Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast
In conversation with Helen O'Sullivan

Hello and welcome to Episode 4 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host in this episode. In this episode. Susanne Hardy from the Learning and Teaching and development Service here at Newcastle University sits down over Zoom with Helen O'Sullivan, who is the chair of the Association for Learning Technology and DVC, a Chester University. Helen, recently did a keynote session for us at our art of the possible week and titled Preparing Students for Their Future, Not Our Past. How the Pandemic Pushed US Past the Tipping Point into Education 4.0. In this conversation, Suzanne and Helen, try to unpack that statement on the session itself. So and enjoy.

Welcome. Helen O'Sullivan, it's really nice to see you. It's always a pleasure to have a chat with you about aspects of technology, enhanced learning and elearning and innovation and creativity in that area and all the aspects of pedagogy that go alongside that. We always have really stimulating conversation. So thank you for agreeing to be part of this podcast.

I've got a few little questions that I'd just like to run through with you, but we can just talk in whatever direction this takes us really. I was really grateful that you came to us, too, that you agreed that you would do a session for us as part of our recent art of the possible week. And your session was a couple of days ago now, and it would be really nice to just recap some of the things that you talked about in that session, maybe. And I thought your title was absolutely intriguing, which was preparing students for their future, not our past, and how the pandemic rushed us past the tipping point into education, 4.0. Can you just talk a little bit about that and maybe talk about what you mean by Education 4.0, please?

Certainly. Oh, thanks, Suzanne. And thanks for inviting me. It's always great to chat to you as well. I mean, when I'm normally when I'm asked to do a talk, I usually try and give the vaguest possible title. So I've got plenty of room for minovery I'm planning. But I realised I gave a very, very specific title. And I think it's because it brings in to focus three things that, you know, I wanted to sort of get across. And I suppose preparing students for their future, not our past, is something that I heard, you know, once when the pandemic was first with us last spring. There was a sort of an outpouring of sort of webinars and seminars also people were trying to make sense of what was going on. I can't remember who it was because I went to so many. I'd love to be able to give them the credit for this, but they said that one of their closing remarks was, you know, we have to remember that we're preparing students for their future, not our past. I wrote on a Post-it note stuck it up. And it's been it's been really meaningful for me ever since. And I think we have a tendency in academia to think about what has always worked and what has worked in the past and assume that's what's come to work in the future. And somehow we have to put ourselves into our students future in a few years time in five and ten years time, and think about how we prepare our students for that future. And, you know, there is a lot of uncertainty about what that's going to look like, but organisations like the World Economic Forum have really looked into this and many organisations have. And so we have to constantly be thinking perhaps, working with

employers and other sector of bodies about what those skills and what that content looks like.

So the tipping point thing was really about digital transformation and I'm sure at Newcastle. Like with most universities, you already had a kind of digital transformation plan and thinking about how to meet all these challenges. And, you know, I suppose it's not a very controversial thing to say that a pandemic has kind of tipped us into the, you know, really having to accelerate those plans and really think about them on the hoof. So, you know, you will have had the same sort conversations that I've had where people go, yeah, well, we know we need to do that. You know, we don't really think it's important at the moment and we need to focus on this. And the tipping point is now it's really there is a burning platform. It's really here and we need to do something about it. So just Education 4.0, is JISC term. And it used to think about how we transform the future of education through advanced technology to. Bringing in all of the other things that I'm really passionate about. And that's how we use technology in education. I suppose it's a play on this concept of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which again, you know, organisations like the World Economic Forum have suggested is a new area that we're just starting them, starting with the foothills of this fourth industrial revolution that kind of really builds and expands on how digitisation and automation is really going to have an impact on our lives. Our working lives and our lives in general in unanticipated ways. So that's what we're trying to do with the titles. Bring in all those three things that I'm really thinking about at the moment.

That's brilliant. And I was just wondering, because you've recently taken over the chair of ALT, Association for Learning Technology. And they always do a survey every year. And they did quite a lot of questioning of the sector during the pandemic and just after. And I'm wondering kind of what the sort of headline findings from some of that work was that we could say is probably not nothing surprising. But I think it's always useful to be able to bring in the kind of the general feeling in the sector and the literature as well as we're moving through this digital transformation from the old normal to the new normal, which we all know is going to be different, but we don't know how yet.

Yeah, I mean the work with ALT is really interesting work and of course ALT been around for a long time and has been at the forefront of developing things like how you recognise and reward, learning technologists, how we create them as a as a learning community, see how we make a practice across. So it's that so that the ALT community has been a very, very close and a very well formed network for many years. What we found in the survey is, as you say, it isn't particularly surprising is how do they learn technologists were suddenly at the forefront of the institution that they work and often were elevated to quite senior level discussions and were at the forefront of enabling a lot of this digital transformation and putting on court, you know, such as workshops, helping staff, literally helping staff to turn things around overnight. And what have you.

I think a couple of things that were quite interesting that came out. One is how many ALT members and learning technologists are now in quite senior positions in universities. And I think just as the universities have recognised across the sector over the last few years, the importance of digital transformation you see more and more senior leadership roles, that have that word in the title or some sort of reference to digital or what have you. So we noticed that a lot of our members are in actual formal leadership positions. But I think the

other thing that came across is the sustainability of this model and how universities across the sector need to really think about how they invest in the support that they give staff and how we can all work in the formal aspects of staff training and also the more informal communication sharing of good practice. So like you say, not nothing of real surprise, but some really detailed insights into how some of our colleagues have to work.

And everybody's had to work in a really creative way and in a really do things really quickly. I was talking the other day to somebody about the analogy of video conferencing and how before the pandemic, if we tried to roll out video conferencing over any campus in the UK, how challenging that would have been and to try and make the use case for having things like Zoom and teams on everybody's desktop. And we would have had to put in place, do a pilot and put in place training materials and which is how we always we always do things. And everybody just had to kind of pick this stuff up quickly in order to be able to deliver teaching remotely at the drop of a hat. And that was really stressful and would have caused a lot of anxiety in staff and student, colleagues and students. But I think it's really precipitated the kind of sophistication of the kinds of queries and the kinds of expectations that the students and colleagues have about technology enhanced learning and the blended moving forward into more blended forms of delivery for campus based education. I wondered if you had a comment on that.

Yeah, it's an interesting one, isn't it? I mean, I've moved organisations recently so I was at Keele at the start of the pandemic now a Chester. And I think in both organisations, I suspect that was common across the sector. There was a sort of, you know, the real emergency response in the early part of the pandemic where we literally had to change our business model over a weekend. I remember sitting in a meeting on the Wednesday and thinking, oh, it looks like we're going to have to clear out the university by the end of the week. And then, of course, the lockdown was the following Monday.

So the getting the basics. So I think across the sector, our I.T. colleagues, as well as learning technologists and others were absolutely instrumental in just getting some basic stuff done and making sure that we were able to get teams, all Zoom, whatever it was, so that we could have contact with students and keep that engagement. And then the challenge is then how do you start to learn from what has gone well and think about how we move forward? And one approach is, again, I think. I mean, given what I know about Newcastle, I'm sure you were already well ahead of thinking about this before the pandemic came along. But thinking about what digital, what good quality digital supported education looks like and thinking about those elements of learning design. That need to be focused on that. And let's think about what has worked well. I mean, one of the I was doing a meeting at Chester recently with the with all the program leaders, and it was all getting a bit. Oh, you know, we don't know what we're doing next year and everything. And is was getting a bit negative. So I just started asking people to give me examples of things that they'd done during since the pandemic started that they hadn't done before. You know, things that they did innovate. And I was just bowled over by the all the little examples of innovation are things that people just took for granted. But once they got a bit of a roll, people were sharing things. And, you know, that the old adage that necessity is the mother of invention. And I think given the urgency of the emergency situation, in a way, you've got nothing to lose by tryng something out because you know, because if not when. And so lots of colleagues across the sector have

tried new things and new things. And so that motivation to innovate, which perhaps in the way started the day today. You know, getting your marking done, getting your teaching prepared. And so the challenge for us and I'm sure for you is to really think have ways of finding out what was good and then making sure that we can carry on doing that whilst not losing that sense of impersonal activity that obviously students want.

Yeah, I think the whole reflecting on what's worked well during the pandemic and reflect on the tools and the techniques that people are found to engage students in online learning. Without that backup, that long, you know, supported learned design process that we would normally recommend. We shouldn't lose that because that's such a lot of creativity and innovation that's gone on. And I'm sure people will keep things from what they've learned in the pandemic and what they found. I've worked with their students over the last 15 to 18 months. I think what one of my fears was that that there could be a tendency for people to kind of say, OK, well, we've tried online learning and we didn't like it. It didn't work. So we're just going to go back to how we did things before and A I don't think students would accept that way you go. And by the by the service of students and what they've enjoyed both in our institution and elsewhere and how they found learning in the pandemic. I don't think I don't think people can go back exactly to how they did things before. So I wonder. You know, if there are some headlines around what will be different in Education 4.0 as opposed to pre-pandemic education. I kind of want to use the phrase post pandemic pedagogy just because it literates nicely. But yet what will a post pandemic pedagogy look like?

So it's a really good question, I mean, the interesting thing about students, so the recent HEPI advance HE survey that they that they do every year about how students found the previous year, it was really interesting, I think, in the way that some of that have been interpreted. So they asked the question, if there were no pandemic restrictions, how would you prefer to learn? And 57% of students said mostly in person. And that's been interpreted it's interpreted by some as a kind of manifesto to just go back to how things were. But, if you look at that's if you look closely at that survey. 12% said mostly online. And 31% said blended. So 43% of those, when combined, basically want at least a blended, if not more online activity. 57% said mostly they didn't say only in person. So my interpretation of that is that it is a real significant vote of confidence in that flexible digital approach. And we were doing some work at Keele with JISC, with some with some research colleagues on trying to get underneath with what happened with our awarding gap so that the gap between our BAME students and our white students at Keele shrunk very significantly in the in the first year of the pandemic assessments. I mean, we wanted to get under some of those things. We were interviewing students really and loads of the students were saying they really enjoyed the flexibility, especially for students who maybe were commuter students or trying to balance other commitments. You know, there was some saying, well, normally, I'd have to come in for, you know, for an hour's lecture on a Friday morning and then I with Gap and then do a seminar in the afternoon. I was brilliant to just have the flexibility of being able to do the sort of the video lecture ever my time review it as many times I wanted. And what have you. So I think that flexibility is here to stay.

But it doesn't mean to say that we're all going to turn ourselves into fully online diversity's, you know, students. It's not a surprise that 57% students that they want to be mostly in person because, you know, students have not signed up for the open university or for fully

online degree. They've signed up for a campus based activity. But how we make. So for me, this all goes back to the learning design again, how we design programs and modules within that that are built on a digital platform and make the absolute best use of what flexible digital gives us for flexibility whilst thinking through what is in person. But also as technology rapidly improves, we'll be we'll have things better done online, we'll have some simulations will have all sorts of ability to assess students with personalised feedback. They'll been just so much better when it's mediated through a through machine and we're able to personalise feedbacks and what have you. So we shouldn't fall into this narrative that some parts the media and the government have given us, which is, you know, in-person is go to online is a bad, shoddy second rate alternative. Online when it's done really well, is fantastic. And, you know, we should be looking at the best of both, really, you know, in a post pandemic pedagogy, which I also like the alliteration.

I really like that, Helen. And I think making the most of the affordances of online and Face-To-Face is definitely what the whole process of going through and learning design kind of supported learn and design journey would look like. It's fascinating for me. That's one of the things that I do I really love about my job is seeing staff go through that that reflect it because it's a reflective journey essentially where we look at what people do already across a program, we look at assessment strategies, we look at teaching methods and student engagement and all of that. But it's not it's been gone through that supported process with people from LTDS as some of our colleagues in engineering and the business school would testify. It's not LTDS telling people how to do stuff. It's a reflective journey that we go on together to think about what works best and where learning technologists or learning enhancement and technology advisors, as we call them here, can help us in in helping break down what tacit and what is just innate in what people do when they teach face to face in order to then break that down, to work out what's going to be best done face to face and what's going to be best done online. Because each have individual and unique affordances that we need to be exploiting for the for the benefit of our students. There are some things that we can do online that we can't do face to face and kind of equity of access and flexibility of access. Is a really bold example of that. But there are things that are much, much better face to face. And so I think for me, one of the biggest challenges moving into education 4.0. Post pandemic pedagogy, whatever we want to call it is how do we recognise what the things that are best done face to face and how do we use that for the for the best purposes, both for colleagues and students. So, for example, and I'm not saying that anybody that very many people do just transmission lectures. But if we transmit an information in lectures, we could be doing that knowledge acquisition in a different way to leave the lecture open for much more active engagement in learning. And there are lots of colleagues that are doing that. But I think we could do more.

Well, I think it's really it's this is such a fascinating area for me, and I was really I suppose I was really struck back three years ago in that one of the people I follow on Twitter Robin Derosa, who's the director of the Open Learning and Teaching collaborative, think that's right at Plymouth State University. She just tweeted once, you know, I think it's I think I'm starting to think about a new continuum. So what we what we talk about often is this end to continuum is fully on line and this ends the continuous fully in person and that the continuum is the blend in the middle. But what she was suggesting above amongst all of this has been really influential in my thinking. She was suggesting that the new continuum like is

kind of machine mediated. It's machine centred learning at one end of the spectrum and then person centred learning at the other end of the spectrum. Well, what I think she well, my interpretation of that is that so person plus a machine centred to something like something simple, like watching a video or taking an automated, you know, self-test quiz, something like that, something that is fully on the machine, on the computer and doesn't involve interaction with other people. It's self-directed. It's as we move, as technology moves on, they'll be more AI involved in that. You know, giving personalised feedback may be more virtual reality where you testing things out and trying out skills and what have you. The other end of the spectrum is person centred, which could be a collaborative project. This sort of thing that we're doing now, having a chat with each other. It could be a personal choice to having a conversation with a student. It could be peer mentored activity. It could be presentations, you know, to the to the group. And as the pandemic has also demonstrated to us all of those things can also be done online. And as you know, there some there are some universities and many universities that have very successful online programs tend to be mainly masters with students who will looking for different things from their education. But this sort of online collaborative activity is very, very possible. So for me, if you think about all those activities, either being able to be online or in person, the real thing then is to think, OK, what adds value by doing it in person? And what do we really need to do to build those communities, to build the communities of interaction between students and between students and members of staff so that we you know, we give ourselves opportunities to behave as social animals, which, you know, we all are. And some of us are extroverts really enjoy that kind of interaction. So for me, it goes back to that learning design. So having some sort of framework of sorts sort of activities that colleagues are trying to achieve with their students and then exactly as you say, have not reflected the process of what do we want to do in person and what we want to do online. And it could be different for different disciplines. I mean, as you say engineering there's more, more really exciting innovation coming along into all with VR in engineering. And it may be that actually students spend quite a lot of their time on online working with virtual simulations and what have you. Whereas other subjects that might be they might be more a person centred activity that can be done in person.

So I think having frameworks at an institutional level really informed by pedagogy and it's good practice across the sector, but then leaving discipline based subject groups to think through and reflect on that and what that means for their, you know, obviously working with students as well.

A couple of questions that come out of that. One is to do with the machine end of that spectrum are not feeling like quite a scary place to be. And maybe that the input of the teacher is not so required there. But I think it obviously is because they need to be designed and those machine based activities for students to do. But there is that fear of kind of technological determinism and also of that pushing people out of jobs. So that's one thing. And then the other thing that just came out with that we talk often about either face to face or online. And I wondered if you had any thoughts on the things that have been done. There's been a lot of talk in the sector right across higher education about hybrid modes of learning and teaching. And I find it hard to get my head around how that would work effectively. So, yeah, technological determinism and hybrid delivery.

So I think if you think about what we've done in the past as a sector and as academics and how we use our time, you know, when you think about how much time we spend marking for it, for example, and how the NSS, if you look at the last 10 years, say of the NSS, one of the constant themes has been feedback on assessments, you know, across the sector, that has been that has been one of the causes, great causes of dissatisfaction. And if you look at the time that academics spend on assessment and marking and then the value that students get to out of feedback, there's a real mismatch there. So in terms of that's one example I would use where instead of, you know, somebody sitting and spending half an hour a script marking, you know, an unseen handwritten exam and then, you know, the students not even getting feedback at the time that it takes. Compare that with an AI driven, personalised assessment that could give students some help. And then perhaps taking that, the results of that to sit down with a tutor. So instead, that half an hour that the tutor might spend marking an exam paper, they might sit down or 20 minutes or what have you have to have a discussion with the students about that. It's about the feedback that's come back through the AI or about engagement or whatever it is. And that is a really meaningful half an hour that, you know, of personal discussion. How are we going to do this?

So, I don't I don't see a point where the machines are going to academics out of business any time soon because that personal guidance, that personal experience and that personal touch will continue to be critical. And also that that motivation, you know, that the inspiration the academics give to their students. You know, either in small groups or sometimes in large groups as well. That sense of real excitement about that subject and that inspiration. So I think there are lots of ways in which the human academic is still going to be around for a long time.

In terms of some. The second question I've forgotten. It was to do with them hybrid modes of delivery, because we talked, we usually talk in either all Face-To-Face or online, but there has been quite a lot of discussion on various mailing lists at conferences, at big meetings where people are talking about hybrid modes will come. What can we not have hybrid? Can we not have online students in the classroom as well as face to face? And I was just thinking that I find that quite hard to conceptualise in any meaningful way. Going to be a good experience for anybody.

Yeah, and I think, so I think at the moment my view would be that's the best advice is to go back to all the things we've been talking about is to make a clear distinction between those things that should happen in person and those things that should happen online. And for the in-person things to keep that as in person. Having said that's going to be ongoing issues around accessibility and what have you. What I think will change quite rapidly is the technology to allow, that's the moment. So it's something that Microsoft teams has got. I forget I forget what the function is, but it's some way you can have some people on a screen in teams of some people in the room. It reminds me of those Star Trek things. So you've got the avatars in front of you, but it won't be long before the technology allows that meaningful interaction of people in person. But at the moment, if you were to ask me, is it a good experience for, you know, a lecture theatre with 400 students in it and then other people to be following that on a livestream? Is that a good. It's not a good experience for any of them. No. And I'm certainly in another university that I worked, we were we just split sites and we tried to video conference lectures backwards because I know that's probably

old technology, but it never felt. And what's worse, when I had students, when I had students in front of me and students kind of watching all this or watching a live stream, it actually constrains my interactivity with the students that were in front of me because I was very aware of other students weren't there and you couldn't have that interactivity. So I think you actually made it worse for me. So I think in real extremists, you know, that could be have some advantages at the moment around access. But for me, we've got to wait for technology to allow us to be more straightforward. It's the same with meetings. You know, we've all been to meetings where some people have a telephone conference, video conference in. And it's just it's really just not the same as having people in the room. But for some types of meeting, it works fine. You know, more transactional business type meetings, information exchanges. But if you do something like, say, for example, a strategic review of four or five people in the room and somebody else on the phone, on a video in the corner, you know, that's not going to work. So I think it's again, it's about being really clear about what you're trying to achieve. And what's the best way of achieving it?

Yeah, yeah. Totally agree. I try to think of how you might deliver a seminar in a hybrid way, for example. And I just can't I just can't think how it is going to be a good experience for anybody involved. And at Newcastle, we don't have the technologies in the classrooms or the or the lecture theatres. They're just built to do that effectively anyway, as you said. I think the technology still has a way to catch up.

Thank you very much for listening. Thank you to Suzanne and Helen for that wonderful conversation. The session was a real success and of all the possible week. So, until next time when I'm too late and subscribe as podcast and if you want to get in touch, just check out the email address and the blog. Thanks now.