



Pam Gordon: Engaging Passionate Learners

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:01

Hey, Pam, it is so great to have you here today.

Pam Gordon 00:05

Thanks for having me here.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:09

So Pam is one of the co founders of our Edactive Collective. And Pam, I'd love for you just to share a little bit about who you are, where you work, and also who you've studied under, because I think that's pretty amazing.

Pam Gordon 00:26

Thanks, Maureen. I think you know a little bit. But um, so I'm Pam Gordon, I live in Massachusetts. And I've worked at the Leominster Center for Excellence, which is a Big Picture Learning school, it's part of the Big Picture network. I also do some work for Big Picture Learning, running some of the research initiatives for them. So my story I've been in education for quite a long time. I sort of got my, my start as a undergraduate when I took classes, from Ted Sizer, the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and a great educator and great ed reformer. And I would say, quite honestly, he kind of was my, my inspiration, and has remained, his his thoughts, his wisdom, his teachings, everything has have certainly shaped who I am as an educator, and where I've come from, and how I think about what I do. And I guess I'll share, and this is kind of the start of my thinking about education, but when I was a second class I took with him, I was a senior in college, and we went out into schools in Maine, actually. And we were supposed to write portraits of engagement. So we went and we visited, and then we observed, and we were supposed to look at students, observe them, we shadowed the student all day, I believe, in various places. And we were supposed to write portraits of engagement. And we came out of "we" the class, it was a very small seminar, we came all of us came out of those visitations and we thought, there aren't really portraits, too, write. I just watched the student all day and, and there were so few little moments of engagement. And this was a while ago, this was in the early 90s. And so instead of full on portraits of engagement, we actually created this booklet that we called snapshots of engagement, because throughout the day, we could see little bits of moments when the students we were observing, kind of clicked and, and we're engaged. But I think that I tell you this and that was the early 90s and it's really stuck with me, because I think that's one of my major sort of, what am I trying to say, pushes, one of my, my missions in education is really engaging students and thinking about how do we create engaged students that, where you could create a portrait, and it's more than a little tiny snapshot.



Maureen O'Shaughnessy 03:18

Yeah, it seems like this is systemic. I mean, the Gallup Poll has done surveys for years and years and it shows Middle School engagement dropping every year a kid is in school. And we hear our kids saying, "Yeah, I don't know, I don't know when I'll ever use this. And yeah, I just, I'm on my phone, and I just do the minimum. I cut and paste answers to, you know, to turn in assignments." So feels like, systemically a lot of kids are just going through the hoops, putting in the time. And maybe when you were doing your assignment, there weren't so many, there definitely weren't my kids with anxiety and depression and just really down on life. But not only is it just like something to survive, like it may have been earlier, kids are not thriving. It's not like just get done with this and get on with my happy, wonderful life. So I think if ever we needed to have kids engaged and feeling purpose and connected, now with the mental health crisis is the time. But tell me a bit about how things look differently at your school in terms of engagement. What might our listeners be able to kind of like, "Oh, we could do a little of that or a little that" without having a whole new school model necessarily?

Pam Gordon 04:40

Absolutely. So, so the Leominster Center for Excellence is a small school that's part of the Big Picture Learning network. I was really attracted to it because of what it was trying to do with students. So our students follow their passions. We engage students in, in a lot of exploration around their interests, around their passions. And then we encourage them to go out and go into the real, we encourage and require, I should say, students to go into the real world and do things related to their passions. So two days a week, our students are in internships, and three days a week, they're in the school, connecting their internships and interests and passions to their work in the school. And the, a piece of the idea behind it is that there's a whole world out there, there are experts in the field that could help students learn about things they're interested in, and these interests will engage them and, and inspire them to learn and do projects. And so what could what could schools be doing? I fully believe that all schools can have some form of internship opportunity. And I also believe that those internship opportunities could all be driven by students. So it's less of a program where we match students to internships, and it's more of a kind of organic students look in the community and see what might spark their interest in that moment. And that interest might change, they may have one in ninth grade, and it might be different by the time they get to 10th, 12th grade. So that's huge. And then the other huge piece before you and then that, and then I know you have a question to ask that we can talk about is the other piece that I truly believe all schools can do, is the the strength in adult-student relationships. So that's a huge piece that that attracted me to to the work in that school and across Big Picture Learning, is there's a huge commitment to students building relationships with adults, both in the school and in the community that can help them

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 07:13

That is so huge. Before I unpack the relationship piece, um, if I'm in a more traditional school, how are my kids going to get into college if they don't take all of my traditional classes?



Pam Gordon 07:29

Excellent question. I mean, I think there needs to be a shift in how we think about what our requirements are. I think there's a lot of learning that can be done through these internships, the internships aren't just an extra. Students create projects from the work that they're doing with their mentors, which can align with all sorts of skills that we're asking children, we're asking students, children, youth to learn. So you know, if you look at the adult world, the adult world isn't doing projects in a vacuum, they're not just doing a project that's related to history, or they're not just doing a project that's related to English; everybody has to communicate, everybody has to, there's always some form of, we call kind of the thinking like a scientist empirical reasoning. So when students are doing projects, it may not be a hard science, it might be we have a student working in a water, interning in a water treatment plant. And she was learning organic chemistry with her mentor. And she and part of that actually, which was really exciting about this piece was that the mentor, she wanted to learn how to use this machine that was at this water treatment plant to, to analyze some data. I think it's that's kind of out of my realm. But um, and so it's out of my realm, I couldn't help her, but this mentor could help her. And so but in order to be able to use this machine, the mentor said, you really have to learn organic chemistry, or pieces of it. So the mentor helped her, a science certified teacher at the school helped her, and they all work together to help this, this young woman learn some organic chemistry in order to be able to use this machine and so then it was exciting to her too, because she could apply it. So I think I digressed from your question, but there's the.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 09:28

Right, but when she had a purpose, I mean, how many kids say, "Hey science teacher, I want to learn organic chemistry," you know, but because she had a purpose and a real world application, we know applied learning sticks so much better. I mean, I don't learn something you know, like how to fix my toilet until it's like running and running, running and have to open up and figure it out. We don't learn unless there's a reason or we feel like there's a value to it. We don't go out and seek out learning, so she was doing that. My understanding is Big Picture Learning kids get into college with no problem because of this real world experience. So the fear that, oh, if we don't do the establishment of going to college, we won't get into college, maybe isn't true?

Pam Gordon 10:13

I don't think it's true. And I think also this I mean, I think Big Picture Learning students have had huge successes in the postsecondary world, both getting into college, and also knowing when college was the right fit for them. And at the school where I work there's, we have a, we have a huge mix of students, we have a very small school, very small graduating classes, but but there's a tremendous mix amongst them of, with whether they're going to college or not, and it's their choice, it's their, it's what's the fit for them in that moment. And I think what I've been so impressed with, with the students that I've spoken with through my research, and that I've



worked with myself, is how confident they are in those decisions. And in that they, they know what they want to do in that moment. And I think the other piece that I work with my students about a lot is that just as your interests may have changed from when you were a freshman, this is the plan, this is your post secondary plan now, and we'll be in touch and we'll keep working on it. I think also, I want to add, I think, kind of my, I guess what I'm seeing in the post that it's not quite post-pandemic, yet, we're not there yet. But in the pandemic, and there's been a lot of upheaval with the traditional measures, and college entrance. And these are my thoughts, my observation from school and some things going on, personally, but it's, you know, it is the students are prepared, they're, and they're passionate, they're passionate, and I think that comes across as they're entering that next phase and life beyond high school.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 12:18

And that goes straight back to mental health. If I don't know what my future holds, and should I go to my cousin's college, or or, what should I do, or should I work. If I'm confident, I've tried this, I know I want more of that or I don't want this because I got to experience it, so here are my steps, then they can be passionate, they can be confident, and that's the opposite of anxious, depressed, insecure, unknowing. So you're giving them confidence by giving them a chance to really dig into what works for them, and what doesn't work for them. And to figure out who they are as learners. And never again, is anybody going to help them with that. It's like, take this college class, pass it or fail it. But, nobody's gonna really help them learn who they are and how they learn. So you're gifting them with something that's going to last the rest of their lives, and combats a lot of the mental health crisis that we're seeing, because these kids have something that they're alive and passionate about.

Pam Gordon 13:18

Absolutely. And, and then this kind of feeds into the relationship piece. They're also starting to build networks, and those networks are helping them create those, come up with those decisions. So so teachers, it's phenomenal when students have really good relationships with teachers, but they're also creating networks and talking to people outside of the building, who may or may not be involved in who may be involved in fields that they may or may not be interested in the future, and can give them the kind of advice and confidence. I mean, you borrow that confidence, bring it and give them the kind of advice and confidence they may need for, they need as they make these decisions.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 14:01

Absolutely. Well, and they're learning the 21st century skills that employers want, how to talk to adults, how to self advocate How to say, "I don't understand this," or "Can you teach me more?" Where in a classroom, I tell my students what is expected of them, and then I coach them through it, but it's not really conversation where kids are, you know, in a traditional setting, where they're really getting to unpack things, and communicate with adults. So they're practicing being in the real world and gaining those skills that the workforce wants. And I think even more



important, is every kid should feel seen, heard and valued at school. And if I have 150 kids and I'm teaching ninth grade English to by the end of this day, my the system doesn't really allow me that. And we all know we have to have our basic human needs met, to have the confidence to move on. And your focus on having those mentors in the school that are coaching and building that, as well as mentors that care about them in the work community. I'm sure you see transformations just because the kids feel like they're valued.

Pam Gordon 15:11

Absolutely, absolutely. So I didn't talk earlier, I was trying to focus kind of on the real world learning and internships, but advisories, I mean, that is a perfect example of something that any school could do, and could do well. I think there's a model of advisory out there that maybe doesn't work so well. And so schools see it, and they sort of poopoo it. And they say, I've talked to a number of teachers that're upset, "Oh, they're making us do advisories now." But when you can really buy into the idea, and really believe in, it's more than buy in, you need to really believe in the idea that every student should have a person and their relationship. And school is much more than about the disciplines in school. And you create a solid advisory program that is focused on the student and very student centered, student driven even. That gives, it gives students a chance to really get to know teachers, it gives teachers a chance to really get to know students and guide them. I think you just use that language, guide and coach them through their experience. And that's what you know, we've all been high school teachers have all been trained in their specific discipline. But at the end of the day, we're coaches, or I believe in that, and that I think, probably harkens back to my Ted Sizer, world of teacher as coach. And so, you know, that's what we were, we're guiding students through their journey, and, and helping introduce them to different things. And the mental health piece is huge. And I think that having a relationship and knowing a person in the building is vital in that.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 17:07

Absolutely. And I like that a lot of the Big Picture Learning schools, the advisory, you have a ninth grade is the same one, you have 10th, 11th, 12th. So they're on this long term journey with you. I also like that you have materials and that you share them freely, you don't have to be a Big Picture Learning school to have access to all kinds of resources that you have. Because I know I've been in traditional schools where advisory is study hall and teachers kind of getting work done too, or maybe it's when the counselor comes in once a month and talks about careers or the SATs, or whatever is coming next. But the teachers are like, "I don't have time for a separate prep." But there are so many resources out there that are about community building and helping kids unpack their passions. And I know Big Picture Learning has a ton of them too, as well as trainings. I met you by taking a training that you had. So I don't think it's just like, oh, teachers make this advisory happen. It's if we can add this into our school. And even if it's just a 20 minute daily, it doesn't have to change your whole schedule, you can still have the same number of classes. And it can really be about building relationships and specific tools and skills want kids to have just like we would have a scope and sequence for science or English or



anything else; a scope and sequence for how we want to help these kids develop, and know their strengths, and understand their passions, and explore some careers, and understand what classes or what training they need to have those careers. Advisory could be really powerful and it's not something where teachers have to take it on as a new prep; their resources are out there.

Pam Gordon 18:38

Right. And I wonder too, if that needs to be part of teacher Ed as well that when we're training teachers or training teachers to think about being not only that expert in your discipline, but that you're really an expert in or expert in kids, nobody I think can be an expert in the teenager, but that you're really, that that's why you're there: you're there to to work with these students and help them develop and guide them and help them find these interests and passions and it's not just about your discipline. It's huge, but it's when you're in a traditional school, but it's not necessarily the be all and end all.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 19:26

In fact, at my micro school which is a middle school/high school, I had this amazing Spanish teacher, he said "You know but I've only worked with little guys only work with kindergarten first grade." And it's like "No, you're it" because you've done it mock lesson everything but he was like seeing the whole child and and i think elementary teachers I would love I always when I see elementary and sometimes resumes like Yes, because they're the ones that are like, Did this kid eat lunch today? Does this kid have any friends? They're seeing the whole human as opposed to people that have more of a college professor experience, I have content to get through, and I think we need to blend those two content is important, but it's important in the context of really caring for the whole human. So I agree with you on the relationship piece completely. Question for you, if you had a magic wand, what pieces of experience you get to provide kids, would you wish that all schools were providing for kids?

Pam Gordon 20:28

So I, that's a really good question. I need a second. With my magic wand, um, I think it's the, the relationship piece, but I think it's also the student-driven piece. I think it's the, and that's not concrete. So maybe that's not what my magic wand is for. But.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 20:52

It's for whatever you want.

Pam Gordon 20:54

It's the, yeah, it's really hard. I mean, I think the the building the structures and the community to build these relationships that allow you, I'm going to combine them too, here we go, that allow the adults in the building who are designing these experiences with, to design them with kids, and to help students really be owners of their own education, really take ownership of it and



really drive what they want to do, and how they want to do it with that guidance. I mean, I don't poopoo or, you know, I think adults are important. The experience, the guidance, the, the way people can facilitate, they're, they're very important. But I think that I, it was, it's been very clear to me in this past year, with virtual school, and going back to school, and doing all of these different things, and watching it in my work, in my various pieces of work, and in my own children, just how important those relationships and adults understanding children really is. And when I've seen this effort to create solid, meaningful relationships with students, where students are heard and can really drive what they're doing, given those opportunities. That's where I've seen success in this past year. And that's where I see success all the time. But I feel like this past year of this roller coaster has been, just has highlighted different pieces that work and don't work. And so I think students knowing that they're that they're being seen, and they're being heard, and that they're given agency. So that's the other piece, is students need to be given agency over their own learning.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 23:08

Agency being having a voice and having choice.

Pam Gordon 23:11

Yes. And ownership, agency and ownership. And that's what's gonna keep them invested and engaged and, and working towards that future.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 23:27

Agreed. Listeners, I'd love to have you type into the chat one piece you could take, one activism step, whether you're a student, parent, educator, business person, what's one thing you could do that you could help us build more of that relationship piece and more that student driven piece? What something maybe you haven't thought of before that you could share in a different way to be a guide, or to support students having more agency? And then, I would love to have everybody click on the link at the bottom, and move over and join Pam and me in the live session where Pam can share more resources and she's on our website as well. So you can follow up with her later. But let's go over and continue this conversation live. And Pam, thank you for helping us create Edactive, and for being in the collective, and for presenting today.

Pam Gordon 24:24

Thank you, Maureen. This was really exciting, and I'm really thrilled to be here and to talk to everybody.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 24:32

See you guys in the live chat.