Treasure Island Pedagogies Episode 1 - Part 2
Podcast Transcript

Tunde Varga-Atkins: Okay so hello everyone, welcome back to the second part of Treasure Island Pedagogies. This podcast is from the University of Liverpool. Last time we talked about student's lightbulb moments and today we will be discussing how we might preserve and sustain these moments in the current situation as we prepare for the autumn semester in a likelihood of a socially distanced campus. Just to remind people from our last discussion, can you briefly just introduce your name, your discipline, and what items you have suggested to take your Treasure Island with the students.

SWH: So I'm Stuart Wilks-Heeg from the Department of Politics, and I've decided to take my homemade swingometer, which is essentially a chalk board with a white arrow that I can move into different positions.

Anna O'Connor: I'm Anna O'Connor from Orthoptics. I still wanted to take some eye animations and a model eyeball so I can show different aspects of movements.

James Gaynor: My name is James Gaynor from the Department of Chemistry. I will take a chemistry lab

Diana Jeater: And no doubt within Jame's Chemistry Lab there would be what I'm taking, which is a very large white board with infinite supply of marker pens in lots of different colours.

Excellent, so I think you talked about teaching props and we also talked about before about spaces and spaces we create for students to learn and different strategies.

Last time you talked about active learning, enabling students to look at things from different perspectives, creating and making learning fun and exciting and engaging. So, can I ask you now to consider how, based on your lightbulb moments as well that you discussed last time, how you might take some of those ideas-, how next semester might look like for you in the situation?

So, I'm just opening up the discussion. Please feel free to talk to each other as well and ask questions. Or, you know, perhaps argue with each other about what's important, what's not important, or what things you consider are the challenges that we are facing or you are all facing or the students might be facing?

SWH: Well, I'm happy to carry on going first if nobody else minds, but-, So I've run a big first year module on British politics and we had to shift online, as you know and I did quite a lot of things to try and facilitate the online learning this semester. Really sort of heavily scaffolding, the content I was putting online and so on, and I've run a module evaluation even though they were cancelled in most schools just to see how the students felt about it and how it compared to last year.

And overall, they're very happy, but what they clearly missed was some form of real engagement - ways of really talking about the subject material.

So, what I'd really like if we just have one hour a week with the students I can see all of the kind of benefits and virtues to a lot of online content, but

really, I'd like to use those times to bring them in and really allow them to talk about what they're learning. Journey what their progress is, what they're finding works for them, what they're struggling with and to just spin off from that and-, you know, talk about whatever they want about the material, really. To really provide that engagement.

So, in some ways it would be a kind of extension of the radio show, but it wouldn't be a live broadcast, and so, but it would be a lot more freeform. All of the online stuff is very, very heavily structured but those classrooms turn really quite open and liberal and much more of an of an exchange of experience and ideas.

Yes, and what about the others? Have you had similar experiences as Stuart?

AOC: We keep talking about this engagement and interaction and I think by putting a lot of content online that that's the key thing we're missing and it's trying to replicate that. And we talked previously about sort of sessions being run synchronously or asynchronously and the need for both I think, is what students just describing is having at least, you know, sort of some aspect of face to face online.

I think it's just that engagement and ensuring you know just giving the opportunity. That's the challenge. I think in a lot of the content exists already for the online material. And like, we've got all the animations that we but we used to use computer labs, how are we going to then yes?

So then one of us will be there in person going well, why have you pressed that? What, what happens there and then they can ask questions and they can do it themselves. Or it's just that, how do we ensure that that support is provided online? And I think that's sort of the biggest challenge we face.

And I don't think I've got lots of answers. I think having that opportunity, and I think what Stuart's just said, having a weekly catch up, a session so at least you're going, "look we're here, talk to us – please!" You know, "What don't you understand?" "What can we do to help?" "How can we help you?"

Because I did actually have a session few weeks ago and some of the students were being hesitant to put the webcams on and I said please put your cameras on. I could see them sitting there, you know, pulling that face - the kind of "I am really not getting this."

Yes, so the words it was the non-verbal, I needed that and I'm going "you're just not getting this yet? Right? Let's go back to basics." And afterwards, like ah, they had a light bulb moment, but I wouldn't have gone back over that if all I got was their audio. So, I don't know how others feel about the online content and the delivery. I'm just interested to hear other people's perspectives.

DJ: I think what's clear is that online synchronous sessions are there for different things from what perhaps we use being in the same space as students with normally.

So, the point about is, as you said, that being in the same space for them. It's not necessarily that a lot of teaching is going to go on then, but a lot of communication is going to go on then, which builds up the possibility for student's then to talk to each other more effectively, as well as to talk to us more effectively.

And we know that some students, for reasons to do with technology or to do with what else is going on in their lives, can't necessarily attend regular synchronous sessions. So, a lot of the teaching needs to take place

asynchronously as it always does. But one of the one of the sessions I attended recently was talking about how, particularly when we're teaching online, we need to make time for kindness. Just simply, for kindness for community so that the kind of things that would normally happen in the conversations outside the classroom, we need to make space for those to happen, and so if we can make those fun, and if we can make them about asking questions about having fun together, which is something that we've already been talking about then, then that's an important part of the learning process, even if at the end you can't take this and say this learning outcome was necessarily reached in that session.

So, Diana, how do you think we can make those kindness moments happen? Because one of the things I also miss from the campus, you know, is the lingering behind in meetings, that has such an important role? Even if you know, I obviously liaise mainly with staff, but just that you know before and after events and meetings and teaching sessions that they have a really important role. This is when students can ask questions, can relay insecurities or confirm things and so it's interesting that you pointed out the kindness. I just wonder how you have-, have you found ways to make that happen online or in other ways?

DJ: Well, I mean the session that I attended emphasized the importance of making space specifically to encourage people to talk about insecurities, but my own experience has been that if you try to do that, even in the normal size seminar group, people aren't comfortable about doing that.

Whereas in breakout groups, even when people are with people they don't know very well, as long as they know a breakout group is going to be a fairly short period of time, they tend to tend to be comfortable talking to

each other. And we know normally if you ask students to talk about something in groups, fairly rapidly they will end up talking about what they saw on television last night or the football, not whatever they're supposed to be talking about. And only if you're in the same room as them then if you catch their eye then they stop it.

But I think in this case what we need to do is not to give the sense that we're going to intervene-, to actually not try to police what people do in breakout groups and instead to allow those relations to develop.

But then what I do think is important for active learning is that then we build on the relationships of trust that are then developing through that to begin to move towards peer assisted learning and peer so that there's much more going on when we're not actually there.

Great yes, I think that they're really yes, really important points. I think I've heard other people talk about peer-assisted learning as well that can have a really important academic and social element as well, and opportunities for that.

Other thoughts on your experiences?

JG: From my perspective, whilst I agree you know with everything, getting students to think, being a kind face for them to talk to, I absolutely agree with that. We were also quite restricted by our accreditation in that our lab skills still needs to be done and there are-, I can show someone how to run something called a TLC. I can demonstrate how to do it, but it's not the same as them actually using their hands to manipulate the equipment needed to do it.

So, whilst I think it's stupid, that said that you know the free face to face stuff will be quite freeform and discursive and online more structured. In a way, if we only had to pick one thing, it would be the flip of that for us, really because we'd want the labs to be more structured.

Well, I hope the plan is that we're going to have a bit of both, but the priority has to be labs. So, I think just as a as a hands-on subject, that is the priority for us. But we need to make sure all the other things are there and we need to make sure that the time in the lab is quality time. They're in for six hours. You know they're doing things for those six hours in a quality way.

Some of the other wider thinking that I advocated earlier about critiquing the scripts and things that can all come beforehand that that doesn't take place in the lab. In the lab is doing the skills that they can't do at home is the perspective that we have to take it. I'm sure other practical based subjects will have to take a similar line I guess as well.

AOC: It's the same in Health Sciences. That's what we're now planning for. Like, say, more of the thinking more of the, you know, really kind of as much as we can in advance the session.

So, for maximising that time within you, know our clinical labs. Yes, so when they're doing the test they write. "Well, I I've already seen the video on this. I've already gone through the step by step instructions. I've already done a little quiz online to check my understanding. I've already asked all the questions" and going on, and you know.

Because you will have to have potentially less students in one space, socially distancing. So, you can't. You can't have one member of staff teaching you X amount, you'll have multiple staff. Again, it's all these sorts

of practical implications. You have to maximize that time face to face so I'm completely with you on that one.

That's the interesting in terms of practice based and clinical to some extended differences. In terms of your experiences the last time we talked a little bit about students experiences and how they-, the kind of support they needed in the remote teaching. But what are those aspects that you're considering now for the for the next semester?

In essence, some students might be in a similar situation. Some students might be, hopefully, can come back to Liverpool. So what sort of things are you considering from a student's perspective, as you're designing for next year?

AOC: I think the challenge is, it's still up in the air. The practical stuff is going to dictate everything else until we know when it's safe and appropriate to be able to get into the labs and how that's going to look.

Then that informs the other stuff, so we're trying to sort of prepare as much as we can. Reassessment stuff that we did online, like, "oh, that was a bit scary to start with", but actually, you know we did. OK, so maybe yes, well, we'll certainly take some things from it.

I think we maybe we've just been too scared about it. "We need to make sure that everyone's got reliable technology. We've got to have this. We've got to have that." And it's not too, you know, dodgy, but it worked.

That was going to be my sorry James go on...

JG: It's fine just linking back to something stupid said in the last session was in a way that the act of making the podcast is the most important thing. The actual content kind of irrelevant. So, the from a perspective of what can we do online, a lot of the skills like planning experiments and can

all be done and all the skills are around that. It doesn't matter really what the chemistry is or isn't or what we're talking about. What they could do in the lab is all the planning aspect of the discussion in the group work, so that's kind of. That's the process I'm trying to take.

And so again to come back to the point of balance is everything in the lab is practical skills learning all the other all the other kind of, I hate the term softer skills, but all the other type of skills and design-based skills can come offline or online ye.

So, in a in a sense, are you sensing anything from having reflected and about you thinking now of anything that you might do less of or more of as a result of this period?

DJ: We may probably do more smaller assessment. Because that's really important to keep people engaged and for them to feel that they are engaged. I think it's good in itself anyway. Actually, the problem is how to do it in a way that isn't workload heavy.

But maybe there are two approaches to online teaching. One is that you give the students everything as a kind of "Read this, think that, watch this, do this exercise" and then the actual teaching takes place with how students respond to that in assessment. So you have little and often assessment and the real teaching takes place in the feedback on the assessment.

And then there's another way of looking at it, which is the real teaching takes place with what you're asking them to do, and the sessions and the things that they do together and collectively. And I think we're heading more towards the latter, but I do think we have to really think about how we design those activities so that they have some kind of assessment at

the end of them, even if they're teaching takes place through the doing of them rather than through the feedback.

And so I think we're dividing everything up into much, much smaller chunks. And that's a lot of work, but I do think ultimately it leads to a better pedagogy, not least because each time it's asking students to do those things with that are important, which is to think for themselves.

James, you said something about continuous assessment? And is this something that resonates? Is this something you're already doing in chemistry, for instance?

JG: Yes, particularly for lab-based courses, they're being assessed every week pretty much, and you know we have pre-lab assessments before they come in. We just have to work with them more and be more rigorous and they were quite rigorous anyway, but that would be-, rather than that being a barrier to getting into the lab, that will be the learning activity itself, kind of, you know.

So yes, we this is kind of the plan that we're going to have more shorter assessments in chemistry. Other than roughly knowing when that would occur, the specifics that Diana's been suggesting we were still discussing,

SWH: So, one of the things actually I want to be doing more curiously is a lot of thinking about what our pedagogy really was when we could be on campus and teach students, what it was we were doing and why we were doing it, which often we don't reflect on very much. We just teach because that's how we were taught and that everybody else teaches, and we assess in certain ways. Just because we've just kind of absorbed it, by osmosis or something.

And those things are quite hard to carry over into online learning and we could have debate about whether we should or not. But last week I did- it was a kind of spontaneous. Twitter poll because I saw this thing. You know somebody very senior in a University said actually that students don't want lectures anyway. We should bin them anyway. And I thought no, I'm not sure that's right. Actually, I think there are students who like lectures. So I did this poll. We got 500 responses, which is pretty good. You know if you've ever been to University, what were your wow moments at University? Where did they happen? Where they in lectures? Where they in seminars or groups? Where they private study reading? Or where they, you know, in sort of informal conversations in the bar, well, the cafe or whatever.

Ait's very interesting that the responses were pretty evenly split between lectures, seminars and private study and the informal stuff with peers was smaller. But in the discussion, there was a lot of talk about the interplay between those things which is something we don't often go back on and importantly, all of those things happen in particular types of physical spaces, whether it is the bar, whether it is the seminar room, where it's the library, the lecture hall, and so recreating those kind of environments online and then getting the interplay between them among students and staff is virtually impossible, actually.

So, if we want to retain some of that, okay, I'm going to scaffold learning online. I can have lots of ongoing assessments. I can make it clear to the students what they need to know when they're going to be tested, what they'll be tested on, what the progress is, but to get all of those other ingredients of higher education then is challenging. I haven't got the answer, but I'm thinking about it a lot.

DJ: Yes, I'm actually running a workshop for my colleagues on Friday, where what I want them to do is with something fun, you know, a cartoon or something to feel the difference between being shown something and then told what to think about it, being shown something and then asked questions and being shown something and then being given guided tasks. Just so that my colleagues can feel the difference between those different ways of learning and moving towards more and more active learning.

I don't know how well it will work, but it seemed to me that was the quickest way to get them to actually think about and reflect on how we teach, so that they can be a little bit more informed about thinking about how they plan what to do in the future.

That's brilliant, I don't know, whether as a closing thought Stuart. I could take your idea that you were suggesting to reflect on our pedagogy and perhaps can you add a final thought snippet of your reflections on this as we are in this threshold space in a sense.

SWH: I've got lots of reflections on them, but I'll just say one because I'm curious about it. I've started to think a lot about the extent to which the way we all teach is shaped by our own experience of learning. So, I mean, we all learn differently and so on. But those of us who thought as a student that lectures were absolutely great, and they loved particular lecturers. Maybe we've carried that over into the way we teach and so on, and we probably need to really ask ourselves those questions a lot more if the ways that we learned aren't possible, at least in the short term.

We may need to, maybe you know, expose ourselves to other forms of learning, and I don't know how many of us have ever done an online course. Actually, it was for me when I did an online statistics course that,

again bold moments, that's when I realised actually, that there's great virtues to forms of online learning and that's where I overcame my scepticism. But only because I took the plunge and an online course that I realised. So maybe we just need to push ourselves outside of our comfort zones a little bit more.

That's brilliant. I guess that actually that's one of my top suggestions for people is to do an online course before. Just because experiencing as a student, there's nothing better than being able to then have that knowledge.

DJ: The main thing I learnt and from doing online courses that I took into my teaching when I was teaching online through the Open University was nobody knows whether you're listening or not. Nobody knows whether you've gone away to do something else. Make a Cup of tea or something and it's really hard not to go away and make a Cup of tea unless it's really engaging and exciting what's happening online.

So that was very much an experiential learning that completely affected how I teach when I teach online.

I mean, that's exactly what I said earlier about asking students to switch on the camera, so at least you have some verbal, nonverbal clues. OK, that's great. Thank you, Diana.

AOC: Well, I just hope we can continue these sorts of discussions as well, at things like the learning and teaching conference we're all learning right now, and we're all trying to figure out what works. We've got to-, and sometimes you can get overtaken by your own work. "We've got get this sorted. This needs doing!" You know, and actually we haven't had the

opportunity to go, "Hang on. Is this the right thing to do? Is it the best way? What else is out there?"

Because like what I was saying about the animations earlier, I found out about that through the Learning and Teaching Conference and it's brilliant. Students love it. Yes, I love it and so it's having those opportunities to kind of go. "Oh, I didn't know that exist so we can do what, yes?" Yes, so for us to keep learning.

Brilliant and I haven't planted you at all. This was completely because our conference is coming up, so I'm sure we will advertise it in a link. So, thanks a lot for that.

JG: I guess we're all going to be engaged with our own CPD quite a lot over the next three months, I guess.

And I think-, I really like Diana your idea of exposing people, tutors, lecturers, or different ways of learning. And that links Stuart with your idea about you know, what do you know and how you've learned and whether you can be challenged to experience other things.

And I think you're Twitter poll, which I also completed does make that point very well. The results that people learn in different ways at different times and in different combinations. So, I think that's so useful.

I don't have any wisdom to add to your amazing contributions. Apart from just saying, I really, really enjoyed visiting your Treasure Islands and I hope we can come together in our archipelago of islands and have some enlightening experiences with students and with each other as well. So, thank you so much for your coming and contributing. Take care, thank you.