

Interview Transcription: David Edmunds*Track Director, Global Development Studies program*

ANDREW KAUFMAN: The class that I was assuming I was going to be talking to you about today is the Engaged Learning for Global and Local Development? Okay. Just share with me a little bit about the class itself? What's the subject? What do you do in the class? How do you involve the community and what are your learning goals?

DAVID EDMUNDS: So, the Engaged Learning for Global and Local Development as I've kind of adapted it over the last couple of years has become something of a shell under which I can gather students who are working on a variety of kind of engaged learning projects. This past semester I had five or six student groups. One was developing a curriculum for a native studies course here at the University of Virginia. Another was looking at supporting a partner in Cambodia to develop kind of a farm school. Another was looking at the Black Power Station in Makhanda, South Africa, and if we could build on some success they had last year in co-creating some music and art performances. Another was looking at public health in a different part of South Africa, Kimberley, South Africa.

All but the native studies program curriculum development, all those projects are ongoing kind of relationships and that both became a challenge, but also maybe our saving grace this last semester. And we could put our whatever struggles we had in the spring, in a larger kind of sweep of history, if you will, if you call five years history, and really get the students to think about how do you maintain these relationships if you can't go to visit your partners in the summer, what does that look like now? And most the students did a pretty good job of trying to figure that out.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: If I understand it correctly, this is sort of an umbrella course, an introduction to global studies or the community-engaged aspect of global studies by involving students in various existing projects and then using those as the springboard for reflection on what it is that we're doing and why we're doing it.

DAVID EDMUNDS: Yes, in some ways, it's meant to integrate new students to the project, into the relationships that have already been established. In three of the student groups, there were students who had already engaged with the community over some period of time and then new students who had never done so. And so, part of the course is also them talking to each other and kind of sharing knowledge and making sure that the new ones understand as best they can what the context is for the work that they're hoping to do.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Okay, so you have multiple relationships across the world it sounds like already in place.

DAVID EDMUNDS: Yeah. Yeah, probably at the limit of what I can do. One of my strategies is to entangle other faculty where I can.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: The spring of 2020 happened. You got an email from our president stating that you had to transition your course online. You had about a week to do so. How did you react to that, how did your students react to that, and how did your community partners react to that?

DAVID EDMUNDS: The transitioning to an online course was, again, both a little bit easier perhaps for us than some other courses and a little bit more challenging. The easier part was particularly for those groups that were planning to go to Cambodia or South Africa or some other kind of place away from Charlottesville. They were already in Zoom contact with these community partners on a regular basis and so the virtual communication was not new or strange or uncomfortable for them.

Many, however, were pointing towards a physical connection in place over the summer and so reconstructing, redefining the relationship on the go when that kind of visit would not be possible was probably the most challenging thing. And I think that's true for our partners. They have come to really enjoy our students coming over and as the years have gone by, they've gotten better and better I think at learning how to mentor our students and kind of guide them and what would be most useful for them to do when they are with their partners on site. And I think there was a lot of disappointment that they wouldn't be hosting students. Certainly, the group from Makhanda that I just spoke with, they're really sad that they won't have another group of students to kind of run around with.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What was your personal reaction? You got the news. How did you react?

DAVID EDMUNDS: When I got the news that we had to move online, I was really disappointed, too. A lot of the relationships that are being built are now in their fourth or fifth year. It takes a lot of energy to make these workable relationships that are beneficial to the community in some meaningful way as well as students. And so, it felt like a real lost opportunity, right? We have one more chance to kind of work together do something tangible with and for the communities that we're working with and give them one more year experience to kind of figure out how best to take advantage of the other resources that come out of the university.

It's not an insurmountable setback. It's not something that we can't overcome. I've spoken with nearly all the partners a couple of times since the transition to online learning and we're all committed to keeping the work going and keeping the relationships going, but definitely it affects the momentum and it'll mean we have ground to make up when we do get together again.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: And what was the students' reaction?

DAVID EDMUNDS: Yeah. Big disappointment. And in fact, it took about, I would say about a week maybe two for them to get their feet under them again and shift towards the mentality of what can we do from here that would be useful and how do we ask them to put out a trail of crumbs for any students who might come after them about what would be good to do next? And so, it took them a while to see that as their primary role this year is to keep the communication going and lay out what a future group of students might be able to do in place.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: That leads to the next question. Can you talk a little more specifically about what did you actually do and how did you have to rethink the class as a result of this?

DAVID EDMUNDS: Rethinking the class after we went completely online had some challenging elements to it. One of the things that the students said that they really enjoyed about the class up to that point

was hearing about other student projects. They were grappling with challenges, figuring out how to mobilize resources, or communicate effectively or understand what their partners were really asking for, and so we lost a little bit of that. We continued to meet at a regular class time and give over the first 30 minutes of the class to sharing stories about who was doing what and how they were coping with the new situation, but the intensity of interaction declined a little bit and I'm not sure we ever made up for them online. We tried doing some stuff with Zoom. I think one group of students had a kind of PowerPoint that they showed about what they were thinking and doing, but it didn't have the same energy or kind of inspirational quality I think that the in-class sessions had I suppose in some ways. So, I'll give you an example. Before the class went virtual, the group that was working with Cambodia, for example, set up separate meetings with Hong Kong and Cambodia to talk about what the plans were and so we have to schedule separate dates for that and do that at 8:00 a.m. on a Friday morning I think to make it work for everybody. The schedule got a little hairier and I probably got more involved in those kinds of communication experiences than I would.

I'm just trying to think if there's anything else. The course syllabus normally would ask students to think a lot about managing budgets and thinking about how you are going to manage your time when you're there. How do you check that you're collaborating as effectively as possible? What are your self-reflection kind of exercises? A lot of that didn't seem nearly so meaningful.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: If you had to identify your single greatest challenge as a teacher on the heels of this crisis, what would that be?

DAVID EDMUNDS: My biggest challenge I think was keeping student energy levels up and then a closely related one, helping them buy into the notion that it was so really important to maintain a good relationship as best they could virtually, even if they couldn't be in the same space. The group in Cambodia ended up offering to do some work on the website for the organization and to feed them some more easily digestible kind of visuals around what a farm school might look like, for example. Again, not the same as being there and kind of testing out some building ideas with their Cambodian counterparts, but still meaningful. Yeah, keeping the students energized and inspired even as they adapted to what was probably a less in some ways fulfilling exercise for them.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about the discipline that you're teaching—and I don't know how you define it, would it be global studies, global development?

DAVID EDMUNDS: We consider ourselves an anti-disciplinary discipline.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Okay. Considering the anti-disciplinary discipline that you and your students are studying, how did this crisis affect your students' understanding of the subject itself, the subject of global studies?

DAVID EDMUNDS: I think the students developed a much deeper and full-bodied appreciation for terms like adaptability, resilience, flexibility, developing a listening posture. These are all things we talk about, but when the kind of emergent plans had to be reconfigured substantially, that's a very hard and deeply embedded lesson in some of those aspects of global development. In the core courses for the program that I teach in, we always talk about the need to develop plans and then be ready to torch them. The first day that you arrive something dramatic has changed or if you really misread what people were talking about and what they were interested in, and they certainly experienced that.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: We use a quote in *Books Behind Bars* from General Eisenhower, who said in battle, I find that plans are useless, but planning is essential.

DAVID EDMUNDS: You develop an appreciation for possibilities and potential kinds of issues that might arise even if you can't predict all of them, right? And I think students kind of absorbed that lesson probably more completely than they ever have.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: And how about you, did you gain any additional insights into your discipline as a result of this experience?

DAVID EDMUNDS: Insights into my discipline from this experience? We're going to meet in the fall for all of global studies and have a discussion about what does it mean to be in a global studies program when mobility might be greatly restricted and when frankly the United States and its citizens might be much less welcome, much less considered a resource for good ideas. And so, I think there's potential actually, if we give up American exceptionalism, to develop what I would think would be a much truer, fairer, more just sense of relationships with peoples around the world. But our institutions are still set up in kind of the old service-learning model where we have all the good and we're going to share it as generously as we can with all those who live in pitiful and marginalized conditions around the world.

Many of our partners never bought into that idea. We've really tried to pick groups that start with the assumption that they have as much to share with us as we with them. In fact, they may have better answers to a lot of life's pressing questions than we do. I think they'll be ready for a reconfigured kind of global studies model once we come up with it, but I think we have to do a little more talking about what does that look like institutionally? What does it look like the way we develop curricula?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Did this crisis give rise to any paradigm shifts in your thinking about teaching, about your role as a teacher, your purpose as a teacher?

DAVID EDMUNDS: I've been thinking about my role and purpose as a teacher pretty much since I got here. I'm considered in some ways pracademic and my experiences outside the academy have taught me that universities would do well to soften the claims they make about knowledge production and who does it and where it comes from and to uplift and share more widely the knowledge that comes out of people, organizations, communities not within the university.

So, since I've been here, I've tried more and more to identify people that, I would call them professors in a different context, but call mentors for our students and engage them as early and often as I can with students. And in that situation, I'm more the facilitator, that kind of guide on the side rather than sage on the stage, and I'm comfortable with that. And I would say I can go even further in exposing students to and creating situations where students can learn from the various kind of people I know—friends, colleagues, partners outside of the university.

I don't know if this particular crisis has changed that trajectory so much as convinced me that I need to continue doing that. I just have to be more creative about how it's done. If students can't go visit people in place, what does it look like for virtual communication, video sharing, guided tours that are done through VR sets? I don't know what we're going to do, but other ways where people feel like they're immersed in thinking and practices of people outside the university.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: In a conversation we had several months ago, you mentioned the challenging of this notion of expertise. What does it mean to be an expert? And I'm just curious if anything in this crisis has led to further thinking on your part around that question.

DAVID EDMUNDS: Yeah. If I think about expertise as I've noted, I think we're at a position in this historical moment in this institution where the notion of expertise that resides outside the university is important to recognize and give a platform to.

Having said that, whenever you do engagement work, you also realize that there are other bodies of expertise that might not reside in the community that you're working with and that may reside in the university. It's made me think even perhaps a little more carefully about where expertise resides and where it doesn't and not be too cavalier about making broad statements that way. It's not as though the university doesn't have expertise that people in Cambodia or the Philippines or South Africa or South Dakota don't want and can't use; there's just a lot of work to be done to make that available and in a good way to those communities.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How did this crisis change your definition of teaching success? Did your idea of what a successful class looks like change as a result of this crisis or not?

DAVID EDMUNDS: I mean at the most fundamental level, I would say no. At the most fundamental level, I want students to learn to relate well, respectfully, humbly, with the framework of exerting power with rather than over. I want them to learn that those are the most fundamental lessons and I think that can still come through even in this virtual world a little bit. We can make that point. A lot of the details about how you do that and particularly under the stresses of being in a different place, in a different community, a lot of those were lost a little bit. And so, in some ways, I had to talk about those when I prefer students to kind of be prepared enough to learn them, but really experience them in person with community members that we would work with.

I would say at the deepest level, we can still have success in getting students to think differently about how they relate to people outside the University, but in the details, a lot of that was lost and some things it's just hard to talk about, right? The first time you're really challenged in the way you allocated resources within a budget in person by people in a community, that's a really hard lesson to learn, right? And I can talk about it, but it's not the same as a student having to stand in front of people that they like and are trying to work with and be accountable for budgetary decisions. So, some of those things I think are, it's unfortunate to lose those.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about some of the insights or the lessons that you gained from this experience, which of those lessons do you think you want to take with you into the post-crisis era? Are there any lessons that you learned this semester that you want to carry with you into future iterations of your teaching?

DAVID EDMUNDS: Have all my classes outside. That's something we don't have to worry about infecting each other.

I thought I knew what relationship-building would look like and I thought I was probably more confident on what the trajectory of the various relationships that I'm trying to nurture in Cambodia, Philippines, South Africa, elsewhere. I had more confidence in what I was doing then maybe I should have because something like this could come up in other ways conflict, in one of the countries or god forbid something

happened to a key player somewhere. I think I'm going to consider more deeply how to build in more resilience in that relationship, if you will. I'm getting tired of that word but prepare better for possibilities that in some ways are usual and how I might prepare better for those. Whether it's a virus, conflict, somebody needing to leave and do something else for a while, I should be ready here for that. We have some work in India and our key player over there is thinking she may have to change jobs and I realize, oh, she's really the only person that I've interacted with at any deep level there. And so, I mean most community-engaged people know that's a mistake, but I had been a little cavalier about it, I think. Those are the kinds of lessons I can take out of this.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about what you've learned, as you consider the fact that this summer, next fall, next year, there's going to be a lot of faculty now who are teaching community-engaged courses who are going to be having to do so either entirely online or in a hybrid model, what are some key pieces of advice that you would offer those faculty?

DAVID EDMUNDS: For any of us who are getting into this kind of engaged learning, the courses that focus on engaged learning, one I think we need to learn from each other. I think the thing that you're doing is really valuable. I'm quite confident that when I see the videos, I'll learn something from the other folks who've contributed. So, in a sense we have to create our own community and be mindful of how it's working, right, and continue to learn from each other.

Echoing something I said earlier, a lot of Indigenous studies faculty say keep the relationship central, right? It's all about the relationships and I think I buy that, that continuing to make that the central focus is really important. When specific project objectives are no longer viable or visits that people were counting on can't be made, if you keep that relationship central, you go back and say, okay, so what is it that we can do? How do we make you feel like it's still worth engaging with us? And the partners that I've had have always had an answer for that. There's always something that they want us to do. There's always some way that we can relate to them that will overcome whatever kind of disruption, a pandemic or some other crisis, that's created for us. Maybe we better do more planning for disruption. Be more, as you were saying from Eisenhower, into the planning without wedded to any specific plans. So, I think those would all help.

Maybe this is an elaboration on the idea of relationships, the relationships where we have had our partners here visiting us at UVA are stronger and it's easier to get over these kind of bumps than others, if they've come here and they feel some measure of investment in the university itself because they've met other faculty. They've seen libraries. They have interacted with a wider range of students. Whatever it might be, those relationships seem better able to weather these occurrences. So, that might be something we could learn, too. We should not just send people out, but really think carefully about making the university accessible to those outside of it.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Is there anything specific to the idea of transitioning online? Any advice to community-engaged faculty who are particularly concerned about how do you do this kind of thing online?

DAVID EDMUNDS: One of the things with some of the work locally with public housing is who has access among your partners to online resources. I would hope that the university would see it as a fruitful investment to perhaps create small grants for partners who have good access now and who participate really meaningfully in the education of our students to be able to build up that capacity. We were talking to South Africa earlier this morning, they are trying to take over an abandoned power station and create

an art and community organizing space up there, and they're in heavy negotiations with local Internet service providers about how to do that. I think they'll be able to get it done, but a small investment from the university would make all kinds of learning moments possible with those folks there for our students. That's something to think about perhaps.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in this moment of trauma?

DAVID EDMUNDS: The meaning I take out of being a community-engaged teacher in this moment of the pandemic, my sense is that breaking down all kinds of social barriers, including those between university employees such as myself and the heads of movements and organizations and other community kind of initiatives, that that is more important than ever right now. We're going to have limited resources. There are people out there stoking conflict every which way. We have to be really serious about making connections with all sorts of groups, particularly historically and currently marginalized groups, so that we can push back against these kinds of pressures. It's always been important, the history of the United States is incredibly fraught, but it feels like a pretty critical moment right now for us to be on our game and not to let legacies of university/non-university hierarchy notions that we are the exclusive source of important knowledge get in the way of those kind of relationships.