

SEED Podcast, Episode 04, Mathew Sanderson.

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Rachel: Hello and welcome to the SEED eLearning podcast. My name is Rachel Willder and I will be your host for this podcast where we focus on all things e-learning in SEED. Today I am joined by Matthew Sanderson who is a teaching assistant in SEED and we're going to be having a discussion about keeping students engaged whilst delivering online learning. Hello. Matt. How are you?

Matthew: Hi Rachel. Good afternoon, and thanks for inviting me to come and have a chat with people its quite a good opportunity for a TA to come and share with you our experiences from kind of the other side of the classroom.

Rachel: It's always interesting to see how there's all those different perspectives as well. I think later on we should probably try and get some students involved as well, just to kind of hear about what their perception is as well and see, see if there are some common beliefs, at the end of it. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the subject that you teach within SEED.

Matthew: Well, I work in the Department of Planning and Environmental Management, which is where I'm also completing my PhD over the last couple of years. I've worked as a TA on various modules, but most recently I've been working with Dr. Joanne Tippet on a couple of her modules. That's Designing for Sustainable Futures, which is an undergrad first-year module and Planning for Environmental Change, which is basically more the same and that's a master's level module. So it's talking to our various planning and Environmental Management and development and real estate students all about issues of sustainability, of resilience, of creating developments really and property developments land; developments that are going to be able to stand up to the Future climate and do it in a sympathetic way.

Rachel: It's really interesting, I'm thinking about changing career now! So to start off with In us moving to online learning and now, dual delivery; Could you tell us a little bit about your perspective of student engagement with teaching and how you found getting that engagement with students from a TA perspective?

Matthew: Well working as a TA I tend to encounter students quite often in a different light to the lecturers anyway, often. And I will see them either in workshops or in seminars and occasionally on field trips and rarely do we see them in lectures and for myself because I'm, I don't beat about the bush, I am disabled, I have Sometimes, I have limited mobility issues. The move to online, learning actually made it very much simpler for me. I was able to sit at my desk here in sunny Cumbria and today it is sunny. It's not raining unlike Manchester.

Rachel: Oh its blue skies today!

Matthew: So yes, I'm able to sit at my desk at home and I'm able to talk to students and listen to the students often much more easily than I can do on campus. That said the move to online learning has not been without its challenges, TA's, we found had been involved much more in the lectures, the delivery of lecturers, as well as seminars and workshops, especially when you're dealing with a large class, of course, we know that Zoom, You really need somebody there to look after the break out rooms, to monitor chat, to make sure that everybody's in the right place, to prompt the next speaker to have their slides ready, to make sure that the right screens are being shared at the right time and with the class of over 100 that's not something you should put on the poor academic.

You, you quite often want the TA or similar who is willing to engage with the software being Zoom or teams or whatever and really give them the support they need to deliver a good lecture. So that's, I've actually spent a lot of the last year doing that. I jokingly call it the zoom director, but it does often feel like that sometimes you know, it feels like you're running the software equivalent of a three ring circus just trying to keep everybody focused on the right screen at the right time. So in that respect, TA's have had a different role to play this last year and it's been an enjoyable experience; I'd say for me though I know others who have not enjoyed the software so much. But we've also found of course, especially working with breakout rooms that some students around the world will engage, they'll be proactive, They want to speak to their peers, They want to take part in group work, others and why I can only speculate, but others won't engage. So you might ask half a dozen students to go to a breakout room and out of the them say two or three will not turn the cameras on, they will not turn the microphones on and you'll have no interaction. So, from our side, it's been trying to find ways to encourage everybody to take part in these in the breakout rooms. For example, in the joint learning sessions, trying to encourage them to engage and quite honestly, making sure that they're there and listening and Alive. Sometimes, you don't know. Sometimes you would come to the end of a two hour session, Everybody else is logged off, and there's half a dozen blank screens staring at you. And on one notable occasion I left my computer on for another hour and two didn't leave, in the end I kicked them out and closed the zoom. But you do wonder, you do Wonder. But you it may be that for example, they have limited bandwidth or it may be that they are not comfortable with sharing the microphone and I can understand that, so, you know, we don't judge, but sometimes it just seemed little peculiar.

Rachel: Do you notice it as so, at the start of the semester, it's there's a lot more nerves from the students and then as the semester kind of continues that their confidence increases in that they are more likely to engage or is it kind of across the across the semester It's the same students popping up?

Matthew: Some students will never engage, and it's just the same. I know this from my experience in seminars and classes. Some are happy to sit there, like the proverbial sponge,

they'll soak in absolutely everything. They'll learn everything and they'll say nothing. Others want to question everything and to discuss everything want to develop their ideas with you and others again will be somewhere in between. So there will be some who you will never hear from and they I would never for example on Zoom, turn on the microphone will turn on the camera. There are others as a you. Yeah. That there from day one is it's interesting to observe, but I'm not in the, I'm not from the social scientist behavioural side of things, So maybe my colleagues over there could tell you more about that.

Rachel: It's interesting, One of my friends is a 6th form teacher and he teaches psychology and he always says like there's that awful open Zoom up and just a wall of blank and just no students. And it's just he said that it's interesting when you get that first student and it's that coaxing out, that first student on putting on their camera. And then as soon as the second, one comes in and immediately camera goes off and he goes No, no, I saw you there I saw you there for a second. Come on. Join us. Come on, join us. But obviously it's completely different to getting a sixth form Students engaged to getting a university student engaged as a bigger, a bigger leap to try and get them to get them to turn the cameras on, so, but I understand, you know some staff don't like to have their cameras on do they, so how we can tempt staff out as well as students out would be interesting.

Matthew: So this this being an audio podcast listeners won't be able to see just how much I'm grinning as a listening to. But I've literally just coming to this session from working with the school within Rochdale. They're taking part in an arts competition to deliver a mural to cop 26 and having spent an hour all be it virtually in a class of year 9s. I have a lot of respect for teachers nowadays because it's very, very different to the way it was when I was about, but being a little more serious. The big thing that I found throughout the last year, is more than ever before. It's important to break up what we do and you've got to break it up into bite-size pieces. It's got to be digestible. Nobody wants to sit on the bum in a lecture hall for two hours and just stare at the board. Nobody wants to sit in front of the screen for two hours. You know, you don't give you a headache apart from anything else. You need to break it up. That's not to say, it needs to be simplified. Whatever you're delivering. It doesn't need to be simplified, but it does need Being as the BBC say bite-sized chunks. I volunteer as a scout leader here at home in Cumbria. Not every week. I don't quite have the strength of will to be able to do it every week. I do Volunteer to be scout leader. And in many ways, speaking to Young Scouts the, the beaver Scouts six or eight year olds or speaking to the Cubs 8 to 10. All the scouts who attend to 14, the explorers who are 14 through to 18 or speaking to the leaders or speaking to students at University. There's actually no difference. As long as it's digestible. And as long as it's broken down, your people will stay interested. And and that's it is, that's that's the simplest thing we found this year is keep it digestible.

Rachel: Do you think that there's, so like we talked about how we link this to video podcasting, and things like that, and how we make these videos available online of, like, the lecture capture and things. It's, it's interesting. I remember seeing an academic in FBMH, and he when we moved to fully online learning and it was, he took all of his videos down from the last couple of years and he redid them, but he redid them rather than hour-long lectures. He re-recorded them in 20 minutes or 15 Minute bite-sized chunks and made those available to the students as like you say to have them as that Bite-sized was really quick little videos, just explaining the concepts to them and then was able to discuss them in seminars afterwards.

Matthew: I think that's a brilliant idea. If you have the time to do that and you have the patience to sit down and rerecord everything. What, in some cases already for some people, I guess would be very good, recordings then. Yes, that is great. But there's nothing to stop you either If you have a very, very good recording, there's nothing to stop you breaking that into pieces or even just providing that recording with the list of times. So, save from the beginning to five minutes. I was talking about this from five minutes to ten minutes. And if you deliver your online or your dual session with break points, then that will make splitting the Video up afterwards, much more easy. So, I think without a doubt, it's a great idea to keep it short and sweet, but there are ways of doing it. You don't need to make a rod for your own back.

Rachel: How would you, So, I've been doing these familiarisation sessions with academics for dual delivery, and one of the questions that came up quite a bit was how can I use breakout rooms. Do you have any tips for our listeners about how best to use the to The breakout rooms?

Matthew: Well, over the last year, we've used breakout rooms a lot. I think, my colleague. Dr. Tippett will speak to you on another occasion about using her ketso engagement kit tool in breakout rooms, but we've also found that if we've used padlet a lot and we've used that to encourage the students to share their share of screen, share their thoughts, to correlate their thoughts, so that they can come back to them later. We found that to be very, very useful. Indeed. We've always had a lead if you will for each breakout room, a facilitator. So one student they can be randomly chosen or we can pick on somebody. We wouldn't do it by name, but would say, for example, the person whose name is first in the alphabet. We can't quite do tallest to shortest as we would at scouts because they're not all in the room with you. And when they're also down, they look the same. But no, you would nominate a facilitator at the start of each breakout session and you would encourage that person to proactively encourage their particular room to engage. We've also found that at the start of each session and it doesn't have to be for every single breakout room. We might have three or four in a two-hour session. But in the first breakout session that can be as much as anything about introductions. You prime them with a few questions. Where are you from is a good one. As is, what can you see out of the window? One that we tried, though. Actually, we thought afterwards, maybe we shouldn't is, would you like to share a picture of what's out of

your window? And then we realize actually in some countries. It might be frowned upon to be leaning out of the window with a camera. So we had stopped doing that one. But no its, what do you think about this or, I don't know, What did you have for breakfast today? Something like that to start with, a simple inane question and it gets the students talking to one another. And we found that to be very, very effective. And actually a lot of them have commented that by starting with a simple introduction in the first eight breakout room They're more inclined to keep talking afterwards.

Rachel: Yeah, do you think as well, it helps as well from in saying, okay, This 'student A,' you are going to be the person that leads this breakout room. It takes, it takes the ownership on to the students as well, and it helps them engage a bit more because they feel that they've got that responsibility as well?

Matthew: Would I call it responsibility? It's a tricky one. It's about encouraging them to encourage one another. It's about teamwork is you can have a team of the leader or you can have a team of equals is it's not about necessarily asking someone to be the leader, but just asking somebody to say, well, on this occasion, could you just encourage you or your peers to take part? Or maybe the facilitator could be the person who shares for example, the padlet screen and acts as the Scribe. So, you might say well who's got the fastest connection? Or who's got the most reliable connection here. Your camera always comes through, we can always hear you, maybe you could facilitate for this question or this this session? So, there are different ways of doing it, you know, if if we were running a quiz for example, and we did that at Christmas. With one of the CDT, centres for Doctoral Training, we had a team captain for each team but then there you may have a little bit more of a leadership role. But now in the more, the you kind of do traditional teaching and learning setting, it's really just about having somebody who is going to politely encourage their peers to take part for a little quiet or to give them that space to maybe give the quieter students the opportunity to facilitate their ability to say something.

Rachel: Do you think student engagement has improved then in recent years or and how best then do we engage with students and encourage them to participate?

Matthew: I think, over the last year, we've all had to from TA's up through academic staff and Senior leadership, even we've all had to change and up our game as to how we engage with people. From my side of things because of where I am is a TA. Obviously, I'm not leading modules. I'm just there working in support of someone I spend a lot of time looking at different software opportunities, looking at different web-based tools, for example, of how we can engage. Rather helps that the, my PhD is around Community engagement. Anyway, so I spend a lot of time looking at different mechanisms and different approaches for how to

talk to people. How to listen to people how to work together, how to encourage people to work together. I think we've definitely got better at doing it online. I hope, I think, I hope some of the skills that we've established online will transfer definitely to dual learning and hopefully we can take them forward into the classroom going forward when we become fully face to face once more if that ever happens, when it's simple things like say, mentimeter and I know we have other software that the university likes, personally. I love mentimeter because it has a brilliant word cloud, and functionality. And quite often, when students start using the word cloud I'm not saying you lose control of the conversation but conversations can go in some very interesting ways that you might not have expected. You might suddenly see that actually a lot of students have an interest in one thing that you haven't thought of. So you have that using the technology, you're engaging straight away. But at the same time you're reading the room, you're listening to what everybody says and if you can do it on the fly, you can just change direction a little bit and without losing where you want to go with the with the session, you can incorporate a little bit of what people want to know as well. So I think we have definitely got better at listening to the students in real time. And I think we can carry on taking that forward.

Rachel: Yeah. I think it's, it's interesting. So like I say, I've been doing these familiarisation sessions for dual delivery, and we've been working with student ambassadors for the first time to help us deliver on the training and it's really interesting to me to hear the students. Just how confident they are at saying to the academics. No we'll tell you if we can't hear, we'll tell you if we don't understand something or tell you if anything's up, we'll tell you about it. And I think that took some of the academics back and they said oh! I didn't think that you'd engage that readily in the online experience.

Matthew: The online experience has in some ways, it has become a more personal and one to one learning experience. When you have your lecturer in front of you and your screen at home, it almost feels as though they're speaking to you and whilst you might not necessarily be able to cope with every single person in the zoom room. Asking a question at once. Every single person in the zoom room can send a chat straight away. If you've got one or two TA's are sitting watching the chat, you can get through a lot more and especially if you've got one or two TA's who were good on the subject as well, which we had on a couple of occasions. And how this goes forward in dual learning will be interesting. Actually. I'm quite excited about it. I think it's going to be quite good fun. I know some people are a little terrified of the technology, but I've worked in this career for the last 30 years. It is required as to use a lot of technology or be that a very, very different sector but I've always worked with computers and technology and quite often quite cutting-edge stuff in terms of data processing video recording so on and so forth data transmission. So for me, this is just another toy and it's something to play with and get the most out of. And I think it's going to be good fun. And I think if we go into it with that kind of approach, you know, you know that yeah, let's enjoy this. Let's get a bit of fun back into what we do. It's going to be really successful.

Rachel: Yeah. I completely agree with you. I think I've seen. So I've kind of seen from both sides now, so I've seen Our PGCE academics have been and play playing with the dual technology as well. And like figuring out how they were going to teach and it was really interesting for me to see the academics in the room, arguing with the academics online, and it was there was a lots big conversations going on. And it did feel, it didn't feel any different to me. It just felt like everyone was having a conversation. So, and in delivering this dual delivery Training with Stuart Phillipson, then it's been interesting for me having 10 academics in the room. But then 40, 50 academics online and it's a little bit weird. The first couple weeks for a bit weird. We're just kind of going between the two making sure that you're spending a nice equal time between the two groups, but it's just second nature to me. Now. It's just I'm kind of expect to always but have one person in the classroom and people Online. That's not any different to me. Now. I think it's that it's that great big unknown. I can completely understand why it's this great big unknown, No, but I think I think it's very quick to adapt to,

Matthew: I think as well. So I think you just have to be open-minded to it. So yes, I think I think you're exactly right. We've got to be open-minded. You could have a team, even if it's only two people, you're going to have to have a team that is We can make it, we can make it what we want and I think it can be fun. But at the same time it can be a valid learning experience for the for the students.

Rachel: Absolutely. Absolutely. Well. I hope that, I hope that you'll come back when we have the podcast with Joanne where we're going to talk about the Ketso boards, which were I've got to play with before. They are fantastic. Fantastic pieces of Kit. So, thank you. Thank you. Matt there for a really interesting chat about student engagement. I'm sure we could talk talk for a lot more on it. So you can find out more about this topic and so much more by visiting our humanities Pages, which includes our best practice resources and is full of information from the e-learning team in Humanities. There is a link to this from the notes section of the podcast, where you can also subscribe to this podcast and you'll automatically get the latest episode on release. From wherever you get your podcasts. Finally if you liked this episode tell other people about us or if you have any ideas of things we should be covering get in Touch with us. We love to hear from you. See you next time and stay safe.