

Melanie Giles - Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, recorded Sept 2021

Transcript

**Becki Bennett (BB):** Welcome to the second podcast in our podcast series. Good Practice in Teaching. I'll be talking to Melanie Giles, a senior lecturer in Archaeology in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures. Melanie talks about her experience of using innovative assessment, in particular her use of groupwork to get students to produce a collaborative radio programme.

**Melanie Giles (MG):** Hi Becki. It's Dr. Melanie Giles here from the Department of Classics, Ancient History, Archaeology and Egyptology, and thanks very much for inviting me to talk to you today about the challenges I faced last year with adapting my teaching online and how I was helped by the eLearning facilities on offer through the University of Manchester.

**BB:** Thanks so much Mel for coming. If you just tell me a bit more about these challenges, I think its around assessment, just tell us a bit more about what happened and how you overcame those challenges.

**MG:** So I run a module which is taught jointly between level 2 and level 3 students called Dealing with the Dead. And I would normally teach it in a classroom environment where the students would get together in small groups to produce one component of their assessment, which is a joint assessment. The normal challenges I faced with that is getting them to get to know each other and getting them to work together well in the classroom, and then set up meetings outside of that to plan their piece of work. The assessment is a radio program or a podcast, I suppose as we would describe it today.

They're supposed to go off and do some background research, put together a script and produce a final digital recording. So, the way in which the mark was awarded to these groups was: this assessment was worth fifty percent of their grade, 25% of it went on the group mark, the group project which was shared between all of them. But 25% of it went on a set of minutes that they had taken of the meetings they'd been to, where they describe their role in the process and what they contributed towards it. Now this obviously relies on a little bit of honesty because some of them were keen to promote the amount of work they done towards the radio program, but it became very obvious through the other minute books for that group. You know, who had really borne the burden of the work, where people have gone above and beyond, and those who perhaps played a lesser roll. So overall though that 25% was generally a very good mark, then the minute books help temper that with individual performance towards the final product so that I didn't have any student complaints about, you know, feeling that that was an unfair grade.

So when covid hit and we were all online the very first challenge I had, I suppose was getting them to know each other because many of them had not been on campus together. They haven't bumped into each other in the corridor and the normal activities we would do in archaeology, like, fieldwork working in the archaeology labs, we have some lovely experimental archaeology sessions. None of that happened. So, I was using obviously, the kind of digital learning environment to do that. Zoom meetings, I found really helped because I randomly assigned these groups. They don't get to choose

who they work with because I like to mimic the workplace setting. So, I set them into random groups of mixed second and third years, and there are quite separate learning objectives there. The third years take a kind of leadership role and the second years are given specific roles within the group.

So actually, the Zoom breakout rooms really helped me there because I put them into those rooms, very immediately and they had introduced themselves and start to plan their project. But one of the things I know can happen that other staff reported is that if you leave them alone in their Zoom rooms, they can be very quiet. And so one of the things we had to decide right at the start of the module is how we wanted to conduct ourselves online. Now, the university is very sensitive to the fact that some students found this very difficult. Some students don't want to share their screen. They don't want to see themselves online. They don't want to share their background and that's not something that we can enforce. So we just had to try and create a really supportive environment where people felt comfortable and confident to share with each other. And they were nervous at first, but we did find by encouraging that atmosphere, that it happened quite organically and once one or two of them did it, everyone else thought it was normal, and that really helped actually form a kind of sense of a friendship group that crossed the year groups, and they did get to see each other and they got to kind of interact, there's a lot of humour. And I tended to leave them alone for a little bit, but then I would tell them that I was going to drop into the group's quite you know for 10 minutes or so to discuss what was going on each session. So that's how we did it.

**BB:** It sounds amazing. It sounds like you actually got some real positives out of going online and that Zoom helped in some ways. Would you say that going online was positive in terms of trying to build those groups and those connections between the students?

**MG:** Yeah, I think it was. I mean this is a module that can have up to around 50 students on it and in a classroom it's easy for some people to lurk at the back and even when you rearrange the groups and you get them sit together, you know, some people hang back a bit. So in a strange way, being put into a tiny digital environment together where you know, you might have four or five people, I think that that encouraged them to share their screens and to talk a little bit. And also, for the more shy students, I've noticed that the chat function works really well. People who don't like speaking up, are far more comfortable and confident expressing ideas or putting in links or putting ideas in the chat.

So I found that organically, they were beginning to use those Zoom technologies to help with their own skill set and where they fell within the group. There was usually one very chatty person who took on the formal role of the chair. So, I told the group they could decide on their roles between them and in a way that helped those roles fall out quite naturally, once they found out who was the person prompting people. The little groups that they were in vary between around about seven to eight students. And what also helped I think along the line was, you know, inevitably some of them got ill during that period, some of them had care responsibilities or things that meant they couldn't attend the odd meeting. So sometimes that group attendance would fluctuate a bit, but it was much more obvious, and somehow from those Zoom groups and I could keep an eye on that and chase students where they were missing. But also the students, you know, having got into the Zoom habit, found it really easy to organize their extracurricular activities, because it was much easier to get everybody together on a Zoom meeting than it was on campus and find a place in a coffee shop or in

a spare classroom. So, I think they met each other a lot more in between. Certainly, you could see that in the volume of work they put into the final pieces of the assessment.

**BB:** That sound's great. I wonder if there are any things that you can draw from that online experience that you might use now we're back on campus. So we often find that the same sorts of things happen when we're on campus, that we've got groups that don't necessarily work together very well, the shy ones often just becoming visible sometimes, and we don't even know they're there. So, I wonder if there was anything from this experience that you might take from to try and build that sense of group work and community when we're back on campus?

**MG:** You know, we must model that good practice. This is what the workplace is going to be like in the next decade. So I think I will keep that notion that the group work happens online in a zoom meeting. Partly because we must ensure there's parity there for the students who are off campus or isolating or ill or just can't attend because of other reasons, because it's much easier to do that Zoom meeting, I think. Now the students have got access to that technology, wherever they are they can join in and I'm sure that will help with that sense of more even balance and workload in attendance and I'll be doing a lot less chasing of individual students than I used to do. So I'll be building that into my handbook, that they're outside of the classroom sessions are Zoom sessions together and that they take responsibility for organizing that. And for me, that means that on their CV, they can show that they can work in a digital workplace and that they can organize meetings and they've developed the netiquette protocols and principles and ethics of good group work and respectful sharing. I think there are life skills here I've certainly learnt, like if everybody talks over each other in a Zoom meeting, it's impossible. And actually maybe that's going to develop slightly better more respectful skills in the classroom too, that people speak with clarity and with purpose, but they let each other speak and there's much less muttering going on. I hope so, anyway.

They were all really proud of what they've done by the end of it, and then they got to share that, you know, normally they don't read each other's essays. They don't go and look at each other's assignments, but they really loved listening to what each other has produced. And of course, they learn much more than just doing this solo assessment. So, it really has gone on to inspire some dissertation topics and hopefully some careers in the future. And when I developed this assessment, it was very selfishly with an eye to the BBC down the road and I thought, you know, I need to train my students to go off and promote themselves as researchers or media workers. But we've got quite a tradition in our subject areas of people who do quite a lot of media work - film, television advice work, radio programs, and television documentaries. And so I devised this assessment to give them something that was very different and that they could take to the BBC. And I didn't realize, I think in the world of the post pandemic, how absolutely vital an audio experience is, and they are plugged in most of the time, they are listening to stuff. We know that they're soaking up a lot of their academic resources digitally. So, actually training them to produce that themselves in a professional manner, I think is really valuable. Now in the small groups, what they decide is, they'll be somebody who will take the final bits of sound effects, music. Some of them compose their own music tracks, for example, they go away and they do a foley artist stuff, chopping melons in half and crunching over gravel or recording in echoey environments to mimic a museum. But they also create these wonderfully lyrical and poetic scripts where the emphasis is upon the voice and the experience that somebody is soaking up from their research and somebody puts that all together. So they all have their own little digital suite of skills they develop through this assessment, but the final product

absolutely speaks to the world they live in, where they've got music or a podcast on all the time. So unwittingly, it's got a new lease of life, in a way, in this contemporary world and we've seen that have a big impact on our students. They're going off and making their own podcasts now, and they don't need us to help them and that, you know, they're out there in the real world with their own podcast series, getting their own audience, and that's a wonderful testament to where they might go next.

**BB:** And a wonderful testament to the work that you've been doing, I think. We can see your passion for it, but I'm sure the students really enjoyed it and I can see how much they must get out of it. So, thanks so much again.