Matters of Engagement podcast
Episode "Hosts Jennifer and Emily learn to 'let go of perfection'"
https://mattersofengagement.com

00:00
Jennifer: 1, 2, 3… [sound of hands clapping not quite in unison]

00:04
Jennifer: close enough!

Emily: Do you want me to do it again…?

00:07
Jennifer: No, no, no, no, that's fine. I'll be able to get it close enough at least. Okay, sorry. So let's start over.

00:16
Jennifer: Hello, and welcome to Matters of Engagement, a podcast exploring the complex world of patient engagement and partnership. I'm Jennifer Johannesen.

Emily: And I'm Emily Nicholas Angl.

Jennifer: It'll be another week or so until we release our next scheduled episode. So we thought this would be a perfect opportunity to give listeners a bit of insight into how we approach making this podcast. This is our unscripted but lightly edited conversation about everything from interviewing guests to how we think about scripting and editing, to why we love working together on this podcast. We started by talking about how every episode is unique. And things just rolled from there.

Jennifer: ...there are a a lot of components to consider. I mean, first and foremost, of course, well the first thing I think of is the guests themselves, you know, what sort of position do they have in the field? And who are they, who are they to others, who are they in their own minds? And are we inviting them on as a kind of critical commentator, are we inviting them on as a kind of example of something that happens out in the world? And so that shifts how we think about them and how we want to script things. So there's that piece, but then you're right... there's also the topics we've already covered. What do we think is already out there in terms of content and what have our listeners already heard in other forums? And is this even interesting. Are we just contributing to the pile of stuff that's already been mused over> So yeah, it's all intertwined. And, yeah,I can't imagine we would come up with some perfect formula.

01:56
Emily: One thing that struck me is that I obviously have some ideas in my head that sort of float around a lot. And I think one of the things is, when I hear someone speaking… not to be already thinking of those things. Because what I found is it's really shaped some of my ideas or made me take a step back or something, with some of the guests where, you know, I have to fight that urge to be like "but don't

you think this…?" or, after they've spoken to kind of say, "Yeah, like, I think that underlines this" and to say, "No, like, put all of that aside… what did they say?" It's the sort of thing I wake up in the night about wondering if we've done justice to what they said, and not inserted ourselves too much,or made it too much about things that I already was thinking. That really weighs on me.

02:51
Jennifer: Mm hmm. Well, even if it didn't weigh on you, it would still be a hard balance to strike. When we're in the interviews, and we're talking to people… we're not just having a conversation. We're also thinking about how to shape the episode, we're thinking about all the conversations you and I had prior to talking to them, and we may have even had a pre-conversation with the person that we're now recording and interviewing. So there's so much context for the conversation that it's almost impossible to just be naive and just chat, because we've got so much else going on.

I would say it's partly that, yeah, it's wearing the different hats because we have to be listening for different things at the same time while we're talking. And I'm so glad that the two of us actually do the interviews, because there's times when I… it's not that I'm tuning out, but I'm tracking a different thought while the person is still talking. And so I may have lost some of what they've said. So when we listen back to interviews, I'm like, oh,

03:54
Jennifer: wow, they said something really interesting there. And I'm glad Emily was listening to pick up on it!

Emily: It just speaks to the subjective nature of this stuff. I'll hear something and I'll be like, you know, when they said that, and they were saying about how this [...] and you'll say, "No, I don't think that's what they were saying at all, I think they were saying this…" and then we really have to dig into exactly what they were saying. And that really helps because I find what it does is it stops me where it's necessary to stop in terms of assumptions, a little bit better. One struggle, I think, with this format, is that we do the interview, but we don't just play the interview. We do this extra bit on the end, which means we've removed that person from the ability to comment on that or just to be part of that conversation. And I think it works in its own way but it does add a different onus and a different level of scrutiny, I think, or consideration, that you know, obviously if we just designed the questions for the interview… and then did the interview and played it as our podcast… you know, we wouldn't have to consider.

05:04
Jennifer: I think the other piece that gets tricky is that you and I pour over the transcript. And these are words that are spoken 'temporally' or whatever, you know, like they're there in a moment in time. And were not necessarily scripted by the other person. And so the things that they say, they may not want to live and die by the one thing they said that one time. And you and I are trying to extract meaning from the spoken words of somebody who may be, you know… they were maybe speaking off the cuff and wouldn't necessarily want to be held to the words they said. So, I mean, we're obviously trying to figure that out by letting people now hear what we've recorded before we carry on so that they can, you know, have the option to take out pieces that they may have said or reflect on them differently. So that's a

good learning. But I still find that there's risk there in catching somebody out inadvertently, when we're trying to extract meaning from what they said. And yet, they maybe didn't think that hard about it.

06:06

Emily: I think it's been a lesson for me in speaking on the record, because I think most of us don't have much experience with that unless we're constantly being interviewed for things or whatever - is the fact that what came out of your mouth is what you said, so people are gonna use it as what you said, and what you meant. That's really tricky. You know, because it's true! There's probably lots of stuff that we all say that genuinely is not what we meant. And so I think it's been a good lesson for me to be more considerate. You wouldn't know by my talking! [laughs] But I'm learning. You should have heard me before I started the podcast!

06:44

Jennifer: Well, I think one of the things that will help in the future that we're still working on is trying to get clear on what our own agenda is. Because I think up until now, we've been earnestly just interviewing people around certain topics or something that they've written or something we think, you know, they would have some interesting comments on. But it's rarely about the person - there are few celebrities in the patient engagement world! So it's more about people who have a particular vantage point or perspective or an expertise, and we want to hear what those words are… and that person themselves? We're not trying to elevate them. So I guess what I'm saying is playing a full length interview, where it's just 'the world according to the guest', it doesn't quite satisfy I think, what you and I want to construct in an episode. And yet, we haven't really come out and declared what it is we're trying to construct in an episode! Or, you know, nor do we really tell the person because we don't really know yet until after we've talked to them what it's going to be.

So I think once we get a little clearer on an overall editorial statement, which I think we're kind of constructing as we go... it's getting clearer every time how we negotiate topics, how we negotiate guests and - or navigate, rather - those sorts of things. But I don't think it's terribly obvious to the listeners what that agenda actually is. I am clear, I think that I come from a critical point of view. And, and not just because I'm, like, inherently pessimistic! I mean, I am [laughs]. But I also feel like in this field, somebody has to hold space for that. And that doesn't mean I don't see some of the things that other people are saying about, you know, what they get out of it, and why it's meaningful to them. And I think that's a part of my growth over the past little while is now that I've encountered people in a much more intimate way, I can see just how passionate people are and how their identities are connected to the work that they do in engagement. So I feel like I've developed more empathy around that and more curiosity as opposed to just wanting to take the whole thing down!

And yet, at the same time, I personally have a bit of a mission of speaking truth to power. And I feel like even though there are good people doing good things - I'm not necessarily wanting to like call them pawns in somebody else's evil game, I think there's nothing helped by that (I'm not going to include any of this! [laughs]) But I feel like that is the case, actually, that there's a machine at work. And even if we can't escape it, I think it's important to hold space for naming it and talking about it.

Emily: I felt like when I started in engagement work, I felt really solid in this kind of concept and the logic of experience of healthcare and the way people experience it and what happens outside of you know, clinical research, and these things are really relevant to making good care. But I had no concept of 'engagement'. Sholom Glouberman, who is the first person I met, was sort of talking about this idea of not advocacy, but having people working with other health care providers to kind of share experience and, and shape things. It resonated for me in terms of the logic of having a system, which wasn't just based on like, "Fix you, now you're fixed, now you go home". And I think when I started, I felt good about it. I was like, "Yeah, like, let's get these voices, let's get these experiences included" without much thought about what that would really mean or, or presuppositions. And then it sort of: happened! And then it all just got built. And it was in research, and it was in institutions. And there was, like, engagement this, that and the other, and, and I was in it. And I don't think I thought as much about it as I could have. But also, it was just going so fast. And I was doing a lot of work and various...and so I think I really hit a bit of a point where I'm like, I don't know if I can just do this without criticizing it. Because where does that happen? The logic that I felt was there? ...didn't uphold all that was going on. My somewhat agenda for coming here was just trying to understand it for myself. And also feeling kind of a moral imperative to be like, "if I'm going to do this work, like I better be able to speak that I understand why I'm doing it or know what's going on". And also just that I was really disheartened by how few places I could go to read stuff like yours, or to find conversations like I'd had with you.

And it felt like for me the agenda was sort of like, well, let's have it happen a little bit more broadly. Or, like, can we do this in a bit more of a structured way, have others included more and also was curious with so many other people, whether they were willing to go there. There's something here - I don't even know yet what it's going to be or what I'm trying to understand - because the more I talk to people, the more it feels a bit like a moving target. And my thoughts are being shaped and even assumptions I had are being shaped. So if anything, I feel like my agenda is decreased. But my curiosity has increased. And I want to give more just like a practical structure to things like how we approach interviewing guests, and maybe some of the topics and how we do our critical part or those sorts of things have become more important.

Jennifer: We've been you and I had been talking about a podcast idea kind of very broadly, before this project came to be specifically. But I think just the nature of our arrangement and how we negotiate tasks and things like that… and the fact that it started from a contract, or an agreement I had with OSSU…. so anyway, all of that to say that you've had to kind of naturally absorb some of my agenda. Just because that's how these two seasons have been shaped so far. I mean, that's not to say that that would always be the case. But I do feel like sometimes I push for more criticism, and you have a more open curious mind than I do [laughs].

But I think that was our understanding going in. And that was kind of the point of having us both. I was also critical, but I had a little bit more of an openness and perhaps more of just anxiety in general about "Oh, do we want to…" But to be honest, too, and I think just from a more selfish perspective, that leadership or that sense of you pushing me a little bit was of interest to me, was what I wanted out of it.

Also, I have a three-year-old and certain things that consume me in a way that I knew that I couldn't do justice to certain aspects of this [which] you have the skills and the ability to do. And I've learned so much. I love it.

14:16
Jennifer: I think I have a sense now of where you're going to come up against where some of your boundaries are, like "you know, okay, Jen, you've gone way out and left field, let's talk about this!" And so I have a sense of that. And I think you have a sense of where I've maybe just been, you know, throwing some stuff against the wall, trying to see if this works, trying to see if this fits. And I feel like you're holding a certain end and I'm holding a certain end and we meet kind of in the middle. So it works. It works really well. And I was pretty clear at the beginning that this couldn't just be me, me and my big mouth, holding forth about engagement and that I needed another big mouth to come and join me! Your implementation experience brings a lens to this that I don't have. Because I've been known more as a critic, to whatever extent I have a reputation in this - I do feel like that, you know, for the benefit of the project and the benefit of our guests and our listeners, like just even even these personas of, you know, light and dark, kind of coming together, I think serves the project well.

15:30
Emily: There's certainly been a sort of way of working together that's developed and it's come somewhat, I think, from actually talking more because of COVID. I think we would have tried to book more in-person appointments to do our work and therefore not spoken as much in between and the ability to kind of… and I think that's immensely helped the kind of level of consideration that we can give to things. Because instead of saying, "for this script, you and I will sit down for an hour, and we'll work it out, and then it'll get done", or whatever that is, you know, there wouldn't be as many iterations. And I think it's certainly been beneficial for my thinking level, let alone if people saw the scripts when they started versus when they heard them - I think there is quite a big difference that comes from the fact that we probably talked through it, like, quite a good deal!

16:23
Jennifer: And one thing I was going to comment on something you said earlier - I think, you know, listeners who may be enjoying the podcast in the context of all the other podcasts they listen to and just it sort of comes and goes - they're probably not thinking too deeply about all the work that we put into it! But I think what might surprise listeners is just how much writing work there is with this project. I think of it primarily as a writing task. And that may just be because the production stuff comes naturally - it's part of my professional work, too. So I don't have to outsource that. I just do it myself. It's just piecing the things together. But it's the writing and the think… which of course, is also thinking - you know, in my mind, writing is thinking in action. And so you and I go through a lot of iterations of the script and kind of negotiating or navigating what we're going to include, what not to include, what's too much what's too little, you know, do we need to do a deeper dive conceptually into something? Is this too much of a shorthand? Yeah, there's all of that. And I think it comes out in the writing. And hopefully the episode itself sounds a little more easeful than that, because we've done all that work upfront.

17:42

Emily: I don't think I could have ever anticipated how intellectually heavy this project would be. Because initially, I did think they would probably be more like an interview. And then we might write a little, we thought we'd write like, sort of blog to go with it, right, we thought we'd have like a research paper or something - we'd talk to the person about it, and then there'll be a blog to go with it, and maybe summarize it. And so in my head, you know, that's pretty straightforward. And then we got to the point where we are really just listening to the interview first and trying to pull out what the episode was, and then you would do the first draft, and then we would work on it together. And this kind of thinking is what I needed to do, let alone wanted to do, for the work I do in the implementation stuff. I mean, the amount of writing you do for this, I can't imagine how exhausting that is. Because, the thought that that takes let alone then my editing with you and working through the... I didn't expect it to be so mentally consuming.

18:42

Jennifer: Yeah, the writing part is similar to the production stuff. I mean, people would know I do a lot of writing typically and have done so in the past. And part of the challenge for me has been trying to find a writing voice that is a voice. Speaking words is very different than writing an essay. And then also, you know, trying to figure out where you and I start and stop. And you know, there is some degree of like, we might agree on a point, but it makes more sense for me to say it or for you to say it. So then we're trying to figure out, "what would Emily say?" And "what would Jen say?" So there is this piece of performance and putting together a production or a package that makes our point. But you know, without being inauthentic. And so there's, yeah, a lot of navigating of that. So that's a piece I've been learning as we go for sure. And also learning to let things go, like just, you know, put it out and see what the world thinks and carry on. And we can't be perfectionists because they we'll never get anything done. Even though I have to say that each one of our episodes feels like you and I are putting together an hour-long conference presentation! Every single time. And submitting a paper to go with!

20:06

Emily: That's what it feels like!

Jennifer: I know, I know. So it yeah, it makes a lot of sense to me that it's all consuming. And then we're also trying to string together concepts and episodes and build on themes. And we haven't talked about this a lot, actually. But well, it sort of comes out when we figure out what episode is coming next and how are we stringing together various episodes - we know that there's a thread that we're trying to build on. And if our listeners are following us from the beginning, what have we done so far that kind of primes people to think about this topic? And are we ready yet? And are there things that might be too out there to bring forward yet when we haven't really done some of the foundational stuff? Our interests often range very widely, but we have to, at some point, just put out an episode. So yeah, learning to just let go of perfection. And also, I mean, this comes up in every episode, where we're trying to decide: how much of a point are we wanting to make? Or how many points are we going to make about this? And does it always just come back to, you know, what's the purpose of engagement?

Emily: Why are we doing this!

Jennifer: It does always comes back to the same fundamental questions. And so then I think, well, so should we just never talk about that? Because that's what everything is about?

21:28
Emily: Or should we only talk about that? Because that's it? Sometimes I feel like that should always be our first question. Like, "why do you… what do you think this is all about?" But I think there's, in terms of "this", this discussing it.... This is also what's so good about this process - this kind of constant reflection - there's the reflecting on the podcast, there's the reflecting on the episode, there's the - and this has been such a big part of it, for me, at least in terms of doing the podcast is this kind of progressive sense of like - what it is that we want to do with it. And I find that aspect of the work really, really interesting too.

Emily: I don't know exactly out of this recording what we should put in but we should definitely call it "letting go of perfection" [sarcasm]

22:20
Jennifer: My god, that's so nice! [laughs] Hashtag #blessed

22:22
Emily: Yes, well you said it... I was like… You said it and I'm like, "Oh, that's a hashtag right there…"

22:29
Jennifer: And that's it! Thanks for listening.