

Mairead Pratschke – Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, recorded November 2022

Transcript

Hannah Cobb (HC): Thank you so much for joining us today in this podcast. Today we're meeting Mairead Pratschke, who is SALC's new Digital Chair. Mairead started in September. Hi Mairead, nice to see you.

Mairead Pratschke (MP): Hi Hannah, pleasure to be here.

HC: Thank you for coming to have a chat. It's really exciting that we have these Digital Chair roles, and all of the Schools are a little bit different, the roles are all a little bit different, and so I thought would be really lovely to have you along to find out a little bit about your background and your expertise. And, your sort of view of digital learning. All of those kinds of things. Tell us a little bit about your background, you've been doing digital education, you've got a wealth of experience of digital education. Tell us a little bit about it.

MP: Okay so I'll try not to go too far back, but yeah, essentially I have been working, I would say at the intersection of digital education, eLearning, and also in the Humanities and Social Sciences for 20, 22 years now.

I started actually before I even did my PhD. I accidentally fell into online learning when I was asked to design an online course, for the University I graduated from in Canada, and that's actually how I first began. I got some mentoring and tutoring on how to do it. And the reason I was asked was because I was the only, as they say, SME in online learning. I was the only subject matter expertise in the area, in the country. And so I was the learning designer and I was the professor at the same time. So I ended up creating two courses for a distance version of European studies program and then I taught one of them several times in succession. So that was really my introduction to, as it was called then, distance learning and online learning.

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And from there I went I suppose a more traditional route. I went on to do a PhD in History, but I've never been very good at staying in one discipline or another. So I went on to do a PhD in History but focusing on Film. So film was my resource, which is then really my link to Media and, from there, I got more and more into, you know, online materials, etc over the years.

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But while I was in academic teaching in Film and History, I was also working in eLearning and in EdTech as an industry. So for example, I worked at Smart Technologies for several years and in Canada which is the creator of the famous Smart Board in many classrooms. I worked for film festivals doing online promotions and writing for the websites and all kinds of things. So I ended up setting up a blog, doing film reviews. So I kind of kept my way in eLearning and Technology by doing things a little bit on the side of my academic practice.

And then about 10 years ago, I found myself in a position in the University of Massachusetts, where I was officially cross-appointed between two departments. And one was Online Learning and Professional Education and the other was the College of Fine Arts and Humanities. So that was the

first time I was in an institution where the two kind-of sides, you know, traditional face-to-face, teaching in a discipline, and online learning were really brought together in one position.

When I look back now, it's quite funny because even then I think there was a temptation for me to be seen as the IT help, which is something that e-learning can sometimes suffer from. But really my role was to, you know, teach in both design in both but also be the bridge between the two. And I think that's probably the best way to characterize my career, is that I've always been in eLearning and EdTech, but also a traditional academic in that I've, you know, done the PhD, published the book, taught in my discipline, done the research and the conference circuit and all that. But about seven eight years ago now, I suppose I made the decision to switch completely to digital education. I finished the research kind-of stint of my life, published a book, finished that role and came to the UK in 2016 to join Imperial College London's EdTech Lab and I suppose that was probably the start of the chapter that's brought me to the University of Manchester, in that that was fully digital learning, programme design, hands-on.

And so I worked for several years in the UK in EdTech, working with faculty, hands-on, helping them, you know, with learning how to create digital learning, how it works, how you take what you do in a classroom and put it in a blended or flexible or online environment, whatever you'd like to call it. And it really, really helped me see, I suppose having come from the other side, what a lot of faculty members, or academic staff members as we say in the UK, are faced with in terms of challenges. I suppose probably what's unique to my background is that I've been on both sides of that fence and I really understand what it's like to be an academic staff member who's struggling with this. And, you know, for whom it's quite new and probably quite daunting. And then also the tech side, which I've also worked on and really understand. You know, I know the gap, so I suppose that's a very long-winded way of explaining where I've gotten to where I am now as Chair in Digital.

HC: Oh, no. I mean, you know, it shows that you're sort of your expertise is amazing. And it, you know, it's so brilliant to hear about all of that kind of journey. I suppose, my question for you is given all of that expertise and the kind of way, the long-term trends that you've seen. Obviously, the pandemic has vastly accelerated and changed our relationship with online learning and digital education. What do you see, sort-of very broadly, the sort-of higher education sector, what are the kind of trends that you can see in the sort of future directions based in all of your experience?

MP: Yeah, it's a great question and it's a really tough one because, you know, we're at a really interesting point right now. I think for those of us who've been working in digital education, for as long as I have, a lot of what we're talking about as being new right now is not actually all that new. It's just that the covid pandemic caught a lot of people up to where other people had been working for quite some time. It also did a bit of a disservice quite frankly to those of us who've been working in digital education for a while because I think in mainstream media perhaps, and for unfortunately for some people who had the experience of having to do kind of emergency remote online learning, that's not really what digital education is, in the sense that I've known as, and I've been working with it for the last, you know, two decades. So just to say, first of all, I suppose yes, the covid pandemic sped up, in a certain way it has, it has forced people to digitally upskill perhaps, people who might not have been so keen or willing otherwise. So in that sense it's actually quite positive. It's put us on more of an equal footing. The bad side is the bad PR. But we can get past that now. I think that now

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people understand that the key now is to, you know, not throw out the baby with the bathwater, take what we've learned, consolidate and move forward.

And for me what's really interesting about right now with e-learning with Ed Tech, with where all the technologies have come from, is that the pedagogical side, the learning, the teaching and learning side, the scholarship of teaching and learning, all of the research that we've done on how people learn over the last say, 20 years, is coming together and it's matching what's being offered with the technology. So, you know, it's not new now anymore to talk about active learning, social learning, student-centered learning, personalized learning, flexible learning, all of these things that, frankly, people in digital education had been talking about for quite some time, because the wonderful thing about digital is it enables all of these types of learning. And I think what's exciting about where we are now and particularly for the humanities, is that we have a coming together of these pedagogies, which are now mainstream, are coming into the mainstream. People are learning about them, they are accepting them, they want to put them into practice in the classroom and we now have the technology that can actually enable us to do that. So I think that's really exciting and I also think it is a great opportunity for humanities in particular. Now I'm not going to jump necessarily on the AI, VR, everything bandwagon because I've been in EdTech for long enough to know that every time something shiny and new comes along, we all get excited for a while and then we integrate it and then we step back a step and then we proceed. So I think we're at an interesting stage with that now, where we're testing it and we're piloting it and we want to see what we can do with this. But just like every other innovation that came through from the history of time, you know, I think it'll take time for us to integrate it and figure out how to use it to serve our learning purposes; because that's the absolute number one priority of any tool or technology, it has to be something that is going to serve us and our pedagogy and we in SALC in particular, our approach is pedagogy first. So it's the discipline, how are we going to serve the discipline, how are we going to help students learn the things that we need them to learn, and that's really what's most important. And my job, I suppose, as I said, this is where my two sides come together. I understand the need to foster that learning, the learning agility. But also, you know, the competencies and skills. All of those things we want to foster in our students. I understand the need to be true to the discipline and learn all the content that they need to learn. And I also understand where the tools can come in and help us to do that, but not maybe overshadow it. So it's kind of finding that balance between the three areas is really, is really key.

So, back to your question Hannah, sorry, I didn't really answer it. Where we are going. I mean, there's no doubt, the AI, machine learning, robotics, virtual reality, all of that is going to be massively important in every part of a student's University experience. I mean this is the thing too. I suppose the thing that I say to people about education, digital education, is that it's not actually just about the tools and the technologies. We now live in a digitally transformed world. Everything of education is digital right now. AI is not influencing just what we do in the classroom, how we assess, how we track, and trace assessment and things like that, but it's also things like student recruitment, student enrolment, students socializing, promotion, everything really. So, I think from my own perspective, I look at digital in a very, very broad with a very broad lens and I think of it really in terms of this is my corporate influence coming back to me, really almost in terms of customer journey, student journey from recruitment to graduation to employment. And I think about, how can digital education, prepare them, not just in their discipline, not just in the digital, you know tools they need to be able to use, but how do they learn to learn? How do they learn to live in this digital world? How do they learn to prosper? You know, and succeed 20 years from now, working in jobs, we don't even know exist yet. So I see it, really long term. I know those things are going to be very important, so I would like to bring them into the classroom in a way that's going to be useful for them but still in the

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context of pedagogy in the degree. So it's going to be very interesting, it's going to be a great challenge but I think it's a really exciting time to see all of those things coming together.

HC: That's so brilliant Mairead. I forgot say my introduction that not only are you SALC's Digital Chair but you're also SALC's Associate Director for eLearning as well. And I was sort of going to ask you the kind of way that you think all of this is going to go into SALC and into SALC's teaching. But I can already sort of hear those kind of directions from what you're saying. It's really exciting to hear about it. I don't know if you want to add any kind of final thoughts to that, although, I know we can come back and talk to you about it any time in the future to?

MP: Yeah, I suppose I would just give a little bit of a, maybe a trailer. Film background, sorry, I can't help myself... I hinted a little bit when I talked about aligning the tools, the technology, with scholarship of teaching and learning with the discipline. I think those three together. That three-pronged approach is really, really important. For me, that's going to be the basis I think of what we do in SALC. But yeah, really starting with the pedagogy, incorporating learning design, you know, really working on learning design alignment of what we all of the aspects of what we do in a course, scaffolding learning and really helping academic staff with all of that, who've never had to deal with that before. I think we cannot underestimate the fact that people need support, not just students, but staff as well.

And so, I'd like that to be part of what we do in SALC, and, of course, I want to create communities of practice, communities of learning. I want us to be able to help teach each other. This is one of the classic frameworks again, Canadian plug, but the Community of Enquiry Framework, is something that's come out to Canada, 10, 15 years ago. And it's tried and tested. And I think I'd really like to implement some of that in blended learning, flexible learning and see where we can go in terms of creating communities and helping us all teach each other.

HC: Amazing. Thank you so much Mairead. It's really fantastic to hear about all of that, and I know that with your Associate Director for eLearning and Teaching Innovation hat, loads of fantastic things are going on in SALC. There's a brilliant programme of talks and workshops with the Teaching Innovation Collective and that is something that we can put a link to in the description for the podcast. And I know that people can get in touch with you if they've got any kind of ideas about things going forward, but it's really, it's really fantastic, both to hear about your amazing experience in digital learning but also the way that you see it going and the way that you're going to be leading on that in SALC, it's brilliant. So, thank you so much for coming and talking to us today. It's really fab. Thanks Mairead.

MP: Thanks Hannah.

Link to Teaching Innovation Collective site: <https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/salc/teaching-and-supervision/teaching-innovation/collective/> (accessible to UoM staff only)