

AL Interview 18 - Tommy Happynook Jr.. (Completed 12/15/18)
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encourage students to bring in the knowledge that they already carry and the experience that they already carry into the classroom so that we can be having discussions on topics that are actually related to their own experiences and then the learning that they do in the classroom, that they can then take that out and apply it to their own understanding of the world.

Tommy Happynook: If we're talking about indigenous ways of knowing, I will try to encourage the opportunity for actual applied learning in that as well. We'll do a number of classes that lead up to a cedar workshop and then it's that cedar workshop where the elders that I work with come in and they tie everything that the students have been learning into the cedar work that the students are participating in. They do some learning, so the theory bit, and then we take it to an indigenous art form in cedar weaving and we apply it. I've noticed over the years, and so do the elders who I work with, they notice how, through the discussions that the students are having, that they're really almost weaving together all of the theories and the methodologies and the things, the content of the course, into what they end up producing.

I think that for me applied learning has to be a part of everything that I do because I don't adhere to the idea that students need to learn what I think they need to learn. I think students need to be involved in that learning process. When we create opportunities for them to ... The students who have done weaving before, they become teachers in this classroom so they gather small groups of students and they work together and then we see all of these things coming together and it's amazing. The applied pieces of the course that I teach are the most beneficial, I think, to the students.

Dan Reeve: We've heard that time and again with all the instructors. I want to move us now into, for the listeners who have listened to multiple podcasts, we know we're going to work through the eight principles here. Already, Tommy, really you've sort of got to the heart of it already with talking ... It sounds like you're really talking about the intention of where you're coming from and where your

out walking around campus and talking about biology or what the environmental tech students are doing, out and about actively participating, being a part of the natural world while you're learning.

will hope to get to here or maybe by the end of the semester we'll hope to ... Whatever the project is, we hope to get there." What's your process? How do you prepare yourself and your setup for that?

Tommy Happynook: That's a good question. It will always depend on the group that I'm with. I don't often bring in the explicitly Applied Learning piece, so the project or the workshop or whatever, until I've had a month or so to get to know the students and maybe have a couple of really good critical discussions with them so I can kind of get a sense of where they're at. Because I'm always mindful that I don't want to be passing on knowledge that students aren't ready for. In my preparation, it's really about getting to know the students, where they're at and trying to ensure that I've shared the important information and philosophies so that students can feel comfortable with how we're going to be learning. I'm often... right away I'm preparing students for these concepts. I say, "This isn't going to be a class like you're maybe used to. I don't teach in a way that you may be used to." Sitting in a circle right away, that's a big piece because that changes the classroom almost immediately. You see the people who want to sit outside and ensure that they come in, things like that.

Tommy Happynook: In terms of ...

Dan Reeve: Can I have a follow-up then?

your know

Dan Reeve:

Right, right. Right from the get-go, it seems like your focus is really so ... I want to use this word in the best possible, like an intimate relationship with your students in terms of them as full human beings in relationship with you. I feel like, at least what I'm seeing here, the authenticity starts with that very real and genuine knowing yourself and then sharing yourself with others in a way that's going to best able those students to grow. Is that ...

Tommy Happynook:

can ... You're not trying to overwhelm a first-year student here. They've got a lot of other things. You don't have to overwhelm them with pedagogy but just kind of say, "Hey, see what we're doing here. This kind of is symbolic or metaphoric

Tommy Happynook: When I'm engaging with community or with students... my wife doesn't say this to me so much... It was early on when I began teaching and whenever I go to do speaking that's not necessarily a normal part of my life or week, she reminds me, "Don't shame the family." We laugh about that because it is funny, right? "Don't shame the family"

maybe around so I'll turn a bomber into a learning opportunity where we can discuss what might be a better way to approach this. How can I adjust the way that I teach to better present this information to people who maybe aren't in line with what I'm thinking or doing? I try and take those opportunities and shift them into a place where we can have a discussion or we can create some kind of dialog on things.

Partly what it does, I think, is it shows students that I think a lot of times there's this power dynamic that people think exists, or that probably does exist, and so it shows students that I screw up, I can a.94)3ecBtfs.16)3ecBtfs.1gmdspsi lg?-8)04.96)3.36)0.7

Dan Reeve: Right.

Tommy Happynook: Sometimes, as you pointed out, the class that is not going well, when you back it up, you acknowledge it's not going well and then you ask students for their input into things and involve them in making the experience a better one. I think it's almost as valuable if not more valuable than ru

Tommy Happynook: I am a firm believer in constant acknowledgement and validation of learning and so I ask for several critical reflections in most of my classes throughout the year. Then I also, for most of my classes, I don't do a final paper anymore. I do a presentation. I found that the presentation... it's much harder to hide. You can hide in a paper if you don't understand things because writing and that, right?

I find that I can see what students have learned much more clearly in a presentation. In some ways, the presentation, as scary as they are, are an acknowledgement of the student's learning because that's when they're sharing and they're often sharing something more personal, their own story or their own understanding. You see the class engage. I'm always really careful, too, to ask questions that will lead to more of a positive experience. In reflections I tend to write just all over so I'm always careful to remind students, too, that just because I'm writing a lot doesn't mean that it's bad. In there, I encourage students. Most of my comments, a lot of the time it'll be work on editing. I think that's the standard thing we all have to write.

Dan Reeve: That's universal.

Tommy Happynook: Please work on your editing and things like that but I always try to comment in a way that builds students up. I'll say something like, "Okay, you need to work here but you did a really good job here," or, "This paragraph is really excellent," or things like that. In the classroom itself, I try to validate the questions, even if I'm like, "Where did that question come from," right? I want to encourage students to be comfortable... ask the questions in whatever way they have to, ask them and if we need to work on a better way to ask that question, we talk about that.

Within the programs that I teach, most of the indigenous students who are

Tommy Happynook: Yes.

Dan Reeve: Yeah.

Tommy Happynook: I tend not to focus ... I focus on the people who show up and the people who are in the room with me. I feel like because they've shown up, they want to be there. Yeah. Yeah.

Dan Reeve: Okay.

Tommy Happynook: Yeah. That's a good question. I don't really know ... I want students to leave my class feeling like education is something that's good and not scary and something that if they wanted to pursue, they can. In some ways, that's the acknowledgement piece... is letting them know that ... For the indigenous family support, the last thing I always talk to the students about as they head on to the next thing is that... is a reminder that despite all of the impacts that our people have had, we're the strongest people because we're the descendants of the people who survived the disease, the genocides, the residential schools, the [inaudible 00:57:44]. We're descendants of the strongest of our people and so that's what I want them to remember as they go off into other things or where they venture out into things that are not within our program. I try to leave students with that kind of encouragement.

Dan Reeve: A sense of confidence.

Tommy Happynook: Yeah, a sense of confidence that what they know and who they are is a key piece of the education that they can have.

Dan Reeve: I think that's amazing. Any final thoughts that have percolated through the interview? Any final ideas or ...

Tommy Happynook: No but Applied Learning, yay. I love the idea of experiential or Applied Learning. The more that the college gets behind and supports those things, I think the stronger student base we'll be sending out into the working world or onto universities.

Dan Reeve: Okay. With that, thanks very much, Tommy. I really appreciate your time and your amazing insights.

Tommy Happynook: You're welcome. Thank you.