuable.

And it depends on what you teach. I mean, I'm blessed. I teach a course on identity, belonging, and citizenship. Like there is nothing about what students bring with them that is not relevant to our course, which I have to say makes this stuff really, really easy for me.

It doesn't make the future self one as easy, though. Because establishing relevance is a little bit harder when you've got students doing a compulsory course that some of them, quite frankly, don't want to do. So, depending on what you're teaching, it can be easier to think more about future, current, or past self.

But these are all different things that you can be doing. And that enables the student to feel, again, that sense of belonging. Because they can see a connection between them and this content, this course, and these people. They can see a connection between them and other students. They can see themselves.

And firing interest, it helps with that relevance. Why does this matter? Does it matter for what you're going to be doing when you leave these hallowed walls? Does it matter for what you're doing in your daily life? So much of what we teach is valuable transferable skills. And we know this.

There's a whole rhetoric around it now about students not knowing enough or not seeing enough of the transferable skills that they are learning. We know they're learning them. We know we're teaching them. They don't.

So we need to be saying, hey, in this discussion, we are thinking critically. Why is that important? Because every time you read the newspaper, you need to be thinking critically. You need to be questioning. So getting them to understand the relevance of what they do, not just in terms of employability, in terms of them, not just those academic outcomes, but those personal outcomes as well.

Couple of quotes as to why interest is so important. Apparently interesting stuff just sticks automatically. I'm not sure it's quite that easy. But you can see her point. Felix: ‘It wasn't interesting. So I left it to the last minute and I didn't know a thing. I borderline passed.’ And that's classic, isn't it?

If we're not interested in something, and this is of course why you guys are here and the other people that I mentioned before, your colleagues, are not here. But of course they might be watching it. And I understand if you're watching online later, that's OK. You were obviously interested as well. But interest matters. So we need to foster it.

At the same time, I have been known to say to my students, you know what, so maybe this isn't interesting. But you know what? You have to know it. Like everything doesn't have to be interesting. But if you can explain to them why they need to know it, then that in itself makes it interesting.

Course design, structure and flexibility. And I think this is particularly important again for our distance students. It's harder for distance students to see the clear structure. And it's harder for them to necessarily fit around what we want them to do.

Usually they are studying by distance because they have messy, complicated lives. And they can't come to campus and study from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM or whatever each day. They've got children. They've got jobs. They've got other commitments. So we need to be thinking about that in our course design.

And we need to be signposting those structure and flexibility issues, giving them materials enough in advance so that if they've got kids and school holidays coming up, they can get it done in advance. And saying it to them, school holidays are coming up. If you've got children, why don't you do this week's work a week in advance. So giving them as much flexibility as we can within the constraints that we have around students and marking and those kinds of issues that we have in managing these kinds of things.

To do lists, especially for first years, they don't know what to do next. They don't always know what's the most important thing. They think everything is important, which of course it is. Otherwise we wouldn't be putting in front of them.

But clear sign posting, this is critical this week. This is really, really important. This one, honestly, if this is a bad week for you, if you want to leave something, just skim this one. It's OK. We know there was a difference. Be honest about it.

Think carefully about synchronous activities in terms of distance teaching. So synchronous as in real time, like this is. But this is being recorded. So it's OK. Because you've got both needs met. People can be there and get the sense of immediacy, which is a lovely thing to people. But those who can't can still get the benefits afterwards.

The benefits afterwards are never as good as the benefits at the time. But it's still way better than nothing. But don't overuse it. I think what's happening with technology is we're getting tendency to do everything the coolest, flashiest way.

Distance learning isn't about cool flash. It's about presence. It's about connections between people and things. And you don't have to be cool and flashy to do that. You can be simple. And you'll see that with my practice in a moment. I'm pretty simple.

So some examples of practice, some of the things that I do with my course. So again, a bit of context: 200 to 300 distance students ranging from age from 17 to 70. Our distance students, and I'm guessing it may be the same here at Deakin, tend to be more diverse than our campus based students.

We have more Maori and Pacifica students in the distance cohort than we have face-to-face. We have way more first-in-family, lower socioeconomic status, people who this is quite a big deal to come to university at the age of 40 with two children having dropped out of school at the age of 15. So we have a real diverse cohort.

I'm teaching a course on identity and blogging and citizenship, which I adore and most students come to adore, except for a couple who, it doesn't matter what I do, they're never going to adore. Because it's always an intersection between student and university.

So videos are incredibly important, as we know. Because they allow that face-to-face and that personal. Now, my videos, I do a weekly video for my students. And I record it each week. It's not a pre-packaged thing that was done last semester.

Someone said to me recently, cause I'm away at the moment and the semester starts next week, and I'm like, got to record a video. And they're like, why don't you just use last semester's? And I'm like, because it's not the same students. And they'll know. They will be able to tell.

So I do this week’s, which means I can say, ‘Hey, great conversation you guys are having in the forum right now. Love that comment that Mary made. That was really interesting.’ And Mary and everyone else is thinking, that's pretty cool. She's talking to us. She's not just talking. She's talking to us.

And that thing that happened, you know—no, that's a really bad example. I won't give it. That thing that happened in the news is really relevant to what we're talking about this week. So we were doing a week on protest. The kids were protesting about climate change.

And I can say, ‘Those kids protesting about climate change, that's them using their voice.’ And I can use real life examples. That matters to students because it's about connection. But it's also about them getting to know me.

I start with a song every week. Not an entire song. And no, I don't sing. I can see the look on your face. She's listening to my voice, going, really? I mouth. I mouth. Only about 20, 30 second clip, but it's a song that's relevant to the topic of the week. And it just starts on a slightly lighter note.

Every time I do a student survey at the end, there's a couple of people who go, ‘I just love her songs’. We start with a song. And it came about because it was something that I used to do in the classroom, just have music playing when kids came in the class room. And I thought, well, hang on a minute. How can I replicate that, but in a way that will work? Because I couldn't play a three minute song because no-one's going to sit there and watch a three minute video of Ella mouthing anything.

These videos, like I said, 20 minutes. Originally I tried for 10, because everyone tells me that's the attention span. I gave out. They can pause it and go make a cup of tea. And I tell them, ‘Look, if this is too long, pause it and go make a cup of tea or do whatever you need to do.’

But I think, you know, there's a risk of patronising people by saying their attention span is too short. Like you're at university, people. You need to actually learn to listen for 20 minutes. You can do it with Netflix. I can do it with Netflix. I think you can do it with me.

So it's always a trade-off. But I don't do recorded lectures as in capture a lecture for internal students. Because to be honest, it's not very engaging to watch, to watch someone teaching to other people. Whereas in this, I am sitting there face-to-face with you talking with you. And they feel like that. They really do. They feel like the quote from a student this semester who said, ‘It feels like I'm in the room with you.’

And it's mostly, it's not a lot of content. The content in my distance courses is mostly in reading. Because it needs to be so that you can re-read it, do it slowly, highlight, scribble, and all those kinds of things. This is about, hey, these are the three really main ideas this week.

This is the thing I want you to really, really be thinking about. Don't forget we've got that assignment coming up. You need to be doing some planning with that. It's the stuff we would do at the beginning of a lecture anyway to set our students up for the week's work. And I posted the week before so that it's available to them.

The other thing is the discussion forums. This is the way that I start my discussion forums. And this is about making that personal connection. I start with a thread called [SPEAKING MAORI]. This from 2016 when I realised that I didn't use the Maori phrase. But I now use the Maori phrase. Who am I? Who are you?

It's a course in identity. So I introduce myself with all my gory details. So I am English-born, Kiwi, straight, atheist, married, mother—goes on—grandmother, student, toastmaster, reader, jigsaw puzzler, feminist. Honestly, I get really carried away. I tell them everything I can think of about myself.

And I say, who are you? And they all respond with similar incredibly diverse and incredibly interesting lists. I've learned so much about people in terms of really deep stuff. People will share stuff about their abilities and disabilities, their identities in terms of gender and sexuality. And you'll have people go, you know what, I've never heard of aromantic before. I had to go and Google it. Now I know what it is.

And every student who posts, I respond to personally. It's time consuming as hell. But it makes a big difference. Because they might say something like, I'm studying from Australia, I'm in Melbourne. And I'll just go, hey, welcome from Melbourne. I was there last week presenting at Deakin University. Lovely city you've got. The sun was shining though it was flipping freezing. And that's because I've come from London, in case you're wondering why I'm freezing coming from New Zealand. I'd come straight to London. And they think, oh, look at that. We've got something in common.

Now, I'm not going to remember that six weeks later when they contact me. I just can't. But they're going to remember it. Because for them, that was the sole activity. And so they're much more likely to reach out if they need help or to contact me and feel like they've got a relationship with me.

Tu News is one of things that I love doing and my students love. I do recreate these and just tweak them for each new semester. This has got no course content in it. This is about skill development and pastoral care, about timely skill development and pastoral care.

The one on the left is from very early in the semester. In fact, it's before the semester starts. We have a meet the teacher session where they can drop into a Zoom Room, … think about whether they've taken too much on. Because the students always take on too much.

They all have a things to do check list, because some people just like it. This is a PDF. If it's a very old fashioned kind of thing. It arrives by email with a PDF. I know some students print them and put them on their noticeboard. Some don't. That's fine. We don't like staring at screens all of the time. So it just gives them another option.

And then the one on the right, you can see that's later in the semester. They've got their essay coming up. So it's just a really friendly, how do I write an essay. You do this. You do this. You do this. You do this. It's just different ways of communicating with people.

Often I have motivational quotes. I share poll results with them that tell them a little bit about their classmates. It's timely advice, friendly, creating that sense of belonging. Everything's called Tu something. Turangawaewae, by the way, is the name of the course. In case you're wondering what that means, that means standing place, place where I come from. So Turangawaewae is the Maori name for the course. That's why even it's called Tu Live and Tu News.

This is one of the assessment tasks. This is a weekly assessment task that I'm not going to talk for ages about though I could. Incredibly valuable for my students. They do it every week. Or they can do it every week. But only the top six count. … flexibility. And I say to them, only six count. So if you've got a really, really busy week with other courses or whatever, don't do that week. Just make sure you do do the weeks when you have got time. Because otherwise, you'll be close to the end and realise you're not going to get your six.

They are, again, given the opportunity to fire interest. They take a specific aspect of the course, whatever one they want to, and work through the materials, and they reflect on it in relation to themselves, their past experiences, events in the media, whatever else is happening, getting that deeper and more connected learning. Students love them. Just some quotes from some of my students. They also hate them because I make them do something every week. But they love them.

This is the only synchronous activity that I run. This is Tu Live using Adobe Connect because of the numbers. So Adobe Connect works by video but they're present by text. I would use zoom if I could. But I have 95 students attend one of these, which is bedlam, but so much fun. I love doing this.

I run them in the evening because most of my distance students often have more time in the evening. No … but they're recorded. They have usually two checkboxes, one specific questions for me because otherwise I'd miss them, and one check for them. And I just check. And sometimes they check while I'm talking and sometimes I have to stop and go, you are listening to me, aren't you? And they all go, yes. You can just picture all these people sitting in all their rooms all around the country and around the world. I have some who zoom in from 2 o'clock in the morning because they're in China or something like that. But they make the effort to be there.

I often will have coffee with them. Or bring a glass of wine. Don't tell anyone. Because one student—sorry, I shouldn't whisper while being recorded. One student actually in the survey at the end said it was very unprofessional of me. Don't matter what you do, people! You can't please everyone all the time.

And it's 8 o'clock in the evening, after my dinner at my house. I'm finishing my wine, people. I don't think it's unprofessional. But it's about setting that personal warm welcoming space for students. And the rest of the 300 students really, really valued it.

And these are focused on assessments, which is actually critical. That's one of the reasons I get such a high attendance rate. They're specifically focused on assessments to give us a chance for me to talk through what I'm expecting, for them to fire off all those questions. And it's really effective.

AUDIENCE: How often do you do it?

ELLA KAHU: It's about five or six times a semester. Like, they're two weeks before the assessment's due. You really have to get the timing right. There's always a few students who wish they were earlier. And a few students I'm doing this, they haven't even looked at the question yet. But sometimes this makes them look at the question. Because I send a thing out going, ‘Tu Live tonight. Please go and read the essay question before you come.’

I change the date. Because otherwise, I might need to do something else on a Monday, and wouldn't even be able to attend. So sometimes it's Monday, sometimes it's Wednesday. And I set it about three or four weeks in advance. And that's for my own life. Because the more flexible it is for me, the easier I can go, look I can't do it Wednesday. This week we're going to do it Thursday this week. Never had anyone worry about that.

Couple of final little things. This is what's called the intellectual kete. Kete is a Maori word meaning basket. And this is a place in the learning management system where once they've done the serious work, they can go and have a play. And it links to online resources that are relevant to that week's topic—TED Talks, music, art, poetry, articles from varying online sources, non-online sources about the topic.

It's very, very clearly labelled as optional extras. Because otherwise, some students will spend too long there. I warn them about the fact that you can spend too long in the kete. It's a bit of a—you know what it's like once you go online. Then you link, you link, and all of a sudden—which is why I'm very clear about, you do this afterwards.

And I say to students, if you've got stuff, if you found something relevant to this week's topic, let me know. Because I'll pop it in the kete. And I can see it build up with them in there as well.

And finally, I do a number of polls with my students. This is around getting them to see who they are, but also who the rest of the students are. Especially for distance students, it's very isolating. And so that first one we do a week looking at use of voice through political participation. So I ask them, who votes? Who doesn't vote? We do a thing on digital identity. So which tools do you use? And then I see the results back with the students. And we talk a little bit about who we are and how diverse we are.

I have no idea how long it was, but I know it's too long by the look on Merrin's face.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: It's perfect.

ELLA KAHU: Really? Cool. OK.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: It's 1:45.

ELLA KAHU: Ah. Nailed it. I'm going to end with a Maori [MAORI TERM], so a Maori proverb. [SPEAKING MAORI]

What is the most important thing in the world? Let me tell you. It is people. It is people. It is people.

Or to put it in the context of today, [SPEAKING MAORI]. It is students. It is students. It is students. And I know you know that. But it's good to finish on that note. Thank you. Time for questions now.

[APPLAUSE]

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: I know there'll be clapping at people's desks and clapping at other campuses. Thank you, Ella. That was so terrific.

ELLA KAHU: You're welcome. Do I go and sit down over there? Or how do we do this now?

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Well no, we've got this sneaky way of getting people to stay. Because Ella will be back in about 10 minutes to answer some questions that may come through from Slido or some comments from discussions that people can have around the place. We'll have one here at downtown. And they'll be happening other places as well. So we'd love you to join our conversation here. I think that we will come back in about 12:55 with some questions. Please put them through Slido. Is it happening already, Trina?

TRINA: Yes. We already do have some questions we can ask. And we'll come back at five-to, perhaps.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Terrific. So up on the screen now is our take away question. So this is something for us to talk about in our groups or have a think about. How can I/do I foster not just student engagement but also self-efficacy, belonging, well-being, and positive emotions as pathways to engagement: our point of discussion. So let's take that for 10 minutes. And we'll reconnect again at 12:55.

TRINA: And as you're having a discussion in your groups, please do add questions to Slido. And also vote for the questions that you are most interested in hearing the answer to.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Right. Thank you, Trina.

…

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: So welcome back everybody. We've gone a little longer because there was a lot of engaged conversation happening here and I'm sure where you were. Trina has got the mic with the big questions. And I'm going to throw to her and to Ella.

TRINA: Thank you. So the most popular question, by far—well done, whoever wrote this, anonymous person—how can we ensure we're not disadvantaging quiet engagement, that we don't only focus on visible engagement?

ELLA KAHU: That's a really good question. That's a really good point too. We can't. It's a very short answer. But I think that we can remember—and that's what I meant a little bit about the behavioural engagement. We can not assume that because a person is not doing A that means they're not engaged.

There are students, particularly in my distance students, who I know are just out there, they're doing the work, they're engaged in their way, and they're not participating in discussion forums. But you know what? That's OK. As long as they know that if they need something, they can reach out.

And I don't think we know. I don't think we know with internal students either. I think we have to be OK with that. I'm just thinking that one through. I know that students will say at the end of the semester that they read all the discussion, you know, lurking. Lurking is a great way of doing distance. And they'll say, I never thought about this, this, and this. But other people talked about it.

The difficulty, of course, is that if everyone wants to be the silent lurker, there's nothing to lurk on. And I have a tendency to put that pressure on students, to the class, and say, look, if no one has a conversation, then none of you can read the conversation. Because there won't be a conversation. So some of you need to step up.

But it is a really, really hard issue. I agree. I think it's around trusting students as well, that they learn the way that they learn, and not saying the only way to learn is to have a conversation in a forum or to participate in the classroom.

I say to my students, I want you to talk about this. But you don't have to talk about it with me. You can talk about it around the dinner table. You can talk about it with colleagues. You can talk about it, you know, any way you like. But talking about things is a really, really useful learning strategy. So talk about it. But don't feel you have to do it with other students.

TRINA: And that relates to what you've already said about acknowledging, so acknowledging that students are going to engage differently and that they may be learning outside of the classroom so they don't feel isolated. Excellent response. How important is it to set and emphasise expectations and responsibilities at the outset, establishing rules of engagement?

ELLA KAHU: Yeah. I think expectations are important. I think particularly for first year students who don't have—and two kinds of expectations, actually, that I want to talk about. One, expectations of us and how it's going to work. And two, expectations of themselves.

I certainly have the thing in the course guide that says, I will respond within 48 hours on a working week on any question that you specific—you know, we have the official policy. And then of course I respond way faster than that because I'm a really engaged teacher.

And there is a danger of that. I've been told that I do it, as I was saying to these guys, do it too well as in I'm setting up a terrible expectation where teachers will reply quickly. When people say that to me, I go, yeah, OK. So in a lecture hall, when a student asks a question, do you say, right, well I'll be back to you in 24 hours? No, you don't. You answer then and there.

And if you're a distance educator, I think you should set aside a couple of hours a day when you are then and there for your students. And you make that clear to your students. So yeah, I think expectations are important.

I think it's hard in distance education. My students will post things on a Saturday. And if I don't reply, they'll then email me on the Sunday. And by Monday, they're just about banging down my door even though they live in Australia.

And I will politely say, hey, guys, I know you do a lot of your work in the weekend. I'll admit I do some too. But please bear in mind this is my working week. This is yours. They may not always overlap. Open, honest communication. Open, honest communication I think is just critical to everything.

But the other expectation that I think is important is expectations around grades for students. I don't know if it's an issue for you guys, but with mature age students, I have a real issue that they come in and they are confident in other areas of their life. They are bosses of their families and in their workplaces. And then they come in and they get, you know, 65% and they're crushed.

And I'm like, what do you mean? 65% seems fine. This is a great start. I don't know what the—what am I doing wrong? I had this one guy ring me up. And I love telling the story. He rang me up. He was a distance student. And he was an Olympic athlete.

And he had represented New Zealand at the Olympics. So I mean, I recognised his name as soon as it appeared on the course list. Intimidated much, yes. And he rings me up and goes, ‘I don't know—this is just terrible.’ And I'm like ‘Hang on. If I took up your sport’—and I won't name the sport because it would narrow it down too much in New Zealand, who we're talking about. ‘And if I came into your sport and six weeks later, I competed. Do you think would I do well? ‘

And he went, ‘Of course not.’ ‘Then, why do you think you can come play my sport and do well straight away?’ And he's like, ‘What do you mean?’ And I said, ‘It's a sport. There are skills. There are things that you need to learn how to play this academic game.’ He said, ‘Oh.’

I said, so ‘What would I have to do to do well at your sport?’ He said, ‘Well, you'd have to practise, get feedback, get coaching.’ I'm like, ‘Well, there you go, my friend. Practise, get feedback.’ And honestly, he was like, ‘I've got it. I'm not going to do good straightaway, am I?’ I'm like, ‘No, you're not. But you will. And you can. If you put the same time and commitment into my sport as you put into yours, you'll be teaching me before you know it.’ So expectations are critical.

TRINA: So I'm going to try and cluster three questions together now. Because it touches on what we spoke about in our group. So for those who were not here, we spoke about how teacher engagement intersects with that of students within that educational interface. For example, our emotions, self-efficacy, and wellbeing. And then we have a couple of other questions which are, I think, related, which is why I'm clustering them, which is,’How can we balance the implementation of these strategies with our need to manage the workload of multiple units, research and service responsibilities?’, which is certainly something we spoke about here.

And finally, just to really challenge you, ‘How much do you invest yourself in your students? Do you accept a certain level of failure as part of your own self care?’

ELLA KAHU: Who is failing, me or the student? Sorry.

TRINA: So how much do you invest yourself? Do you accept a certain level of failure? So I guess what I'm seeing this as is ‘How do our roles intersect with the educational interface? And how do we balance all these strategies and our desire for our students to succeed with our own expectations elsewhere? And then do we accept that we're not going to get it every time? How much do you give?’

ELLA KAHU: Academia is a no-win game. Let's be absolutely clear here. I think that the way academia is set up, particularly for academics, the conflicting tensions between research and service and teaching are such that it's probably impossible to be stellar at all three. I don't know that we recognise that well enough.

I helped get around this by researching my teaching. It was my clever strategy when I did my PhD. I love teaching, not such a big fan of research. Solved the problem by researching the teaching. And then basically I'm always teaching. It's just, you know, sometimes I'm writing about it and sometimes I'm doing it. But that was my strategy.

I think that the institutional issues—and we were talking about this at the table that I was with—in terms of progressing in university, there was an issue around progression being predominantly based upon research as opposed upon teaching. But we're getting better at that. And some institutions, they certainly are as in mine, it sounds like a little bit like it might be in yours as well.

We can't have it all. We can't do it all. This is true of everything in life. The world is forever telling people, you can do it all and have it all. But guess what? You can't. So maybe you can choose to be a great teacher and an amazing researcher. Or an amazing teacher and a great researcher. Maybe you can't be an amazing both. And maybe we have to be OK with that.

In terms of my own self-care and my students, I accept a huge amount of failure. I teach a large, compulsory, first year distance course. My retention rates are really, really good for large, compulsory, first year distance courses. But they’re still not perfect. There's an awful lot of students who come through my door and do not pass my course. And I hate it.

And I hate the fact that large numbers of them are overrepresented in terms of Pacific Island students and Maori students. And I'm always trying to look for new strategies. But I also think that, at the end of the day, if you look at the framework, I'm only one part of it. I'm a little tiny cog in that huge wheel. Little tiny cog. And I don't have a great deal of influence over all of the institutional structural influences—the policy, the culture, the curriculum, the stuff within the institution which is also what you were talking about. And yes, it impacts on it.

We were talking in our group about how if we're overworked and stressed, it's much harder to be a caring presence for our students, as much as we try to put that behind us and be there. And we do. I mean, right now I'm sitting here engaged with you and I'm talking—I'm really tired. I flew from London yesterday. You don't know that because I'm being all—But the end of the day is if I did that every day, it would be much harder to be enthusiastic.

And when you email me—and you know, when that student emails you and you're like oh, for god sakes. Because actually it's the 40th email that you've had. But it's the first one they've sent. And it's hard to sustain that. Of course it is. And you do have to look after yourself.

I don't have an answer for it. But I do know that the people who care about the students manage it because they care about students. It's just like parenting, isn't it? That was a bit patronising to students. But you know what I mean? You're a parent no matter how stressed you at work or whatever. You still parent. And sometimes you snip. And you know what? You do that with students, too.

The trouble with distance, the thing I don't like about distance stuff, is every time I do snip, it's in writing. And sometimes I'm not snipping, but it sounds like it because it's in writing. You know when I say, please read the course guide. I can sit in class going, please, guys, read the course guide. And you all know that I'm saying it lightly.

But you put that in writing, and it goes, please read the course guide. So, yeah. That's a real struggle. And I've gone off topic. And I have no idea if I answered any of those three questions.

TRINA: Well, no. I think that you have. And then I'm going to go to this one because it's related. So it sort of adds to what you've already said, which is how do you manage those personal boundaries with your students. Because you're talking a lot about sharing a lot of yourself.

ELLA KAHU: And that is a really interesting question. I remember the very first time I did that lecture when I was tutoring at university. And I was teaching first year psychology. And the only time anyone's ever assessed my teaching, I had a really good lecture that I was working with. And she came in and she sat in the back while I lectured.

And I can't remember what the topic was. But the thing about psychology, a little bit like teaching on identity, it's about people. So it's hard not to be personal. Like if you want a personal example, gosh, I've got plenty of them. And I said something and used several examples. And she said to me in the thing she wrote about my teaching, she said, you need to be careful of that. Because you know, it's professional boundaries.

And I've thought a lot about that. And I disagree. I really do. I'm a person. And I don't have a problem with them seeing me as a person. I'm not going to share stuff that I wouldn't share—like, you know, I'm still thinking about the fact that I don't know them.

Sometimes, you know, if you run into them in the street when you meet them face-to-face and they say something like, oh, how is your grandson. And you're like, oh, yeah, cool. So I put pictures of Leo my grandson out there. And yeah, we can talk about the ethics of that one. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that one. When Leo's 20 and comes and goes, Nana, why did you do that. But anyway, I'm sorry. No I don't—I think that it's part of being present.

TRINA: He'll be all over the internet anyway.

ELLA KAHU: Exactly. Exactly. His mother's way worse about posting than I am. So, you know, I think I'm OK.

TRINA: So since you've been very good at answering questions, we all agree. We might then share back some of the answers. There are still more questions for you. But we've had some answers to the key question at the end from different groups. So maybe we'll share those. So I'll try.

So Burwood has said—oh, no. We'll come back to the actual question. So a nursing lecturer is using the #hellomynameis campaign to make personal introductions contextually relevant to the field of study. That's one of the things that people are doing. Planning to try Padlet to support interactive discussions about a unit topic. Anyone else had experiences using these types of platforms? We might come back to that one. But that's something that people are looking at.

ELLA KAHU: I've done some in the classroom with Poll Everywhere, which is a similar kind of thing, to encourage students to ask questions about the content when they don't want to. And so it's all anonymous. And so I've done where I say to them, ‘If there's anything last week that you want me to go over again, pop it in here.’

And what I found most interesting about it was that they would. They would ask questions, ’Oh, I didn't understand that.’ Or, you know, ‘I read the textbook, I don't understand this’, because it was anonymous. But what I realised was after three or four weeks, I didn't need the tool anymore. Because they'd seen how I responded to questions. And then they felt OK asking them.

And I thought that was really interesting, that it was just in those first weeks establishing my response. You know, it's like that whole—we all say there's no such thing as a stupid question. Then someone goes, ‘What date's the assignment due?’ And you go, ‘Actually, there is such a thing as a stupid question. That was one of them.’ Said with a smile. So I thought it was interesting how the tools can sometimes actually just be used to break the ice to make that level of comfort so that then they are able to engage in person.

TRINA: And I now realise that we also have a response from anonymous, who should talk to the other anonymous. Because they are interested in the same things, which is in response to the Padlet question. It can be a really powerful tool for student discussions and sharing of ideas and perspectives. That person has found it be very useful. So there is someone, anonymous, who can help you with that question and talk to you about their experience ... OK. Well, gosh, people are replying to the questions. It's quite complex. All right. So another question for you now, which is someone has said ‘Discussion boards tend to lack peer-to-peer interaction. How can we support more interaction within these forums? And is it even important?’

But then, we have a response to that while you're thinking about your response, Ella. You're doing very well, especially jet lagged, which is that check out …, their book discussions as a way of teaching. What are your thoughts on that?

ELLA KAHU: Oh, that I should read that? So my thought is I should read that. So I'm going to get to see this, aren't I? I'm going to get to see this copy of the Slido thing afterwards, please?

TRINA: I think I can probably make that happen.

ELLA KAHU: Yeah. OK. That'd be fantastic. Because you guys have got some really good questions. What are we talking about? Discussing forums.

I struggle with this. And I get really frustrated with my students. Because I have the same problem. They will post themselves but they won't respond to each other. But at the same time, when I first started teaching this course, and I'm not sure if it was just a feature of the course, we had some amazing terrible conversations.

We talk about things in my course like racism and privilege and colonisation, and some really, really, really meaty kinds of topics. And we had one situation where a student posted something about homosexuality and how it was—was it not natural? Or it was a choice, something like that. I can't remember what it was.

And varying students responded. And I was just like, ‘Oh.’ And I thought I'd sleep on it. Bad plan, never sleep on it. Because, of course, I woke up the next morning, having slept on it and thought of some really good responses and how I could sort of manage this, by which time 50 people had already posted. And it had gone and tuned into an absolute ....

And that, in some ways, made me think sometimes it's better if they don't respond to each other. Because sometimes it can be a disaster. But at the same time, you want them to because that's when the learning can really, really happen, when you're talking about really controversial subjects.

I have very clear guidelines. And I talk about respect. The very first reading in the course is one about how to have conversations about difficult subjects. Because we're going to have them. But I am still frustrated by the fact that they don't respond to each other. So it's almost like I get the best or the worst. Either they don't respond to each other at all, they'll a conversation that goes, this is my experience, this is my experience, this is my experience. And I will have to come in and go, oh, look there's connections between your and your experiences. And oh, I see that you see this differently. Yeah, it's a hard one.

But at the same time, does it matter? I don't think it's the end of the world. Reading other people's opinions, even if they're not responding to them, is still a form of learning.

TRINA: And do you think that an all or nothing response from students is harder online? And maybe it's part of the culture of online and anonymity.

ELLA KAHU: Conversation online is hard, partly because of anonymity, partly because—I mean, it's got benefits because you can stop and think. Like in terms of dealing with a tricky question, when a student asks a really tricky question, I get time to stop and think how best to respond as opposed to just going, ‘Blah,’ which you’ll have noticed I'm quite good at just going, ‘Blah.’

And the danger of going ‘Blah’ is that sometimes you read afterwards, you think it wasn't the best thing to say, was it? And so I think there are benefits to being online. But there are costs. I work very hard with my students to point out this is not a Facebook discussion group or social media commentary thing. And we talk a lot about respect and about perspective and about listening to other people's views. Because that's what the course is about, how we have different identities and we see the world differently.

But like I say, I also encourage them to talk about it with their friends. And I have students that say, ‘We have such fiery conversations around our dinner table.’ Now if a student's having a fiery conversation around a dinner table, that is fantastic. I've had students who say, ‘Oh, my 15-year-old is really keen for next week's topic.’ That is a win. That is a win. But it's something—I'm going to read whatever that resource was. Because I feel like this is something I could do better.

TRINA: So we have another suggestion from someone in response to that question, which is from someone at Waurn Ponds who says she had a strategy where she actually uses polling to find out the ways that her students prefer to learn.

ELLA KAHU: Mm. That's interesting. Yeah, that's nice. Polling is really good.

TRINA: And then we have, ‘It's tough to try and get students to approach us after they let us know that they've been struggling at the end of the trimester.’ So you might have a comment on that. And then we also have, ‘Perhaps moments of authenticity or vulnerability from the teacher could create a safe space for students.’

ELLA KAHU: And that would be what I would argue. That's exactly what it does. If I can be vulnerable, then they can be vulnerable to me. I would certainly argue it's easy to answer an easy question first. Because you really can't remember what the one before is. It's catching up on me. What was the bit before that?

TRINA: I think it was more of a comment.

ELLA KAHU: OK, good. I want to know what it was. Go on, then.

TRINA: I've already clicked that button. I can't go back. I'm trying to.

ELLA KAHU: I find this—you're having conversations with people out in I don't know where. I can't see you at all. I've never been in a room where I can't see the people in the other room. And I can't hear them. It's really interesting, isn't it?

I think I love doing this because I think it reminds us what it's like to be a distance student and to watch people having a conversation that you're part of but you're not really part of and you're never actually going to be part of it.

AUDIENCE: … share with you. It turns out because ...

ELLA KAHU: You're not even looking—I know.

AUDIENCE: I was watching you on the screen. Oh no, I don't need to. I was just saying, because I've been involved in distance ed online for a long time, I've found at times that I was interacting more positively with you on screen than looking at you.

ELLA KAHU: I was really disconcerted when I realised—and I said when the guy was setting up the technology, I said, can you get rid of that screen. Because you don't need to see a video of me. You've got me. But then they explained that that's what they see. And I was like, oh. And that's when I said to you, please look at me. Don't make me feel like I'm a screen.

AUDIENCE: It is a learning curve, I think. And I'd be watching you and thinking … So thank you.

ELLA KAHU: It can be overwhelming, some of these digital setups that we have. Those Tu Lives that I run, the Adobe Connect, some people said, you know, like in terms of overload, they've got me talking, the slides, and then there's two conversations in text going on as well. And it's just like, they can't handle it.

TRINA: And again, that's how our identities are impacting their educational experience. Because often it's harder for us than it is for a student, which is when you came in and asked us to look at you instead of the computer, that's about you. But acknowledging that and that difficulty and that vulnerability is also something that we can do in a classroom context.

So there's two more which have been popular. One was one that we actually came in with, which is ‘How can online learning communities be places where all students can live and feel their embodied differences as recognised and respected?’

ELLA KAHU: Look, some of what happens with a student is the student's responsibility. And if they don't share themselves in the forum, don't do online polls that you post, then they're not going to feel that they're part of a community. You don't get to be part of a community unless you are part of a community. And that's the honest truth of it. And I think we can articulate that to our students in some way as well.

My students tell me that they feel like they're part of a community, to an extent. That surprises me. Because I'm aware of the constraints around it. And I'm aware of how many of them there are and how I don't know all their names. But I so often get comments, like ‘This is the first time ever as a distance student that I felt part of the class.’ So I think that just doing the things that we do all of the time helps them feel that way. And it won't be all of them.

AUDIENCE: Can I also, because I posted that question, and my interest is in autism. So I was fishing for how embodied differences can actually impact things like what a community feels like and some assumptions, I think, we have around the desire to participate, and what participation looks like. So that's interesting just in and of itself.

But also, probably, for us as distance educators, because a lot of people on the spectrum will choose to learn in online modes, because it is so comfortable. So it's already a place where many of us feel safe. So I suppose I'm asking about maybe part of what's yet to happen is rethinking and diversifying notions of community and participation.

ELLA KAHU: That's a really awesome point. That's a really awesome point. And it's around what the student does is what they want to do. And you're right. And we know that students with different abilities and different preferences choose different forms of study.

To me, one of the beauties of learning online is that you can offer students choices. So like my videos, for example, I loathe watching videos. I'm the kind of person, when I look something up and it wants to me to watch a five-minute video, I'm like, ‘Couldn't you just give me a page of text?’ Because, you know, with a page of text, I can go, ‘There is the thing I wanted to know.’ With a video, I have to watch all five minutes of it. And my time is way too precious. But I don't think about my students, obviously.

But I give them transcripts. Because I know that for some students the intensity of watching someone is actually really, really hard. So I say, here's a transcript. If you're not a video kind of person, just read it. That's your choice.

And so I think that we can, more easily in some ways in an online space, offer different tools that will have different appeals to people. I think that so I have—like a lot of stuff is still written. And I think one of the groups so I'm particularly interested in is students with dyslexia and what we can do to better facilitate their learning as well. At the end of the day we have, in any group of students, people with everything, every difference under the sun. So to me, it's about offering options. And then for students to be empowered to make choices that work for them.

AUDIENCE: I suppose, I think, going back to autism though, probably what has to be the precursor to belonging is safety. So to the extent that an online space can be also an inclusive space in that sort of literal sense as well. And just to remind us not to take what seems to be non-participation personally, that we have to have a diversified expectation of what participation might look like. So that we're not judging ourselves. We actually might be making that student feel extremely comfortable by not pushing them to or by not expecting them to demonstrate participation in a particular way.

ELLA KAHU: It's a really fine line, though, isn't it? And it's really difficult. Like if I think even in an internal class, I will do things like, I will say it, ‘You're all going to present. And I know some of you are going to find that incredibly hard. But actually, in the real world, I'm sorry. This is something you need to learn how do to some degree.’

So I think there's a fine line between recognising people for the abilities and the preferences they have. But at the same time, is our job not to stretch people and push people out of their comfort zones a little bit? So it's really difficult, isn't it? And making students see that we're doing this for—

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Parents actually dancing behind you… But trust me, it's happening.

ELLA KAHU: I'm not ... She's providing entertainment.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: … dancing around. And I'm just going to make a call for one last question, Trina. Because I think, yeah. We'll make—

TRINA: We have one last question, which has been quite popular as well. When a student's parents make the choice of course for their child, how might we—oh, gosh. My computer had gone to sleep. Sorry. When a student's parents make the choice of course for their child, how might we enhance a sense of belonging when the student's choice would be different?

ELLA KAHU: Goodness gracious. I think that we can do a lot of work around recognising that a degree at university—and I'm sorry this comes as a shock to a lot of students—that whatever they end up doing in the world, it's very unlikely to be the thing that they thought they were going to do with this particular degree. And maybe if we were more honest about that story, then it might be easier to go, ‘Hey, look, maybe this wouldn't have been your first choice. But you know what? You're going to learn these skills and these things. And they are going to be applicable in a whole raft of contexts. And what you're doing here at university is you are demonstrating your ability to think and to learn and to do things.’ But at the same time, I'd be, ‘Go home and talk with your parents and change your course.’

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Or don't, just change your course.

ELLA KAHU: Yeah, well, yes. You're 18 years old. What do you mean your parents told you what to do? But I don't tend to have to deal with that very much because my distance students tend to be older students. Or if their parents told them, they haven't told me.

And it's a compulsory course. So my bigger problem is that, I didn't want to do this course and the Massey University made me, which is another equal problem.

TRINA: Absolutely. So I think Merrin's about to wrap up.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: Not at all. We'd love to have you for the rest of the afternoon. But I'm also mindful of trips from the UK. Trina, thank you so much for facilitating the Slido with the trip from the US, and still a little that way, too. Gosh, I wish I was going somewhere.

ELLA KAHU: I don't know. Someone once talked to me about … and I was like, I did a lot when I was there, promise.

MERRIN MCCRACKEN: We're going to thank you in a minute. I want to thank our participants, here and across all of our campuses. I want to let you know there will be a recording. Our next Community of Practice event will be a presentation of the inclusive aspects of Cloud First designs in the mid-trimester to break.

But I really want to thank Ella. I want everyone to unmute wherever you are. And let's make sure that she can hear us thanking Ella so much.

[APPLAUSE] ELLA KAHU: Yay. Thanks, everybody.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. It was fantastic.