

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

Ideas in Academic Practice: School X, rethinking a University Degree

Hello and welcome to Episode 20 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name is Ben Steel and I'll be doing this quick intro.

In this episode, Dr. Paul Fleet, chair of the Academic Progress Board of Studies, at Newcastle University,

talks to Professor Ruth Morrow and Professor Richard Clay co Heads of the School X about harnessing the collective power of

interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration across the university to help colleagues and students be producers of excellence,

creativity and impact. Ruth and Richard took post in September 20/21,

and have been a consultant across the university to build a vision of how School X can become a new reality of collaboration in higher education.

So over the Paul. Hello my name's Paul and I'm your host for this episode.

I'm joined today by two people who are seeking to rethink traditional understandings of

the university degree who are harnessing the collective power of interdisciplinary,

seeking to work with university as a whole, and wishing to enable colleagues and students to be producers of excellence, creativity and impact.

Now, those are really big and bold statements, but that's exactly what it is.

It's the scale of division of this activity, which is called School X.

That's intriguing for those of us invested in learning and teaching in higher education.

So let's find out a bit more. We're going to have a conversation today with Professor Ruth Morrow and

Professor Richard Clay so I'm invite them to say little bit about who they are and why you became the co-heads of School X Ruth do you want to start

OK. Hi, my name is Ruth Morrow.

I'm Professor of Biological Architecture. I'm based for the most part in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape.

And I'm also part of the hub for biotechnology and the built environment, which is a large research project.

And why did I get involved in school X? Yeah.

All of my work to date. I think I'm trying to think because I'm an architect by background.

So all of the work that I do is always collaborative.

And since I've been in higher education, which is some considerable length of time, all of the research that I do is 100% collaborative.

It's rare that I do anything on my own, I occasionally write my own.

But for the most part, I'm working with a very broad range of disciplines.

Sometimes with artists, sometimes with geographers, sometimes with other writers, sometimes with polymer scientists, civil engineers.

micro biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, the whole a whole range.

So it makes sense for me to be part of school X. It's what drives my work.

And I want to see that part of the culture. It is already part of the culture.

But I'd like to see a real strong place for that within the university. Makes sense, though.

Richard, what about yourself? I'm Richard Clay I'm professor of digital cultures at Newcastle University and I was employed

to come in and have what they called it a boundary spanning role at the time.

But where I come from, being called a spanner is an insult.

So they changed it to a translational professor, which means I operate across HaSS and the other faculties,

talking about how we can embed, thinking about digital across subject areas.

But actually at heart, I'm an 18th century French art historian

Now that's a long story for a different podcast about how do you go from there to where I am now.

But on the way it involved collaborating a lot with libraries, galleries, museums, archives,

working across sectors, increasingly working with digital companies large and small, but mainly small.

And I just got a real appetite like Ruth for this benefit of collaboration across sectors and across disciplines.

And that's why I became very heavily involved in school X, because I love the vision and I wanted to help make it happen.

They're superb. Now we've got to talk about haven't we, we've really got to go for that

very big question. Was it called school X? That's a good question.

There is a long story, but I'll spare you it.

Look, the bottom line is the school has three founding units and they are philosophy, postgraduate research training and combined honours.

And as a mission to work across all subject areas and across sectors and to do interdisciplinary and cross-sector.

So what are we supposed to call it if we go with the original model for naming within universities?

You would list all of those things I've just listed and end up with the longest

name in the history of universities and no one would be much the wiser.

So the alternative is to go for something that's memorable and that's kind of symbolic.

So we went with school X because we work across an X is a cross, we work across disciplines, we work across sectors.

School X and X is the unknown quantity in any equation.

And we're really interested in getting to know the unknown. That I think is perfectly sensible, I guess.

Ruth Yeah. I mean, I'm I'm kind of a blow in,

so I haven't been involved in setting up the school X. I came along one when the job was advertised and I'm relatively new to Newcastle.

But I like the notion of X as a as a thing because it isn't just a word that we can pronounce.

It is also, as Richard alludes to, a mathematical symbol, but it's also a visual symbol.

And I do value the fact that in universities, not everything has to be textural or verbal, that we can also have visual outcomes.

And that's an important stretch of language for me.

So, yeah,. I'd add as well, you know, an X is a crossing is an intersection.

X marks the spot. We mark our decision, our determination when we vote with an X and it's a sign of affection.

I get that I get I get the meaning behind that. Superb. OK, let's play a game.

I want you to imagine that I'm 18 years old and I've gone through my education pathway and I know my discipline

or at least I know my discipline through the curriculum that's been placed in front of me up to this point.

I get to university and I find out that there's this thing called School X..

What what would I expect to be part of what?

What would I get involved with? What would it do for me?

Well, you might actually be come in part of something that's rather like your experience of being in further education,

when you're in further education, you're doing if you're doing A-levels, you're doing three A-levels.

Right. Or three and a bit some As levels. So you're working across disciplines.

And we've got a system that goes from a very broad range of GCSE through a range of A-levels.

And our students are being expected to drop things that they're interested in.

And I had to do that. I had to drop the sciences,

even though I was really interested in the sciences and I became committed to the things I was doing best in which happened to be the humanities.

And when I got to university, I was doing one subject history,

which then became history and history of art and never even knew history of art existed when I was at school.

So I suddenly had this opportunity. And what attracted me to history of art was how multi-disciplinary it was.

And I think that hunger, that inquisitiveness is really common.

Amongst undergraduates, they miss the breadth of education that they had.

And I think they'll be really excited to be engaged with school X

they'll be able to come into modules where they're being taught alongside students doing completely different subjects.

So you'll have historians working in the same group with biologists and with engineers and computer scientists,

and they'll get to enjoy that pleasure of discovery and pleasure of really feeling

that you're pushing boundaries together and doing it in new and exciting ways.

And I think that's gonna be attractive. Yeah. So, my belief is that students, at least initially, won't be coming into school X directly.

They'll be coming to us via other routes. Unless, of course, they're if applied to philosophy and combined honours our funding units.

But for the most part,

I think people will still be coming into other parts of the university and then school X in a way is a doorway to yet other parts of the university.

So students I mean, this has been my experience at least, is they come in,

they apply and they sit on a course and they rarely have any interaction with other courses unless they're in something like combined honours,

which is an amazing offer that exists within the university already.

And I think that's a missed opportunity because there are very few disciplines that don't have interrelationships with other disciplines.

But still, for example,

architecture students are taught almost exclusively by architects and their work has reviewed and assessed by architects.

And yet, of course,

we know that wider groups in society have a lot to say about architecture and have bring in a lot of expertise into the making of architecture.

So I think the school X then kind of opens up door, but not just to other people in the university,

but to people outside the university were very intent on delivering.

A lot of our learning and research experience through live projects.

And live projects are a way for students to interact with key researchers in the university and also with client bodies

and other external organisations that will help bring focus and bring knowledge into their learning environment.

So School X is very much about that kind of, you know, rotating doorway into other parts of the university, which of course,

is a brilliant experience for a psychologist to go out and speak to someone in medicine or equally someone in architecture,

civil engineering, and also go out and meet people beyond the university.

So that that's really, I think, what will end up being the experience of students coming to Newcastle.

Yeah, I totally agree with Ruth that the attractiveness of our collaborators beyond the university

should be something that we're celebrating in our undergraduate and postgraduate education,

that we've done it Ruth and I in the last couple of years. She's only been at the university a couple of years right from the get go.

She was involved in a projects that I'm involved with as well, which involves the council in Gateshead,

in the National Trust and all kinds of organisations and businesses working to try and rejuvenate a park.

The Gateshead Riverside Park.

And what we started to do was say to them, look, we've got like loads of really, really bright students at the university.

Can we offer them some challenges and see whether they can solve some of these issues.

And so far in the last couple of years, we've worked with architecture students,

masters of architecture students and art students on unsustainable building solutions for

main well used spaces within the park. And they've come up with some absolutely far out stuff that's blown the mind.

The National Trust, the council, the architect company, we're working with and us.

And, you know, this is amazing for the students and amazing for the collaborators and amazing for us and feeding back into our own research work.

And we've done a similar thing with history students, third year students. 105 of them doing presentations, AV,

And again, it blew the mind of the external collaborators and us and it feeds back into research.

And we think that, you know, the urgency of the now is really in the mind, I think, of an undergraduate at the university.

You know, they want their work to have an impact on the world around them.

And what we're not always great at saying to them is the world around you wants you to have impact and we can help.

We can facilitate with that. And in the process, we can shape and enrich your education, but also we all benefit.

And it's a classic example of we genuinely are better together than we are apart.

Yeah I think that makes a lot of sense. I mean, both of you know, the more research areas, authentic education are really genuinely believe about the purpose.

And I don't think I take your point, Richard, earlier about, you know, a student being narrowed and narrower and narrower and narrower.

And then we go to the university and we expect them to think about the culture, history, society, meaning creativity, philosophy of this.

And yet they've been funnelled to the point we want to walk back home to get the 18 year old that

the sort of new comer to a university is ready for their understanding of their place in the world.

And I think this provides those opportunities for them to really engage with that.

And having live projects is something that will happen in their working world.

They're all going to be dealing with organisations and talking to other people about what makes sense.

Ruth, what are your thoughts now? Just to follow up on that,

I think it's also fair to say that the 18 year old experiences of life and world that don't necessarily sit with a 58 year old professor,

you know, and I not and I do think we have to find quicker ways to bring that knowledge

and reproduce some knowledge and share that knowledge across the university,

because we can't wait until they get into a position of perceived power and in order to bring that knowledge into the university.

So I suppose the other thing this isn't I wouldn't say that's unique to school X, but it's a very determined focus of school X,

which is to treat the student from you from day one as a as a fellow researcher and someone who will contribute to the making of knowledge.

And so the link to the outside world is critical. But equally, that connection to real top leading edge researchers,

I think is also equally important because we want the student both to experience that and the buzz,

because that is, you know, a researcher is buzzing off their own learning and their own discovery.

And that's the same thrill of learning that first year students should be having as well.

So we want them to be in that kind of dialogue and to kind of share that addiction, let's call it,

to learning, which I think, you know, is a fantastic way for us this as a society to progress.

But it's also about that researcher hearing the reflection of that student on their research and what they bring to it.

Because, I mean, I for one, definite I mean,

I have a family with kids in it and they just make technology be part of their life in a way that it was never a part of mine.

So, you know, I have a 14 year old who programs bots because she oversees a kind of small community and the bot's tell off other kids.

who are involved in that community if they're using bad language, you know, but she doesn't see ourselves as technologist or a programmer.

That's just the tools that she uses in order to be part of a kind of little.

It's actually quite an international community. So that's at the stage of 14.

And I'm sure there's equally other stories of of young, bright people coming into the university.

And I think we need to know how they function better, not just assume that they're,

you know, this idea of an empty vessel to be filled up with our knowledge.

But I want to know what's going on in their heads, filling them with our knowledge.

You know, it's not that we're cleverer than these students are.

It's just we've had more practice at certain kinds of things.

But risk talking to the fact that our students have huge amounts of practice and expertise and experience as well.

And I think we're in favour of unleashing all of that and trying to give them the opportunity to build on it as part of their educational experience.

And maybe there's a little bit of benevolent selfishness going on here as well,

because we want to be enriched, too, and we want our collaborators to be enriched.

We want to all live in a richer mental universe together that actually has impact in the world.

And it's the idea of co-creation, not just being a buzzword or that's likely done in the odd module.

It's something that runs through what we're actually doing in our learning and teaching.

I understand that. Now, I believe you are currently in a vision phase and it's going through consultation and engagement.

What's a vision phase face? Yeah, well, we are in a vision, which is to say that we've tried to articulate what we think School X should become and to

do it in a way that is reasonably concise and pretty gripping and emerges out of Ruth and

I spending, you know, up until Christmas last year.

So it's September 2021

We the school was formed and we spent the following few months ranging across the university and outside as well,

talking to people about where we thought School X was going and we boiled it down and been presenting that into the university and getting

Feedback and tweaking it and just being able to sum up the school and why we wanted to go.

But what we're also doing in parallel is starting to move towards operationalising the school.

So the visions all good and it's very few people say we don't like.

That sounds terrible teaching across disciplines and sectors where an awful idea.

Nobody says that they generally love it. But how do we make it happen?

And that's the next phase.

For any initiative to succeed in the first instance, it has to be understood.

And I think school X needs to be understood by as wide a grouping of people as possible.

And so that kind of vision where it's you know, we're reflecting quite a lot of the language that already exists within the university.

But I suppose we're giving it a bit more focus and we're trying to find identifiable lines that we share with others,

you know, identifiable agendas. But for for any initiative else is to sustain itself.

It can't ring fence itself. It has to be owned really to not just understood, but it has to be owned.

And ownership, I think, is something we want to share as widely as possible.

I mean, Richard and I will kind of steer steer the ship.

But, you know, the wind is coming from multiple directions.

You know, the source of energy will come from multiple directions.

And that's really that's why the vision stage is quite important and it will continue to be important.

School X, one of it's I think one of the we've kind of identified three areas.

But the third area really is about continually saying, again,

reshaping and bringing them onboard and communicating to others what it is we're doing.

So that communication side to a school is rather unusual because for the most part,

you would be speaking to the outside world and particularly focussed on on student recruitment.

But School X is going to have to speak also to other partners.

We want to attract and bring in and we're also going to have to continually speak to our colleagues across the university.

So it's kind of multi-directional form of communication.

And I think that also be a continual act of identity building.

We can't just rest on the three core units because school X is more than three core units.

It's got another series of activities and they also will change over time.

So the act of describing and relating and building narratives around school X

is likely to be a real ongoing while it will be an ongoing job for us.

Yeah school X is a cultural phenomena and the only constant in culture is change.

So we've got to be building into it of a receptiveness to dealing with the changing world around us.

You know, just picking up on the point about collaborative learning.

I'm just wondering, because this is this is a difficult point here, isn't it?

How do you support and resource collaborative learning across the university?

So it's absolutely brilliant question.

You know, it's completely where we're at and how we're thinking because I think in general people think that collaboration just happens.

And there are lots of really terrific examples of collaboration across the university,

but there are also good examples of collaboration that people came together in the first instance and then didn't sustain that or pursue it.

That's because collaboration is quite a challenge.

It is, as I recently talked, a bit like going to live in a foreign country without necessarily having learned the language yet.

Initially you got excited and you learn a little bit and you can see that you can start to talk.

And then after a while, you feel when that when you go to, for example, to a dinner party.

People are still talking around you and you're still viewed as being kind of a dumb person

at the end because you can't fully form your sentences and that undermines your confidence.

And it just takes time in order to be able to build confidence to be within collaborative endeavours.

And I feel that there is a lot of expertise in the university that we need to gather together

and hold in one place and then analyse and show and really begin to share that expertise,

because I think you can't wait for collaborations to merge or you can if you got endless amounts of time.

And we also need collaborations to merge in places where the cultures are vastly different,

where the instinct would be to not collaborate or to kind of stand back from another.

So I do think we have to be much more focussed. We have to bring much more.

We have to Hoover up the experiences that we have already and reflect and analyse and build the expertise and then share that.

And you're right to talk about resourcing because collaboration,

if we're really going to use it as a tool, then we do need to find ways to resource it.

And not really for me is around, you know, building phd potential phd culture post-docs and also experts,

academics who can lead and collaborative endeavours. This is a slight the dull rider on the back of Ruth's exciting vision, which I fully agree with.

And you know, with working within universities, collaboration is sometimes mitigated against by the systems of the university itself.

And part of the vision that we have for School X that has emerged out of conversation with colleagues and collaborators

and students is that actually part of our work is going to be asking where are the barriers to collaboration?

What of the structural barriers? And importantly, how can we overcome them?

And then how can we share those solutions across the university that will help make it easier to work across disciplines,

across sectors, and have education that's shaped by research and research, that's shaped by education, both of which have impact.

I mean, I think both Richard and I as many other people in the university, have with oodles of experience, of collaboration,

but it's often on our own costs and we're driving it, too, and we're making sure that it happens because we believe in the value of it.

But if anyone who thinks that collaboration is easy, it's obviously been in school X in 20 years time.

You know, we travelled back from the future. Yeah.

So I think currently there's quite a lot of things that go against collaboration.

It isn't an easy thing to do, neither within the university nor with external organisations.

We run at different paces. We have different expectations. All of those things.

So we really, really need to learn and become an expert in the act of collaboration.

And I'm hoping that Skill X will be a kind of fulcrum for that activity.

Okay. So I'm going to be tricky. I'm going to be tricky with this one.

And I would ask you for a final thought. And you talked about the Riverside project.

You talked about the link with the National Trust.

And I want you to leave the listeners with an idea, something that will just stay with them inside, something,

embodies, the vision of school X and perhaps, you know, you can use your own research specialists as well.

Of course he can. But what sort of thing?

What sort of project? What can you imagine having that would be cross disciplinary

And would engage a microbiologist with the musician who is also linked to the person that works in chemical engineering.

I mean, I've been slightly provocative but you know where I'm going.

A final thought, something really the person finishes the podcast, oh I want to think about. Who wants to go first

So I'm going to go back to the gates at Riverside Park.

So this is a park that runs from the swing bridge in Newcastle, up the river beyond the stathes, which are the biggest wooden construction in Europe.

And it's on a steep bank and it's underfunded austerity meant

So as I've said, we've gathered all of these collaborators who are really committed to trying to rescue this park.

Now, Ruth and I really committed to social justice and environmental justice.

So we're really interested in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,

although we are interested in critically engaging with them, weighing up their strengths and their weaknesses and addressing both.

So I look at that park and I just say, well, actually, there are cities all over the world that have got parks and that have got rivers.

So any lessons we learn about this park and its ecology and its value for health and well-being, its history,

its culture, etc. these actually could resonate much more broadly that the global starts on our doorstep.

That's kind of how I think about it. So I'm quite intrigued by the idea of going right.

What could happen if we worked across disciplines with this case study and if we were extended it?

Because actually the council, a national trust of universities, are working on a broader space along the riverside, not just on the park.

So what would a micro biologist bring to the party? Huge amounts.

What would a historian bring? What would a computer scientist bring?

We've got huge amounts of data. We've also got communication challenges.

In fact, is there a subject area that we can find that can't contribute to trying to investigate and resolve the challenges faced in this park?

Could this park become a convening space for our academics, our students and our collaborators to pull their resource,

their wisdom, their insights and find actual real-world solutions?

And in going through that process and reflecting on the process,

can we actually learn lessons about how to work together that could be of considerable value to people far, far beyond Newcastle, Gateshead

And I have a feeling that the answer is yes. Thank you, Richard.

Yeah.

So, I mean, I think Richard just described a place based initiative as a place, you know, place based project that brings together lots of people.

I love projects like that. And I think the Riverside project would be a fantastic means to do that.

It is already a fantastic way that we just need to broaden it, I think.

But another way of doing it is through theme based and we're working through the ideas, I suppose.

And here is where I would I would want to feel the younger generations involved.

So you could take a theme like food or like water.

And we could say, what do these themes mean to Generations Z and how they impact or generation z

genze and how do they impact on them and ask them then to go out and investigate that

through interviews across the university with leading thinkers on this.

And then they kind of make almost to report based on what they have learned and what how does that resonate with them?

Of course it goes to the idea that you can't take the researcher out of the research.

So in this instance, we'd be applying the genze researcher to craft their view and on that theme.

And I would believe that would only or at least one one indicator of the success,

apart from the fact that we want to evaluate the learning obviously and the impact on individual students.

But I would want to see that some of that work would go on to be funded research so that almost it's like a collective mind hive mind of students

who work together to identify potential research areas that then we could take on research questions that we could take on to funded research.

So that for me would be a real indicator of the worth of school X.

So it isn't just about educating young people and giving them this kind of authentic learning experience,

but it is also then leading to some extent, maybe even driving some of the way.

The ways we move within the research environment and also how that builds

those multi-lateral kind of research projects that join other bodies,

because I think the great thing about working with students in any zone is that they can't because they have no power.

They don't trigger power reactions. So they are very good at opening up conversations are very good at building relationships and

forming new relationships that sometimes haven't happened in the past because of whatever reason.

And they're able to ask questions and bring in people who may not have previously been in connection with the university.

So I do see them as being also a mechanism for brokering relationships.

And yeah. So I think school X could be delivering quite a lot of that in collaboration with the other schools.

So it could can't and it won't do anything on its own.

It will it will always be in collaboration with our peers. Ruth, Richard, thank you.

Now, we started this podcast by saying, you know, these are big and bold statements and they are they are in a safe space.

They are incredibly inclusive. And you are bringing people with you, not just in the sense of come with us and see what it is,

but it is to be part of it is to be part of the creativity,

the connectivity, and it is treating the students that will be part of this as equal partners in their learning,

which I think got all what higher education needs in it's learning and teachings

To Richard and Ruth, thank you so much for your time today.

Take care. Thanks, Paul. Thanks, Paul.

Thank you to Paul, Ruth and Richard for that great insight and that introduction to school X.

Thank you for listening. Remember to subscribe like and share the podcast.

All of our show notes are in our blog and are ready at anytime.

Thank you. And see you in two weeks. Bye by.