# Lehren – Lernen – Lauschen #10: Melina Amor

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[Intro, Jazzmusik im Hintergrund]

**Lehren – Lernen – Lauschen**

**Der Lehre eine Stimme geben**

Persönliche Gespräche mit Vertreterinnen und Vertretern der TU Graz, die uns in die Welt der Lehre einladen, über ihre Motivation, aber auch Herausforderungen berichten.

*Katharina Salicites:* Today I want to welcome Melina Amor from the Institute of Material physics in our studio. Nice to meet you.

*Melina Amor:* Thank you, Katherina, for the invitation.

*Katharina Salicites:* Thank you for being here with us today. So today this is the first podcast in English. And we'll give it a try. But I'm starting like always and asking you to introduce yourself briefly.

*Melina Amor:* So as you say my name is Melina Amor. I'm a molecular biologist. I am currently affiliated to the Institute of Material Physics here at TU Graz because I have my teaching associated to that institute and besides my teaching duties, I am also working at the Medical University of Graz at the Institute of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

*Katharina Salicites:* And how did you come to our university? What's your way to Austria?

*Melina Amor:* Yes so I came for my PhD. I finished my PhD at the Medical University of Vienna and then I was looking for a postdoc position more less in the same field than than my PhD. I got to know Juliane Bogner-Strauß and I came for a postdoc at her laboratory after that Juliane left because she went into politics and I had the possibility to take over. She gave me some of her teaching duties and that's why I came into teaching at TU Graz.

*Katharina Salicites:* Okay, what's your field of research and teaching at our university?

*Melina Amor:* My field of research is obesity and metabolic complications associated to obesity and fat tissue. I'm also working on cardiovascular diseases, and at TU Graz, I was initially teaching molecular biology. I was also teaching another course for master students of biomedical engineering that is called molecular diagnostics and I am also teaching a third course which is the course I am teaching now, and that is biomaterials.

*Katharina Salicites:* Okay and how many students are into the courses and are they lectures or laboratories?

*Melina Amor:* Well the course I started with, molecular biology or Molekularbiologie was a course for bachelor students in the first year so I had really a lot of students, about a hundred students per semester and then in in the two other courses, they are courses are for master students, so that the number is significantly reduced, I would say, and there are about twenty students per semester. For molecular diagnostics we had lectures and also laboratories and bio materials is only a lecture.

*Katharina Salicites:* And can you tell me do you prefer giving a lecture or a laboratory? If you prefer one of those.

*Melina Amor:* That's a very hard question to answer. I really like teaching and I like things from lectures and things from laboratories. So I would say I like both the same. They both have some stuff I like.

*Katharina Salicites:* You were also awarded the prize for excellence in teaching at Graz University of Technology. For which lecture did you get this award?

*Melina Amor:* I got this award for the molecular diagnostics laboratory.

*Katharina Salicites:* And can you tell us a little bit about your didactical approach in this lecture?

*Melina Amor:* Actually it was...I had a didactic plan, but it was a bit complicated because I started with the laboratory, and one year after, Corona came and running laboratories in the middle of the pandemic was a bit of a challenge. However, in short, I really tried to perform the course from a pretty much student-centered approach. I really try to put students at the core of all didaktic decisions. And this means that I consider diversity of students. I consider of course inclusion, sustainability and accessibility also. And with Corona of course, digitalisation.

*Katharina Salicites:* Do you want to tell as a little bit more about those aspects in your lectures. So there was diversity, inclusion, sustainability, digitalisation - what was the most interesting part for you?

*Melina Amor:* Think all of them are nowadays very important. I will say with the corona situation maybe digitalisierung became extremely important and helps us a lot as teachers to overcome many challenges that we faced during the pandemic. But of course taken into account diversity is very important. So for instance, in order to consider diversity when I teach I try to offer my students a wide diversity of pedagogical strategies, different types of activities, different types of evaluation where everybody is able to do the most, to achieve the learning goals in the best way they can.

*Katharina Salicites:* You have different types of evaluation or feedback in your course. Would you like to talk a little bit about that?

*Melina Amor:* So I really try to use evaluation as an educational practice rather than a measure at the end of the course and I think this is this is very important when we think about evaluation. What I used to do is to make initial evaluations at the beginning of the semester to see where the students are standing and to bring all of them, so to diagnose where they are standing and bring all of them to the to the same level of knowledge kind of or to start from the same starting point. Then I have middle evaluations where I try to track how students are going during the semester and then for instance in the laboratory we have an and evaluation und or summative evaluation at the end where the students can demonstrate in different ways what they...which results they got, what they would like to discuss from the laboratory and so on. And maybe when we talk about evaluation, I would also like to mention and that I think it's not a minor point, the evaluation the students make of the course, so I think it is very important that they evaluate a course by the system or via TUGRAZonline. So I always...or I used to do also evaluation at the middle of the course where I see if the students are satisfied with the course or not. And if not we have time to change, because I think that is quite unfair when we get feedback at the end and the course is over and then we cannot change anything for those students. I think it's very important to make a middle term evaluation, where we see if they are satisfied with the course or if they would like to change something at all.

*Katharina Salicites:* And you have this the middle term evaluation with a TU Graz tool or with another tool?

*Melina Amor:* You know, that TU graz tool is only available at the end of the course, but they can complete it only once as far as I know. Then I can use it at the middle or I can use it at the end because they submit, they submit.

*Katharina Salicites:* So and you want to use it also at the end.

*Melina Amor:* Yes, so what I used to do is use Feedbackr in the middle of the course.

*Katharina Salicites:* Okay, that's the reason. So two weeks ago we had a "lecturer for lecturers" session and you mentioned at the end of the course you have the TU Graz evaluation and most of the students are answering on your evaluation and mentioned that you have a good return rate from your students. How do you do that?

*Melina Amor:* As I said, I think the evaluation completed by the students is an extremely important point for us as teachers. So where i simply do is to follow the indication from the TU Graz which is explicitly ask the students to complete the evaluation. And I give them like five minutes during the last lecture to do it and besides that I explicitly tell them that they have to be used to evaluate, this is part of their construction of their professional profile. They have to get used to evaluate and not to be evaluated all the time. So this is what I think works very well. They immediately complete the evaluation of the course and almost 100% do it. Maybe 90% because somebody was not there in the last lecture and then I also write them an email, I remind them to complete it. However, there is always one who doesn't complete it, but it works very well. And what I also do is tell them that they should please criticise the course, tell me which things need to improve. Not to do it like quick and say: Everything is cool and very nice. Those are the points that I consider when I kind of motivate them to complete this online evaluation and I do the same for these middle term evaluations.

*Katharina Salicites:* You also mentioned that sustainability is very important in your courses. What do you mean by sustainability?

*Melina Amor:* I think sustainability in teaching can be addressed from different perspectives, especially when we talk about natural sciences or technical, more technical subjects. From my understanding, when I come with sustainability in teaching, what I try is that the students really take something for them. They really take something from the course, either work related or academically related or also for their personal lives, so that the course really has like a footprint on them. Besides that, when I talk about teaching in a sustainable way in natural sciences, especially in biology or biomedical sciences, I think it's very important to make the students aware of the use of resources that we use in the lab, for instance plastic waste, for instance animal studies and stuff like that. I think it's very important to make them aware of a ethical issues, environmental issues.

*Katharina Salicites:* And do you have the feeling that awareness for sustainability rose in the last years?

*Melina Amor:* I think yes, for sure. I think pretty much, as I can see or at least ... I'm not that old, so and I think when I was the PhD student or when I was an undergrad, I think we were not that aware of sustainability in general, but now I see the students much more aware and I think this is a great thing.

*Katharina Salicites:* That's what a lot of people are saying. What is very interesting also from your teachers for teachers session is where you came from and your way to Austria from South America.

*Melina Amor:* Starting right from the beginning, I am from Argentina. I studied molecular biology in Argentina for Bachelor's and Master's and then I went to New Zealand for my Master's thesis. And after that I came to apply for a PhD position in Vienna and I was sure I wanted to come to Europe for my PhD. I applied in Austria, also in Germany, and I got the PhD position in Vienna and that's how I ended up in Austria. Maybe also interesting for this podcast: I come from a family of teachers. Besides my scientific career, I was always interested and also motivated by my family to go into teaching. So I always tried to keep those two things running in parallel in my life. I really tried to find a balance and it's not... I know for some people research is a primary thing and teaching its like a secondary thing that that on the side, but for me ... which is fine. You know it's totally fine. But in my case really, I try to keep a balance and I really try to have both things at the same priority level.

*Katharina Salicites:* So for the scientific part of your work. You want to university, you studied that. But how did you improve your teaching, how did you learn how to teach how to learn what didcatics means, what is inclusion and diversity in a lecture?

*Melina Amor:* So as I told you I was always interested in teaching, so when I was studying in Argentina I studied molecular biology but also biochemistry. But I also started a teaching education program in biology, so it was really from the beginning of my studies I was always educating myself into teaching and after I completed this teaching education programme...

*Katharina Salicites:* So it's a programme after which you could work in a school.

*Melina Amor:* So you get a lot of didactics, pedgagogy, history of education and so on. Of course the technical the more technical subjects. After that I was always trying, whenever I had the possibility to further develop my teaching, I was always taking a course. For example, here at TU Graz I took advantage of all courses there are available for teachers. For instance, I took part of the Teaching Academy, I also participated in the Didaktikwerkstatt and I also completed the eDidactics programme. I always register for every single course studies offer for teaching. I have to say I don't have the feeling that I am disturbing anybody here. The TU Graz is very nice and to help when it comes to teaching. In first place I think I have to mention Verena Schwägerl-Melchior but then also all the people from the learning technologies for instance Maria Haas from the TeachCenter and of course you, Katharina, you are always there organizing events for teachers where we can exchange ideas, get to know other teachers and exchange experiences and so on. I am always trying to... even though in terms of hours I am researching much more than teaching, I am also somehow compensating because I take a lot of courses.

*Katharina Salicites:* You also mentioned the eDidactics programme. I think we should call it programme because it's a bigger one. Could you tell us about that?

*Melina Amor:* The first thing I can mention is that I strongly recommend it, it was an excellent programme. I think the nicest thing of the program is that you get to know teachers from all universities from completely different fields. And this makes it very rich. And then the content of the courses are simply amazing. I am really happy to learn a lot so I think it was a great experience. For me it was the first time that I started taking courses in German. All the courses are in German so at the beginning I was skeptical to register but also for all the non-German speakers I can recommend to do it because all people are very open, they let me do some tasks in English so I was very flexible, but I can also say that was a lot of work. It was really demanding, not just taking a course. There is always some task that you have to complete and so on. So yeah, it is highly recommendable and really nice.

*Katharina Salicites:* The next question is a question I am asking everybody who is here. What brings you the most joy in teaching? What contributes positively to your motivation and to your commitment in teaching?

*Melina Amor:* I think there are several components that motivate me to teach. In first place I will say for sure the students. I have to say they are, those great young minds are motivators and are a big part of this motivation to teach and in line with these I would also like to say that it is very motivating when we get positive feedback regarding the course from the students. Secondly, I will say my colleagues who are always there for advice when it comes to teaching issues and it's nice to meet them and to exchanges ideas with them in all those events there are organised here at TU Graz. For instance I think that all that courses that are offered by TU Graz are also a big motivational component when it comes to how to improve our teaching. I appreciate them and them. So these are general things that motivate me for teaching. And personally, I have to say that I come from a family of teachers. Therefore, in my case my family is also a motivational component in teaching. I always exchange ideas with my sister or my mom. We discuss things that have happened during teaching, which is very motivating.

*Katharina Salicites:* And do you have a moment in my mind which was particularly memorable for you?

*Melina Amor:* There does not come to mind any moment which was the most memorable one. However, I think that it is very special when we have the feelings and again in relation to sustainability, that the students get something from us that is really useful for their lives. And this happened to me in some specific occasions, very explicitly. And this is very, very, very, very nice. And also the other way round: I enjoy or for me they are pretty memorable moments when I learn something from the students, which actually happens to me very often. I would like to mention that teaching and learning goes in both directions between the teacher and students.

*Katharina Salicites:* And what was a challenge for you in teaching?

*Melina Amor:* So I think that teaching is already a very challenging task. I used to say that our students are always the same age and we get one year older every year. That fact makes it already challenging. I am still young, but the years come and I always get one year older and they are always 20, 21, that is what makes it challenging. And then so after this fact that for me is the most challenging one, we always have the context and constantly challenges us. For me, the most recent example with regard to the context was the pandemic. But we also have to take into account other important topics regarding the context, for instance as I mentioned digitalisation or sustainability, accessibility, diversity, gender issues. All those are things that make the whole teaching very very challenging, to bring all of this together. And I think to deal with all those challenges, the most important things to constantly educate ourselves as teachers by taking courses, exchanging with our colleagues and also very importantly, listening to our students.

*Katharina Salicites:* So what advice would you have for others, for other teachers?

*Melina Amor:* Well, in line with what I mentioned before, I woudl always suggest ot take advantage of all this great support that we have here at the TU Graz and actively participate in the different courses for teaching. As I mentioned, the eDidcatics programme, the Teaching Academy, and also those spaces to know other teachers, exchange ideas, experiences and so on. Besides that, I think when we think of university teaching, we have to think that university teaching is closely linked to research. Therefore I think it's crucial to incorporate in our courses science dissemination activities that link our teaching exercises with also our research interests. I think for us as teachers and researchers, teaching is a very good opportunity to open the doors of our laboratory, our institute and try to disseminate our science beyond the scientific community. When it comes to the didactics aspects of things, maybe I would like to highlight that I think it's very important to set very clear and realistic teaching and learning outcomes at the beginning. Always keep coherence between what we teach and what we later on evaluate. Also give our students an active role in the teaching and learning process. I think we should motivate our students and all you know, as I mentioned at the beginning, bring our students to the core of all our didactic decisions, things that we already talked about, accessibility, diversity and gender among others.

*Katharina Salicites:* You already mentioned the pandemic and Corona, also that you started teaching a laboratory in a middle of the pandemic. Tell me something about how teaching was and what were your practices and your learnings?

*Melina Amor:* When the Corona situation broke out, it was very stressful for me. For many others as well. I was in the middle of the laboratory with a lot of students I many of them where Erasmus students who could not wait for the next semester to complete the course because they had to leave. On one hand, I was pretty much lost. On the other hand, I tried to stay patient and keep calm. I think at the end, we all managed to deal with the situation and we learned a lot from it, in my case, the case of the laboratory, we just had to wait and as soon as it was possible, we completed it. For the case of the lectures, it was completely different and I mainly did it from home. Regarding teachign from home, if I had to describe this situation of teaching from home, I would like to shortly refer to three aspects of teaching that to me dramatically changed while teaching from home. Those were the idea of time and space, the content that we teach and the weight of technology in teaching. Regarding time and space, I could clearly recognise a collapse of spaces during the pandemic. We had a multifunctional house. Our house was a university, our house was a laboratory, our house was in institute, classroom, an office. I think this is for me the most important thing regarding the pandemic and spaces. In relation to time, I observed some aspects that we did not observe before that that challenged us. For example, sometimes the number of students that was connected was much lower than expected. Some had difficulty to connect to the online classes and those were unexpected or erractic moments that play a role in the timing of our classes. In relation to the content that we teach within this context of the pandemic, we had to make a priority and select those contents that were the most important ones. Before, we had more time for all the contents that we wanted to teach and now we had to prioritise content. Regarding time, we realised, or at least me, how time-consuming it was to prepare online classes. Something that I had underestimated before. And lastly, regarding technology, it was enormous and for me, digitalisation did not have such a weight in my teaching before the pandemic. However, it will stay for now and we learned a lot.

*Katharina Salicites:* So what did you take with you from the pandemic, what stayed? Which development from the pandemic, which didactic approach maybe, a new tool you developed...and is there something going to stay?

*Melina Amor:* I think for everybody the most important thing that we could corporate in our teaching because of the pandemic, or what we learned was to be flexible. And I think to be flexible is pretty much related with inclusion with accessibilty. I learned to be more flexible regarding the technologies and the digital teaching. Of course I learned about a lot of tools that I had no clue existed thanks to the pandemic, and I could really see that students really enjoy using these tools and for sure some will stay.

*Katharina Salicites:* You were also nominated for the Prize for Excellence in Teaching. What significance does that price have for you?

*Melina Amor:* So for sure a lot of motivation in the first place. I was always interested in teaching and I always try to do it in the best way that is possible. This prize was for sure an "extrawurst" in terms of motivation, to try to make my teaching every time better and better. However, besides the motivation I have to say that it meant a lot of learning, first during the selection process. We have to sit and write a teaching concept and even though the course was already organised in this teaching concept, it helped me organise and rethink about the course. For instance, to think how could I further develope the course or how could I improve the course. Later, after we got the prize, we were invited by TU Graz to submit our concept for other prices. All those applications help me to sit down, think my teaching, read and learn a lot. So I would say it was a very big motivation and a lot of learnings come with it.

*Katharina Salicites:* I thank you for that insight. And finally. I am going to ask you to finish the following sentence from your perspective: Teaching means to me...

*Melina Amor:* Teaching means to be a lot. I could make this sentence very long, but I will try to make it short, so teaching means to me "learning".

*Katharina Salicites:* Thank you, Melina for being here and to give us in inside into your world of teaching and learning.

*Melina Amor:* Thank you, Katharina for the invitation again.