Good Practice in Teaching Podcast,
Episode 08, Ali Owrak – Co-designing Curriculum
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BB: Hi Ally. Thanks for coming and talking to us today. And I've been reading all about this work you've been doing using students, to help you co-design curriculum, and I wondered, if you could just tell me about, maybe why you thought the curriculum needed redesigning and why you took that route to do it, I guess.

AO: Thank you very much for having me as a guest today. It's a great opportunity.

I guess you talked about some of the work that we've done. The reason that we took on the process of a guest redesigning the curriculum for the program, which was quite a big ask. There's never been normally a need to do it on the scale that we've done it. It was that we were concerned with a number of things that were being highlighted.

So first of all, thank you very much for having me on here today to talk about our experiences and the process in which we took to redesign the program. The reason it was really initiated because our program was, in essence, we had lots of red flags about failures at different points, within the program, and it was quite a bit concern, especially with the student satisfaction. So, we were slowly our NSS was decreasing.

And that's obviously to do with lots of different factors and we tried to undertake a smaller readjustment to the program, which I guess was the traditional sense is what we do in academia, which is just look at maybe some of the issues and try to rectify them and we didn't really get the traction that we needed, you know, something as simple as let's change some of the content. Let's update some of the content and you, you would he. Here, academic, say things like, oh, I can update a slide or I can try to squeeze, you know, five minutes on this topic and it really wasn't where I wanted the program to be. It was, it was very minor changes and the there's probably lots of reasons why in academia, we don't make big wholesale changes, but it was felt that was what was needed and then we the news broke that. I think we've got the NSS score of 64 percent, which was a kind of aligned with the time I was taking over the program. It was quite a lot of red flags that this needed looking at and with it being a technology program, it was definitely a great opportunity to enhance and update since not much has been done since the program was originally set up about, you know, eight, nine, ten years earlier.

So it was a good opportunity to do that.

BB: So what why did you take the approach then to work with student Partners rather than Maybe just do what most people would do is just sort of all sit with academic stuff and figure out, try and figure out where to where to take the program.

AO: Two reasons. One was more personal. So when I first became an academic, I had never been trained, I guess, in the art of teaching in the higher education, you know, you do your PhD, you do some research, you might have some time as a research associate, you might have a bash at doing some small amounts of teaching. But then when you become a lecturer, it doesn't really, you're not really set up to understand how teaching works and how pedagogy works. So I used from day one of arriving. I kind of use the students as my as my compass on where to go and what to do and it was through working with them really, asking them, always for feedback, understanding what they were learning at all times. I created, you know, multiple surveys run, lots of focus groups from the day I arrived just to get an understanding of, am I doing this right?

So I had a little bit of trust and understanding in that process. On the flip side of it, when I initiated a call to investigate and reshape the program the initial thinking around it by, I guess the people I worked with was, okay, we're going to put academics in a room, we'll run a two-hour meeting, we'll solve all the problems really quickly and really easily.

And that was the, that was the first step that was actually taken and it was as you'd expect 20 academics sat in a room all suggesting that they're going to add a paragraph here and a slide here and I came out of it and I had to write back to some of the senior people in the schools to say these are the changes and it was literally three paragraphs and it wasn't on the scale that would tackle the issues and the problems that we had. And a lot of it. I guess is down to, I guess some old school thinking, which is these problems that they'll just go away, you know what do students know, we can just address this through the, the he's like, I guess, you know, the low-hanging fruit, right? You know, I can just make this small change in it be fine and the the problems were much wider and much bigger than that. So, I just made a decision that whilst I was pushed into going with the initial process that there was an alternative ways. I just wrote the document that outlined how it could potentially be done. And I attach that to the report that I sent about the changes and I said, look, this is the changes that were made. That was agreed upon, but this is a different way we could do it. We could use different partners whether its students, whether it's employers and academics, we can bring it all together, we can do lots of different things and it would potentially lead to greater changes. And it was a while after that, where I got, I got a message to say, we totally agree with that, it is a big undertaking, but let's give it a go and then the process began of doing it in a big, big way.

BB: And it's a very different way of doing. It was great that you got that support to, to do it in a different way, but I wondered, if you could tell me a little bit about the practicalities of what you did, and how you engage those student partners and other partners in in that process.

AO: The easy part was getting the students because they were so dissatisfied. So when that idea of you know, this this is your program, you're paying a fee to be here and we want to work with you to improve your experience and your education and the outcome that you'll get from that that. That was that was the easiest sell. I literally I think at one point I had we had a validation part of the outcome, which was right towards the end. And I literally had every student on the program in the room who wanted to contribute and they felt, they could contribute to that process.

I guess some of it was down to the work that I'd done on the program. Anyway, prior, which was engaging students at all the time. And we had lots of activities. I'd set up the student society, which was part of the program. So we're very engaged. The program isn't huge. It takes in about 50 students.

A year, so, you know, collectively we've got a hundred fifty students and we work very closely with them. And there was there's a good connection and within the program with the students amongst all the year groups. So, there was some things that led to that kind of offer from them, that, yes, we entrust, we can trust you to do this and to do this properly. So, there was definitely, I, I guess I had some goodwill in the tank, that I kind of cashed in and because they believed in the work that I've done previously in changing my own course units. They kind of bought in on this journey, quite easily.

BB: And what were the sort of main things that the students were suggesting and, and the kind of maybe the more major changes that you've made that weren't just that kind of tweaking around the edges that you talked about before. What sort of things did they suggest that you did change?

AO: We decided, we wanted to see what worked and what didn't work. It wasn't just the case of tell us all the negatives because you could sit there and listen to people complaining. And, you know, that's too easy. So we worked with them on identifying, what really worked with the program. We try to keep some of those things where we could and when we sat down to talk about the areas that would going wrong. What was interesting, was the list that came out of, let's say our first year, students was very similar to our second year students, as it was with our final year students and I was the odd thing that was a little bit different for each one. But as an example, some of the key things that repeated was the lack of support from I guess academic advising, was one of the big areas that came up. There was the way we perhaps delivered our technical content wasn't to the standard perhaps it could have been, there was a lack of depth with some of the technology areas that we're delivering on as well that perhaps, it could

have been more because they felt it impacted that their ability to get jobs and be able to sell themselves to employers.

There was a lot of insight into overlapping of content. So nobody's better positioned really than students to say I've done this before. We you know, I've done a similar assignment before similar content before so that was I mean, those are quite major things, right? That academics, don't speak to each other as perhaps, as much as they should do. So we've missed a lot of things over the years, is, maybe academics are moving from course unit to course unit and they're taking some content with them and the were teaching the same students in a different year group and they were introducing the same assignments in the same content. And it can, it can happen right over the years.

So there was there was this idea of imbalance within the structure as well. There was lack of consistency and lack of feedback to one of the key things that came out of the NSS that we saw repeatedly and I guess it shows across The Faculty as well is perhaps student feedback, you don't, you know, it could always be improved and that was I think that was 27 percent, which is exceptionally low. Yeah, it was a lack of and then when you look at these things you say, okay, so there's a lack of feedback.

But then what do we have as academics within the course units that allow for formative assessment to take place, or is it all just summative?

Because if you haven't got the formative, then, obviously there's going to be a lack of feedback. Right? So we had to go back and then look at those. We didn't have a standardized marking practice across our units. So we needed to bring that in, even something such as peer assessment. It wasn't clear. Everyone was using their own different formats, which was very confusing to the students. And sometimes there's a reason why but other times it's just because academics aren't really fully aware about what best practice is or is not very well aligned. So it was just clarifying, in essence. So they were the other standardized issues that kind of came across all the different year groups.

BB: **So was it, a massive amount of work to put things, right? Or was it more of a, as you say, kind of just bringing everybody together and, and, and get in that kind of overview of the whole thing. I mean, And you know try and explain to us about, you know, how how you use that feedback and you know, how big, big a job. It was really to hopefully make some improvement.**

AO: The process took I'd say took about maybe 18 months from when we initiated it and what was fantastic is that I got exceptional support high up in the school to say we are doing this and I kind of had champions, I guess. There were people who sponsored the I'm in, the project was sponsored I guess by our head of teaching and learning so it kind of took some of the issues and problems of maybe push back from certain quarters

away. And that was great and we set up a working group which had some great people on it, who contributed really well with ideas and also support to remove the barriers that would naturally come. And then the process because we came straightforward. We set out a plan to work with employers very separately from the students. We set up a plan to work with the with the students different year groups. And then to ensure that they were kind of a cycle of validation as well. And so the whole thing took about, maybe 18 months, we brought all the results back and then we worked with the working group to, I would present the results back and then we would kind of work on a strategy of how we would fit those, or Structure those and I guess sometimes we find ourselves with, I guess great ideas from employees or students but perhaps we couldn't really deliver on. But in majority of the cases there were sensible areas of concern that they turn around with great solutions and we were able to, were able to deliver on those things.

BB: That sounds great. And what was the outcome that digital NSS improve? Are there any kind of ways of measuring Whether what you did was effective?

AO: Yes, the NSS has improved. Its interesting because we've still not gone through the full cycle of the students have gone through the new program. That will happen at the the end of this year. So we'll get a really, really good understanding, but for the changes we've made so far the different levels, the NSS has definitely improved. It is more to what we would expect from a program within the school.

But we expect to see that go much higher. One of the great things that's happening is that the students last year voted the program as the best undergraduate program of the faculty of humanities and that would had never happened for years. So they, you know, they won, the award, they voted for it and that was kind of like nice to see and it was very much a surprise for me. So, I guess we're we've made some of the right decisions. Were moved in the right space for that to have happened.

BB: Amazing, and are you you were saying you were already talking to students before this process, but it does that process continue or did you feel that? You know, it's a it's something you come back to after a few years, or is it on an ongoing thing?

AO: It's definitely on ongoing things. So every year we've introduced a new year, so we didn't go full out by introducing, you know, all new year old new content, every year of the program. We're introducing you first year, then, in the second year, and then a new final year.

Yeah, so at the end of each year we do a very simple review process whereby run a couple of focus groups and will bring the students back in and say, okay, so you that was a fresh new year. Fresh content. Can tell us about it. And then they give us feedback

and we go and we adjust. And that's how I've always done it for my course units for the last nine years that I've been here. I've always ran focus groups for each one of my units and there's no better compass than understanding, whether you know did learning happened. They not so much did they enjoy it, did they walk away thinking they've made some kind of achievement in that area and they can understand the concepts and they very honest with it. And as long as that door is always open and the students realize that they've got a voice to always put back in. They always tend to do that and their maturity in the way they do it, as well, is absolutely brilliant. So it's, it's a reoccurring process each year. We take the time to meet with students, and we bring them in. And then we, it doesn't take very long. You know, these things can take an hour and as long as you do it regularly, an hour a year, it's not a bad investment of time to ensuring that your program issues are are kind of like, sorted out before prior to the next year.

BB: It sounds like an amazing investment in time, especially if they voted you as being the programme of the, of the year. I mean, that's just amazing achievement from from where things were.

AO: So one of the things we did after we identified the issues with the programme What could we do, when we redesigned all the course units from scratch, put a group of students to work closely with an academic. So the students would spend, I guess a two-hour period to design what that course unit could potentially look like and then the academic was brought into a room to sit with them. Not to contribute, but essentially to hear what the students were saying, so they wouldn't then dismiss what they found later and it was it worked really well. So we kind of like brought the academics in at the beginning for the first five minutes to explain to the students that we'd kind of employee to work with us as pedagogical developers and they would pitch. Well, this is what the course unit should be about. They would leave the students to it and then they would come back with 30 minutes to go. And then the students would pitch back why did make some of the decisions are made and then they would have a discussion about it. That really helps because the academic would then leave the process. Having heard directly from the students, understood why the decisions have been made.

And even if they disagreed with some, they would push back and say, well, you know, this wouldn't work for these reasons. And then the students would go: Okay, they would accept it, or they would say, well, have you considered this?

And it was a great process because what we were really concerned was we didn't want the academics not to be part of the process and just to receive a document. Say this is what the new course unit is and this is what it should be about. It was about them being very much in partnership with the students.

So we used our final year students to review the first, the second and the third unit in that in this particular process. And it was great because a lot of them have been on

Industry placement, they've come back, they're quite mature that they understand what they did, why it worked and the areas that perhaps it didn't work.

They also had that industrial experience, which was, I guess it was added bonus.

Not not all our pedagogical Consultants had that, but some of them did and it led to really good interactions. So I used to sit in in most of those but I would never participate. I would just make sure I would just explain the process and the academics would come in and I would watch I would watch them interact with that with student groups and they would they would walk out of it with I guess, maybe happier, Understanding this, it was like a cloud being lifted. Okay. Now they understood what the students weren't seeking and it wasn't just simply dismissed as what do these students know, so it was really good to bring them together and get them to work in partnership with each other.

BB: Really just thanks for coming and telling us about it today and it's really interesting to hear. And I think it's something that people often are quite reluctant to do is get involved with students in the way that you have because they're worried about the amount of work. And as you say as academics, we often feel that we know better about our own courses. So it's just really interesting to hear what a success that has been with, you know, using those student partners and and really cracking those difficult ones, like assessment and feedback that we've all got on our NSS scores that seems like such a difficult one to do.

And just to say all the best with the program and maybe we can catch up with you again in a year or so time to see what else is happening. And see what other things that have happened due to the student feedback and the other things you've been doing.

AO: I'd be delighted and thank you very much again for inviting me on the podcast. Thank you.