

Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, Episode 04, Dan Foulder.

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Becki: Thanks so much for coming Dan. We wanted to ask you about what you think the effects of the pandemic have been on the students that are now our first years. What difference has their experience during the pandemic had on their skills and their knowledge and their self-confidence? If you could tell us a bit about that it'd be great.

Dan: Thanks Becki. Their experience has been so disrupted in so many ways because they've had periods where it's been full lockdown, so they've been learning completely at home, then periods when they are back in school or college, but possibly off self-isolating, getting hybrid lessons, and then back off again isolated, so I think that sort of disruption will probably have affected them in lots of different ways. And one particular key one will be their experiences in socialisation and group work and spending time with other students because that period in college is so important in terms of those skills: working in those smaller groups. And I think coming into the university setting, working in very, very large areas in lectures, etc. I think they are going to find that very intimidating because they just won't have had that experience; even the times they have been in college or school will have been in much smaller groups, whereas obviously your lectures can be hundreds of students, so I can imagine quite a lot of anxiety around that. I think the positives will be they are now comfortable in various aspects of online learning how that's developed over time, so accessing VLE type resources, online resources, submissions online – I think they should be more confident in that. That's probably a positive difference you'll find compared to previous years maybe.

Becki: And when we were talking before, I think you mentioned that most of your students now should be pretty good with Teams and using other kind of online tools, so I guess that's a bit different from where we were before in terms of the experience that students have had with those sorts of ways of learning.

Dan: Yeah, I think definitely. Also, we found students in general got on very well with online learning in that respect: the technical side. They could all use Teams; they could all submit work; they could all use various interactive tools, Padlet for example, to engage in lessons. I think that's a big advantage and a difference you'll probably find. Then maybe you don't have to have that same level of training-up. I think one issue you will get is that there's a lot of variation in provision across different institutions, different colleges, different schools. So again, not having that expectation that everybody can

definitely do a particular program because there wasn't really a set way of doing it at A Level as maybe we'll expect. So, I think that variation of students coming in will be something we have to look out for and not necessarily expect them to be able to do it, although the vast majority should be able to.

Becki: You were talking in the workshop that we've just been in about transitions and how when you take them from GCSE to becoming A Level students, you try and do a kind of graduated approach, and I thought that was something really interesting for us to think about in terms of how strange it must feel for them to come from a small group of maybe 20 students at A Level to suddenly be in this huge lecture theatre with possibly 400 students and a very different way of teaching. So, I just wondered if you could tell me a little bit about what those lessons might have been like that they came from so that we could understand why that's maybe such a big leap.

Dan: Yeah, I think it's a big factor because essentially they finished their A Levels in June, and then starting in September is only a few months and they are not going to change drastically in those few months and our lessons at A Level tend to involve a lot of engagement with individual students so I can be, through questioning, giving individual support, so students feel that they've had a lot of one-on-one interaction with their teacher, whereas obviously, as you say, coming to a lecture theatre they then lose that. I suppose maybe it's thinking about the way you structure certain activities to help bridge that gap for them. Be aware and say to the students there is a gap, because I can imagine a lot of them maybe start and do feel quite intimidated by it and maybe they look around the room and think "oh everybody else is okay with this and I'm not". So I think acknowledging that difference will be a big part of it. It's certainly something we do at college – we try and acknowledge when they come from school to college that it is different, there are going to be different ways of working, and trying to help build them into that more A Level mindset. I do wonder if that's something you could do in terms of undergrads as well: just acknowledge the difference and talk about ways of supporting the students in managing that difference. I am very passionate and a very big believer in making students aware of their own learning process and how they can develop that, so I think that could be a key part because they can think about what skills are they going to need at university in these lectures to make them successful, because I can certainly imagine students looking around and feeling like everybody else gets it apart from them. I can imagine that can be a very isolating or lonely experience, so I think acknowledging that it is an issue and then suggesting strategies would be a big help in that.

Becki: And maybe that's one way we could use some of the things we've learned over the last 18 months to help with that. We've been using Padlet, which is a bit like, what was the thing you had?

Dan: Pear Deck, we used.

Becki: Yeah, it looks quite similar to Padlet really, and I think there might be ways of using some online things. I know in Law they're doing that beginning with their students to try and get the students to talk to each other on Padlet – they can post anonymously if they want to and that sometimes frees you up to ask those questions and be a bit braver. Do you think there's things that sixth form colleges have learnt through the pandemic that they might actually bring into their non-pandemic teaching?

Dan: Yeah, I think definitely sort of our interaction with online resources and the way we make things available for students to access. I think it's definitely a big part of that. We're definitely moving more towards increased use of VLE in terms of that sort of thing, so students have got extension resources, support things available there, and giving them the opportunity to access those, particularly because we were creating lots of them for the support learning during the pandemic so the fact that they can carry on using them because students are more willing and able to do that, find those resources and interact with them. I think that will be a big part of it. Just thinking about what you were saying about asking us questions. I think that is a big issue the students will find coming in because they're probably quite used to the teacher walking around the class and saying “do you understand this?” and giving them the opportunity to ask for help, so the student doesn't necessarily have to come to the end of the lesson and say “I don't understand this”, etc. And so that kind of opportunity for the undergrads I think would be a big help really, because I can imagine a lot of students would feel intimidated not having that one-on-one opportunity to ask questions and ask for support. So, yeah, I think that sounds like a good way of using the technology to do that. Yeah, definitely.

Becki: And hopefully more people have had that experience. They can kind of supplement what they're doing.

Dan: Yeah, definitely. We recently found anecdotally, I know some of my colleagues and other institutions said that they found that some of their students who maybe quieter during lessons actually came out of their shell a bit more on the online activities

because they weren't maybe as intimidated in a larger group. That wasn't something I found myself particularly, but essentially giving the students that opportunity online to do that I think is something to really grasp.

Becki: I guess one of the real differences and something that might be very difficult for our students or at least very different for our students is, I think from listening to you talk, you really have a sense of who your students are. You also have quite a lot more information about your students about maybe their background and any challenges they already face, so I think that must be a really big difference for them coming here where there may be more students, but also the people who are teaching them don't get to know them as well necessarily and we don't have all that kind of background information. So I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit more about that?

Dan: Yeah, I definitely think there's lots of information provided for us about our students, and this is across schools and colleges, in terms of barriers to their learning whether or not that might be circumstances at home or individual learning needs, learning differences, etc., and also just the fact that you are several hours a week with the students in a relatively small group, say 20-ish often, and the fact that you can have a lot of one-on-one time with those students means you do get to know them very clearly and they get to know you as well. The developments that relationship and that positive secure relationship is a big part, I think, of successful teaching at A Level so I can imagine they can feel very like it's just not there as it was with their teachers who they often had for two years as well, so lots of A Level students have the same teacher across two years and suddenly that's taken away from them and they've then got these large impersonal groups with lecturers who they only see once a week, etc. So again, maybe acknowledging that as an issue and talking about ways to try and get around that and cope with that, because as I was saying earlier, I get the feeling that students often do feel like these issues are only affecting them, particularly if you don't acknowledge them. I know from my classes if you acknowledge issues the wider student body faces, it feels much more to the students that it is manageable, they can cope with it, you can suggest strategies to support them. So, yes, I think identifying that difference in relationship and talking about it will be really key thing, because I think there's also a kind of expectation of when we get new students that they should just know how things work, and this is just how it is, and they should just get used to it. I think acknowledging that is a difference is big part of helping students cope with that difference.

Becki: It's a huge change as well. When you see all these students moving away from home and coming here and not only is the learning environment so very different and

quite intimidating, but they've also got to cope with all the rest of the things that come with being independent.

Dan: I think that's an issue around a lack of the support networks they've relied on for years, particularly through the pandemic and all difficulties that we face there, with friends and family being more important than ever, and the fact that that's been removed from you when you come here, which is positive in the ways that it helps encourage independence, but it's also about acknowledging the fact that it's happened, and again, if you are feeling like this, this is the support you can get for that rather than making students feel they are going through it alone.

Becky: Thanks very much, Dan. You can hear the podcast of Dan's Workshop; I think there will be a link in the description. So do have a look at that and find out a bit more about what Dan's been doing in the last 18 months and about where our students are coming from.