

Treasure Island Pedagogies Episode 1 - Part 1

Podcast Transcript

Tunde Varga-Atkins: Hello and welcome to our Treasure Island Discs edition. It's a two-part discussion with four lecturers from the University of Liverpool. I'm Tunde Varga-Atkins from the Centre for Innovation in Education.

And as you can hear from the title, the podcast is very much inspired by 'Desert Island Discs' from Radio 4, but instead of casting our guests away to a deserted island, we asked him to consider how they would inhabit their treasure islands with their students, which is spending precious contact time together, whether it's physical or virtual, in these social distancing times.

So I will ask each guest about a lightbulb moment with their students. And then I'll ask them to identify an album, a pedagogy or teaching approach and a teaching prop or a luxury item that helps them relax after the Treasure Island visit.

So, who wants to go first? I think it's Stuart, so can I ask you then Stuart to please introduce yourself, your discipline and your lightbulb moment - which is basically when you felt your students were getting it and your part in this and how this has come about.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg: So I'm Stuart Wilks-Heeg reader in politics in the Department of Politics.

So there's been lots of light bulb moments actually, but one that I'd really pick out is a number of years ago when I started up her kind of extracurricular initiative, which was this radio program made by politics students, and the idea was we just make these weekly radio shows to try and understand what was going on politically. Everything had gone mad with kind of Brexit and from and so on.

And I didn't really know if it would work, so I just, you know, advertised it to all students. And if you want to do this, come along and students volunteered and I thought, well, I don't know how long this will work, but they kept coming. They kept coming. So there was no credit involved. It

wasn't part of their course, but I could tell that they really loved it. I loved it and these, and I've continued it since these have been the most amazing moments of my teaching career because the buzz around making these radio shows is just absolutely incredible.

And what it made me realise is actually, sometimes we're too hemmed in by our curriculum. We're too hemmed in by the way we assess, we actually make assumptions about "students won't do this. They won't do that."

Actually, if we do create something where they can see that they're really learning from something, that they're really getting value from it, they will keep coming back. And they kept coming back.

So in the end I turned it into a module and we've carried it on in a similar way, and it's completely different from any other teaching I've ever done before. And it made me realise there's a lot of transferability from that to other forms of teaching as well.

So that sounds really amazing. Can you talk a little bit about that and then we can pick up perhaps what you mentioned about transferability?

SWG: The thing is about radio, particularly if you're going live, which we are, and we're recording now. But anything that's live, you really do get a kind of adrenaline surge, right? So, you know the stuff is going to go out there. You've got to be ready, so the students have volunteered to do this.

And as I say now it's a module. They really get that sense every week. Everything builds up to this moment. It's an important moment. They're primed for it. They don't want to let each other down.

So this is the other thing. That perennial challenge of group work in universities. Students always complain about the other students and so on. Well, in this context, there's so much mutual dependency they know how much they're relying on each other to get through this hour and to not come across as complete idiots. So that's what creates that that moment, and we're doing stuff that's often very challenging because you know the news is changing right up to the moment we press the button and go live. So you have to be absolutely ready for anything.

That sounds really special. That sounds such as you said, both the being live, the buzz of the activity, and then it's so realistic is, I guess it's really what happens in real life.

Yes, can we pick up what you said about creating these spaces so you know this started from a creative, flexible space in essence and now you've transferred in to the module. Were there tensions? Or you know in between that, you know going from a free space into making it work in a module, did it just organically work anyway?

SWH: So I had to think really carefully about that and how to do it. So the nature of making news driven radio is such that when you transfer it to being a module, you don't want to define a curriculum, so you don't want to say you know in this module you will learn about the politics of this country or you will learn about this particular political concept or idea because what you'll be covering week in, week out, is driven by the news, so you don't want to redefine it.

So one point I did actually ask can I run this module with no defined learning outcomes whatsoever? And you know whatever happens is the module and I was told I couldn't do that. But then I realised actually what I needed to do is trying to turn things around and define the learning outcomes in relation to the production of radio to make all of those kind of transferable skills. Things which people probably often don't think about too much really make them the main learning outcomes and then the content in terms of learning about politics and different countries, different political debates, and so on. That's kind of secondary, but they get that.

As well, almost not realising that's what they're doing. So it was that kind of shift in my thinking about how to how to design a module that was so critical.

Brilliant, thanks, Stuart. So I think it's now time to cast you away or take you to your Treasure Island. Can you choose? Can you discuss what you would take with you? An album, it can be real music as I know you like music, it can be a pedagogy teaching prop and a luxury item for you as well.

SWH: Well, yes, I had to think a lot about this actually. About what that might be and how I'm going to change my teaching across all of my modules next year and in the end, what I settled on was this homemade thing I have, which is my swingometer right now.

People might not know what a swingometer is, but if you've watched any election night program, you will have seen it. So it's this thing with an

arrow which moves left or right to show which party is gaining since the last election relative to the other main party. So I made one for one of the election nights we once had, and it's a flexible one. I made it out of bits of wood in my cellar, right? So made a kind of blackboard element to old style blackboard so you can. You can write chalk stuff on it. And then there's an arrow. I may have another piece of wood and you can put that in different positions so I can amend this swingometer to do almost anything to show change in almost anything to show progress whatever. So if I only had one moment of teaching per week with my students, whatever the module, I think I'd take this because whatever we were doing and fundamentally like to be talking about where they're at and with mark it up. However, we felt appropriate to define their progress or whatever, and it's a totally flexible tool.

In terms of luxury all I really want is my Spotify account and a device to play it on so if I could just have, even if it's an old-style iPod with no phone. So long as it's got Bluetooth speaker and Spotify account. I can listen to whatever I want, then I'll be happy. So if you let me have that y

Yes I'll let you have that also because I guess you know on our Treasure Islands we're going to have to have Wi-Fi and connectivity, because in the socially-distanced campus that is one of the things that we will be needing. So I can definitely let you have Spotify. Thank you, brilliant. Thank you, Stuart.

OK so hold those thoughts. I love the swingometer, I hope you hope you can send us a picture of that as well and can I turn to our next guest Anna?

Anna O'Connor: Hello!

And again, can you please introduce yourself and your, let's start with your light bulb moment.

AOC: Okay, so I'm Anna O'Connor. I'm a senior lecturer in Orthoptics in the School of Health Sciences and lightbulb moments. There's a couple that I was sort of thinking of, one really early days in my teaching career and it sounds dead simple.

When I started, you know, as a clinician, that's what I worked as first, I was in hospitals and there's just some basic fundamentals. You just know that if the eye does certain things it's this, and so on, and why. You just don't think about it. It's just there. And then you know start teaching the first

years and you're thinking they're getting it and then the marks come in. And the example like they're not getting this but in the teaching session they were sitting there nodding at you. And it's all of that kind of right, actually I need to check their understanding before that and make sure that they get it. Because what they're telling me and what they're actually understanding is two different things.

Sort of going back to basics a lot more and not making assumptions. It's just it's something you apply to every patient and you just, you just know it reaction, but they have to get that knowledge level.

But I think there was another one that I just want to bring in was-, because we're always talking about movements, eye movements meaning straight and optics, meaning vision. We're looking at the eyes and how they move and how they stay together. And you can't put movement onto a PowerPoint. You can put it into a PowerPoint, but it just it doesn't replicate real life and but they don't see patients until quite a while later.

So yes, you can talk about things, but they often don't get it. And I went to a learning teaching conference at Liverpool and they were talking about animations and they were saying we did this. I think it was some surgery skin flaps that they were talking about and I just got excited. I'm sitting there going, "We can do this with eyes! Eyes move, this is brilliant!" We need this for ours, we need you know, things that move which is just perfect.

So you know, ever since then, we've been building up like a portfolio. Really to have different eye movement animations, different tests, so the student can click on this and select this. And well, what happens and they can move through it at their own pace. They can repeat it. So there's yes, it's just given that opportunity to interact and engage with it.

So does that mean then that you now feel students, having been exposed to these resources and you know what you said about introducing some earlier checkpoints, that you are-, you can see that development and understanding a little bit better?

AOC: Certainly. I revised how I taught things, and yes, definitely there is a lot more getting into the earlier stages and with the animations so far what we've been doing is asking the students their perceptions about it. What, how do they feel about it? Do they enjoy it and you know it's been overwhelmingly positive in that respect, and we haven't-, It's very difficult

to actually attribute an exam assessment mark directly to one tool that you've used because there's all the teaching still going on.

But yes, I mean, we certainly feel it's beneficial and you know, sort of from the student engagement perspective and enjoyment with the learning as well as the actual attainment at the end of it, and potentially that it was taking that forward into seeing patients.

And can you talk about the design process of these animations as well? So that's obviously you as you're designing that for students. You are also incorporating some of the teaching aspects, in making sure that they will work the way you want them.

AOC: Absolutely. We've had to go back to basics just from the perspective of the person we've been working with doing the animations. We have to say, "This moves this at this speed in this direction" and we've got to break it down. So it's really good for us to kind of go and hang on. What is exactly happening? It takes us back to basics as well, but also from a pedagogical standpoint. It's like, right? Well, how can we make sure the students understand what's going on?

And then layering that within the teaching so it's not just about creating this tool, it's how-, it's then, you know, used g

Great. okay, thank you. That's a lovely insight, so casting you away. What are your Treasure Island discs? So now you know. Obviously, we will go into a period of socially-distanced campus. What can you take from these lightbulb moments? What would you like to take from these lightbulb moments into your Treasure Island with the students and then similarly a teaching prop and luxury item for you?

AOC: Well, if it obviously from teaching prop, I'm thinking the animations, but if you had to sort of go back to basics, give me an eyeball. But you know a big model one, not a real one. I can move it around. That would be a good prop or something that, like I said, the animations are engaging with the students and sort of interacting in that way.

In the luxury item, I think like Stuart, it's got to be music. Yes, an arrangement of music. Then you've got like something to make you happy, to submit to, to dance around to and something to relax too.

You know, a good sort of musical, 42nd Street or something you know. Get me started singing along, dancing around, but that would-, that helps me really.

And yes, I'm sure the students would enjoy that as well. Brilliant, thank you very much Anna. So, let's turn to-, hold those thoughts because we will meet on the Treasure Islands in our next podcast, but I think our third guest James is waiting.

So can I ask you again about lightbulb moments and introduce yourself just briefly.

James Gaynor: Okay, my name is James Gaynor, I'm a lecturer in chemistry. In terms of a lightbulb moment, I tried to pin it down to one, but there's been quite a few, So what I've tried to do is try to just think of the different types of lightbulb moments I've had. So I have four main kind of scenarios where I teach. So large lecture, medium sized groups of about 20 or 30, small groups and then in the lab.

When I kind of break it all down, the times that I've had realisation that the students are just getting it is when we're doing something quite active. It sounds quite simple, but it's in a lecture using things like clickers so you can get some direct feedback. In workshops and tutorials, it is just the act of questioning and kind of honing how you question students to make them think. Don't just give him the answer and it's a classic technique, but I suppose I didn't know it when I came into this role.

You're not really-, you don't really get training immediately, you teach and you do training on the job so you're kind of learning as you're going really. So it was kind of a realisation that act of making them think, be active, and then again similarly in a lab where it's quite important where they often follow a script - trying to give them the opportunity to not just follow the script, but to query and question the script. Because as a health and safety issue we need to make sure they follow health and safety. When you've got 100 people in the lab at once, but giving the opportunity to critique, it makes them more engaged and the more they engage, is the better so enjoyable activities that make them engage generally leads to a realisation that they understand or have an appreciation of what they're doing.

So that's similar to what Stuart talked about, enjoyment and fun and active learning, as Anna mentioned as well. That's interesting what you said about critiquing script. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JG: Yes, so I've simplified it a little bit. Techniques I've used before is where I'd give them a lab script in a jumbled way, so this is a technique that has been done elsewhere in the chemistry lab and they have to order it and it might sound simple to order it, but understanding the process of how a reaction works is quite important.

Something I introduced, which I've not really seen done anywhere else is I used questions to consider why these things are. So there's a script where every single point is to kind of ask them why are you heating this up? Why are you measuring this out to four decimal places? Why? Why are you taking the top layer in a separation funnel rather than just blindly following the script? Basically, it's a way of switching from a cookbook style to more inquiry-based without having the-, without being brave enough to go fully inquiry based.

When you have got 100 students, because there's too many variables then. So the it was a way-, just trying to make me think about the script without actually building the script and letting them decide what to do. Which in a chemistry lab is a bit scary.

Yes, and risky! And I guess you are also making a subject which is not necessarily-, I'm not sure when I hear health and safety, it's not necessarily a subject that people would be thinking it's fun or, you know, would be jumping around. But then I'm not a chemist, so I probably can't say. But it's kind of making that as you said enjoyable and intriguing.

JG: Everything I do, I try and make it fun, it is one step into getting to engage. If they're engaged there's more-, there's more chance of learning. So it's the way I try and do it. And again, trying to do for some subjects that are considered to be quite dry. Kind of challenging. So yes, just making them active and think.

Lectures have their place, but even within a 50-minute lecture you can have them thinking by asking them questions.

And then can you talk a little bit about the role of you or the lecturer at this point? So, let's say if you give them this activity of the jumbled, you know how do you see your role in that? What do you normally do in in those tasks?

JG: So usually in a workshop type arrangement where I'd have say PhD demonstrators with me as well, but they just basically talk in a group

amongst themselves and then they'll come up with a suggested arrangement. Call a demonstrator or me over and then we can just discuss it with them and say, well, you know, measuring out this before adding that just seems you know, is that sensible way of doing it so it comes back to the critiquing of the of the scripts and making them-, it's like if you want to bake a cake you know, think about each step in why you doing it. Do people really do that? No, they just follow the most people to follow them.

Follow the method, but do you know why you have to add the egg at a certain point? I'm not a baker, I'm sorry. Yes, people think chemists are bakers, but they're not necessarily because.

I think Stuart can add something based on your Twitter feed, I think you know a lot about cake making!

JG: Yes, so that's kind of the background principle, to let them think about the technique so when they are in a situation where they haven't got a method, they can make the method themselves.

Excellent, okay, I think it's time to slowly roll to your treasure islands. What would be your items? And albums to take?

JG: So in terms of the in terms of what to take with me it would be-, well I would take a lab chemistry lab. It's quite a big item to take, but it's a fundamental aspect of chemistry teaching and a requirement of our programs is that they have lab-based experience. So I would take a lab with me, even though I've been advocating active learning.

Sometimes it's just you need to have a go and have a play doing stuff so some of the active learning stuff can be done outside the lab, but in the lab, they had to actually have their hands-on equipment and using equipment and so that's why that's what I would take with me.

Okay! I'm going to have to talk to my superiors to ask if you're allowed to take a whole lab up to the Treasure Island, but I think it should be okay! Under certain conditions. Okay, thank you very much. So yes, and your luxury item?

JG: I'm considering that if Spotify's allowed, I'd go slightly the other way and have a TV with Netflix built in.

Yes sure, okay? That's brilliant, thank you very much, James.

And then our last guest but not least Diana, have we got you on? And so can I ask you please to introduce yourself and talk about a lightbulb moment with your students.

Diana Jeater: Hi today, thanks for the invitation. Yes, I'm Diana Jeater. I work on African history in the history department.

And I've had, like others, I've had so many lightbulb moments and actually some of my best ones have already been taken by the other people. I think for me the lightbulb moment does always boil down to that thing of getting students to think for themselves, because that's when the lightbulb comes on. When you do your own thinking and you suddenly think "Oh now I get it."

So this is really just saying what other people have said. In some ways. What are the things that we do in one of our first-year modules where we're trying to get students to recognise that there are ways of understanding history that don't just revolve around Europe? And if you are based in another part of the world with another history, the history of the world might look very different.

One of the ways we start this is just very simple. We show them a map of the world. We turn it upside down. We put Europe at the bottom of the side and then we ask them why are the lines on the map drawn where they are? On so many of those lines that are straight. Why are the lines straight?

And most of them have never thought about. Why is Europe in the middle of the world map? And they've never thought about why the lines on the map of the shape they are? And they certainly haven't thought about why Greenland looks almost as big as Africa.

So you just get them thinking about those things and with our students, we keep a journal and this is the first thing they do on that module. And the first thing they say in their journal is "I have never thought of that before." "I have never asked that question before" and that for me is what it's about. It's about getting the students to work out, what are the right questions to ask?

And once they can do that, then they can do anything, and we've had some fantastic examples of that this week because one of the things we cover is Black Lives Matter. And another thing that we cover has been Rhodes Must Fall, and the students have kind of learned the history in the

background and so on. But mostly what we've said to them is why are these things happening now and why are they taking the form that they are taking. My inbox this week is absolutely full of students saying, "wow, this all makes sense." I understand what's happening now. I understood the news.

So that must be fantastic for you?

DJ: Yes, yes, it is. I've been a bit smug actually. Only last week I was talking to your colleague Joanna about whether I should ditch doing Rhodes Must Fall from the module because it was kind of not so contemporary anymore and we want students to reflect on the history of contemporary events. And then wow, it just blew up again.

So it is all about asking those questions and also understanding that it doesn't matter what kind of history you're doing. You can always ask a question, so if you're doing international history you can still ask questions about culture. If you're doing cultural history, you can still ask questions about politics, but it's all about the questions that you're asking and that you don't have to pigeonhole yourself with the questions you ask.

So in essence, also what you saying, that one of the ways you are making these lightbulb moments is by empowering students to ask questions. And as you said, turn the world upside down, you know, looking at things from a different perspective?

DJ: Yes, and to do that collectively as well. One of the most useful bits of advice I was given when I first started teaching was when you look at your timetable and it's got 'L' on it for some of your teaching sessions and 'S' on it from others of your teaching sessions that doesn't stand for lecture and seminar. It stands for large group and small group, and what you do in those groups is entirely up to you. You don't have to lecture in lectures and getting students to talk to each other in lectures and do collective activities and lectures can be really effective because they get through the buzz of being there all together and doing it all together.

Wow, that's great. Yes, I love language plays as well, in questioning pedagogy, I think that's also something nicely illustrated. Okay, so I think it's time to go towards your Treasure Island. What items would you take with you?

DJ: Well this is a hard one, isn't it? For me there's no obvious thing like an eyeball or a chemistry lab. It would be great to be able to take the British

Library. I mean, if James can have a chemistry lab, why can't I have the British Library but failing that, to be honest, what would be really useful would be a white board with lots of different coloured and never-running-out marker pens and a very large whiteboard. Because I think there's an enormous amount that happens when you just write things up in response to what students are saying and then underlining things in different colours and write things in different colours and draw arrows that connect things specially for students for whom text isn't necessarily the easiest way for them to absorb information. To be able to draw things and do arrows and shapes is really important, so I find that the basic white board is a really useful teaching tool.

Excellent, I'm sure we can let you have that and then a luxury item for you?

DJ: Well again, this may be cheating a bit because what I want to do when I stop working is I like to do something with my hands like sewing or knitting, but that doesn't work unless I'm also listening to something. So, what I need is a package where I've got an infinite amount of sewing and knitting projects, plus something that will play me audio books and radio dramas at the same time.

Okay, excellent or you can join Stuart or Anna in their Treasure Island and hook up to their Spotify secretly. Or not so secretly! Okay, excellent. Yes, thank you, that's lovely. That that was brilliant.

I think this this concludes the first part of the podcast. So we've got four Treasure Islands and let's see in our next part of the podcast how we might take these ideas forward into the next year.

Thank you very much for listening.