

From the Beatles to Beefheart - How is it for the educators?

Podcast Transcript

Tunde Varga-Atkins: Yes, so hello everyone. My name is Tunde Varga-Atkins and we are here in the Centre for Innovation in Education talking about remote teaching with four guests, and it's very metafictional because we're trying to also remould this remotely obviously in the current circumstances. So perhaps can I ask my guests to introduce yourself, what subject you're from, perhaps summarise your remote teaching situation in as much or as little detail as you want and then also perhaps about the kind of teaching that you normally do. So can we start with Anna perhaps because you're on my screen first.

Anna O'Connor: Okay. Hi I'm Anna O'Connor. I teach in the School of Health Sciences. I teach Orthoptics, in Liverpool terms that's "gozzy eyes." So, we use a lot of online teaching anyway. We've been sort of, making a big move towards the flipped classroom approach trying to really reduce and minimise any sort of didactic lectures, they're predominantly online anyway.

So, the biggest challenges has been things like the tutorials and the support sessions and the understanding side of things, in the way that we teach. That's sort of been our biggest challenge recently. We've had to make some changes in terms of the exams. We can't do practicals, obviously testing eyes, you need to be able to do the test and have the equipment. And so, there's been some quite sort of fundamental changes

in that respect and we've had to look at rolling things over for the following academic year. So there has been some pretty substantial changes being made.

So, they sound quite drastic and quite important changes. So, can we come back to these in a moment or hold that thought Anna. just let me turn to introducing Diana and then we will start a discussion around what it has meant for you this change to remote teaching.

Diana Jeater: Hello I'm Diana Jeater. I'm an historian and I specialise in African history but I'm also the Associate Dean for Education in the School of Histories Languages and Cultures. So, I've got an overview really of the challenges that are taking place across a very wide range of teaching. And I think for me one of the biggest challenges for my first-year teaching is that I like lectures to be event lecturing, you know it's not, it's, it's an occasion, it's a presentation, it's a performance. And you lose all of that when you move to online or a lot of that when you move to online which then raises the question well what are lectures for and I think that's a very useful conversation to have.

That's an excellent point as well, and I thought that might come up Diana, so thank you. We will just introduce our third guest. Stuart you are next on my screen and then we will come back to those really interesting points.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg: Yes. I'm Stuart Wilks-Heeg, I'm in the Department of Politics.

In Politics, I mean it will be quite sort of normal for other subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences, traditionally we teach with a lot of lectures and seminars where students have done the reading, they take

part and so on. But I mean in recent years we have diversified our teaching a lot and our curriculum a lot. So, we have things like placement modules for example and I run for example a module in radio broadcasting where we literally make radio programs week in, week out, which we would normally need a radio studio. We can come back to that later. And I also teach a big first-year module in British Politics, 200 students quite a different challenge to my third-year broadcasting module which has 13 students, quite tight knit. We all know each other well.

First year module all the students are new, lots of them. Lots of GTA's is teaching the seminars and so on. And you know we've got a big kind of spectrum with different challenges and different modules.

Great. Thank you. Again, just links points that you can link to on, Anna as well. And Diana about what you mentioned, so we can come back to that as well.

So, let me introduce our final guest James.

James Gaynor: Hi my name is James Gaynor. I'm from the Department of Chemistry in the School of Physical Sciences. I predominately teach this semester Organic Chemistry, some for chemistry students, our first years and some as a service option for pharmacology students. But I also have another role as year one coordinator. So, I've been quite involved in discussions around how we switch from a relatively high contact hours, in terms of lectures and active learning sessions and how we switch them online.

So I'm quite involved in those even though for me personally this kind of, this occurred at the best time for me in terms of-, I'd already delivered most of my material conveniently throughout the year. But I'm helping a

lot of colleagues trying to, try to adapt to their situation and to teach online.

Excellent. So one of the things that I set you as a pre-task and perhaps this could be the way to bring back these points that you've started introducing, is to perhaps think about an object of art or a musical piece or anything really, can be a chemical compound. Whatever you think that does anything because one of the questions we wanted to really delve into is how is this remote teaching going for you as the educator?

So this is really exactly from your perspective and we will talk about the students in the next podcast. So how, how have you found it? How is it going for you, and if you can relate it to, to some of those issues that you have already started unpicking and perhaps examining it from a slightly different angle how would you describe it?

DJ: Well I thought this was an interesting question. Its because it's asking you how things feel which I think is just as important as what we think about things. And I was thinking for me, normal teaching although whether anything will ever go back to what we used to call normal. It's a moot. But the way that we used to teach was it was kind of like an early Beatles pop song. It's kind of-, it's comfortable. It's structured. We know where it's going. Everything falls into place. It's all simple pleasant structured and jogs along nicely.

And then it's all gone a bit Beefheart. And so there is a structure but nobody's really paying a lot of attention to the structure. So, it's there underneath everything. But around it there's something that feels very uncontrolled, very chaotic, and a lot of people going off on their own thing

and just trying to see what it's like. And then maybe coming back to the structure in ways that are quite unexpected.

Any reactions?

SWH: When I read this. I mean I, I went for music as well. I mean anybody who knows me knows that I need no excuse to make a themed play playlist on Spotify. And I've actually made a quorum tune playlist which has a song for every kind of emotion that you might feel during the lockdown. So, you know it starts with 'Isolation' by John Lennon, it's got 'Ghost Town' by the Specials and so on. But in terms of the experience of online teaching for me I hope this doesn't sound too pretentious. It's like the Jacques Brel song 'Ne Me quitte Pas', in English if you translate it usually is 'if you go away' its covered by various artists.

And what you've got in that song is this kind of arc of emotion that goes up and down up and down all the time and at times is absolutely desperate when he feels like his love is going leave him. And then the hope kind of comes in again and the music becomes slightly more optimistic. And it does feel like that. But I hope it's better than that Jacques Brel song actually because clearly at the end of that his lover is going to leave him no matter what he offers. And, I do think there is hope in this situation after all.

So, what were your hope and down moments then so far?

SWH: Well I think you know it is very challenging right. So we are adapting sort of on the fly and everybody is, so it's not just us doing the teaching. It's everybody in the administration and so on. The situation's changing very fast at what seems feasible at one moment isn't feasible later on. So sometimes just when you think you've worked out how you

know in my case you cannot deliver this big first year module to two hundred students. You know you find actually things have moved on and the approach has changed institutionally. So actually, what you're going to do isn't going to work anymore, you need to start again and then you have these amazing up moments.

So we'll come onto it. But my broadcasting students have decided that the lack of a radio studio is no problem whatsoever, however, they've carried on making radio broadcasts via Skype and they've just become more ambitious actually. So, yesterday they interviewed Alastair Campbell and put that out on Spotify and on SoundCloud and on YouTube and it's a one of a series of interviews they're doing with very high-profile guests. So, for them, you know, they've taken this as a great opportunity to do amazing things.

That sounds amazing indeed. Yes. I mean Anna, have you got any thoughts. You talked about a similar thing where your student you know the fact that they can't go in to. But yes. Sorry. This it's more about how you handle it.

AOC: Yes for you out there, yes talking about that, some of the highs and the lows. I was thinking more about going to the amusement park thing about a roller coaster ride really. In sort of, you know there are highs and lows, and there are some scary times as well. And like we need to get something sorted and are all of the students going to be able to graduate and go and work in the NHS. How are we going to make sure that we can that they are fit for purpose and that they are?

So, a lot of this is surrounding the exams so that some highs are those things like the third years have been really engaged with some of the online teaching elements and it's been really nice to see that and then

some of lows - it's kind of rough. I was thinking about the art example like the Edward Munch the scream when the I.T. technology when it doesn't work. Yes. Like yesterday I wanted to record an e-lecture. So, I'll just do it. Use Stream just sort it. Yes. I've got a University laptop but then Stream wasn't working.

So I went on CSD looked at their alternative software so I downloaded that, so then I had to get admin rights that I had to download. So, what should have been a relatively short job turned into quite a big job using new technology that I'm not familiar with, couldn't edit it and then it just-, yes.

I get you. I get you. And people are nodding probably the audio won't have caught that. They listened and there's a big nodding and empathy going on in the background for you here.

AOC: Yes. And I think it's because of the frustrations of how we feel that we've got out. I personally have got young children so I'm trying to juggle things with my husband who is also working from home. So we're trying to say "well you've got that time. I've got that time." So I've got a defined period of time to get things done. So if the technology isn't working, that can be real frustration it and a real barrier so that that can be a challenge.

Yes. And I think James you are nodding as well there.

JG: Absolutely. I could follow on from Anna directly as I keep muting my mic because my children are behind me in the corridor. Yes. My wife's working full time too.

So for me I have a very defined structure now. It's very variable that we try to alternate when we're available so we both fit with our jobs and try and prioritise when I have my teaching time and but for me this is quite

structured. It's just a very different structure. So I'm not minded that side of it really too much.

For me I'm finding the trying to think of the link to music or whatnot. I was trying to think about this earlier. For me it feels like I tried to engage with new technologies when, whenever I've been able to. Not as fast as some colleagues but faster than others. What this essentially has been like is November and December on the radio where we get Christmas, Christmas songs forced down our throats for two months. People are being forced to do things they would never have done.

I see optimism for the future in terms of not everything that we do, we're doing now can be done for everything in the future. But certainly, things like Teams where we could, it could, certain things will be brought into our mainstream teacher teaching.

So I see optimism in this. I'm trying to do lots of different new things because I'm being forced to and some of my colleagues are being forced to, who never would have done this. So, I'm seeing optimism in this. I'm just trying to adapt our teaching because let's face it our courses were designed for online. We're not an online delivery system university.

So we need to think ahead about what we can do for 2020/2021. We need to-, we need to do some remote teaching and more for a longer period of time than we thought. So, I'm optimistic but it feels a bit like Christmas being forced to listen to certain things all the time on the radio. My music is not very eclectic, I just listen to the radio the whole time.

It was a brilliant analogy. Thanks James and Diana wants to come in to that.

DJ: Well this might be part of going forward but following on from that with what James has been saying and how people are forced into this and the opportunities that offers, a lot of what people have needed immediately, talking about Anna's roller coaster has just been training in how to use the technology. And there's been a lot of emphasis on that.

But as somebody who has done a lot of online teaching for the Open University what's very clear to me is that it actually requires a different pedagogy. And we haven't yet in this university really had the opportunity to have that conversation. Because we've been too busy just trying to get people up to speed for how to use technologies.

But without a conversation about the pedagogic benefits of using technologies and how to actually teach in completely different ways using those technologies then just knowing how to use it doesn't, doesn't help because if you're trying to do what you've always done, but just do it online, that's not going to work. So you might know how to use Teams but that's a different thing from knowing how to teach online.

Yes, and I think you said something really interesting earlier Diana which I wanted to come back to is about the lecturing and the performance and the presentation experience.

So, what I was getting to with that. There are some moments in in your life as educator that you perhaps can't replicate in a technological way and perhaps this has, as James said, there has also given opportunities to people when to try out where those things are possible.

And so, I guess I'm trying to turn this now into a question of what were these moments for you, taking forward the argument of where have you found, it crystallized to you more perhaps the points where you

really can't do without being together with the students, and then what were the things that perhaps you found "actually I could make it work this way." So any thoughts on that perhaps?

AOC: We were already in the process of translating a lot of our stuff into e-lectures which we would then support with tutorials. So it's kind of forced us to speed that process operates. So we've got a bank of resources. And now I think was James who was saying about trying new technology is at least trying to see what works, what helps the students learn, what they engage with.

There's lots of these questions that were sort of just having a look at, suck it and see and have a go. You know keep asking the students as well. You know how, how is this working. But making sure that we're ensuring that they understand the materials in time for the assessments which are not far off. So, there's a lot of things going on at the same time.

Okay well thank you. I think we are coming to the end of, of talking about your experience as the educators and in the next podcast will uncover what it's-, how it's well it's working for students and how we might go from here.

But is there any final words or final thoughts you wanted to pick up on in terms of how has it been for you and for your colleagues or a summary that stood out from this conversation?

DJ: There was a lot of discussion at the start about the need to support students and students' sense of being out of control and being scared and we perhaps didn't pay enough attention to how many staff members were entirely unfamiliar with any kind of distance learning and how scary it was for them. I think the University did catch up on that but I think it took it

sort of a little bit longer than it should have done, which you know, we were all making it up as we went along.

I'm not criticising the University but I think quite a few members of staff disengaged quite profoundly because they needed to for their own mental health. And so we lost some valuable time.

I think we're getting back on top now. And I think things are settling down. As I get back to my Beefheart analogy, there's a kind of renewed sense of what the underlying beat is. The underlying structure is. We're beginning to see it again. But we did have a period of quite extreme chaos I think and fear which links again with Anna's roller coaster right at the start that in retrospect it would have been nice if that had been more acknowledged but quite rightly perhaps we were focusing more on the students at that point.

AOC: I think I'd quite like to get off the roller coaster at some point though. Maybe go onto the horses that go round and round. Nice and calm. Just a little bit, up and down, yes that would suit me. Certainly.

SWH: If I could just add one thing as well we haven't mentioned. I think it's important to recognise that Liverpool like most universities also went into this transition on the back of a very long period of industrial action. So actually, a lot of students-, I mean they only had four or five weeks teaching. And we were in that period of industrial action and then we suddenly had to move immediately when that ended, to this radically new form of teaching at the drop of a hat.

I mean I think in retrospect, you know in some ways, it turned out to be a good thing we didn't have lots of people on campus during that period in terms of preventing the spread of the virus. But in terms of our transition

to online learning, online teaching, online assessment, again it really added to the challenge because you know we taught so little and we were not in a great place already in terms of what we had covered in many of our modules.

Yes I think that's definitely the case. Yes. I mean you couldn't imagine a more perfect, in the best sense of it the perfect storm comes to mind. You know it's.

Yes. OK great. I mean I think that Diana your point about the well-being for, of staff and I think we have found that as well and coming back to what Stuart you said about the Spotify playlist you know that there's lots of things that we, our department has helped.

I don't know if you have done things within your departments but trying to keep morale and meet and just you know just exchange silly things that we can help each other and, just tell people to switch off from technology as well.

So, I think those things are so important these days, times as well.

But thank you very much for your contributions. And I think we will say goodbye and hopefully you will hear us next in our next podcast on how is it all going for students.