Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast
Placements with Dr Lee Higham, Settling into University Learning with Emily and Josh, and Learning through the Pandemic (Part Two) with Dr Adam Potts

Welcome to episode four of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast. My name is Glen Campey and I'm your host for this episode. We have a few different things for you again in this episode.

Later on, we'll be catching up with Emily and Josh, two of our students, to hear their thoughts around the start of the year. We'll also hear from some of our recently graduated philosophy students in conversation with Dr. Adam Potts talking about learning and teaching through the pandemic. But first, we'll hear about placements from Dr. Lee Higham, who is a senior lecturer and the School of Natural and Environmental Sciences academic lead for Employability and Enterprise, who spoke to Tom Meadows, our NU placements advisor. They start the conversation with an overview of placements and their benefits.

Placements, for those of you who don't know, you would undertake for most degrees after the penultimate year of your course and some of the benefits that come from doing a placement in the work... Obviously, you go out to the workplace. And really it's developing some really key transferable skills, such as your communication, your time management, your teamwork, your planning and organizing, all those kinds of transferable skills that, yes, you can get in other types of work experience in an internship or in part time work. But obviously, this is in a year, a whole year. You've been thrown into, in some cases, a big company. And you you develop all those skills all the time. Soaking in everything from being in a workplace for such an elongated amount of time. And also then when you come back, you've got all of those skills that you can that you can use when you come to complete your final year of studies, as well as this huge benefit to doing a placement alongside some of the other things like you can earn quite a bit money as well. You know, most placements are paid. So you could get a bit of money for that.

Can they be quite variable? So you said, you know, some of the bigger companies, but I imagine there's also a very different experience at some of the SMEs and this kind of thing?

Absolutely. Absolutely. You don't need to go and work for a huge global company. And you know, some of the myths that you have to go on work for these big companies or all the best placements are in London, or all the best placements are snapped up by the end of September. Some of that is true and there's parts of it, like anything that there's parts of it that ring true. But actually, there's loads of really varied experiences that you can have. So we've had a lot of students work for SMEs, so small to medium enterprises here in the northeast, really close by to the university so they can actually continue to live with their friends while they go out and do a placement and develop policies, really interesting skills that their placement offers.

That's really interesting, isn't because I think intuitively you probably associate placement with moving away and starting...

And of course, there are placements like that. Like you say, also others where they can keep their houses that they've got. Yeah, I know loads of students last year that stayed in Newcastle and actually lived with that with their friends and a few of them were doing a placement, but few of them weren't. And yeah... it just it it just means it doesn't interrupt your life as much. It doesn't have to be this huge interruption in your life that people think., right? so you can work in big companies or small companies. You can move if you if you, you know, want to use this year as a chance to, you know... explore different parts of the UK or abroad. But you can also stay closer to home.

Absolutely. What would you say are the top tips for students considering making applications?

Do your research. You know, really have a think about what it is you want to do. In the vast majority of cases you don't necessarily have to do something that's related to your degree, though most people do. But really just have a think about the kind of role that you're looking for, the kind of company that you want to work for, and do your research or research in... sort of... their values is a really important thing to do. Make sure that their values align with your own. Make sure that the role you're interested and that you really want to do it: don't just do a placement for the sake of it. You know, make sure that you're really interested in the role that you're doing. And yeah, just research absolutely is is key. Think a little bit outside the box as well, you know? You might want to try something a little bit different. And I think one of the big ones for me is quality over quantity. We have students who'll, sometimes put 30, 40 applications in. And personally, I think you're better off just focussing in on a few, but really doing them well, really, really do in your applications while doing that research and getting advice from all the support networks that you have around the university. So both within your school, so your tutors and your lecturers, but also here in the careers service as well. There's vast amounts of support available both in person, online and there's static resources as well that you can that you can go in and use. So really, it's all about the research and the preparation before you think about doing a placement.

I mean, I can speak first hand that the career service really is it an excellent resource full of lovely people like yourself.

Thank you Lee, I'll give you that 20 quid later [laughter]. The other thing is, of course, for SNES students, they benefit from this... 'Should I Do a Placement?' event that you run in... in semester one where returning placement students talk to those who are mulling over or have decided and are in the process of applying. That's always a really good event.

Yeah, absolutely. So that's running... and it's part of... I believe it's timetabled. So myself and my colleague Helen, who's a careers consultant for the School of Natural Environmental Sciences, we'll come along, tell you a bit about placement. We'll tell you about the benefits or some of the things I've talked about today. But as you say, Lee, that the biggest part is getting that student voice. We can tell you all this wonderful stuff 'til we're blue in the face, but actually hearing it from a student who's

been there, who's done it, who sat in your seat and been that person who makes that decision to go and do a placement, I think is absolutely invaluable, and they'll give you some really good advice, really good tips, and also bust a few myths.

I think there's a lot of myths around placements. And it's really good to hear the students who come back and sort of bust those myths. One being that, for example, all you'll do is go make the tea, well... absolutely not! You're an integral part of a business, whether that's with a huge company or with an SME, you'll be doing really important and business critical work for the vast majority of your placement. It certainly won't just be making the tea.

Great! So if you're a SNES Stage 2 student, look out for the 'Shall I Do A Placement?' event: as Tom says, it's timetabled. So just to wrap up, Tom, is... in your opinion, should students do a placement if they're given the opportunity? Yes! [laughter] No; absolutely. Students... Students have come back to us, I've got some stats here: ninety five percent of students who we asked a couple years ago said that they... 95% said that their communication skills, had improved, 90% said that time management skills had improved. And the biggie for me, 100% said their confidence had increased. So every single placement student we asked a few questions to 100% of them said that their confidence had increased and that will help them no end when it comes to completing their final year. But then also when it comes to looking for that graduate job as well.

Lee has also caught up with several students who are on or returning from their placements. And here is Lee talking to Caitlin Storry, who recently started her placement with NUNA-BIO.

It was through the University, actually, it was just, like... the regular e-mails coming through from the industrial placement team. And I saw this one right at the end, and was, like... you know what? I'd be really interested in doing this one, so I started the application then.

And did you have an interview or anything like that? What was that like? Yeah, I had to send my CV across, I had to come for an informal chat first, and then after that was when I sent my CV, and then I did an interview. And then after that was when I got the place.

What kind of things did they ask in the interview?

There wasn't really too many questions, I had to do my own presentation. Because, obviously, the company is based around DNA, I had to do a quick presentation about the usefulness of an 80% accurate DNA test. And it was my response to that, that decided it really, I guess!

I mean, that's interesting, right? Because your company that you're working for is... I know their thing is DNA, isn't it, for diagnostics and tests.

Yeah.

And so, I guess when you go for an interview like this, the interview might sometimes ask you background, and fundamental subject type questions, but they normally expect you to have looked up what they do. And that's, I mean... one of the points of the podcast is to try to get students, you know, their applications as good as possible. And sometimes students overlook the importance of doing a bit of research on the company that they've applied to. So you obviously did that, and you landed a

placement, so congratulations! What about, you know... sort of... concerns? Did you have? Have you got any now?

I don't really have so many now that I've started, but I did have a bit... when... just before I started... I don't know if 'nervous' is the word, but I was kind of, like... my first year was quite short because of Covid, and then I completely missed my second year, so I was a bit, like... Do I really want my third year not in uni as well? But I think, because of the one I've got being in the university campus anyway for the work, it's like the perfect balance. And I think now that I've started as well, I've realised, actually, I really enjoy it, and I'm totally fine with having the year out!

You've probably got the best of both worlds: like you say, you're back on campus, but you're also out, so to speak, on an industrial placement.

Yeah.

So what are you excited about, just to wrap up?

I think mainly just being able to work on my own projects. Cos I've only been there for like two weeks so far, so I've not started on it yet. I think just being able to actually... rather than just... even though I'll be learning new things while I'm here, rather than just constantly having a list of more and more things, being able to actually apply it to something and being able to work on my own things, I think is what I'm mainly looking forward to.

And it's a year long paid placement, that's right, isn't it?

Yeah, it's like 10 months, but for the year, yeah.

Lee also caught up with Goda Stastyte, who is just returning from her placement with Oxford Nano Systems.

So, I'm, Goda Stastyte. I'm a student from Lithuania doing a chemistry degree here in Newcastle University, and I spent my year doing research, mainly research and some analytical chemistry, in Oxford Nano Systems. There I focussed a lot on research and also analytical chemistry, as I mentioned, and learned a lot, obviously, because I had a project to focus on and I was able to go around it the way I wanted.

So there's a lot of freedom in the project?

Yes, in my company, there was a lot of freedom. I guess it's because it's a small company and I think this is a huge perk of a small company as well. Yeah, I think my experience was just great, because it pointed me towards research a lot and I really, really enjoyed the year. Yeah, from the first day I came, it was, like... all right: so that's how it is. You get a project, you go around, it's in... in all the ways. Research, papers, reading, familiarizing yourself with it. Even doing such things as, pricing how much your project might cost. And yeah, planning the experiment, making sure the plan is solid. You checked all the variables. If everything's okay and you're not introducing to your project any unwanted ones. And it was, yeah...

It's interesting you should say that because when students ask us how is it different to being at university doing normal studies, they're the kind of things that you've just explained. You know, those applied aspects, planning the things yourself, not academics planning it for you. Pricing the project rather than the price of being kind of abstract.

Every time I needed some kind of chemicals, I had to go to Sigma and choose the ones I wanted. And yeah, it was kind of cool as well: a full on experience.

I saw your references, and the company's delighted with how you how you performed.

Do you think you might go back there? Have they made any noises?

Yes. I think I might go back to them, for sure. I just need to gather more experience so that I'm even a greater asset.

Yeah, absolutely. So your final year of study is to...

Yes.

Hone the skills that you've learnt. How do you feel it's helped your confidence being out?

A lot! Like... a lot, I would say, in terms of analytic chemistry and lab work it was every day you're in the lab, planning experiments, conducting experiments, if something goes wrong, you're trying to fix the problem. Read research papers, speak with your supervisor, with your colleagues about it, and it was really a process.

I think I know the answer to my final question. Would you recommend it to other students?

Absolutely. This is definitely a really good experience.

Even if you don't think you might like it, it's good to clarify that? That it's not for you, let's say? Because I thought that I really liked it, that kind of stuff. But once it came to the company and actually did this placement, I was like, no, yeah. This is definitely the path for me. It just was really, really good.

Thank you to Tom, Lee, Caitlyn, and Goda for their insight into placements. We'll hear more from Lee in future episodes. Next up, Emily and Josh return to give us a student perspective in starting university. We asked them first about their early experiences of lectures, labs, and seminars.

So... very daunting... The... when you first go into you like your very first lecture, you might be in a room with like a hundred, two hundred students. It's a big lecture hall and you're all packed in. You've got to find your seat. You've got to look out for your mates if you're not already there with them. And that's stressful in itself. You don't know where to sit. Do you sit at the front? Do you sit back? Do you sit in the middle and do a bit of a mixture between the two? And it is very daunting. And, I mean... It's not the same as college because you have a lot more independence and you have to learn how to cope with that because you won't be chased up for things, you'll just be sort of penalized if you don't do them. So you've got to learn how to be organized and learn how to, sort of... do things yourself and not rely on other people? Which is quite hard. But lectures, again, are a good way to make friends, too, because if you sit next to someone you don't know, you can always exchange notes and things. And my advice would be to get involved in lectures as well if there's an interactive element. Because I didn't, and I sort of regret that now because I was very shy at the beginning. Whereas now I feel like I've matured a bit and grown a bit of confidence. But just get involved because no one's going to remember a mistake you made in the first lecture. You just learn from it.

So my first lecture in first year, it was an intro one. So there wasn't actually any lecture content within it. But as it was your first lecture, you're kind of a bit... you don't really know what's going on because you've never done a lecture before. It's a bit of a different experience. And after a few weeks, you actually realize it's very

similar things you've actually done before. If you've ever been to, like... a talk at your sixth form, maybe they've bought in, like... someone to do a talk or a speech or something like that. It's just like being in a show or anything like that where you just go to your seats since... they're randomly... they're not assigned to anyone. So it's wherever you feel like coming? So for me that was turning up late and trying to grab the seat in the end of the row. But... it's just like going into a show where you just grab a seat and you listen in and then maybe they'll have a five minute break in the middle that's a bit similar to an interval and then you'll come back and then you'll go again through the rest of the lecture. So it is a bit strange with the whole tiered system and not having desks, but you do get used to it quite quickly. And for my first lab, that was an experience I do remember really well. And... they took a good approach to it. And... I do chemical engineering, and I don't know who's listening to this that's done chemistry before, but my first lab was a titration, and that is not chemical engineering at all, really, it's quite simple chemistry: you might have even done that at GCSE, you've mostly certainly done it at A-level. Well, they took a different approach to it, which meant that it felt slightly new for what you were trying to achieve. And it was like a nice little transition to get used to the labs, but without throwing you on some piece of equipment that costs thousands of pounds that you've never seen before. And you don't want to break it, but it's nice to just have a conical flask and a burette, and just kind of settle in with your lab partner and it's like a nice little stepping stone before they start throwing you on the big stuff. After a couple of months in first year, I ended up gravitating towards a group of four friends that I stayed friends with, even up until now, five years later, and we had like almost designated seats. So although you move around lecture theatres, about 50% of the time we were in the same one, and then the other ones, we had similar seat arrangements. So we'd always be on the third row back slightly to the left, no matter what, lecture theatre we were at. So you kind of, at that point, you know your place, you know the people around you. And it's nice to get back in to see some familiar faces. Obviously, your close friends, you'll have spoken to over the summer, but some of the people you haven't, and you kind of have a bit of a chat before the lecturer comes in, and normally they leave you a couple of extra minutes on the first day, because they know you're a bit chatty. But it is nice to get back, but there is a bit of a fear of: 'oh god, we're doing this again!'. You've had three months off, because you have really long breaks from university, compared to even sixth form and GCSE. So it is a bit of an odd feel to get back into the swing of things and you kind of go for a bit of a mini freshers again the second time around. So you still might be feeling a slight bit rough in the first lecture. So it's after about two weeks you settle back in and it's perfectly normal, but it does feel different to come back after such a long time out. Next, they were asked about making friends and working with friends to learn. Right, so I met my friends on the course, in couple different ways. The first way is just bumping into them in lectures. As I said a few seconds ago, I tend to turn out near the end and the first few weeks I just hopped on the end of the row and over the next hour or two hours, depending on whether you're in the same theatre. You'd have a little chat with the person next to you either before the lecture starts or if you have a little break, or sometimes the lecturer will stop... sorry, a lecturer will stop the lecture

so that you can have a pause and a talk about what's been going on between you and the people around you. Throughout a lecture with a bit of like whispering and stuff like that, you do have quite a few minutes where you're actually chatting to the person next to you. So you do kind of get to know a few people that way and then that's useful later on. But... the two biggest ways that I met people on my course... The first one was with my group of tutees, when we had a stage two tutor with us, and two of my best friends I still speak to more or less every single day, even now I've graduated, I met them through that. So my group of five that ended up being five started out as a group of three for quite a while. So I was really good friends with them. And in my group there were six of us, but three of us really got on, so that's how I got to know them. And the other way that I tended to meet people on my course was from the socials that were put on. So during the first week of uni, we had this social: the whole Chem-Eng society put it on and everyone went to it, so you know, probably, a few hundred people there, but it was nice to meet a load of first years. And everyone went with white t-shirts and funny hats and stuff like that. It was a really good night out, and you had a good laugh, and it was just nice to meet people in not-the-uni environment, where they can kind of let their hair down, relax, and see a different side of people. And from those experiences, I've made some friends that I've then carried through to the more serious course-side of it. And that's how my group actually ended up going from 3 to 5. And I've met various other people through different socials and it's nice to get to know them from a different point of view. And then I feel like you work better with them when you're actually doing group assignments after you've done that.

For me, it was my personal tutor group. I met one of my closest friends and then it was sort of just us two for the first, I don't know... week or two? And that's fine, because when you're in such a nerve wracking situation, you're in uni and you're going to lecture theatres, and it's already daunting, I mean... making friends can be daunting as well? So just having that... at least one person that you can show up with and chat to and support each other academically as well as socially, that's fine. But then after a while you sort of go off and make your own friends. So I suppose that's how our group started? So we... me and this friend would go off and make our own friends and we bring them back into the group? So what started with two would end up with five with just other people that we've gone and met, and then we introduce each other to our friends and then... that's sort of how that started. But as long as you as long as you are open to speak to different people and go and sort of explore and be open-minded, then you'll be absolutely fine.

Finally, we ask for thoughts on working with academics and other teaching staff.
The first thing to cover is the difference between A-Level and uni, as far as your interaction with your lecturers? At A-Level, you have three subjects and you probably see the exact same person for an entire year or two years. About... for about a quarter of your time... probably quarter with one teacher, quarter with another, quarter with another, and then a quarter for free time. Where as, at uni, your percentage of time with a single lecturer is less. It might be about a tenth of your time. Some lecturers will do one semester, but not the second semester. So you end up changing modules halfway through the year, or on some modules you might have

two or three lecturers because they teach the speciality. So there are some lecturers that you will see for about six hours a week the whole of the first year, whereas there will be some that you only see for, like... an hour for half a year. So you find that you have different relationships with people depending on whether you are in their tutorial group, whether they were your mentor, whether they teach you a lot, or where you sit in the theatre, or how chatty they particularly are. But... one thing Newcastle is really good at, I do mean really good at, is lecturer interaction. So if you do have any issues, they'll always be there for you at the start of the lecture, after the lecture, if you got any questions. In my building, the top floor is where all of their offices are, and the floor below the fourth floor is the computer cluster. So if you ever have any questions, whether it's to do with a tutorial sheet, or an assignment, or whether it's just do with the lecture, and something you didn't understand, you could just go and knock on their door. There's no set time: if they're free, they will always spend 5, 10 minutes with you. If they're not in because they're lecturing in or in the lab, then you just drop them an email and they'll say... they'll either answer your query from the email, or they'll set out ten minutes the next day for you, or the same day. So they're really good for their interaction here: you don't have to wait for a one hour session that's available for, like... on a Friday, when all of the other lecturers are at the same time. Newcastle is really good for communicating with them.

Yeah. So once you've been in uni going to lectures for like a month or two, you can sort of gauge the different attitudes that certain lecturers have? Some of them will be a lot more professional and... sort of stricter in a sense. Some of them you'll admire a lot because of their passion for their subject? And they'll just put extra effort in with sending you, like… extra reading and just extra materials that they found interesting that you might find interesting as well. And that might be sort of a conversation starter to share your passions with them? Actually, one of my modules in first year, which was like my dreaded module, I thought it was going to be absolutely boring, but it was a compulsory one, so I had to go. So I was dreading it and I sat down and the lecturer that was giving it, she was called Emmie, and she was just so bubbly and charismatic, and would send us extra reading materials, and would spend time answering all of our questions. And it was something that I struggled with. So I asked a lot of questions at the end, which just led to conversations, and she ended up becoming one of my favourite lecturers and also like a friend. And it came to a time where she would... she also taught us in the second semester? And we'd always chat after a lecture. Sometimes it wasn't even about the lecture material, we'd just talk because she used to own a bar and she was cool, you know? [laughter]

Some of the lecturers you're more friendly with than others. The more time you spend with them, the more they know your face. You can't expect all of the lecturers to memorize everyone's faces because on my course, there's a hundred eighty people in first year. So the first time you see them, they have no idea what your name is. But a couple of times later, they might do. Or depending whether... what kind of interaction you've had in the lecture, if they've asked you a few different questions and you've bounced back and forward in a lecture... they might have, picked on you, or you might put your hand up. They remember you. So after a while you do... your relationship with them develops, and then they'll teach other modules in the year

after, or the semester after. So you kind of grow on them? And you get to know them better and better as time goes on. So you end up with some lecturers you prefer more than others and some you're more friends with, but they are really good, and they're really helpful. And I know them a tiny bit more than some people on our course, because I've been involved with being an ambassador for my subject. And I've also... have occasionally gone to some of the when I've been dragged along by one of my friends, James, who always went to these... one of the student-staff meetings where they discuss things. And they get... the more interactions you have with them, the more helpful they are to you and the more... the better the relationship goes. They'll look out for you and they'll ask you how you're doing.

Finally for this episode, we hear once again from Dr. Adam Potts in the School of Philosophy in conversation with some recent graduates about being a student during the pandemic. This time they look specifically at managing time and at learning communities formed while remote learning.

Do you think it's important as students, to... I mean, I think this was one of the big challenges talking to a number of you, like I say in philosophy and outside of philosophy, it seemed that one of the big challenges was precisely what Josh just touched on there... I mean, after you closed the device, there was nowhere to go because of lockdowns and restrictions and things like that. Do you think as things start to... well, hopefully open up in a safe context, do you think it's going to be important if there is still this large element of flexible online learning that students protect time, that is non-work time, and to do... to plan and things that do allow you to fundamentally disengage?

Definitely, I think... in the same way that I said earlier, that that you have to be strict with yourself to make yourself work at certain times, I think it also takes a lot of self-discipline to be able to relax and not look at your emails. And I think a way, certainly I wish that I'd perhaps timetabled better? I think that would be a way to stop work intruding into downtime as much. And I certainly wish that I'd perhaps sort of structured my days a bit better on paper so that I did kind of have an official deadline to switch off [phone rings]... sorry, my phone's ringing.

OK, so, actually... kind of protected time, essentially timetabling protected time. What do you think Izzy?

Yeah, I mean, I did do more of the paper timetabled thing, but it's, like... I would stop doing my proper work at 5, 6 o'clock. I'd always just find myself thinking about it. But I think the thing to do is find activities that stop you from thinking about it like exercise or actually leaving the house and doing something with people. I always find when I'm doing things like that, I don't actually think about my work anymore. Now that we've, like... finished teaching and I'm doing that type of thing every day, I'm finding it a bit easier to sort of stop thinking about work. Not there is a need to do anymore, but... I think something that would have been useful would be actually timetabling in those activities, not just leaving, sort of... blank space on my timetable.

Yeah. So actually planning things to be doing. That's interesting.

How about you, Josh?

Yeah, I agree with what Izzy said about going outside and seeing people. I think the only time that's generally sacred for me is time I spend with other people, I truly do. I

don't really check my phone that much, if I get wrapped in a conversation. I truly am there, and it's really immediate, and it's important. I'm, like... here. And this is, you know... it may sound silly, but really good conversations are, like... life or death, it, like... really, really, matters! And, if I anything, I feel like it's demarcated from the kind of work milieu the kind of drudgery, the low-level kind of... boredom or stress... so I do think, I think socializing is very good.

That's quite interesting. Well it feeds into the other thing I was going to ask you about, which was... and I know you've been involved in these things in different ways, this question of learning community within a university which takes many forms, which is as informal as what we just talked about before having those conversations and making friendships, leading to more formal things like, you know, philosophy societies or subject-societies and events that related to your subject, or perhaps engaging in events with other subjects and students outside of your subject. It's so important to life at university. Did you feel that there was still a sense of community as we moved to online? And if so, how did you establish it? Or feel connected... or stay connected to it? Josh, how about you, as someone who's been... was heavily involved in the philosophy society and committees.

I personally did not feel that there was a sense of community online. It was a very solid systemic learning experience. I think Jen is a really good one to talk about this, as you used to be head of the philosophy society during the darkest time! So how was that?

Yeah, I must say that was it was difficult, I think... I think we did okay. We managed to maintain frequent events. I mean, towards the end, we just took the view that even if no one turns up, at least at least we can say we've done it. And we always did have a couple of people, turn up.

Was this on Zoom? Were you doing things on Zoom?

Yeah, it was always on Zoom. Unfortunately, by the time things did start to open up a little bit, it was kind of assessment time.

I mean, one things that we were really fortunate was in the philosophy society this year is that we were... just over the last summer, we joined with other philosophy societies in Scotland, and in the northeast of England. So it was Edinburgh, Glasgow, Durham... places like that. And their events, the events we organise with them, would have always had to be online simply because the distance between universities? So we were really lucky to have that, because, you know... having those events online, we didn't lose anything because they would always have been online. Things like the classic "Think and Drinks" as they were called, which is supposed to be informal debates in the pub, they were really difficult to move online. They became more seminar-like, because only one person could talk at a time. Whereas, obviously, when you have them in the pub, people... you speak someone on the way to the bar, on the way to the toilet, you can kind of move around the room or the place where you're sitting. So yeah, they... we really struggled for them. So, I think... you know, we did OK: we had a couple of people come. But I would say there was definitely something lost in the philosophy society this year.

I remember a committee member saying that one difficulty of it was trying... convincing people to come with you to a social setting, or a... well, we only really

went to the pub! But it's much easier, like... after a live seminar. But online, it is kind of, like... trying to convince students, after going to three hours of seminars throughout the day, to come to another seminar at 5pm, and that's one thing that the committee members struggled with.

Yeah. And I think, you know, fine... I mean, I remember this when I started in my first year: it's really stressful going along to the society. It's a really big thing. And even more when you get there, actually talking to people is a really difficult thing to do. And if you turn up not knowing anyone to a Zoom call, I think it's a lot more difficult to talk because when you talk, you talk to everyone you talk to your group, it's almost like public speaking, whereas, as I say, in a pub, you might just, you know, say something to one person as a kind of side comment or something like that. I remember when... because the committee made an active effort to, in our committee meetings, we spoke about how to get new members more involved in the discussion, and really, the only thing you can do is when there's an actual pause in the conversation, say... whoever... "Sam have you got anything to add?" kind of thing?

You know: give them a kind of platform to speak. But that's really quite a terrifying thing to do to someone. You know, this new person who doesn't know any of us, suddenly has to say something... In front of everyone, like you say, so you can't have that... breakaway conversation. Yeah. Yeah. So I think the society probably did stuff I wouldn't say... because most things with online learning, I'd say there's pros and cons. I think with something like a society, it is mainly cons, unfortunately.

How about you Izzy? Did you... How were you feeling during the past year? Did you feel kind of connected to things or...? I mean, in terms of, sort of... the community between people on the course,

I felt completely cut off from pretty much everyone, as in, like... I don't talk to anyone on the course except for, like... two people. And, you know, I might occasionally bump into someone on a walk and talk to them for five minutes. That was the extent of it, and I just... I found that quite difficult, not knowing what other people were thinking about modules, content, never getting a chance to catch up with people about just their general thoughts on things. I miss that aspect you get from going to seminars and lectures and things. Just, you know, the brief conversations at the start and the end, or in a seminar when you finish discussing the question, you're doing, just the casual chat you have with the people you're having the group discussion with. I've missed all that type of stuff.

Yeah... I think, even though it might be a bit of a crude representation of that community, I think that there was... I guess there was always a bit of a sense of that when you just sat in the lecture room, right? Because everyone was just there in the seats. And it's like, OK, this is the module. Although I do remember doing Consciousness, Art and Technology, it might have been your year... that had the 9 a.m. Friday slot, with Thursday being the big party night, and I think Halloween was on the Thursday as well... maybe ten people were there of the seventy cohort module? So maybe the learning community wasn't always well represented!

Thank you to Adam for hosting that conversation, and to everybody who contributed discussions to this episode. We'll be back in two weeks with another episode of Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University.