

## From the Beatles to Beefheart - How is it going for students?

### Podcast Transcript

**Tunde Varga-Atkins: Welcome back everybody. We are here continuing our Remote Teaching podcast hosted by the Centre for Innovation in Education, and I've got four guests here who will introduce themselves and we will launch into our into the podcast after so, can I start with Stuart?**

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

**Great, Diana?**

I'm Diana Jeater, I'm an historian, but I'm also associate Dean education for the School of Histories, Languages and Cultures.

**Lovely James, you're Next up on my screen**

I'm James Gaynor from the Department of Chemistry in the School of Physical Sciences.

**And Anna?**

Hi, I'm Anna O'Connor, I am from school Health Sciences and I'm an Orthoptist.

**Great, OK, so last time we talked about how remote teaching was going for you as as the educator. And naturally we would also want to talk about how it's going for the students from your perspective, so you might want to introduce what when we start talking about your student characteristics and then just talking about how you have**

**found they finding it. So, I'm just opening up the discussion for you there, so there was probably two questions.**

**SWH:** Well, I'm happy to start then, I think I've got quite diverse experiences for my students in politics. So, I've got this huge group. First, just students, about 200 students that is challenging to know really how they're doing, and we virtually at the moment when we moved to online teaching, they had an essay due and the deadlines were extended, and so on. But I mean that was really the period of maximum disruption when everybody was working out, whether they were going to go back to their parents, or you know, some of them international students, whether they were going back to their own country. I think a few stayed in Liverpool, not many.

So there's lots of them moving around and so on and trying to get ready for whatever is going to happen next and I find it very hard to gauge with 200 students what's going on there really, quite a lot of them submitted the essay quite a lot didn't. The ones who haven't, I haven't necessarily heard from them and in the midst of all of this we had University communications which I thought was right about the no detriment policy and the safety net.

Little bit concerned that some first years have thought why it's okay then. I don't really need to do anything now, which appears to me to not strictly be true, so to actually engage with that large cohort versus students is difficult and challenging. My third-year students have been-, it's only 13 of them in a group making radio programs, but within that group very diverse. Three have gone to one extreme and started to make daily podcasts with amazing guests.

And so I'm really grappling with the politics of this incredible period that we're in. Again, some of the others have just gone silent, and it's quite, it's quite hard to reach them with that group.

I did set up communication platform using Slack, which for those who don't know, it's a kind of social engagement tools and I really meant as an alternative to email. That's a bit more sort of like Facebook or something like that and that's worked really well.

Actually, with that with that group they've really enjoyed using that. And it's been a great communication tool, so it really diverse experiences and I am worried about the students that I just don't hear from at all.

**Okay, I mean with the students that you don't hear. what is available? What is at hand for you, or because that is a difficult situation when you don't have them on campus and you can't meet them.**

**DJ:** Um, if I could speak to that at the school wide level, we put a lot of thinking-, and I think the University as a whole has as well-, we have done a lot of really good thinking about student well-being. A lot of these central communications from the University have been about student well-being student support, mental health, and that's very welcome. We've asked all of our academic advisors to contact each of their academic advisors just to say are you OK?

And normally I find if you contact your academic advisors, about half of them ignore you and you have to contact them several times. In this case, almost all of them got back to me within hours to say I'm OK, which suggests to me that that reaching out was very welcome. So I think in terms of our students mental health and well-being, we've got a pretty

good idea of the ones who are not talking to us, and they are quite a minority when it comes to their well-being.

This is slightly different from the engagement with the academic side of things, and I think the reassurance about their well-being and how the University is taking that into account has in some cases encourage students to think well. In that case, I can disengage from the academic work, I can focus on my well-being. I'm in a very stressful situation. I mean, we've already heard from each other about how when you've got a bunch of people in a household and everybody is trying to work from home.

There's this pressure on the resources, and that's equally true for our students, and I think some of them just thought, "well, we've got the no detriment policy" which I think made a huge difference. Actually, particularly my dissertation. Students who were becoming incredibly stressed because they couldn't do their dissertation work and they just didn't know what was going to happen to their degree.

So I think we've done all the right things in terms of addressing our students' mental state and reassuring them that their whole University career won't be destroyed by this. But I think a knock-on effect of that is that some of them very understandably have just decided to put University to one side because they haven't got the resources at home anyway.

One of the things that's encouraged my first years is to point out to them that they may not be eligible for study abroad or some other things like placements if they don't have a 2:1 or first, and therefore it's worth trying to do something if they can because we want them to continue to engage with the learning anyway because that's providing foundations for what they'll go on to do. So. I think there is a problem with our students, a lot of

our students engagement with the academic work, but I think we've been pretty good at making sure they are okay, physically and mentally.

**Can I just check that with James as well from your perspective?**

**JG:** Yes, as year coordinator immediately after this discussion I'm going off to have a catch up with our first-year students where they can just dial in, have a Q&A, ask me about arrangements, the alternative assessments and just have a general chat with me.

Small talk is not my forte, it puts me out my own comfort zone, but our support office will be there as well. I did one of these a couple of weeks ago and whilst it was like "oh yes, ten people came - our first year's 150."

So, it's, you know we've had some online support for workshops. Again like we like 10 students turned up, but usually our attendance is 90, a 100 out of 150 is a minimum.

So yes, the engagement side of it from our perspective from on the academic side has been an issue with our first years. But that said they had been submitting work. They're just not taking up the support that we're trying to put on. The idea was just turning support online isn't necessarily the best way of doing it, but it's what we're all trying to do to get through this in the for the next few weeks.

I agree with the mental health issues. I think we've found, but we're doing similar things in chemistry toward Diana was saying and so, but the students do seem to be struggling with this with this from the ones I've come across, but I only hear about the cases where they're struggling.

People don't generally come and tell me, I'm fine. They generally get in contact with you. I'm really struggling to keep on top of all the emails, the deadlines, things on Teams now, so and so will still be using discussion

boards. So it's there, some have adapted, some have, and I think a big consideration is that their resources at home. I think that's a massive thing that's already been pointed out. That's all. I was basically gonna say really. So it sounds like we have similar concerns.

**AOC:** I mean, in terms of the support level, so working in Health Sciences, you know some of that is sort of integrated within our programs anyway, so the mental health side of things, and so that hasn't changed and there are mechanisms, University wide and schoolwide.

In terms of engagement. I think, yes, it's been heartening to see the third years engaged, so we've got about 30 or students in our third, 3rd and 50 in our first year, the third years, because it's this is graduation is and the assessments have to happen not just in terms of academic ability, but for registration to work as a clinical practitioner, we have requirements that we need to meet for registration. I'm sure that's yes, that would be true across all the clinical programs, so I think the third year are very motivated in that respect. One of the tools we use quite a bit is PebblePad because they use that when in non-clinical placement. And so we've been putting cases on that, and they've been really engaged in sort of joining and asking questions and putting up evidence. And so that's really been heartening to see I think.

And, similar to what you were saying James. The first years for us for our experience seem to be the ones not engaged as much, but I still think there's an element there still in that transition from school to University to being independent learners, and I think they're still in that transition absolutely of wanting information and wanting VITAL to be an information portal and not interactive. You know, I'm here to help you understand and

you know that this is that transition and trying to manage that at the same time as all of this is a challenge.

**At a distance and with the tools, because I was going to ask that in in terms of I mean, have you felt that apart from the resource issue that you've all mentioned. In terms of the digital tools, perhaps there is new tools that you and colleagues might be using with students or in terms of their skills of using that? Or just the way they think of what learning is like and you know people might be used to coming to campus and learning in a particular way what you mentioned about the transitioning to independent learning, so have you had a sense of that? How that their response to that side of things as you're trying to engage them in learning?**

**AOC:** This brings in their digital literacies, doesn't it? Basically, and I mean from digital literacies perspective, we tried to maintain similar tools. We haven't bombarded them with a whole load of new tools, "Ooo you could use this. We could use it." Yes, pebblepad they're very familiar with so yes it is trying to use what they're already familiar with and how what works and what we're familiar with. You know it's a learning curve for us. It's going to be learning curve for them. Do you want to add that as an extra layer?

So I think that's one thing. Yes, we've tried. We were looking at new things and we have introduced bits and Bobs, but fundamentally we're still using the tools that we and they are familiar with. I don't want everybody else feels.

**DJ:** Well, one of the things that that I think always needs to be stressed with online learning is don't try to do something outside of your comfort zone. On the other hand, going back to the you know, we used to just be doing things we were familiar with and how we need a new pedagogy.

One of the conversations that we needed to have quite early on right across the school was whether we were going to go for synchronous or asynchronous teaching. Initially everybody went for synchronous teaching, they just turned up in Teams to teach their seminar. A lot of students didn't turn up those that did turn up. Those that did wanted to talk about how stressed they were, and those having a chance to see people and see each other's cats and just, you know, reassurance that life is normal and to talk about somebody's new puppy. All of that was really important, but it wasn't really where the teaching was happening and.

So there was very low take up, whereas if you go for asynchronous teaching then students can fit around what else is going on in their households and you can get much higher levels of participation.

So this is something that that really neither staff nor students are familiar with, so but it is nonetheless better option. I think despite being unfamiliar then these, I think of the kinds of conversations we need to have more about, especially if we're going to have to be doing this next academic year where we will design this in advance. What works for students that you can't get together in a seminar room? Um, and so I think we do need to talk much more about pedagogy.

**AOC:** And I think it's an important point in synchronous, asynchronous, and I think we've been trying you right, you. Yes, trying to sort of change some what you were doing previously into an online format, and it doesn't necessarily work. And a lot that we do is. Yes, we've got international students - different time zones. You've got people who work at like I'm alternating with my husband working, so the other people. Do you know some of our students were doing exactly the same thing, so yes, but I think using Teams or things recording what we're doing at least gives that



opportunity to students to then revisit it later so that if there are barriers or there are reasons that they can't be at the computer at that time. And still giving everyone the opportunity, but like you say that there are some people who value that time together. So yes, I think it's a place for both, isn't there?

**James, did you want to?**

**JG:** Yes for me I think it-, my initial thinking was, well, let's go synchronous because you know, that's what the students are used to, but they're not used to it online. As it was pointed out, the students who spoke couldn't come-, virtually come to workshops because they signed up to help with the NHS and they actually doing things around for the NHS now. So yes, I think moving forward we need to have this conversation next for next year exactly as already pointed out.

Also from our perspective labs are a massive challenge. Students have not necessarily adapted well to be, you know, we can give them data, but that's not the same as them getting their own data and understanding how to write an experiment up. If they're not actually done the experiment themselves. So whilst because of the time in the year, I think we could model our way through, but I think for if we're going to do this for the next academic year.

In any event, for the first six weeks or first semester, we really need to have a sit down and talk about the education side of this pedagogy. We really need to another point that was raised by Diana.

**SWH:** I just completely agree with everything that's been said really. Particularly in terms of synchronous teaching, but really. I mean, it works

for the handful of people who are on at any given time, but it's really not doing the job that we need to be done.

That then I think it opens up other, you know, that's where we're going in this conversation. Other discussions about, well, it's no use then trying to record a one-hour lecture, which is the equivalent of you doing the lecture room. I mean, if you do that, it's really not going to work for the students, so you need to start to think if you're going to record fresh lectures, make them much, much shorter. I would say probably maximum 20 minutes, sometimes just very pragmatically an old lecture that you've got last year's lecture on available lecture capture that can be reusable, but I think it's very important. Then you know on VITAL or somewhere just to put in that kind of if you like what the narrative of that lecture is. The summary of that lecture to give the students something to work with before they start watching something, which is typically going to be about 15 minutes long.

One of the big challenges I've faced is my first-year seminars, in particular delivered by GTA's. They were very much designed around group work activities, most of which involved usually things like moving bits of paper around the classroom so you know they were exercises where I didn't know a big graphic was cut up into bits and they have to reassemble it as a group or they were card trading games that I'd invented. And so now obviously cannot do that online. What I'd love to have is access to web developer or somebody who can recreate these as apps or web-based activities. I haven't got that clearly, but there is so much you could do with these same activities where student could do it individually or in groups you could.

Turn it into a computer game type thing. I've got lots of ideas of how we could sort of replicate a Duolingo type format for politics teaching, but

again, you know this would require a lot of a lot of resource, but I mean, I can see enormous potential from materials we've already got that could be converted and thinking towards the future. You know there's lots of possibilities.

**Diana, you want to?**

**DJ:** Sorry yes. When I used to work for the Open University we had software that could do a massive range of things for a synchronous seminar.

And it would be great to have that software, but one of the tasks I had was to advise new staff on how to use this software and the thing I always said was don't try to do something that is too complicated because it's far better to do something you feel safe with and for all to work than to try and use all of the bells and whistles. So, I would love to see the University investing in software that has many more bells and whistles.

The ability to divide students up into groups with whiteboards and with polling and with sorting activities and as Stuart says being able to move things around. All of these things are possible. But I think we also need to reassure staff that just because they have software that can do all these things that doesn't necessarily mean it will make their teaching better and if they don't normally teach like that, if they normally teach a seminar by doing Q&A then go on, doing that. Do what you know works well, but in the new context.

**That sounds great advice, Diana and I think it's definitely that thinking process is so useful to think through what exactly we're trying to do and or not. And Anna, I think you wanted to comment.**

**AOC:** Yes, it was just the resources out there. There's a lot of stuff that's that exists and I think we're trying to tap into that because what? Yes Stuart was saying things that we have to then create. Yes it's great then. It's exactly, you know, sort of made for purpose but you know we use things like Quizlet and looking at what's online and some lots for a lot of the first-year stuff, Iron Brain. There's some brilliant stuff out there. Again, it takes a bit of time to sort of figure it out or sort it out. What we're looking at because of not being able to deliver some of the clinical placements for students, we're now working with clinicians across the country as well to sort of. Let's pool our resources. We need to support our students. They're not going to be able to see the patients you know for the foreseeable future. So, we can't recreate the placement without bodies, but we can use to help support their learning so you know, sort of pooling resources and seeing what's out there.

**I mean, I don't know whether that's similar to my sense as well, but with this pandemic, just the collaboration and collegiality, just in every level - you know in my field, your field, people are so ready to help and support and share. So that's been really nice to see, because obviously that's such a hard situation for those students and for you as educators to try and deliver this education in the environment where it's not feasible. You know when they can't go into the hospitals and get the experience first-hand. So, I think we did talk about we covered the question around you know some of the things what we might think about going forward and I wanted to because we are aiming at the hoping that people listen to this podcast. Is there anything that you want to pull out from your bag in terms of advice or tricks or things that have worked for you that you wanted to pass on?**

**JG:** From a perspective of not having done a huge amount of online teaching, I've used online resources, but that's not the same.

For me it's too early I to know what has worked the main thing I picked up partly through this discussion and but I was also thinking this anyway, is the do what you know. Don't just jump into think using synchronous tools is the best I'm repeating. I know what Diana said, but that is the main thing that I picked up on is that it's not the you don't have to be all fancy nor singing and dancing type of stuff. Just do what works and be willing to try new things that's to get students to engage. That was my main thing.

**Yes, any others.**

**AOC:** I think student engagement is the key thing isn't it. It's helping and showing that it's supporting the students and their understanding.

I mean we use tools and you know sort of little online quizzes and all those sorts of things you know so students can be competitive. You know this setting little games and things like that sort of so you can have a little table, league table or just make it a bit of fun as well alongside the learning, and it's so like you were saying that kind of addresses the well-being a little bit as well.

Make sure you know that they're out there and go look. You can do this. It takes 10 seconds like some of the quizzes and you or someone's got you know, score of eight seconds. Can you beat it? Can you know? So there's some little things. I think there can address both well-being and the learning side of things but, thinking from the students perspective that they you know they can't just follow the normal timetable, they're not on campus. They have got other demands as we have. But we've just got to try and so yes, at the minute, but you're like, James says, it is early days.

And I think because we're just figuring it out as well and juggling as we go along that we will just have to be very interesting to see. So come the summer where we are in terms of pandemic where we are in terms of the University and where we are moving forward.

**Yes, this is the final words now I think because I suppose the last question I wanted to ask is just what keeps you going or what what's in your resources and we can come back to our initial analogy of art or whatever analogy we want to make. You know, we started off with roller coasters. The scream. Some sort of order and we are in it for the long haul. You know it is going to be a long year so I'm asking you what keeps you going or what would be your, I don't know aspirational thing, to hold onto in these times?**

**DJ:** There's a couple of things I would say. One is care for the students I think a lot of our students, and this may be even more true for Anna's students and James's Students, is a fear that they will be assuming that something you know that we might call normal in some sense returns to us that they will be a stigmatized group. They will always be the the Covid generation of graduates who didn't quite have a good enough education, didn't have the clinical practice and so on.

So one of the things that keeps me going is doing my best to make sure that those students can feel confident in the education that they're getting. And one of our heads of Department in my school used to work in with the UN doing crisis stuff in conflict zones, and he said one of the most important things you have to do in a crisis is to create sense of confidence in the people that you're dealing with, that they feel that you know what you're doing. And I think that's really important.

The other thing that keeps me going. But this is just because I'm a geek is I am-, I like the idea of exploring the new pedagogy, that what can we do? What are the possibilities? How can we work with new people in new ways? And so for me, it's a kind of exciting adventure to discover what else we can do.

**Lovely, that's really nice. James just put a note here, his view on the last question. Look after yourselves, and colleagues who might be living alone. Give time to yourself away from the computer. Particularly if looking after children also OK, so that's yes, Stuart?**

**SWH:** Yes one of the things that's been keeping me going, and I've mentioned it already, but my students who have turned from making weekly radio shows to making daily podcast, which is quite incredible. That's been a kind of highlight every evening. It tends to sort of drop on to SoundCloud or Spotify around about the time that I'm making dinner, so I listen to their latest broadcast while I'm making dinner. And, you know, one of the great things is they're talking to other students on there as guests, asking them how it's going.

Obviously those broadcasts are available then to all students in the Department, so there is a sense of, you know, not just being reassuring for me, because I know these students are doing great work and so on, but a sense of it. Kind of sustaining building kind of virtual community for staff and students in politics. And they always surprise me with who they've got on the show every night. And that's been absolutely amazing.

**Wow, that's fantastic.**

**AOC:** I think what's keeping going realistically there. This semester isn't too far over, too far to the end. You know there is at least there's a little bit

of a break and we've just got to be realistic. And what we are prioritizing what making sure that our students are supported in that they're ready for their assessments and this sort of thing. That other things can wait an in terms of for our mental health in terms of making sure that were available to students in terms of. Just reality. And yes I'm, I'm enjoying the sort of the online teaching aspects.

But yes, it's just a juggling act for everybody, students, lecturers and yes, and we, you know, we dropped some balls sometimes, so it's just trying to make sure you're not juggling too much.

**Yes, that's fantastic and I hope you have some of your students listening because such the care, the pride and the empathy you have towards them and the commitment for their learning is just amazing to hear.**

**And yes, I think that that's why you were in this profession and that's why the students are lucky and hopefully. It will work for out for them, but thank you so much I think, thank you so much for coming along and sharing your experiences and views and we hope to see you on another topic or perhaps some follow up after this. Thank you very much.**