Episode 022: Learning & Teaching Conference 2022 Special - Transcript

Hello and welcome to Episode 22 of the Learning and Teaching @ Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this episode.

Now, in this episode, we take a look at the learning and teaching conference that took place yesterday and the Frederick Douglass building.

This is the first in-person conference we've had since 2019.

So it was great to be back on campus with lots and lots of people sharing ideas, speaking to each other,

actually seeing each other probably for the first time, not in a small black box, but before the conference.

I caught up with Professor Tom Ward, Pro Vice Chancellor for Education,

and spoke to him about the importance of these conferences and what he's looking forward to the most.

Over to Tom. Hello, everyone. I'm really looking forward to meeting many of you at the learning and teaching conference this year.

The theme is Education for All: Learning Together.

And I couldn't think of a better title for this really wonderful period when despite all the difficulties,

we are back in person, we're meeting each other. I've just been celebrating some graduation ceremonies and it's just wonderful

to be in the room together with our brilliant students that in that case, the parents and and friends.

I'm looking for quite a few thematic things to emerge from this conference.

There are plenty of interesting talks and I'm looking forward to getting to some of them.

A couple of things that I think are of particular interest to me are several talks about student mental health and wellbeing.

They've had a very tough time, as have colleagues.

And it's really important that we hear some good evidence based thinking about issues like perfectionism and

how that is playing out as we migrate from online assessments to in-person traditional mode assessments.

I know that's causing anxiety for some students and it's great that so much thought is going into it.

I'm also quite enthused by the fact that there's a lot of thinking about assessment design.

We all know how easy it is for that to slip to the side of the desk when we're designing modules and programs.

But as we know, assessment design is central to many of the challenges we face.

Good assessment design can support learning and poor assessment

design can undo all the effort that goes into pedagogical thinking and module design.

It's a particular concern right now because some of the feedback we're getting from the high volume of personal extenuating

circumstances has its origins in how we design the assessment and how we navigate assessment journeys for our students.

As usual, there's a great deal of stuff on co-creation, which is wonderful to see.

It's a real strength that Newcastle and the commitment to involve students in education, development and education design.

It's wonderful to see. Looking further ahead, we are increasingly going to be an International University.

And it's great to see several talks and ideas on how we accommodate and enable success for an increasingly diverse student body.

That's going to be an important theme over the next few years.

The last thing I want to pull out from a really gorgeous array of talks are themes that link to the values of the university.

We're very committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

And it's great to see some real thinking behind how that can work out in practice in the classroom.

So an exciting array of things. I've just picked out a few that are particularly on my mind right now.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the event and I'm sure it will go very smoothly.

Next, I caught up with Professor of Higher Education at Lancaster University, Paul Ashwin.

Now, Paul delivered our keynote address on the day. I caught Paul in the afternoon after his session.

The first thing I asked him was how we actually found his keynote session.

Yeah, that's that's kind of difficult to answer because you're kind of quite focussed on trying to put an argument across.

But my my sense was that the argument seemed to go down quite well.

People seem quite enthusiastic about it. And the important thing for me was there was a sense that people were relating it to what they do and think

about how those ideas might be relevant or irrelevant to what they're trying to achieve educationally.

Some really got past a point for me. The keynote is for people to take those ideas, apply them to that particular context,

apply them for what they're doing in conference, and think about the parts that help them to do stuff and ignore the bits.

They feel a little irrelevant or unhelpful.

I then ask Paul, how does he find the process of development, a keynote address and how important does he find these sessions?

For me, they're incredibly important. So I love the ways I develop my research

ideas are really through keynote talks, through giving seminars.

I'm really exploring those ideas in conversation with people and then seeing which bits work and which bits don't and then that will turn in to writing.

So.

So a lot of what I was told about today is based on a book 'Transforming University Education Manifesto', which came through doing keynotes in the past.

And then as I explore the ideas further and future keynotes that leads to the future ideas.

So. So for me, as someone who's focussed on education research, my sense is that in doing that, you need to read research.

You need to talk about research and then you need to write it. And those three things give you different ways of understanding.

And in the keynote I was talking about when you have a rich three dimensional sense of the ideas you're engaging with.

For me, that comes from the combination of reading, writing and talking to people.

So keynotes are really important element of that a lot.

That sense of, you know, okay. That these ideas I think are important.

How do I make them accessible to other people? I'm not kind of a sense of pedagogical content, knowledge.

I was a man before about not just what you're talking about, but how to try and give other people access to that is again,

another really important way of developing out three dimensional sense of the ideas you're talking about.

So in a nutshell, what was Paul's keynote presentation all about?

So the kind of underlying argument is that we need to think about what we're trying to achieve educationally.

So. So when we invite students to study with us,

when we say we've got this really exciting knowledge that can change you and can change all what you can do in the world,

then we think about how we design a program that enables them to develop in that way and be transformed by that knowledge.

So so the central argument was around that I'm really saying the rather than getting too worried about

Graduate outcomes in terms of salaries or graduate outcomes in terms of generic skills devoid of knowledge,

we really need to think about what the knowledge can do for and with our students and really

I was focussed on that and thinking about way, ways in which we might design curricula.

That really puts out the relationship between students and knowledge and knowledge at its centre.

What's the next steps with the argument that he paused in his keynote?

So I kind of- the the way my writing tends to go is that I kind of moved through on specific research.

Projects are very focussed around a topic and then I kind of try and move back to the bigger picture.

So so this was starting from a bigger picture. At the moment, I'm really working through with with the colleagues.

I mentioned the keynote, those ideas within in relation to chemistry and chemical engineering degrees and how those things play out.

The other thing, the other kind of big picture thing of where these ideas are going is in relation to thinking about systems of education.

So we think about higher education in the UK as an entire system rather than getting tied up from individual universities and higher educations.

Institutions are kind of very noisy in a way saying look at us, look at us.

It's more about, well, if you think about across UK, the education system is given by universities and other institutions.

What would a good system for education by what system level?

What would be an effective system to give as many people access to knowledge as we can?

So it's really trying to move from education of the kind of program level or the institutional level to

think through what what what what counts as a good system and what the purposes of that system of education.

So next, I asked Paul, how important are conferences like the learning and teaching conference here in Newcastle for build and maintain relationships?

I think they're really important in supporting the conversations, as you say.

And I think that the way in which I see them as important is, is, first of all, kind of, you know, that there's a lot of pretending that goes on in

higher education, so. So if we're in kind of institutional meetings, we kind of pretend things have a really, really good and they kind of all.

But that's what we focus on, putting a portrayal about how well we're doing.

And the thing is everyone's, you know, the things we're doing a difficult and there a struggle.

So having honest conversations about how we meet that struggle,

what we do to give students the best access to knowledge we can, where that's where that hasn't worked.

I'm kind of just being realistic about what we can achieve.

And then six, celebrating the successes.

So as I think I said in the keynote, often the kind of notions of good practice or excellence make this stuff sound easy.

And as if you're always excellent or you're always rubbish, rather than accepting that we all struggle.

And what we do is we develop something that's good enough. And if we can do that, that's a brilliant outcome.

So so just having kind of honest, realistic conversations is a bit like say in research is that if you get in conversations, at research conference,

then there's a tendency for people to pretend they've read everything so they know have never say, oh,

not red thought that they'll they'll perform as if as if somehow they've read everything rather than saying, oh, "I haven't read that."

And it's similarly for me with teaching that sense of, well, sometimes has gone well, sometimes it hasn't.

Let's just try and be honest about it rather than just just trying to, you know,

kind of present this effortless achievement, you know, that gets in the way of interesting work and good conversations.

So just kind of being, you know, modest and realistic about what we can achieve.

Rather than, kind of going for the marketing excellence where you can put this on your website conversation, which is which performs a different function.

Finally, I ask Paul now that we have reflected on the last 24 months and we're moving into a more in-person environment and rebuilding those connections.

What's he looking forward to the most?

I think it's it's how do we integrate what we've gained in terms of digital digital education into our other practices?

So. So for me, I can feel, you know, there's a great desire to move things back to face to face and work on those equally.

My work and where we offer, you know,

post-graduate online programs and the feedback we've had from our students because

students need to come to banks to study with us is actually when Avalon's been online.

That's been really equalizing. You know, you know, we're often in blended sessions.

The people who are in the room got a different experience. The people who are joining online fail is a richer experience.

So as a department, we've moved to doing lots of things online even when we're back, because that gives the strength.

So so that working through about how can you make best use of digital technologies, but also face to face interactions.

I think it's a really interesting kind of kind of educational challenge and that- you know really-

The other thing is it's just spending time with people face to face and talking, which is a different quality of interaction.

And and I think, you know,

the kind of tactile nature of that is offers offers us a kind of a different kind of experience that leads to different kinds of thought.

So, you know, you know, this is the first thing I've spent kind of turn off years doing keynotes online.

This is first face to face, one I've done since then. And it's a very different experience.

You know, it's it's it's really nice to come back in and do such an engaging conference.

Thank you, Paul, for catching up with me on the day. I caught up with a few of our participants at the conference.

Firstly, I caught up with Helen Elliott, a faculty support experienced manager in our Faculty of Humanities and Social Science.

I wanted to get her view on the day so far and how she's found it. So, over to Helen.

It's been fantastic. I've really enjoyed it. It's great to be back in Person doing things again.

Worked at the university for almost 10 years now. Across all the faculties.

And it's just great to see so many people who have worked it in the past and get chat to them,

find out what they're doing now and move to different places. And it's also great because I'm quite new to my role.

So I'm making connections with people within my new faculty so I can make a note to go and speak to

them about something they presenters or something that I'm working on that they might be interested in.

So it's just really great to get away from being behind your inbox and actually go and meet people in a very facilitated and friendly and,

you know, interesting way. Everyone that's here and this present presenting is really passionate about learning and teaching, and that's what I am about too.

So it's really great.

I then sat down with Dr. Andrew Beard, a senior lecturer in our School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, to get his take on the conference.

Well, I think we're in a very major period of change.

Hearing what other people are doing during that time, hearing from people from different schools, different faculties,

and being able to really basically steal some of the ideas,

really good ideas they've had and things that they've shown to work is is excellent from a personal perspective.

And it's just good to be able to talk to people outside of your normal, normal area,

because sometimes they they've actually they're further along the journey than you are, whether with were certain projects.

And you can really learn learn from them and they can they can answer some of your questions or ask

you questions that will draw out deeper thinking about about projects that you're maybe involved in.

So you know that that's why I've found the workshops this morning to be and have been really useful for that.

Just being challenged to think in different ways.

By the you know, by the plenary speaker picking up little snippets of ideas to use in our own practice in the in the in the sessions with colleagues.

It's been really good. Finally, I sat down with Gilly Box from LTDS Gilly, along with Devin, Susan Nuala and Claire,

all from LTDS set up and organized a very successful and enjoyable conference.

But how has Gilly found it? From the initial idea to the last session being delivered?

Well, it's been quite a challenge to organize this conference.

It was the first time we've planned an in-person conference since 2020, a conference that didn't happen.

It had to be cancelled at the last minute. Thanks to COVID.

We started last summer and planned out- got the programme committee together and put out the call for papers and things.

And it's got a little more complicated and more recent months as we've tried to juggle whether it would be in person or online.

Given that the situation changed quite frequently and we did it for an in-person conference,

specifically because we wanted to create some of those networking opportunities for colleagues,

a chance to get everyone back in the same room, having some of those really fruitful conversations about work.

But also from a social perspective,

I think giving people the chance to be back together and seeing colleagues that they maybe haven't seen for up to two years.

Particuarly colleagues that you maybe don't work with all the time,

but that you those connections are still very important in terms of your work and in terms of the stuff you're trying to get done.

And I'm really glad we pushed for that,

even though it's been quite stressful at points pulling it together because it's been fantastic today to see everybody together in

our space and talking and sharing ideas and coming out of sessions and discussing what they've heard and what's been proposed.

And it's fantastic to have Paul here earlier.

His keynote, I think, was really thought provoking for people and has made everybody think about how we move forwards.

And we tried to really give the day a very positive focus.

So thinking about what's what we've done well during the pandemic and what's been successful and how we can maybe take some of

those lessons and some of those ideas forward as we progress back to some kind of normal quote unquote way of working.

But, yes, it's been it's been a really good day. I think people seem to have enjoyed it and it's been just brilliant.

See everybody back together. Definitely worth all the hassle of organizing. So does everyone together.

Thank you, Tom. Paul, Helen, Andrew and Gilly for talking to me for this episode.

I hope you enjoyed this episode. And if you went to the conference was a nice reflection on what you actually saw that day.

This is your first time. Listen, this podcast like subscribe and tell your friends and we'll see you in two weeks time.

Thank you, Bye.