Three Questions About Teaching and Learning: 3QTL

Episode 9 - What motivates students to be their best selves?

Guest: Bryan Dewsbury

Description:

For Dr. Bryan Dewsbury, equity-minded, inclusive, or humanist teaching means distinguishing teaching students from teaching subject matter. The humanity of students, in other words, is prioritized over course content, and their lived experiences become vital to how the classroom operates. In our conversation, Dr. Dewsbury describes how he confronted the challenges of teaching online during COVID lockdowns, while also highlighting the many dimensions of his approach to humanist teaching. He explains, for example, how restructuring "office hours" as "student hours" can deepen student learning; how the principles of PhD qualifying exams might help us design open-book undergraduate exams; and he offers other possibilities for inviting students to become thoughtful, engaged citizens.

Bio:

Bryan Dewsbury is an Associate Professor of Biology at Florida International University (FIU). He is the Principal Investigator of the Science Education and Society (SEAS) research program, which blends research on the social context of teaching and learning, faculty development of inclusive practices, and programming in the cultivation of equity in education. He is an Associate Director of the STEM Transformational Institute, where he directs the Division of Transformative Education. He is also a Fellow with the John N. Gardner Institute where he assists institutions of higher education cultivate best practices in inclusive education. He is the creator and executive producer of the Massive Open Online Course called Inclusive Teaching. He is a co-editor of the book The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching. He has led faculty development workshops in over 150 institutions across North America, Europe and Western Africa. Dewsbury grew up in Trinidad and Tobago and immigrated to the United States in 1999. He received a BS in biology from Morehouse College and an MS and PhD in Biology from FIU.

References:

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Dewsbury B. 2020. A chance at birth: an academic development activity to promote deep reflection on social inequities. J. Microbiol. Biol. Educ. 21(1): doi:10.1128/jmbe.v21i1.2037

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Other resources:

Eli Review. Michigan State University. https://help.d2l.msu.edu/msu-docs/othertools-at-msu/eli-review

NPR. This I Believe, website. Available here: https://www.npr.org/series/4538138/this-i-believe

Sound clips:

Sparkle:

https://splice.com/sounds/sample/425e083a990ee378af0176f371a27ac9e57e f2673e502e7520b10674a7f083db

Door Knock:

https://splice.com/sounds/sample/31979af25a7221c4c60f9059f995e23d0e5f547a450f4b467db21b2b08f2ded5

• Footsteps:

https://splice.com/sounds/sample/1c51000f9446f058b75ca3a5889e41871fc6 2e5bfe128f217800f1cac3b1f3d5

Eerie Music:

https://splice.com/sounds/sample/3af651a3cc3483b25d24b1f70705a94357e872b4a92ba0db6124261494caa3c8

List of acronyms:

FIU - Florida International University

NPR - National Public Radio (USA)

LA - Learning Assistant

SLR - Single-lens reflex camera

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

Transcription:

DERRITT MASON: [00:00:00] Just a quick note for our listeners that there are a couple of acronyms and technical terms that Dr. Dewsbury uses in this interview. For explanations, please just see our online episode notes.

[Music Theme in]

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:00:21] When you think about teaching students versus teaching a subject, the humanity of the individuals involved really comes first before you get into the beauty of whatever the subject matter may be. The challenge you have to joyfully accept as an instructor is: what does it take to motivate an individual to be their best self?

DERRITT MASON: [00:00:40] Hello, I'm Derritt Mason. Welcome to "3QTL: Three Questions About Teaching and Learning." This season, we're in conversation with post-secondary faculty from across disciplines, and our three questions focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped values and transformed classrooms, challenging faculty and students in extraordinary ways while also sparking innovation. Our guest today is Dr. Bryan Dewsbury. When I heard Dr. Dewsbury deliver a keynote at the 2022 Conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, I knew that I had to have him as a guest on 3QTL. I was particularly compelled by how he described teaching his large Intro to Biology course as "more Intro than Bio," an Intro, that is, to thinking and feeling critically, sorting through our values, asking difficult questions and listening thoughtfully to one another. Dr. Dewsbury brings this passion for the civic responsibility of science to our conversation today. But regardless of your own discipline, I know you will find something inspiring in Dr. Dewsbury's approach to student-centered pedagogy, which frames learning as a life experience and teaching as an act of care and love. Thanks so much for being here, Dr. Dewsbury. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:02:05] Thanks for having me.

DERRITT MASON: [00:02:06] I'm wondering if you might please share some more details about yourself for our listeners. What kind of classes do you teach? What topics are they on? How many students are in your classes? And how many courses do you teach in a given year?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:02:18] My name is Bryan Dewsbury. I'm an associate professor of Biology at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. There is also an institute at FIU called The STEM Transformation Institute. I'm Associate Director of that Institute. Over the years, I've taught several different kinds of classes. The class I've taught most often is Introductory Biology. Some schools call it General Biology, Principles of Biology. At my previous institution, it was a relatively large class of about 155 students, could be up to 250, depending on the room size. Now I've taught smaller versions of that class as well. I've also taught graduate courses on course design, upper division undergrad classes on critical thinking. So, it definitely varies.

DERRITT MASON: [00:03:05] Great. So, let's jump into the three questions. I'm curious to know about the core values that guided your teaching and learning practice before COVID and how if at all, these values shifted during the pandemic.

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:03:19] I definitely wouldn't say they've shifted. I think that "deepened" might be a better way I would describe that. I've always taught my classes out of love. Every class in every university has subject matter, content, that you are expected to engage and cover. But my approach has always been about teaching students. When you think about teaching students versus teaching a subject, the humanity of the individuals involved really comes first before you get into the beauty of whatever the subject matter might be. You might call that inclusive teaching or equity-minded teaching. I'm good with those terms. But I think at its core, what it is it's really a humanist approach to teaching. So, with that, comes a natural understanding that you have to be concerned and aware of what your students' histories are before they come to you, what their lived experiences are like, and how all those things come to inform the degree to which they engage in a classroom. When the pandemic happened, we already had structures in place to react, perhaps, a little bit more quickly to people's human needs. And it really wasn't just about how you get these, how much of our chapters on a Zoom screen. Like everybody else, it wasn't easy, but it reinforced for me that humanism and care and togetherness, brotherhood, connection, you know, family, like, those things, it's what drives a quality classroom experience.

DERRITT MASON: [00:04:50] Can you say more about how some of these core values that I'm hearing you speak to: love, care, a humanist approach to teaching, community, collaboration, get operationalized in your classroom, either prior to, during or now, in this strange post-COVID, but not really post-COVID era of teaching?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:05:09] Oh, we are not post-COVID? They told me that. Well, I'll give specific examples. I'll use the Intro Bio class as the chief example. Before I even see the students, I send an assignment, which I copy-pasted from NPR's "This I Believe" website. So, they have this wonderful program called "This I Believe." Their prompts result in people doing like an oral essay. I think it is every Friday, it was. And it's a long-ish prompt. But the summary of it is "describe the values that shape your deepest passions." When you're asking somebody that, and this has nothing to do with if you're going to be a doctor, or dentist, or whatever you choose to do with biology, I just want to know about you. I want to know, what's the thing that motivates you to be alive and thriving in this world? I think, just being asked that question triggers our students to understand from the get-go, like, this isn't just a three-credit class. This isn't just an Intro class. This is an experience. So, then I can't just do that, and then say, "Okay, well, now Chapter One says X, Y, and Z." I have to back that up. You know, all the flowery first day-of-class speeches I give about, "We believe in your potential, we're here to support you, we understand everybody has a different history;" I have to back that up with giving feedback on time, with being understanding with deadlines, with how I support them outside the classroom with Office Hours, which we actually call Student Hours, with the way in which I introduce them to not just the beauty of science, but the times when science didn't quite get it right. And, you know, showing them the connection between scientific practice and civic responsibility. So, I have to have behaviors that back up the 30,000 feet kind of flowery, emotional things that start the experience. I'm not saying you have to go in there and hug everybody. But it's a human love, this; they're not necessarily your best friend; it is not necessarily they have to know everything private about you. It's the basic concern you have somebody in a community that you literally and genuinely believe can thrive and be better than they might even believe that it can be. I hope all of that makes sense.

DERRITT MASON: [00:07:16] It does. And I'd love to hear more about what you described as, instead of Office Hours, you run Student Hours. Are there also differences in how you structure that time with your students?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:07:27] Yes, let me give a bit of context with this. In the paradigm of teaching students, the challenge you have to joyfully accept as an instructor is, what does it take to motivate an individual to be their best self, in this case, specific to the classroom, the course that you're teaching, whatever modalities. This is not something I'm asking you as a thought experiment. This is something that has been researched, has been studied, and there are whole fields dedicated to fully unpacking this, and we, as scholars in the classroom, we have to do our due diligence and read that scholarship. It's important to say this explicitly, because we do live in an era, especially in science, where subject matter expertise is assumed that that's all you need to teach well. And we know now that's not the case; we should have never really thought that was the case. But the evidence is really pointing towards: there's so much more we need to know about humanity and psychology and sociology and things that do this well. Within that context comes this question about: how do you message that you do not become an excellent biologist, so, I would submit anything really, three hours a week for 50 minutes a day. You know, it's a technical discipline; it takes a while to get comfortable with the language and the environment. Depending on what your training has been, there's gonna be a little bit of a learning curve, right? And so, you have to sort of normalize this notion that you might need out a time with me, you might need out a time with your colleagues, with a tutoring center, etc. That can be seen as you need that only if you have a deficit. All of the language used to describe that is very, very carefully chosen because you don't want to message "Yeah, well, if you're not good enough to get, you know, from 2:00 to 2:50pm, then yes, I guess you can come see me." Also now, if you understand how some cultural norms are - I'm saying this from experience, because I was that student, where going to a professor's office was like walking on the Green Mile. You had a voice in your head literally telling you that by you coming to ask these questions, you are admitting that you're not good enough. As a grownup now and somebody with my own classroom, it seems logically silly. But as 19-year-old Bryan didn't quite understand that, 19-year-old Bryan was that student who was C after C after C, you know, before you've really summed up the courage to have that conversation. Simple cues can reinforce the narrative of you're not good enough. Some people might say, but Office Hours, it makes all the sense in the world. There are some students who legit thought Office Hours meant that's when the professor got a chance to do, like, check their email and things like that, which is, which is a funny, like a funny thought. So, we named it Student Hours to just make it a bit more welcoming. And we actually moved it to a room, which was the basement room of the dorm in which they live. Because here's the other silly thing, right? A lot of professors always complain that students never come to their Office Hours. Well, if all of them came, where would they sit anyway? Unless you're

Joe Biden, you have two chairs in your office, right? So, it's actually not even set up to work. It's not set up to serve a lot of people. It is set up to be exclusive, and exclusive to the people who have the cultural and social capital to feel okay coming to ask a ton of questions. So just by that simple shift of moving the Office Hours to renaming it to Student Hours, and moving into the dorm, you know, we average 30-40 students a week. There's no credit, we don't shame anybody for not coming. And you know, other simple things like you have a different time every week so that somebody who has a class clash or work clash doesn't miss it for the entire semester. These are just solutions that come about when you're thinking of the individuals involved and not just about information delivery.

DERRITT MASON: [00:11:48] A shift in language from Office Hours to Student Hours, the shift in space, it communicates so much, I think, to students about the type of classroom environment that you're trying to foster. How does an average Student Hour play out? What happens? What do you talk about with 40 students who show up?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:12:03] A typical one can sound something like this. I come in, and I will ask "what's troubling you this week?" And you'll have about four or five topics. At least in the beginning, what some students want is for Bryan to re-explain something, like, the comfort of passive learning, right? Can you just, you just say three more times? I flipped that on its head, right? I was like, I'm not going to examine you on how well you can listen to me, I'm going to examine you on how well you can explain something. So, what we're going to do is going to practice explaining something. So, take this dry-erase marker, go to the board, and explain to me how the electron transport chain works. The thing with Student Hour is that the amount of students is less, so there is a little bit less of shame factor in terms of pressure to do it, and how you might feel in front of a class of 200 students. If you miss out 50, 60% of the information, let's just start somewhere. I have students where English is their second language, and I say "Okay, well, explain it to me first in Cape Verdean Creole, explain it to me in Spanish first, just get a rhythm of the explanation in your head, first, and then do the conversion." So, most of that time is really spent doing that, then what tends to happen is the Derritts of the classroom will come because, you know, even though they get like an A plus, plus, plus, plus, plus average, right, they'll still come. And so, I would say, Derritt: "Okay, I see you really get this. I want you to explain this concept to this group of five and make sure they understand this as well as you do." Those are the kinds of students who will tend to go on to be my learning assistants. Because it's not just about doing well in the classes, you know, showing a particular kind of leadership, and empathy, and

listening. And I like that because sometimes people's concern with facilitative type pedagogies is that: do the high-fliers get any value from this experience? And I say yes. This is where you kind of have to have a differentiated instruction mind because you have to figure out other ways to push them, because you can see that they're ready for it. It's really nice when you have that sort of spectrum of understanding, I suppose, at Student Hours because it sort of messages as a place for everyone. The people who might be struggling can see that they're not the only ones. They could also see that their colleagues aren't out there for themselves, their colleagues are all there to make sure everybody at the end of this is actually, you know, excelling and enjoying doing Biology.

DERRITT MASON: [00:14:38] I have to say, that's a very generous and flattering version of how I would be in a Biology class as an English professor. [Laughs]

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:14:47] I feel I should give you a quiz now just to see what I just said.

DERRITT MASON: [00:14:52] I mean, I would love to join your lab. It sounds like it would be great, and I would learn a tremendous amount because I haven't taken, I don't even think I took Biology in high school, to be honest, I took Chemistry. But the sciences were never my forte. But I'm curious to know, just before we move on to the second question, I heard you give a really, really fantastic and dynamic keynote at a conference in 2022. You talked about how your first-year classes, your Intro to Bio class, is "more Intro than Bio." You've been describing all of these other skills and ways that you introduce students to learning and to university life. Is there anything else that you find really emerges in Student Hours or in your classroom? What are the kind of key non-biology-related skills that you find yourself sharing with your students?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:15:39] We understand how universities work, we understand that you register for a class with three credits, you pay tuition. At the end of the transaction, I give you a curriculum and some assessment that proves you understood some percentage of that. I'm not here to be dismissive of that process. But I certainly enjoy teaching because to me, teaching and education really is the business of preparing people to be fully participatory citizens. That, to me, is agnostic to any major, any discipline, whatever the manual says. There are salient human characteristics and ways of engaging as a community that I want you to get formative experience in before you get that degree, before you get that grade. And I can't assume that just because you know how to pi pattern, just because you know

how DNA replicates, that you will self-navigate to these other really crucial values that are needed for a functioning democracy. So, I think every class has to have some feature of that. And, how it kind of gets constructed will vary by class. But in Intro Bio, the kind of mindset is, "I want you to get a sense of how we do biology. I don't want to just talk about biology. You can get it from YouTube. I want to tell you how we do biology." We do have a lab, right, where you kind of do the experiments, Biology procedures. But in class, the other thing biologists do is we ask really difficult questions. We interpret data, we are wrong a lot of times, and we figure out what made it wrong and come up with a new idea. We communicate not just to each other, but to the public, who, in theory, stands to benefit from us having a better understanding of how life works. We debate very socially fractious issues at times. We have to think about whose voices are not at the table several times when we come up with research questions or interpreting data. All of those very social things, I intentionally infused in how biology is done in that class. So, there's a lot of case studies. And they are given kinds of assignments where they have to debate, not like cable news debates, but respectful dialogue. That means the class actually begins with a process we call guide-posting, where we read a list of statements that talks about active listening and talks about when things get difficult. It talks about people having a right to speak their truth. This is not just a kumbaya thing. It's highly structured and highly intentional, including our mechanism to assess it and have them reflect and give us some feedback on how it landed and how it made them think about values in the context of scientific practice. I always feel some need to remind people that we do still actually do Biology. I really shouldn't have to be apologetic for that. But I think sometimes, when people hear all of these social things, they kind of wonder, like, how much has been sacrificed for that. And I don't do it that way. I view teaching students as involving content mastery, but that is part of a bigger experience.

DERRITT MASON: [00:19:11] So, in terms of all of these fantastic things that you're doing in the classroom, what did you find best supported and what hindered this teaching and learning practice during COVID?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:19:23] I would say we kind of leveraged technology very well. And we gave ourselves some grace. There were a lot of other classes around the country, a lot of universities trying to pretend school, even though there was a raging pandemic, and people were dying by the thousands by the day, and it was kind of weird, honestly; the numbers were just piling up to the point where you're almost sort of a little bit numb to it. I'm not trying to blame universities. I know it was a difficult thing to have to navigate. But, you know, in the teaching students'

mindset, I mean, I had students who were losing multiple family members. Am I supposed to expect you to just show up and be just fully ready to talk about cells? I mean, we're gonna still have class. But we had that discussion about, like, "Look, these aren't normal times." And this is pre-vaccine, right? So, we don't know where this stuff was going. And we're going to do our best to keep each other safe. And we're going to, as best as we can, have a good time with this material, right? If we need to take a day off, we take a day off. And it was so beautiful to see how the students gave each other grace. I was really impressed with how the students who were on Zoom, they would populate the chat with like real questions, real engagement. There is no single time that any of those conversations go off the rails. We didn't get to know any of that proctoring foolishness like, screen thing locked, nonononono. We had open-book exams. And we wrote the kinds of questions where you can Google whatever you want, but how you're being assessed is based on other things that are not Googleable. We didn't make this into a subversive-like battle, right? Oh, you're gonna achieve it... No, no, we're family here; we're all going through this pandemic. So, I think the quality of the technology I had was very supportive. But I think the support from within the classroom community was probably the most powerful thing. But it was really a tough few months. I did, unfortunately, have some students who had family members pass. And, you know, we responded to that as best as we could, you know, really show them some love. As you might know, in 2020, there was a presidential election in the US around November. So that sort of added its own level of anxiety to the classroom. So, we had to be thinking about that as well. So, we had to deal with a lot of emotional externalities that semester, but I think we got through it.

DERRITT MASON: [00:21:48] So, it sounds like from your description of Student Hours and everything you're doing in the classroom, that the in-person component is really important to your teaching and learning practice. Was it challenging to adjust to an online environment?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:22:03] It was a little challenging. I do thrive in in-person. I mean, that's just a personal preference. This is not knocking anything digital. It's just kind of where my teaching has lived in my career so far. And we still had some people in person, right, and we had them really spread out. So, there was that element. We invested in a good amount of tech. So, we had an SLR [camera] trained on me. And then, like I had one of the LAs was like managing that because I move a lot in the class. We had an LA kind of monitoring the chat and replying to students who had questions there. And it took a little bit of doing to get the right chords in the right place, but in the end, it was fine. The University had actually

invested in a system that was supposed to do that, but it wasn't very good. So, I just use my own stuff.

DERRITT MASON: [00:22:51] Well, I'm happy to hear you had some support at the level of technology from your institution, and also, learning assistants in your class as well. So, I think I'll move on to our final question, which is, if there's one thing that you started doing during COVID, that you hadn't done before, that you imagine you'll keep doing in the future, what would that be?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:23:15] We had already begun this before COVID, but when COVID happened, we really leaned heavily into it. And that is open-book exams. That's kind of the only way I assess now. And I have to say, what kind of inspired that was my PhD qualifying exams. So, in Science at most universities, the qualifying exams, of course at a doctoral level, you're asked to, you know, "write a grant in a day based on your understanding of Cascade effects, and blah, blah, blah." I went through it to get my PhD candidacy. And it was a painful process, but dare I say delightfully painful, just because you couldn't just remember stuff, you had to organize that information in a way that didn't just make sense for the concept, but that allowed you to ask new and more beautiful questions. You know, once you go through for a PhD qualifying exam, like you wouldn't really want to go through it, frankly, ever again, but spread out over time like so that's the beauty of being a scholar, right? Being able to organize information so that you are asking new, more challenging, riveting questions. So, listeners, no, I do not ask my students PhD-level questions in Intro Bio. But we do actually spend a significant amount of time in the weeks before the major assessments critiquing our own writing. So, I give them writing prompts, fairly challenging writing prompts, problems to solve, and we have a software called Eli Review. I think it comes out at Michigan State University. I would give them instructions on how to give each other respectful feedback. And so, they spent a lot of time writing. So, by the time they get that major assessment, they would have gone through this practice six, seven times, such that you can ask an open-book exam question, and you know, yes, if you remember the specific enzyme, so be it. If you don't find, I mean, you choose, you can Google that stuff. I really want you to be able to take that information and take that next step, be able to synthesize and create and things like that. So, we were always on that path, but now we've been 100% into it.

DERRITT MASON: [00:25:24] I realized I only asked you for one. But, I understand from our previous conversations that you began a practice of bringing in guest speakers over Zoom during COVID to speak to your students. And I'd love to hear

more about who you brought in, how you selected guest speakers, and if this will be something that you think you'll continue doing in your classes.

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:25:40] I will, and I have, and it's been great. It's easy to do. It's not cost-prohibitive. People can be anywhere at anytime. We've had situations where, like, we've Zoomed another class, in another location. I bring in guests with a purpose. So, I'm fortunate, I'm privileged to have colleagues and friends around the world who are practicing scientists in different ways. Some are medical doctors somehow, you know, some are researchers, nongovernmental associations, conservationists, just wonderful colleagues. And, with grace and gratitude, I will ask them to guest lecture and, by guest lecture, it really means, can you tell us a little bit about your career, what inspired you to do that, giving my students a little bit of a sense of, "this is where a lot of this can lead. This is where your interest can take you. And here are some things that you might not read in a book or even see on TV and on what that pathway looks like." We actually have a whole unit in Intro Bio called Careers in Science, there's a whole bunch of stuff involved in that. But our big goal with that is to normalize this notion that anybody can be a scientist. So, we don't really use terms like Black scientists or minority scientists. You know, they're scientists. I mean, I choose carefully, I choose who I bring in. This is just a person who is excellent at what they do. And you need to see that, and you need to internalize that anybody, no matter the background, can get to that point, as long as that motivation is there, and the right choices are made. So yeah, it's been great and so easy to do. And that kind of started during the pandemic and continues now.

DERRITT MASON: [00:27:18] Is there anything else you wanted to speak about today before we sign off?

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:27:23] You kind of said post-pandemic with an asterisk, right, because we don't quite know what this is, right? People are still getting COVID. And I guess, thankfully, we have ways to respond to it now. And I worry sometimes that as a higher education community and teaching community, we haven't fully internalized the lessons we need to learn from that time period. But I think maybe shows like yours are trying to surface that. So, I appreciate you for doing that.

DERRITT MASON: [00:27:47] I hope so. And thank you again, so much, for taking the time to join us. This has been a really, really exciting and inspiring conversation for me, and I've learned a tremendous amount. So, thank you, Dr. Dewsbury.

BRYAN DEWSBURY: [00:27:57] Thanks, brother. Thank you.

DERRITT MASON: [00:27:58] Just a final note to our listeners that as of Spring 2023, Bryan Dewsbury has a brand new co-edited book out. It's called The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching, and I'm reading from the web description here. It says: "This guide offers concrete steps to help any instructor striving to ensure that all students, and in particular historically underserved students, have an equal chance for success." And great news: this book is actually available as a free ebook download at wwnorton.com. Once again, that's The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching, co-edited by Dr. Bryan Dewsbury and colleagues.

3QTL is recorded at the University of Calgary, which is located on the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty Seven region in southern Alberta. The City of Calgary is also home to the Métis nation of Alberta, districts five and six. This episode was produced by Xenia Reloba de la Cruz, edited by Tarini Fernando, and features additional editing and sound design by Eric Xie, who also composed our music. Our consulting producer is Stacey Copeland. Support for 3QTL is provided by the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary and a generous financial gift from the Flanagan Foundation. I'm Derritt Mason, 3QTL's host and executive producer. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you again soon.

[Music out]

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