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SARAH Today in the podcast, we're looking at a new kind of independent study.

HANSEN:

ANJALI SASTRY:Teaching this way is incredibly rewarding and also really scary. You'll often be invited into domains where you don't have the expertise, and it's quite hard to predict how a given session or conversation will go.

SARAH Welcome to Chalk Radio, a podcast about inspired teaching at MIT. I'm your host, Sarah Hansen, from MIT

HANSEN: OpenCourseWare. In this episode, we'll be talking about action learning and an exciting evolution of the independent study.

The MIT Sloan School of Management has a tradition of involving MBA Fellows in collaborations with partners from around the globe. For years, these projects have helped participants build experience and connections. And these students, the MBA Fellows, are often already established in a career or in building their own projects.

My guest today, Dr. Anjali Sastry, has led over 100 groups of MBA Fellows in these projects. Now the thing to note here is that these projects were developed by the school and instructors, and students would sign on to work on them. But Dr. Sastry wanted to get students more invested right from the start, so she decided to do something a little different. We'll pick up with Dr. Sastry's explanation.

ANJALI SASTRY:This last year, I tried a new experiment where, instead of us bringing in the projects, I had students work with me to create the projects they were interested in that spoke to societal challenges that would be important in the coming decade and that also linked to technology in some way. Students come in with a passion or a set of questions they're really interested in investigating. Could we take some of the things that work in action learning, traditional action learning classes, and bend them towards that kind of drive? Could I use my own connections, relationships, Rolodex to help students follow their passions but also to find thought partners or project partners in the world and also tap into my own expertise and that of other MIT faculty as well as their peers?

SARAH Could you talk a little bit about some of the specific projects that students did?

HANSEN:

ANJALI SASTRY:The projects students did ranged greatly, but all had as a theme using what they were learning here and tapping into emerging or existing technology in new ways to find solutions to problems that face many. One of my students, Alini, came to MIT completely on fire with this idea of tapping into analytics and AI to solve what she saw as a major challenge when it came to bringing finance to smallholder and small-scale farmers.

She's an expert on agricultural finance. And she realized that in her native Brazil and elsewhere, people who didn't have good credit standing and good credit records, farmers who didn't have those assets, couldn't get loans and were forever locked out. So there's a big dichotomy between the people who have access to finance and those who don't. Could she break down that barrier in some way? Could new forms of data and technology help do that?

So instead of relying only on somebody's credit record, could you look at the weather, their farming choices, their behaviors, and physical data and use it to come up with a better assessment of the riskiness of a given farmer from the lender's point of view? Slightly technical area, but it actually has huge implications because it could open the door to all kinds of folks who are excluded from traditional finance by providing other methods of sorting out their riskiness and their credit worthiness. So she's got drone data, map and weather data, behavioral data, transactional data, and is trying to stitch it all up in new ways.

SARAH Each of these projects required significant time and engagement from Dr. Sastry. I couldn't help but ask how this
HANSEN: all worked. What did it look like to be involved with each student's project?

ANJALI SASTRY: Each project was customized. And one of the things I've learned about trying to innovate when it comes to teaching is you have to be willing to invest a lot the first few rounds, the first few years you do something. And then over time, you learn how to make it a little more efficient, streamlined, and maybe scalable and more cost-effective. I learned I had to keep a whiteboard up in my office with each project and each person, because I had over a dozen running, to keep them straight and try to remember who's doing what so that when I saw it when I came into the office, that person would be on my mind or that project would be on my mind. I do think, mundane as it sounds, I think it's also important to have good forms and paperwork.

SARAH Sure.
HANSEN:

ANJALI SASTRY: Having people really articulate in writing briefly what they want to do and having a structured update process really helps keep the momentum and build the focus.

SARAH How do you measure success in projects like this?
HANSEN:

ANJALI SASTRY: That's a great question because students who are following their passions really get into it. You give them enough freedom, they will have a good time, right?

SARAH Right.
HANSEN:

ANJALI SASTRY: But part of our challenge as their teachers is to help make sure that we're embedding into their approach enough rigor, that we're looking at the data and the evidence and that it's being linked to the content we're teaching here. So a passion project by itself may or may not be academic. Not every student who comes in with their passion project is necessarily going to want to or should turn it into an in-depth study.

So I've learned that you can't convert everyone. And that's OK because we're offering-- this is an offering of a new learning experience that's very much driven by the students' interest. You need to really be able to allow the students to self-select in. It's hard to offer something like this as a requirement. So that's another piece is striking the right balance between opening the door and inviting people in versus cracking the whip and following up on them.

SARAH Dr. Sastry pointed to one of the challenges that she faced in taking on these students' projects, and it's one that
HANSEN: many instructors face at some point. How far would she go outside her area of expertise to support her students?

ANJALI SASTRY: I need to be able to figure it out for myself and then also be very clear with the students. How much do I know about the blockchain? That's not an area of my research. So how far do I want to go down a set of projects that take that on? I'm interested in this topic. I'll learn with you, but my domain of expertise relates to these areas.

We can apply it to your questions. We can apply systems thinking or organizational change or business models to the questions you're articulating. But I am not the technical expert on this domain, so you'll need to work with someone else on that. And different instructors have different interests in stepping out of their comfort zone. So I think that's really important.

Another big question is, how willing are you, as an instructor, to have a mishmash of projects that take on very different domains? Teaching this way is incredibly rewarding and also really scary. You'll often be invited into domains where you don't have the expertise, and it's quite hard to predict how a given session or a conversation will go.

It's not like running a case where you know the story and you know what you're going to say at each moment in class or you've at least got a sense of what that might look like. Because very often, students will come in and say, I've totally changed my mind. And you have to deal with that.

So there's both the kind of personal journey of learning that's less predictable and the domain part that's less predictable. But you, as the instructor, get to set some of those parameters. So I want them to not simply make general arguments about what should happen but to think about what they could do as a leader, an entrepreneur, and executive.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

If you're interested in learning more about social impact technology projects or independent studies, you can find Dr. Sastry's teaching materials on our site at ocw.mit.edu. You'll also find videos of Dr. Sastry's students sharing their insights about their own projects. Additional materials and Instructor Insights about project-based learning are on our educator portal at ocw.mit.edu/educator.

As always, thank you so much for listening. We'd love for your OCW story to become a part of our conversation. Use the contact link in the show notes to share how you use OCW to shape your own life or those of others. Your story will inspire us and other people and will help us continue to share the kind of open educational resources that make a difference. Until next time, I'm Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare.