TEACH.LEARN.SHARE

Episode 5: Integrating principles of well-being and assessment, with Professor Andrea Creech

TRANSCRIPT

Margo Echenberg (0:10): Welcome to Teach.Learn.Share, a podcast that thoughtfully explores teaching and learning practices in higher ed. I'm Margo Echenberg.

Jasmine Parent (0:16): And I'm Jasmine Parent. We're recording today from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, on unceded land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange among Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg nations. We honour their stewardship as we live and work on these lands.

Margo Echenberg (0:33): Over the course of the four previous episodes of our miniseries on assessment and well-being, we've been asking: Can we view learning, assessment, and student well-being as connected rather than separate? What are some of the ways in which we can build a culture of learning and healthy students simultaneously?

We've posed these questions in a number of different ways and asked them to different members of our community who all have says in assessment. So, undergraduate students, for example, also graduate students, the Senior Advisor of Faculty Development and Inclusive Pedagogies, and a Student Engagement Officer whose graduate research was in assessment and mental health.

Jasmine, what would you say are some of your takeaways from the series as we near its end?

Jasmine Parent (1:10): I was especially impressed with the students. I was obviously impressed with everybody. It was really, really fun to speak to different members of the community. But I was very impressed with some of the things that the students said. And some of the takeaways that I got from them included that students feel a sense of satisfaction whenever their learning is being assessed; so, not just their ability to, say, memorize content and then regurgitate it on an exam. And they reported that being assessed in ways that moved them beyond memorization stayed with them much longer. So, it's something that I could very much relate to.

And all of the students that we spoke to, as well, mentioned the fact that not all of the responsibility in changing assessment practices lie with the instructors. So, students, too, have to shift their thinking to what serves *them* down the line in terms of learning, and not only focus on grades, or to really separate the grades from their sense of self-worth. And I'm not thinking that that's easy. But I just thought it was really interesting that the students did mention that and … and felt that they had a responsibility, too, in the conversation.

Margo Echenberg (2:18): Absolutely. And I think we've … we've learned something we … we all know intuitively, I suppose, which is that there're so many emotions mixed up with grading and assessment, and the way we feel we're either performing or being evaluated and assessed. And it can be … it can be really a stressful time; but it can also be an opportunity to … to learn and grow and thrive.

I think, for me, a really important takeaway is the way we even think about assessment. And talking about emotions too … we always approach it—or we tend to always approach it—negatively. So, we think, immediately, sort of, about the stress related. Or we think if we're "assessing" someone, it's because we have to fix something, something's wrong, something's off. How do we improve it? How do we do better? As opposed to

starting from a more positive and creative approach, or way to think about assessment. So, that's something that I've been thinking about throughout the series.

And, I think, something else that I wanted to point out was how small changes can make big differences. Sounds kind of corny, but I think in a teaching environment … a teaching and learning environment, it can really make a huge difference. And it's important to remember that if we want to think about our students' learning and to teach in a way that's more reflective, that maybe implies a little bit of experiment, yes—but it doesn't have to be hugely experimental—that can sometimes be enough when we're also communicating with our students *what* we're doing and *why* we're doing it. Like, why are we assessing their learning in a certain way, why are we making an attempt to make the outcomes clear to them so that we can trace a path of what we want them to achieve. Those small changes can really make for … for big differences when we're talking about student well-being. So, even though I'm talking here a little bit about the instructor side of things—we've talked about students, we've talked about instructors—but we have not yet *heard* from an instructor, and our miniseries would not be complete without having that perspective. So, we're very fortunate to be joined today by Dr. Andrea Creech, Professor of Music Pedagogy at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University.

Before she was at McGill, Andrea was professor in Didactique Instrumentale at the Faculty of Music, Université de Laval, from 2016 to 2020, where she held the Canada Research Chair in Music in Community. Following an international orchestral and teaching career, Andrea was awarded a PhD in Psychology and Education from the Institute of Education, University of London, where she subsequently worked, promoted to Reader in Education, in 2013.

Andrea's research has covered a wide range of issues in formal and informal music education contexts, including interpersonal dynamics in instrumental learning and teaching, informal learning in school music, inclusion, and music for positive youth development. Her recent research has focused on intergenerational and lifelong music-making and community contexts, addressing questions relating to the social and emotional outcomes associated with music learning and participation, as well as the pedagogies and facilitation approaches that can support positive musical experience and lifelong learning.

At McGill, Andrea is researching innovative pedagogies and practices within tertiary music education. As part of this research strand, she's collaborating with international colleagues at Monash University, Australia, exploring signature pedagogies in creative collaboration.

Welcome to Teach.Learn.Share. It's so great to have you here.

Andrea Creech (5:33): Thank you. It's a real pleasure to be here. And I really appreciated all of your preamble. And I think we're going to have a really interesting conversation.

Margo Echenberg (5:42): Wonderful. Can you tell us a little bit about when you started thinking about assessment and student well-being as being related?

Andrea Creech (5:48): So, this is a really great question. And I reflected on this. And, to be honest, I cannot remember ever *not* thinking about this. I think my interest in this topic has its roots in my own early childhood or early educational experiences. I was educated in the sixties and seventies in the experimental school movement on the west coast of Canada. And in that context, assessment was entirely student led. So, when I landed in higher education and began to encounter much more traditional assessment practices, I was very acutely aware of how some of those approaches impacted my own sense of well-being and my capacity for learning.

And, as an aside, I will also say that if you had had this conversation with me about 35 years ago, when I was still in my more radical youth, I would have certainly been advocating for abolishing assessment altogether. Because, at that time, I really did not see or understand how assessment could possibly support learning. That just hadn't been really part of my experience.

Fast forward to now. And stemming from those experiences, I really now believe that learning, assessment, and well-being are almost interdependent. They really go hand in hand. For example, the extent to which we understand how we are being assessed—and you did touch on this—our understandings of why and how we're being assessed, and our recognition of a sense of purpose in the ways that our learning is assessed, will, of course, influence our motivation and our well-being. And, similarly, our expectations for success in assessments, and the ways in which we can see that our learning is being supported to make those expectations actually feel within reach, will also influence our well-being. So, essentially, learning, and assessment as part of that learning, corresponds very closely with our sense of who we are and who we want to become.

And in music, this is really very particularly the case. Assessment brings very particular challenges in that context relating to emotional and social well-being. For example, performance, or other creative outputs, are very personal and intricately bound up with one's identity. And when a performance is assessed, the performance and the person often become conflated, at least in the performer's mind, and sometimes even in the minds of the assessors. So, high-stakes assessed performances can have very serious implications for one's sense of identity, self-efficacy, and motivation. And, of course, those are all kind of dimensions of a kind of global understanding of well-being. There is now actually quite a lot of evidence in the field of music that music students live with a very high vulnerability to mental health issues and experience of assessment plays a role in that, for sure.

Jasmine Parent (8:50): I really appreciate the way that you think about well-being and learning being joined together in a positive way. You were speaking about that a little bit earlier, and, as you said, so often assessment is tied to negative emotions, disappointment, and frustration, which can be felt on the students' side, but I think it can also be felt very much on the instructors' side. There's just a lot of anxiety that surrounds even just the word "assessment." But you make a good argument to think of learning as also stimulating and encouraging our ideas of who we are and what we want to become. So, how can we begin to think of this in more practical terms? Or, in other words, are there elements of your assessment practices that changed because of thinking about student well-being, and can you describe these for us?

Andrea Creech (9:36): Yeah. So, I see assessment as an integral part of pedagogy. And my pedagogical practice is really shaped and guided by principles of well-being. So, I'm always coming back to this idea of wellness being embedded in the pedagogy. For example, thinking about the ways that pedagogy can support a sense of belonging, it can support self-efficacy, student autonomy, and a belief in the students' capacity to make a meaningful contribution in the thing that they are learning.

Some examples: I try to scaffold assessments in such a way as to foster reasonable expectations of success among students—I think this is *really* important—while also providing students with the scope to demonstrate their learning with a degree of creativity. So, this might mean a series of low-stakes assessments, where the assessment options are differentiated. It could also mean being very clear about *what* is being assessed, *why* that thing is being assessed, *how* it's being assessed, and *who* is doing the assessing.

And I always devote some class time to reflection on criteria and rubrics to support this sort of clarity over the what, why, who, and so on. So, I invite students, for example, to reflect on the rubrics, to actually revise the rubrics in language that they … they find meaningful and comprehensible, always with the caveat that we arrive, as a group, at a shared understanding.

I also like to foster a collaborative rather than a competitive learning environment, where students are encouraged to support one another's learning, and to share and think critically *together* about their learning. And I have come across several instances where students are kind of a bit afraid to do that. There's a little bit of suspicion sometimes about sharing their work with other students. And I really try and work on that, and address it, and sort of model how we're better as a community of learners than as a bunch of individuals. And we really can learn from each other.

So, your question is really about change in assessment practices. And I don't know if I have actually changed so much as *developed* in that regard. I think, probably, the message is coming across … that it's something I think about a lot and have done so for a very long time. And so, I think it's … it's a process that evolves.

Margo Echenberg (12:10): I agree. I think you're right. And "to develop" seems like such a … it seems like a better … a better verb, a better choice when we're talking about incremental changes. And when we're talking about adaptation, as well, right, how to adapt our practices to what we're trying to achieve in terms of our students' learning, and guiding them, modeling them. I think that's absolutely right on. And I think we have to speak in those terms, too, when we're moving away from more traditional assessment practices, right? We have to develop other kinds of, not necessarily, as we said, enormous experimentation, but at least … even something like discussing in class, as you say, the criteria with which students' learning is going to be compared, or showing the students a rubric, having them talk about it … making sure the language is a shared … that there's a shared understanding of how that assessment process is going to happen, is not something that many instructors often do, but it can be a change that's not enormous. But it does make the instructor also a little bit vulnerable. So, I think that that's something also worth mentioning. That often, in higher education, instructors are specialists in their fields, absolutely, but they don't always have the same sense of … surety in the classroom. And, I think, having a sense that taking some risks … it's hard … it's definitely hard to do, but it can have excellent results.

And since I've mentioned instructors, I think something that is often overlooked when the conversation is based on assessment and well-being, is instructors' well-being. There's a focus on students, for sure, but sometimes less so on instructors. So let's talk a little bit about that. As an example, of course, giving feedback can be a key, or is a key element for assessment for learning, but it can also take a toll on instructors in terms of taking up a lot of time when they're … the demands on their time are many. And sometimes students, of course, don't always respond to the feedback or use the feedback in a way that instructors are hoping for. So, do you have ideas or strategies for giving feedback that can help students learn but isn't overextending the instructor?

Andrea Creech (14:13): Yeah, for sure. So, I mean, I absolutely agree that providing feedback can certainly be very time-consuming and sometimes extremely tiring and exhausting. On the other hand, an investment in formative feedback really *always* leads to higher quality student work. So, I think it's a bit like front-loading the work. For example, giving students feedback on drafts of their work always, in my experience, has led to better quality final work. And, that then … at that stage, it is much easier and much more interesting to engage with. And, after all, the bottom line for me is that this is our job as an instructor. Our job is to support student learning. So, our assessment practices need to be in service of that learning.

Formative feedback is one way we can do that. And if that is embedded within a pedagogical approach, where students develop advanced skills in self-regulation and critical thinking, then it becomes less onerous for the instructor. In other words, formative feedback needs to be understood as an embedded facet of a wider pedagogical approach or orientation. And I take your point that students don't always respond to feedback. But sometimes that's a function of the, sort of, culture. So, if you suddenly expect them to respond to feedback, they may not know how to do that, they may not have a history of doing that, they may not have been scaffolded in … in being able to do that. So, I think it's all part of a much, kind of, bigger picture.

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Also, it does not always have to be the instructor who takes the full brunt of responsibility for feedback. Students can be scaffolded in giving and receiving feedback from one another. This goes to my point of building a collaborative environment for learning. And students can … in … in doing so, they develop their self-regulation skills, they're able to also evaluate their own work and provide feedback for themselves. So, a couple of examples of this. I like to turn the table somewhat and help students to take responsibility in the feedback process and really think about what they want feedback on. So, rather than being passive recipients of feedback, they're more active in kind of identifying: "This is what I need feedback on to develop my work." So, this could be in the form of attaching a cover page to an assignment or just simply saying what they want feedback on, let's say, in a performance or a kind of presentation situation. I think this helps students to think more critically about their work and about what they need in order to develop that work, in order to close the gap between where they are and where they want to be.

I also like to provide a framework for students to evaluate their own work against criteria before submitting it for formal assessment. In my experience, this has had a pretty dramatic effect. So, the students catch things themselves and improve the work before submitting it in the first place. And in music, I think we could take … we could do this much more and make much more extensive use of self-assessment using recordings, for example.

And then one further example. I think students can be scaffolded in giving and receiving peer feedback. With the caveat that this really does need quite a lot of scaffolding. So, we can't expect students just to suddenly, you know, be able to be peer tutors and to give and receive effective feedback from each other. They need to be aware of their role: Is it symmetrical? Is it asymmetrical? In other words, are they functioning as a sort of peer tutor or are they being much more collaborative. And they need the skills in both being able to accept feedback, and, as I said before, respond to it, but also in … in providing effective feedback in such a way that, you know, they avoid judgments, and they really talk about the work rather than the person, and so on.

But for sure, you know, these are all different examples. But I do think, overall, that there's much more scope for collaboration in peer feedback, in self-assessment, in terms of feedback, and so on, which again takes the onus off of the instructor.

Margo Echenberg (18:37): Those are all great suggestions. Thanks so much for sharing them, and we'll be sure to also list them in the Teaching for Learning at McGill University blog so that no one has to take notes listening to the podcast! It makes so much sense to me ... I think of my time as a … as an instructor … and not pausing to think about teaching students how to engage with criteria and with feedback. And I often wanted to justify where I had deducted marks instead of encouraging my students to use feedback productively and giving them the opportunities to do so. Because [as] students, understandably, you often think of assignments as sort of open and closed. And, unless we walk them through that scaffolding process, and ask them to produce multiple drafts or several problem sets, etcetera, etcetera, they don't necessarily think in those terms. If we want them to sort of push that feedback forward, we really have to accompany them in … in that process. And it makes sense to me now. But when I think about the frustration I felt, it was real, right. It takes me a lot of time to give all this feedback, and then it's not being taken into account. So, the frustration level for instructors can be high there.

Jasmine Parent (19:42): I really like this conversation. I really think that there are often expectations put on students that they should know how to do certain things that may seem obvious to the instructor—like knowing how to receive feedback, knowing how to give feedback. I think it applies to so many softer skills that students are kind of expected to master without any guidance. And … and giving and receiving that feedback is one, you know, working within a team, giving oral presentations. And, sometimes even in certain Faculties, which … I've

had experience in the Faculty of Science, even writing, like, we were never really taught how to write well. And then moving into grad school, having to write a thesis was … was very hard, and I often felt underprepared.

But in terms of giving and receiving feedback, I really appreciate, Andrea, you talking about giving students the responsibility to communicate what *they* want to receive feedback on because, at the end of the day, this is their learning experience. And often I feel like students are kind of playing the game of "I have to guess what the instructor wants, so I need to just take the feedback they give me, implement it, and move on". So, I think making them a part of that process makes them realize that this whole … this whole journey is for them. And this is their learning experience. So, they're going to walk away with knowledge and skills, and then use them in the real world. I really like how you include them in that process.

We've been talking about assessment in general terms. But I would also like to ask you about assessing learning in creative disciplines, like music. Assessment literacy, that is, being better informed about assessment, is probably an area that most instructors and students can benefit from. You've worked on aspects of interpersonal dynamics in musical instruction and innovation and pedagogies in music. So, does assessment have a place in those conversation? And is there value in talking about assessment with students of music, that is, not just sharing expectations for student work, but also encouraging some meta-cognition in their own learning processes?

Andrea Creech (21:46): Yeah, so this is a great question. And, as I said before, if you'd talked to me 35 years ago, I would have said assessment has no place … in it. But I … I've really done a kind of 180 on that. And assessment is really… it's so central to our institutional structures and when structured properly, and thoughtfully, I should say, it is part of the learning. And I think it can be a really powerful tool that can really support learning. And to your point, you mentioned, you know, students guessing what the instructor was looking for, and I think that does happen quite a lot in creative disciplines. You know, sort of trying to second guess—what are they going to be looking for? What do they want to hear or see? And really that should never … students should never be guessing.

So, I … I think the answer to your question about "should assessment be part of our conversations"? Yes, definitely. Really definitely. In music, assessment, as it stands, is often a sort of benchmarking exercise. So, typically, we assess whether performance—or some other kind of output—meets a required standard of technical or artistic competency, as understood by a panel or by some kind of assessor. And there's often some resistance to articulating in *criteria* what the nature of those competencies actually is, and how different levels of achievement can be described. So, we'll have conversations, you know, and … and the … the idea comes out that, you know, there's something mysterious and wonderful about a wonderful musical performance that we just can't put into words. But in a higher education context—I mean, that may be so—but we are … the reality is that we are in higher education and it's our responsibility to really think about the learning and development of our students. So, this discourse, which I call the "mastery versus mystery discourse," is something where I position myself quite strongly on the mastery side. I really believe that development *is* always possible. And, as I said, it's our responsibility to think about how we can support that development. That's … that's what we do with our students. So, ultimately, the development and the learning is achieved through pedagogies that support, for example, self-regulation in learning, and the other kinds of things we've talked about. So yes, you know, thinking and talking about assessment, in its broadest sense, is absolutely vital, certainly, in … for music and artistic development.

Margo Echenberg (24:34): Yeah, I mean, assessment thought of as creative possibility or potential, that's fantastic. And … and how we frame things makes … makes such a huge difference. I couldn't agree with you more. And I feel, too, that there's something really productive and interesting in thinking about how to make

that … what you call "mystery," comprehensible to students, right? That exercise of transforming tacit knowledge—knowledge that instructors have because of where they're positioned in life and in academia—is something that *can* be put into words and made understandable for students and can benefit them in … in huge ways. So, so thanks for sharing that with us.

I want to ask you a question now that we've put to several of our guests on the miniseries for the same reasons, to try and solicit what their understanding of this question is, and if it's a misunderstanding or not. And it has to do with rubrics as an assessment tool. Potentially, of course, expressing meaningful criteria to students, to show them how grades are earned, can be something very positive, as we've been discussing throughout the show already today. But some of the critiques of … of rubrics is that they can squash creativity, they can box students in, or work as checklists that potentially can inflate grades. So, if students are ticking off all the boxes, then they're getting an "A" and then, somehow, academic rigor can be affected by that. So, the question would be: Do the benefits of increasing student well-being by abating stress and anxiety outweigh concerns about the potential drawbacks? So, is academic rigor threatened when rubrics are shared with students as part of the instructions for this … for the assignment? And I make the distinction, because sometimes rubrics are used as grading rubrics, where students don't see them ahead of time, but they'll get the assignment back, and it'll be accompanied by a rubric. But that doesn't give them any sort of sense of where they're … the direction they're supposed to be taking.

Andrea Creech (26:33): I mean, first of all, I'm struggling to think of a good rationale for *not* sharing a rubric with students. There may be one. I don't … I'm not aware of that rationale. And I also think that probably the answer to this question is dependent somewhat on context. So, there may be some contexts where rubrics really are not effective and other contexts where, you know, very specific kind of tick-box checking is required. So, I think, you know, there's never going to be a one-size-fits-all kind of answer to these kinds of questions.

But, overall, I think it really doesn't have to be either/or. In other words, I don't think we have to trade off well-being for academic rigor. On the contrary, I'm very committed to the idea that well-being, in the sense of experiencing maximum learning and maximum sort of self-actualization through our learning, intersects very intricately with deeply engaged learning. And deeply engaged learning is challenging. It's hard. It means stretching oneself and being supported in that process. So, I guess what I'm proposing is that academic rigor and well-being go hand in hand. And that symbiotic relationship is supported by assessments that promote critical thinking, that promote self-efficacy, and a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging in an academic community, and so on. And I do acknowledge the critiques of rubrics that you've mentioned. But I think it's not rubrics per se or criteria that are the inherent problems. Rather, it's whether and how we use these tools to support the deeply engaged learning that I'm talking about.

So, in my specific, sort of, domain of music, I have written about assessment of creativity, and I've discussed whether creativity should be assessed, or whether it can be assessed and, if so, how can it be assessed. Arguably creative products can be assessed by experts in relation to their novelty, their utility, and expertise, and so on. But there is always a risk that rubrics will foster a formulaic approach that puts a disproportionate focus on what is measurable and potentially inhibits or discourages risk taking. So, in the specific kind of context of assessing creativity, there may be discussions to be had about the place of rubrics. And, in some instances, I think there is scope for thinking more critically about, again, coming back to the purpose of assessment. So what purpose is it serving? And is it always necessary?

Maybe it's not, you know, maybe it's not always necessary, and maybe a rubric isn't always necessary. In a higher education context, ultimately, the assessment should always be in service of learning, and it should be aligned with the intended learning outcomes. So, if the assessment is necessary, then it must be structured in

such a way as to support those outcomes. And if the desired outcome is creativity, then perhaps summative assessments could or should play a relatively small part of the assessment overall, as creativity can be thought of as the product, which is the endpoint, but the endpoint of a very complex and long creative process.

So, again, it comes back to questions around context. And, you know, what is it we are trying to assess? And, ultimately, is the assessment serving the learning? For me, that's the bottom line.

Jasmine Parent (30:22): The context, of course, does matter so much, and it's one of the huge challenges of speaking of assessment in general terms, because it never happens that way—in the abstract. So, context will impact how and what to assess, and will also determine how much students' learning should and can be measured.

So, we just want to thank you so much, Andrea, for sharing your insights. Before you go—we've done this with our other guests—we would like you to, if you can, share a tip or a recommendation—it could be a strategy, a resource, a podcast—for our listeners.

Andrea Creech (30:57): Yeah, well, there's a couple of resources that I personally come back to quite often. The first—we've spoken today quite a lot about feedback—and I love the book by Liz Lerman, called *Critique is Creative*. And I think this is a very accessible—it's a quick read, you can read it in an afternoon, for sure. For anyone who's interested in feedback, and feedback as part of critique, as a formative assessment tool, this is a great resource.

And for French listeners, who are musicians, I can recommend a podcast called "The Strategic Musician" [Musicien Strategique]. This is a great podcast about … which touches very much on issues of assessment and feedback.

Margo Echenberg (31:43): Thanks so much for both of those recommendations, Andrea. We're going to put them in the program notes for sure and thanks again for your time. Thanks for listening everyone. Make sure you subscribe to Teach.Learn.Share, and we look forward to being with you next time. Thanks!

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