Engagement with Educator-in-Residence Scholar, Professor Peter Felten
Highlights and Insights

During the first two weeks of September 2024 (02 – 12 Sep 2024), CTLT had the pleasure of hosting **Professor Peter Felten**, our 2024 Educator-in-Residence Scholar from Elon University, USA.

Professor Peter Felten generously shared his deep expertise and insights with the NUS community through a variety of platforms. Highlights included a thought-provoking public lecture, an interactive faculty workshop, a dynamic panel discussion, a student dialogue, and engaging discussions with senior leadership and educators from across the campus. These sessions sparked meaningful conversations and fostered new ideas on teaching and learning.

Key Takeaways from Student Dialogue
How You Can Help Your Peers – and Yourself – Learn, Connect, and Thrive at NUS
(06 Sep 2024)

The dialogue highlighted the importance of human connections in university and the need for students to build meaningful relationships for their success and well-being at NUS. He highlighted that strong relationships with peers and professors contribute significantly to learning, well-being, and long-term success.

Professor Felten emphasised the following:
- **The quality of relationships matters more than quantity.**
- **Diversity in relationships is valuable.**
- **Connections formed in the university can have lasting impact.**
- **Students have the capacity to build meaningful relationships**.

Prof Felten encouraged students to connect with professors and peers both inside and outside the classroom, sharing real student experiences and advice. He highlighted the value of:

Being Present
Making time for connections, even outside of class.

Giver's Gain
Helping your peers leads to personal growth and academic benefits for them – and for you.

Multiplex Ties
Forming connections across different groups and contexts enriches the student experience; student peer relationships that include academic, affective, and practical components tend to contribute most to student success.

He concluded the dialogue by highlighting how such relationships, whether with faculty or peers, help students navigate university life and shape their future, both academically and personally.

Teaching and Learning in a Time of Generative AI: Reflections on Relationships, Trust, and Well-Being

03 Sep 2024

Professor Peter Felten challenged the NUS community to shift our focus from asking, "How will AI revolutionise teaching and learning in higher education?" or "What can AI do?" to **"What are OUR purposes for using AI in teaching and learning?"** Framing the conversation this way, he said can help us reclaim our agency as educators while recognising AI as a powerful tool—but a tool that should ultimately serve our goals and the institution's goals.

Peter highlighted the core purpose is in enabling students to learn and grow and connect in ways that enable them to have good, meaningful lives and us to have thriving individuals and communities that prioritise well-being. Our approach, therefore, should be to move beyond simply embracing AI towards delving deeper into why we use it. Echoing John Warner's work, Peter urged us to think about the difference between "the basics" of teaching work (e.g., administrative tasks) or the "the fundamentals" of teaching and learning (e.g., course and assignment design).

Peter suggested four ways AI can help us achieve our goals with "the fundamentals" of teaching:

Transform student work

1

AI can help reimagine academic work that we ask students to do. Make the tasks more meaningful and valuable to students, one that matters to their learning and to their future. They need to value that task and would want to work hard for that learning to happen! For this to happen, students need to trust their instructors.

Practice difficult things

2

AI can assist students and instructors in practicing difficult skills (e.g., applying, communicating, creating, and synthesising ideas) in a safe environment. Peter shared a few examples:

- AI can be smart tutor that adapts to students' work by offering progressively challenging tasks to strengthen their knowledge.
- AI can enable role-playing by adopting various perspectives to help synthesise complex concepts.
- AI as a valuable tool for students with social anxiety or learning disabilities, allowing them to practice difficult conversations, such as asking a professor about grades or seeking peer feedback.
- AI can be used to rehearse emotionally sensitive conversations, such as discussing a personal tragedy with a student, improving their empathy and response in challenging situations.

Be a feedback coach

3

As a feedback coach, AI can help instructors give tailored, meaningful, and more effective feedback to students, and in helping students give more effective feedback to each other. The point is not to have AI generate and give feedback, but rather to have **AI coach instructors in making their comments to students more constructive, inclusive, and learning-centred**; similarly, AI can coach students in effective ways to learn from feedback on their work, and also can help them make their peer feedback more constructive. This approach builds on the literature about 'feedback literacy' and on research that the more structured feedback a student gives to peers or receives on their academic work, the more learning happens.

Rethink learning and well-being

4

AI has the potential to transform our understanding of learning and well-being in higher education. Learning is often viewed as an individual, high-stakes, stressful, process, shaped by our assessments and course structures, impacting negatively on the well-being. If used appropriately, AI could help reframe learning as a collaborative experience.

Citing Ethan Mollick's work, Peter highlighted how AI could make co-learning, co-thinking, and co-creating the norm. He also emphasized that real transformation comes from fostering dialogue, relationships, and trust in education. AI can support this shift, but the **change must be intentional and purposeful**, led by educators to create truly revolutionary learning experiences.

Peter ended by asking educators not to just passively embrace AI, but actively shape its role in education to build a future of learning that is meaningful, transformative, and rooted in human values.

Cultivating student connections for motivated learning and well-being

05 Sep 2024

Peter Felten shared key insights from US research, inviting reflection on how they apply to Singapore's context.
Key take-aways include:

Strong connections = strong outcomes

Peter shared research that showcased how quality relationships with faculty, peers, and staff are vital for learning, well-being, and even long-term success. Building connections is critical to fostering student success. Students who feel isolated or unsupported, particularly first-generation or low-income students, struggle more. It's vital to create meaningful connections within the classroom to help students thrive, with the suggestion that teachers focus on helping students connect with their peers. These peer-to-peer connections can significantly contribute to a student's academic journey.

It's not about quantity, it's about quality

Even a handful of meaningful connections can have a transformative impact on a student's university experience confirmed Peter.

Faculty as "mentors of the moment"

While strong faculty-student relationships matter, Peter emphasised that even a short interaction with a faculty member under the right conditions can make a substantial difference in a student's life. This approach, of being a "mentor of the moment" rather than a life-long mentor, can be powerful for students – and often is more sustainable for busy faculty than cultivating deep relationships with many students. However, deep mentoring also matters -- strong faculty-students relationships can have long-lasting effects on students' learning, even extending to personal and professional well-being years after graduation.

Belonging & mattering

Students who feel supported and valued are more resilient and persistent, regardless of their background. Feeling a sense of belonging and mattering helps students thrive, even if they don't fully fit in.

Practical strategies for fostering connections

He shared practical tips that can help faculty in fostering connections:

1. Introduce yourself in a way that fosters connection.

2. Discuss the value of relationships with students.

3. Validate students' potential, even when they are struggling.

4. Try collaborative testing to promote interaction.

5. Use structured peer feedback in your courses because all students benefit from giving and receiving feedback.

The workshop served as a powerful reminder that fostering meaningful connections is vital for creating a supportive and thriving learning environment.

Key Takeaways from EiRP Panel Discussion
Students as Partners: Reimagining Higher Education for a Collaborative Future
04 Sep 2024

In this panel discussion, **Professor Peter Felten** and **Dr Nira Rahman** explored the concept of staff-student partnerships in higher education, clearly framing and clarifying what it is and what it isn't. Throughout the session, both Peter and Nira emphasised the importance of ongoing dialogue, transparency, and mutual respect in the partnership.

The discussion also explored various practical approaches, including pre-course surveys, regular feedback sessions, and peer teaching. Challenges and opportunities were discussed, such as how to engage less-vocal students, address power dynamics, ensure ethical grading practices, and build student capacity for peer evaluation.

Key points regarding staff-student partnerships that emerged from the discussion include:

Shared understanding and responsibility

Partnerships involve open dialogue, where students articulate their understanding of course goals and demonstrate their learning, while educators facilitate and respond to student feedback. This shared process fosters a sense of belonging, where students feel valued and respected. Tailoring partnerships to fit different student and educator contexts is crucial, recognising that individual experiences and expectations can vary.

Facilitating student-led agency

Educators should foster a process where students naturally take agency, rather than positioning themselves as those who "empower" students.

Equity and transparency

Conversations need to be honest, open, and acknowledge the differing expectations of both students and educators. This requires faculty to showcase vulnerability, being willing to share their own experiences and perspectives, and acknowledging the limitations of their own knowledge.
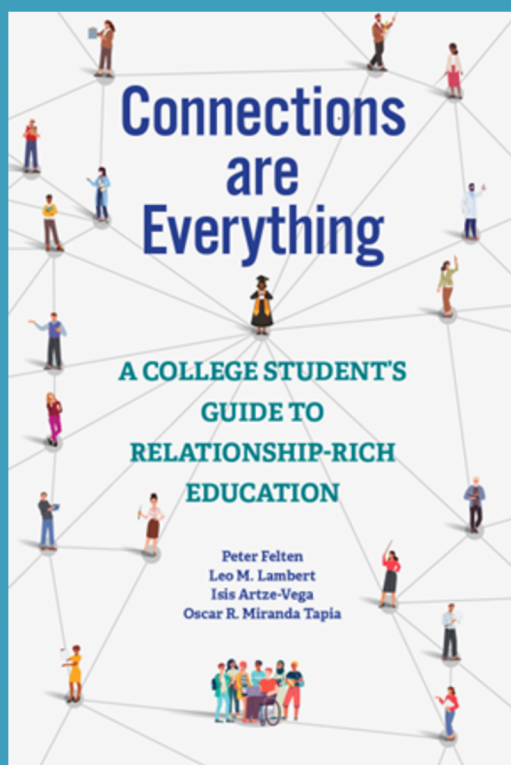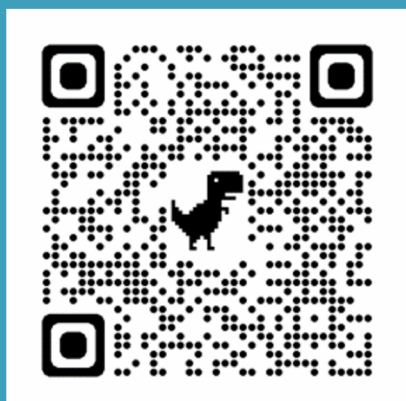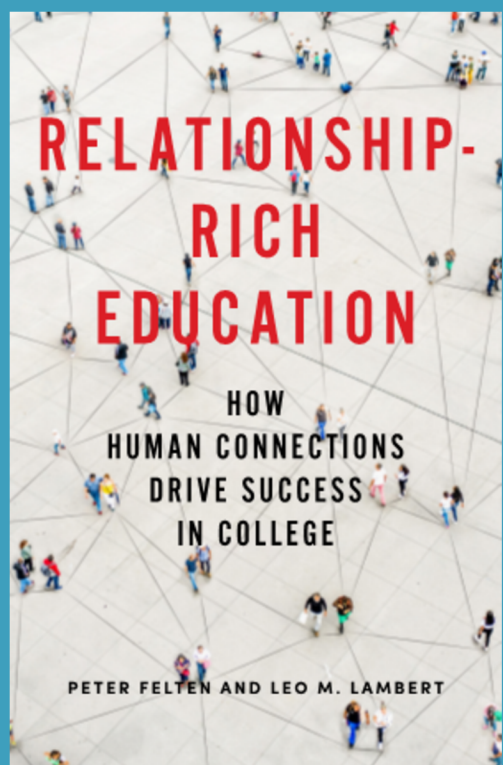
Value of student voices

Students bring unique expertise and experiences that educators can learn from.

Beyond tokenism

Partnerships should be genuine and sustained, with ongoing dialogue and responsiveness to student input.

The panel concluded by emphasising that partnerships require a commitment to being "**relentlessly invitational**," acknowledging the value of student perspectives, and recognising the importance of cultural and contextual factors. Ultimately, the value of pedagogical partnerships lies in the exchange—both educators and students bring unique assets, experiences, and cultural perspectives that enrich the learning process.

Resources