

Dan Reeve: Hi and welcome to another applied learning podcast. I'm your host, Dan Reeve. This time I sit down with Yolina Denchev, and we go through how applied learning plays such a pivotal role in the work she is doing in Economics and trade. I hope you listen in and enjoy.

Yolina Denchev: Okay. Well thank you very much for having me here today. My name is Yolina Denchev. I teach in the School of Business in the Economics department. I teach on both campuses. My students are in the business administration programs and in the University Transfer Pathway for Business and Economics.

Dan Reeve: Great. Great. And what are the things that made you think in terms of an instructor about trying to start you down the track of using applied learning in your classroom?

Yolina Denchev: Well one thing that I always try to do in my classes is to demonstrate the relevance of what we teach to the real world, to solving real-world problems. The thing is that, with our area, things tend to be quite theoretical in nature, quite technical. So for me it's really important throughout the course if I build in opportunities for students to experience the relevance of the course material. So this was the main reason that brought me to applied learning and incorporating applied learning in the classroom.

Dan Reeve: And can you briefly describe, and we'll get into it in more detail, some of the ways you use applied learning in your class or your program?

Yolina Denchev: Okay. The applied learning project that I will mainly talk about today is an international project. It's incorporated in my international trade course. The project involves international team teaching. I deliver this project together with a colleague from our partner university in Ingolstadt in Germany. In a nutshell, what happens in this international trade project is the students from both countries, the Camosun students and the German students, they form one international team, and the task of that team is to work with a local company in each country. So we have a Canadian local company, and there is a German company. Students develop an export strategy for each company to export in the other country.

Yolina Denchev: The company that we partnered with this last fall was Live Edge Design, locally here from Duncan, B.C., and the German company is called Iluna. The Canadian students for this project also work with a number of Canadian government agencies in the area of exporting. For example, Export Development Canada, the Trade Commissioner Service, the Ministry of International Investment and Trade, just to mention a few. We also worked with a number of community partners, a number of local businesses and other community partners for that project.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. It sounds like an amazing project. So let's begin with intention. How do you decide that an experience like this is the best way for students to learn a

particular concept or a theory or an idea? What kind of gets you started on this path?

Yolina Denchev: I think, as I mentioned before, our area, Economics, tends to be quite theoretical in nature. If the material is only delivered at that level, it is possible, for example, that students might be left thinking that trade agreements or trade policy is just something of an abstract nature, something out there that doesn't affect them or doesn't concern them. That's why I brought in this applied learning project in the international trade course, because I want students to experience first-hand the importance of trade policy and trade restrictions and trade barriers, and go through the export process in real time, and see how that affects an actual company that is currently exporting.

Dan Reeve: That's excellent. When you're planning your class or your event, what do you hope students will get out of the activity or series of activities? What's your highest aspiration for this experience that you lead your students through?

Yolina Denchev: I think that initially when I first started, I probably didn't have a full appreciation of the value of the experience that students would get. I can speak a lot on that question, but I think a lot of my ideas for answering that question actually come from the feedback of the students and from what I have learned after we went through the project once or twice.

Yolina Denchev: What am I hoping for students to get from this project? Probably one of the most valuable things is working with a real company. Students become fully immersed in the life of the company for the duration of that international trade project. Students observe the production process. They learn the current issues that the company's facing. They learn the strategy of the company, the export, the hopes that the company has for exporting in other markets. So that's a huge aspect of the project.

Another thing that is shaping up to be a very important take away from this project is that it helps students to build currency. Not only build, but also maintain currency in the area of international trade. And also to appreciate how important it is to be current in their field.

I will give you a couple of examples here. When we ran the project in 2016, in the fall of 2016, it was around the end of October when the trade agreement with the European Union was signed, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. This was happening as our project was unfolding. So students got to understand how the international environment might change in the course of them completing the project.

And a similar thing happened last semester when again we were working on this project. The trade agreement with the European Union actually went into implementation in the end of September. So again, the students in that group experienced that immediate shift in the international environment, because one

of the provisions of the agreement is that tariffs are eliminated upon the agreement going into force. So one day you have a tariff. The next day you don't and I think that those experiences become unforgettable experiences for students, and they clearly teach them how important it is to be current with the regulatory environment for doing business.

Dan Reeve: All right. Excellent. Now from your point of view, when you're sort of thinking about doing an activity, how do you know when you're ready to try an applied learning activity? And maybe you don't.

Yolina Denchev: Well, I don't know if anyone can say that they're fully ready to launch into an innovated applied learning project. From my experience, I had taught this international trade course for a while. Actually, I designed the course. I put it through the curriculum, and I know that this course by design has always had an applied learning component and I had tried different ones throughout the years. I had tried case studies. I had tried classroom experiments. I had invited guest speakers, but I became intrigued to do this international team teaching project, and to work with a real company just as an opportunity to bring something new to the course, something more challenging, something more ambitious. In a way, it was pure curiosity to get into something like that. I was ready to explore, and to experiment, and to risk, and to learn, and ultimately to bring something new and innovative to my students.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. How did you begin ... Well... it sounds like you had a really..., because you designed the project and then taught it, you really understood the course. What were your first steps when you were taking on this particular part of the applied learning project? What were your first steps?

Yolina Denchev: Well it's an interesting story how it all began, actually a coincidence of two unrelated events. So, I had always in the past been interested in bringing an international component, and helping students get international experience. I had done field schools before. I had worked with exchange, with international students, but what happened when this project was about to start, what happened was our dean had just visited our partner university in Germany. That university had expressed an interest in running an international team-teaching project in international trade with us. So our dean introduced me to the faculty member in Germany who was going to be running the project on the German side, and we just started to work and plan together. That was one of the developments that led to this project.

The other development was actually local here. The Greater Victoria Development Agency had just started a three-year program to expand the export capacity of the region, and they were funded partially through Western Diversification Canada. So, bringing the two things together, it sort of made sense to continue on with that project, and to just make it possible to plan and put everything together and deliver it to the students.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. Serendipity. When you start putting together the pieces, and obviously you're working with an instructor and really two classrooms, what's your thought process when you consider logistics, equipment, learning materials? What are you thinking about as you build this project? And it seems, if I may sort of interject, that you had a really good handle on this course. So maybe the starting point was you felt comfortable in the course. You tried some activities. That part of the course was well in hand, so the next part was to build out what was your planning process, your thought process as you started to build out?

Yolina Denchev: Well it turned out that the planning process, even though I had taught the course for a while, and I was comfortable with the material and all that ... The planning process for running this international trade project and with the team teaching and with the external partnerships, the planning process turned out to be huge. I had not anticipated how huge it would be.

The nature of this project is such that it involves working with a number of community partners. For example, in order to make the project possible, we need to find a local company that wants to work with our students, and a company that is interested in exporting their product to the German market. That turned out to be the most challenging part of the planning process.

So, I discovered that the local business community is not very much aware of these applied learning opportunities that Camosun offers, and it became quite of an endeavor to reach out to the business community. So ultimately, what happened was I was able to get introduced to a local company through the Export Navigator program of the Ministry of International Trade. So I reached out to a number of government agencies, and they helped me out to connect with a local partner company which is interested in the German market. And that turned out to be a very successful partnership.

Because this project involves international team teaching, we also do planning and design in collaboration with my German colleague. That's part of the planning process. I also work with a number of government agencies for that project, so the planning part involves making arrangements with those government agencies for their participation in the course. Later on, the students will follow up independently with these government agencies, but I have to set up everything at the outset.

Dan Reeve: Can I just ask you a follow-up question here is, how many times have you done it now?

Yolina Denchev: Three times.

Dan Reeve: And is it fair to say that by the third time, while the first time that sounds like a huge amount of planning, some of it of course you couldn't foresee. Do you find it easier to reach out to community partners now? Are you getting a reputation?

Obviously you're probably working ... You have a well-worn path now with the German colleague. In what ways has it gotten easier?

Yolina Denchev: It has gotten a little bit easier, mostly because I have learned a lot from my own experience trying to reach out to community partners. We have also managed to build some reputation with those external partners, and they're quite impressed by the work of our students. So it becomes a little bit easier to approach them for subsequent deliveries of the project.

There is a portion of the project though that is probably always going to be new each year. So I think that we're never going to reach a point where we completely have it under control. I think there is something that will need to be looked at for the first time with each delivery.

Dan Reeve: Right. Okay. You kind of touched on this a bit, and it goes to a lot of what you've said at your introduction, but it's about the authenticity of applied learning. What is it about your students' experience through this activity that you feel is foundational to your field and what you teach? You kind of walked us through it a little bit, but maybe just a quick ... It's a lot of work. What you're doing is a lot of work.

Yolina Denchev: Yes.

Dan Reeve: But the authenticity must mean something to you in terms of what students get out of it professionally, personally.

Yolina Denchev: I think the authenticity comes from the fact that students work with a real company. And actually, each semester we have worked with a different company. So this is not a repetitive process. This last term we worked with Live Edge Design from Duncan. The year before we worked with LifeSpace Gardens in North Vancouver, and the first time we did the project three years ago, we worked with Latitude Geographics here downtown. So, working with a real company that is actually really looking at going into the German market is a very authentic experience for the students.

For example, the company we had last term, Live Edge Design, they were scheduled to participate in a trade show in Germany several weeks after the end of our semester. So students knew that the work that they're doing is very relevant for the company and will be put into use immediately. So, I think this makes the experience very, very authentic.

Dan Reeve: Awesome. Thank you. Let's move on. There's a number of ways when we go through. We typically talk about applied learning as an iterative process. There's always points of reflection and review, and we're going to talk a little bit about reflection. What reflective practices or questions do you have your students consider once they've completed a part or some cycle piece of this project?

Yolina Denchev: In the course of the project, while we are running the project, we're on a very tight timeline. Because of the start and end dates of the semesters in Canada and in Germany, we actually have only six weeks to run the project. So our timeline is very tight, and it is very important to build in these reflective pieces at the right time. So what I do in the course of the project is I schedule debrief meetings, and they're on my course outline. Students know that they're expected to come to those meetings and report on current progress, and then at that point we also discuss any challenges and make decisions about moving forward.

Another reflective piece that I have is a project journal. So, actually each student is expected to prepare a project journal which documents their own contribution to the project, but also includes a reflective piece. And that project journal is delivered in the end of the semester. So these are the two reflective pieces, the two types of reflection that I incorporate in the project.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. When and how do you reflect on an AL activity? When do you do it, and then how do you do it? So we've talked a little bit of how your students do it. How do you take on and reflect on what's happened in a cycle?

Yolina Denchev: I do a lot of my own reflection at the start of the planning stages. I try to envision all the steps that the project will go through, and what the expected outcomes are from the students at each step. I also try to develop the appropriate incentives and guidelines for the students. When the project starts, I monitor the progress very closely. I also maintain a very close contact with my German colleague, and together he and I decide if and when we need to intervene if the team is experiencing some difficulties.

Dan Reeve: Right.

Yolina Denchev: At the end of the project I always debrief with my German colleague, and we make decisions about the next delivery.

Dan Reeve: And do you consider...Do students ... at the end of the cycle, they've finished this project. Does their reflection on how the project went inform how you do the next cycle?

Yolina Denchev: Absolutely. I have a specific section in their project journal where I ask them specific questions about evaluating their experience in that project, and I very carefully read that section in each student's journal when I make the design for the next delivery. I have learned a lot from the student feedback.

Dan Reeve: Right. Okay. In applied learning we typically ... It all kind of blurs together, but the first stage is this idea of what your intention is, planning and preparedness, the authenticity of the project that always rings through in every applied learning, and then this reflective piece. While all of the next four pieces all fit together with the previous, but we might want to talk a little bit now... We've

done the reflection, and now we're on to the on-the-ground work of the orientation and training and engagement.

Dan Reeve: When you're beginning, how do you prepare yourself to guide an experiential learning activity?

Yolina Denchev: This is probably the most difficult part for me, and this is the part maybe where I feel I could get some help. I reached out to other institutions here in B.C. that have tried similar international team teaching projects, and I learned from their experience. My German colleague has been also very helpful because he has been running projects like that with other European partners for a few years.

But I don't know if there's anything that can fully prepare you for the experience. I think I've learned a lot as I went along, and I had to be ready to make adjustments as needed.

Dan Reeve: Yes. Okay. And we'll get to that in just a minute. How do you explain to students the process? How do you explain to them why we're doing this? This is a lot of work in a very short time. Then once you've explained maybe why you do this, or maybe your explanation is how we do it, how do you connect the why and the how to your students at the beginning? Then maybe at the end they can see the connection, but at the beginning, what's your process?

Yolina Denchev: I am so glad you're asking this question. I think this is my favorite question so far, because from my experience delivering that project three times now, I think that it is extremely important to explain to students why we're doing it. I think that we should not be assuming that students who walk into the course knowing why we're doing it. They actually don't know. We need to really point out to students what is the value of this international trade project, and I do it in several different ways.

I have found that it is very important to provide students with clear handouts that explain what is expected of them and what this project will involve. Students want to know how much work they're going to be putting into the project. They want to know what is expected of them to do. They want to know if this is going to be a team mark, a group mark. They want to know if this is going to be a lot of work. So all of these concerns I try to address the very first week of the semester.

Providing information in writing, I think, is more valuable than just standing and talking. Another thing that I have found works very well is to use the experience of the students from the previous delivery of the project. Because at the outset when we first introduce the project, students are a little bit apprehensive because usually they have not done anything of that magnitude before. Some of them start to be even a little bit unsure, "Oh should I stick with that course, or should I find something else."

I know that the students' satisfaction from this project and from this experience tremendously increases throughout the semester. So I know that by the end of the term, they're going to be very satisfied. So, what I do is I use the experience of the students from the previous delivery of the course to give them stories and to give them information about how it went along. And I actually, I make that information available through my D2L site.

So my D2L site for the course includes sections with the project work from the previous delivery, and students really appreciate that, and that removes the uncertainty and the initial maybe worries that some students might have. Being able to browse through the steps of the project the previous time helps tremendously to understand why we're doing it and how we're going to be doing it.

Dan Reeve: And it seems like now ... The question I had here is: does your preparation differ if you work with community partners? But it seems your project absolutely works with community partners. What other steps does that add to this process?

Yolina Denchev: Quite a few steps in terms of the logistics of bringing in external community partners. Planning, scheduling becomes very important, and this is also a part of what I introduce to students in the beginning of the term when I talk about how we're going to do it and why we're going to do it. I have to also introduce the fact that there are uncertainties in the business world, and sometimes the community partner may not be able to visit the class at the time scheduled. We may have to adjust that. Students learn to understand that throughout the term, and to appreciate that the business world is full of uncertainties.

Dan Reeve: And that's a vital learning tool right there. So let's talking about ... We've talked about reflection. We're going to put it in a slightly different lens. We're going to talking about monitoring reflection and continuous improvement. Recognizing that sometimes parts of the cycle, parts of the activity don't always go as planned, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, how do you assess your students' experience in light of when things go a little bit sideways? How do you say this was still a vital activity, or we need to really change this activity because of this potential?

Yolina Denchev: I have learned a lot in that area because I think that this is one of the challenges when we run an applied project of that nature. Everything cannot be pre-planned, and this is not a controlled environment. We actually don't have control over what is going to happen, because again, the project unfolds in real time. We cannot always predict the final results.

Yolina Denchev: For example, we cannot predict what a team of students in both countries will find out about export opportunities for the companies that we're currently working with. We don't know what they will find. So oftentimes what happens is students pursue a certain client, or they pursue a certain area where the



company might want to export, and they cannot find a solid client. Or they do not find as much interest as they were hoping for.

It is important for me to step in at that point in the project, because I don't want students to be discouraged. My role is to explain to them that it is perfectly normal to find out that maybe this is not a strong market opportunity for this company. Maybe we need to look in another area. I also make sure I make the point that the fact that they have explored a certain market opportunity, and they found that it's weak or maybe does not exist, this is not a failure. That this is part of the market research process. That not every client you approach will be successful, but that doesn't mean that you're not doing good work.

So this is the main reason why we have had to rebalance our work, but again, this is not something we can plan in advance. It is our job to go and explore market opportunities, and sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. We have to rebalance after we find out where the opportunities are.

Dan Reeve: And that takes a certain kind of maturation for the students to realize to tell your client, "There isn't a market for your product in this region." You're actually doing them a huge favor, because what if they had invested in that region thinking that this was going to be great, and put money down, and put effort and time. And you've said, "By our analysis, our data doesn't show." You've actually done them a huge service. While it didn't meet maybe the original goal, still a very important piece of information for your client to know.

Dan Reeve: How do your clients respond when they say, "Hey. We don't think you have a place here, but maybe here"?

Yolina Denchev: The partner companies are very satisfied with the work of the students. Typically the way we work is at the start of the project we invite either the president of the company or another representative of the company to give specific guidelines for the students. So the company has usually some very specific questions about the German market, and the students work on those questions and deliver the results in the form of a final report in the end. And the feedback from the company is always very, very positive.

Dan Reeve: Oh, that's excellent. Now if things don't go as planned, what tools or practices do you have placed to reset and get things back on track? You mentioned maybe choosing a different market. What's your strategy when things don't go as planned?

Yolina Denchev: So what I try to do when I set the marking rubric for the project, I try to anticipate situations like that, and I set up the marking rubric in such a way that the students evaluation will not be affected, depending on whether a certain market opportunity was successful or not; or market potential.

Yolina Denchev: Sometimes students are a little bit worried about that because they tend to think that they have only done good work on the project if they immediately found a partner or a client. I have to explain to them that entering a foreign market is not something that actually happens in the course of one semester, let alone six weeks. Some of our guest speakers from Small Business BC, and the Export Navigator program, they talk about that as well in the course of the semester. So students realize that entering a foreign market sometimes takes a year, a year-and-a-half to two years worth of research. So in that sense, their evaluation cannot be tied to a successful market entry within a very short period of time. That is not possible.

The marking rubric focuses on the quality of the students' work, and also to encourage students to be innovative and to be creative, I have created special incentives for showing initiative and leadership as part of the project. Students are particularly fond of those incentives, and they have really shown an incredible initiative in coming up with their own ideas about moving the project forward.

Dan Reeve: Let's move on. We sort of started talking about your rubric and your assessment. So let's move into that, and you talked a little bit. So this might be a little bit repetitive, but not too much. How do structure your formative and summative assessments of the students? You mentioned your rubrics, but-

Yolina Denchev: Okay. So what are the deliverables of this international trade project? From the viewpoint of each individual student, each student works on the project, the journal, and submits their own project journal which has a reflective part. The team as a whole, that includes both Team Canada and Team Germany, all students, prepare one final report. This report is shared with our Canadian partner company and with our German partner company, and we receive feedback from those companies for the final report.

There is also final presentation during the last week of the term. Students present together. We establish a Skype connection, and students present in real-time, and we invite the partner companies to be present during the final presentation so they can ask the students questions, and so that we can also hear their feedback and evaluation of the work of the students.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. [inaudible 00:36:46] What shows you ... What have you seen in your applied learning activity that the work you've put in here deepens students' understanding of concept or a theory or a practice? What gets you to that golden standard of just that deep learning that you feel the project is worth the effort?

Yolina Denchev: I read some very strong statements in the students' reflective piece on the project. Statements of the type that this is the most practical and hands-on course I have ever taken. Statements to the fact that this project will be a huge asset to my future career in business. Statements about how this project was an

eye-opening experience, and how students understood the complexities of the real business world through it.

Yolina Denchev: I have a number of very strong written statements in the reflective piece that students prepare, and I have a number of stories, sort of anecdotal evidence, in my contact with students subsequently, after the semester is over. For example, I had a small group of students approaching me after the term was over, after their grades were in and all that. They wanted to know how the company reacted to their work. They wanted to hear back from the company. They were so involved with the project that they did not see it ending when the semester ended.

Dan Reeve: Right. Yes. So it's deeply ingrained.

Yolina Denchev: Yes. A deep connection.

Dan Reeve: Yes. That's always a very rewarding sense. Okay. So how do you celebrate this transformation?

Yolina Denchev: This is my next most favorite question. I think it is very important to celebrate this experience that students go through, because it also demonstrates to students that we as educators, we value applied learning. I have tried to do a number of different things, and I am open to trying new things in the future, as well. So one thing that I've done is I have kept students involved. We did this work on the international project even after the course is over. I have created opportunities for students to present their work.

Yolina Denchev: For example, I organized a student panel that presented at Walls Optional, our teaching and learning conference here at the college. Together with my colleague, Tim Kemp, we organized an applied learning showcase at the School of Business last year. Actually, the students who presented this international trade project won second place. This was a group of students that participated in an international study tour to Germany. We were able to put together a one-week study tour for students taking this international project, and we sent three students to Ingolstadt last year to present together with the German team the final results of the project. The students spoke very, very highly of that opportunity and that experience.

Yolina Denchev: I will continue to create opportunities for students to share their observations and their experience through that project, and I am open to celebrate in other ways as well. I think that it is extremely important to celebrate.

Dan Reeve: Excellent. Any last thoughts or ideas that have percolated as we've gone through this discussion about applied learning or what it might mean to someone who's brand new or taught a course? They're feeling comfortable. Maybe they're interested in taking a next step. Any suggestions? Any advice?

Yolina Denchev: Well, I think my advice would be to not be afraid to try it. I think that it feels like a daunting task at first. I am not new to teaching. I've been with the college for a while. I am not new to teaching the international trade course, and even with that experience and comfort level, if you like, walking into this international team teaching project was quite a daunting task for me.

I discovered things I had never known before. For example, things about how the college works, and how to figure out the logistics of delivering the project. How to work with scheduling and with room booking and with AV and IT support, and all of those internal departments. But even though it's a lot of work, I would say it's worth it. I would say in the end, it's a very rewarding experience, and probably the most rewarding part of it is to see what kind of a difference that makes for students. For student engagement, for student involvement, for student participation, for student retention. It is huge. The impact is huge, and I think that this is what keeps me going. Otherwise, it is true that it is more challenging than just taking chalk or a marker and going to the classroom. It is more challenging, but it's definitely worth it.

Dan Reeve: Great. Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate all your many insights and your inspired classroom. Yeah. I look forward to talking about this more in the future.

Yolina Denchev: Thank you.