S: This is Sandy Gamble and I’m here today with Julie Wolter who’s an associate professor in the program of Health Sciences. Julie, thank you for talking to us.

J: Thank you, I’m excited to be here.

S: So as part of our ongoing series on engaging all learners, Julie has agreed to talk to us about an honors course that she taught last semester. Was this your first time teaching an honors course?

J: It was my first time teaching an honors course. The program came down and asked if someone from the Health Sciences campus would like to teach a course and I said yes, I would love to do that.

S: Great. Who were your students?

J: All freshmen, first semester freshmen except one, I did have a first semester sophomore. They need to take this crossroads course either their freshman year or their sophomore year, what works in their schedule, and they could choose which course to do so the instructor of the course could pick the topic that was approved through honors. And then they could develop it into a three hour course for the students to challenge them with their writing skills, their speaking skills, service and bring it up to the level that the honors student needed.

S: Well that sounds really exciting that you got to choose the topic of the course. How did you go about determining what topic you would select?

J: Well, that’s an interesting story, I actually when they were talking to me and she said what topic would you like to do, what came out of my mouth first was the thing that I’m very passionate about and I said dogs. And she looked at me and the others in the room laughed at me too knowing how passionate I am about animals and she said well we can work with that. And I knew right then and there that I would teach this course but she said let’s see how we can
develop this and how it turned out is we decided to work it into something called Animal Advocates focusing on dogs and cats in the St. Louis area and how the students could be advocates to help the situation with the overpopulation of dogs and cats in the area. And then how does that play into where they’re from and also how does that play into other animals and advocacy for other animals around the world.

S: That sounds like a really exciting topic. Did you have any thought going in that it would be engaging to this particular group of incoming freshmen, or how did students choose to enroll in the course?

J: The titles of the courses are listed, and then they looked at what worked with their schedule and hopefully they picked the topic that worked with their schedule but to be honest with you there were some students who picked my class because of the time and so they weren’t truly excited about the topic at first I will say, and then they got through the class and I will say they were enthused at the end, at least they told me they were enthused at the end, but it was a two-way kind of a street, they could pick the topic that hopefully fit with their schedule or pick the time that fit with their schedule. So I had about nine students and they were very eclectic in who they were. They were pre-meds, they were undecideds, they were in, let’s see I had an education, an art major, it wasn’t one particular one, I’m used to the sciences, the health sciences students, so this was very different for me to have a wide variety of majors in one particular class. But it was really wonderful and they brought their different strengths to the class in many different ways.

S: Wow. So we know that engagement doesn’t just happen.

J: Correct.
S: What were some strategies that you used in the course to engage as many of the learners as you could?

J: Well I knew that we were going to do some writing, because we wanted to work on that, we needed to work on their speaking skills but I also knew I just didn’t want to lecture. It wasn’t something that I felt was important for me to sit there and just lecture this to. I am active in my volunteer work, working with the animal issues here in the St. Louis area. So I have a wide variety of people that I know or that I can contact so I thought well I’m just going to get those people to come and talk and present and show the students what they’re doing. And so I knew I would have guest lecturers and I knew that I wanted to do field trips. I knew I wanted to do service. I wanted to do two types of service, I wanted to do hands-on so we could go out into the neighbors’ neighborhood and do some service for them for some type of advocacy and I knew I wanted a hands-on project, and that seemed to excite to be able to have a product that they could do at the end, present at the end. And they really enjoyed the animals that came into my class.

The dean allowed us to bring animals into the class, so I let the speakers know that if you wanted to bring an animal with you, they did. So we had dogs, and we had cats and they wandered the room and the kids absolutely loved it and they sat on the floor and were very engaged as the speakers talked. Speakers used slides and Facebook and videos and they gave real life stories and the kids asked questions. I think the most exciting time for the students was when we went to stray rescue and got a tour at stray rescue. In their reflection papers, what they told me was that when you go into a shelter, you go in to adopt a dog or a cat, you see the front reception way, so you see the beautiful desk, you see the living room set up that’s for you to be introduced to your animal or the room to the side where you can go by yourself, but you don’t see the behind the scenes. They got a behind the scenes tour, they saw the animals, how they were taken care of,
how important it was to stray rescue to keep the animals clean and healthy and well-socialized and they walked away from that thinking this is just amazing. They don’t realize how much work it takes to be a shelter for cats or dogs, so they learned a lot about what was going on.

S: It sounds like the service projects in those real world experiences you exposed them to were very meaningful and engaging to them. Did you have to do anything to prepare these first time freshmen to do service learning?

J: You know, these are honors students and they really have already been exposed to service, but when we talked about the service that we were going to do, which the hands-on service was bagging dog food, and the boys that didn’t have animals and picked this class because it was a time frame that fit their schedule were a little hesitant at first. But they really enjoyed themselves. They got a lot out of the day, they smelled like dog food at the end of the day, and they loved it. Talking with them, they thought that this is really exciting. They bagged up 5600 pounds of dog food that day, we went with another group of people and were informed that, at the distribution when they passed out that dog food every last bag that they bagged up went away, so they were shocked at the amount of food that was given away, but they were also very pleased with themselves in how they helped, but the students really delved into the service, they were excited about the aspect. Did I get all of them on the day? No, but when the others that went out and did it themselves, I told them it had to be some sort of animal rescue type of a situation, and they went out and had a couple of boys doing laundry and picking up dog doo and they were a little taken aback at first but then they were like ‘This is really cool’ and I was like ‘Yea it’s really cool.’ You know? So I think their service was already built into them. Now, their hands-on service project as far as the product that they developed, I was a little concerned about it at first they were given a project to develop a table top, how do I want to put this, tool
presentations, a resource, something that a rescue could take with them to an awareness event so that they could engage tweens to the plight of what is happening with the animals and they were given this early on in the semester and I was a little concerned as the semester went on that they were not working with it as much as they should and I would ask them for updates and they didn’t seem to be a cohesive group. But about a month or three weeks before they were to present it to the rescue group, they turned into a totally different group. It took that semester for this group, who didn’t know each other at all, to become a cohesive group at the end. They really did an excellent job with what they presented. You could tell the art major, she was very prevalent in some of the products that they put together, her artistic side. The boys were the techies behind it. Some of the other girls were the ideas and the hands-on and then they presented it and did really very well I thought. And I was very pleased with the product and so was the rescue, so I was kind of blown away with what they did and I didn’t want to give them a whole lot of guidance because I wanted this to come from them. I didn’t want to be the one to be the one to say ‘do it this way, do it this way’, I just wanted to be the one to say, ‘How’s it going? You really should be working on this and doing this’, that was the guidance that I gave them for that project. And they did beautiful, you know? And I was blown away from it.

S: Do you feel like maybe that lack of guidance and prodding helped engage them more in the project because they knew ultimately they would be responsible?

J: I’m hoping, I really didn’t want to be that person that said ‘here take my hand I’m going to walk you through this’, I wanted them to do this. And they were perfectly capable of this and I think they realized Julie’s not going to be telling us what to do. They were given their parameters from the rescue. The rescue said ‘this is what we want’ and they had full connection with this site if they wanted to and they finally realized, ‘Ok we’re going to do this’ and they engaged and
at the end when they were discussing it, they truly enjoyed it and one student actually said that because of doing this and being in this class, she made a decision to become a social worker, which brought a tear to my eye, I thought, ‘Yay, I helped somebody to make a decision on what she wanted to do’ and she seems excited, in fact she just emailed me the other day and said, ‘Julie, is any service coming up in any of the organizations that I Can help with?’ And so I’m going to hook her up with a place so that she can go and do some stuff with the animals again.

S: Wow it sounds like just a fabulous experience to help acculturate these incoming students to service learning, what SLU classes look like. My question for you is what did you learn from structuring the engagement in the course this way? Are you taking anything from this and using it to shape your practice in other courses?

J: Well yes, depending on the size of the course, or the class I should say, sometimes I do have larger classes and it’s more difficult. I try to mentor my service so that they know what I do, so I talk about dogs, but my senior level classes I’ve really found what I have enjoyed doing is almost doing what I did with the service, turning parts of it over to them. And saying here you go this is what we’re doing and so one of my courses this semester, it’s a senior level course and I looked at my syllabus differently, I just didn’t want to lecture the whole time, these kids don’t want to be lectured to the whole time. So I decided that I was going to do a unit of lecture, it’s more of an introduction type of stuff and then a unit of hands-on, active learning. And I could present a topic to them and say ‘what do you want to do, how do you want to handle this, let’s do a survey, how do you want to do the survey’, and so yesterday I presented a survey that they were going to do, I just gave them some of the parameters and I said ‘How do you want to do it?’ and they spent 20 minutes just engaged in how they’re going to do this and how are we going to ask the questions, what questions are we going to ask, are we all going to ask it, how are we going to pull it
together for statistics, and they’re going to do that over the weekend and come back next week and spend a class and they’re going to pull it all together and the end product will be a short presentation on what they found out dealing with health literacy, issues with college students and how much do they know about healthcare, so they’re excited about it and I watched the class and when I walked out of that class I felt good because they were totally engaged, they were very excited about what they’re doing and I was just kind of the moderator, the questions if they came my way, it was like ok what do you want to do, you know? Or that might not work this way or you’re veering off the topic here but I didn’t really speak a whole lot and I have a feeling next week I won’t be speaking a whole lot either because they took ownership of it. That’s one class and then the next class that I’m teaching is a hot topics course, so it’s a capstone course and I could have looked at it and thought well I’ll pick the hot topics in health care for us to look at. And then I thought ‘No, I’m not doing that, I’m not going to sit down and pick the topics’ because they’re going to be going out into these healthcare professions and they know what’s important to them so we spent two days with them writing all over the board and everybody throwing out ideas on what they wanted, and then we spent another two days trying to whittle that list down into a workable list of topics that they could work with. And then at the end of that day, they chose the presentation schedule and then they were like well how do we present this? So I’m like ‘I don’t care, you do it however you want. This is your topic, this is what you’re doing and they do it as groups, they do it as individuals, we had lots of Youtube videos, we had one, he did the entire class and brought in a video and we watched it the entire class and the last 15 minutes he led a discussion on it so he had prepared questions. We had another who did lecture with Youtube videos, and we have others that will do debates and they’re just excited about how they’re doing it. And they come into class and in fact, I have a hard time getting them
to be quiet, which is really kind of exciting, but when you want to start talking, they’re talking louder so it’s been really exciting. We’ve also been talking about what can we do service wise. How can we as healthcare professionals be in service to others? I mean we’re in service to others in what we do but how do we do it as students, how do we how do we help others, so that is a conversation that we have too and we have a day at the end of the semester which could very well turn into some type of service day. I’m excited, it’s been a really interesting metamorphosis for me over these last few months

S: If you had one piece of advice to give a faculty member who’s struggling to engage all of the learners in their classroom, what would that be? It’s a big question.

J: Yea, I can go many different ways, but I have found that, yes some classes it’s all presentation and you can’t help but do that, but what I have found is that if I don’t hold their hand, if I just give them a project and give them the parameters and don’t hold their hand and don’t make it so tight, but make it open enough for them, for their creativity, for them to feel like this is truly what I am giving to you and not ‘I’m just regurgitating back to you what Julie wants’, then they seem to thrive in that environment better. It’s difficult in all classes to do that, especially if you have a large class, but I think that’s something I’ll try next semester when I have my large class again, how it goes with them and we can do a follow up to see how that works but the smaller classes have been very open to ‘I’m just giving you this’ and go for it, whatever you want to do, however you want to do it, you know? Let them be creative, they’re idea of creativity is different from my idea of creativity and it’s that letting go part that is sometimes difficult, and I’ve seen some really cool things

S: Well thank you so much for your time today and I hope you’ll let me come back and talk to you after you’ve tried some of these techniques with your larger class.
J: That’d be great, thanks for coming.