Working Together with Colleagues to Support Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning with Peter Kahn

Good Practice in Teaching SEED Podcast, recorded February 2023

Transcript

Jonny Crook (JC): Hello and welcome to the latest episode in the SEED podcast series. For this episode, we are joined by Peter Kahn who is Professor of Digital Education in SEED and also the School's Digital Chair. And I'm Jonny Crook, a Learning Technologist in Humanities providing e-learning support across SEED. Hello, Peter. Thank you for joining us. How are you?

Peter Kahn (PK): I'm very well, thank you, yes.

JC: Good. So I think we're going to focus this podcast on and talk about working together with colleagues to support innovation and excellence in teaching and learning. But before that, should we start with you giving a brief background to your role in the School? And I know you've recently joined the university. So, maybe you can just talk about where you've come from and kind of joining the University of Manchester.

PK: Yes, yes. So I joined the university in November as a Chair in Digital Education. You have digital motorways, don't you? And Digital Chair, it's not quite the same driving along a physical stretch of road, is it, as opposed to a digital motorway, but my role is, is covering education in the broadest sense, as well as a more digital focus. The role is partly, designed to help stimulate innovation in digital education across the School, but also to work with colleagues in whatever way seems good to support the quality of teaching and learning, and the student experience in the School. So, it's a fairly open brief. So that's the brief I've come into.

I was previously at Liverpool University where I was working for the last 11 years, on an online doctorate, in higher education studies. So I was running a large-scale online doctorate in higher education studies and director of a small Centre in Higher Education Studies. Before that I was at the University of Manchester for seven years, and the previous incarnation, I spent seven years in a central role. And in that role, I setup a postgraduate certificate in Teaching Learning and Higher Education, that lasted a little time and over the time of the merger and I was also involved in things like inquiry-based learning in generating innovation in that area. But that seems like a long time ago now though. 15 years ago that I was last here.

JC: Oh wow. Well I've worked at the University for 13 years now so you left before I started. Yes, so it's been quite a while for me now. So good to have you back in Manchester I guess.

So you're based in MIE aren't you, in Education. And so we're going to talk about working with together with colleagues. Are there ways that colleagues from across the School can work more closely together on teaching, you know, alongside each other. Do you have any ideas on how we can kind of work towards that?

PK: I mean, I think it is essential that it's seen as a collaborative activity, that one works together with others in order to move teaching ahead in School. I remember 20 years ago I edited a book called 'A guide to Start an Educational Development' and one of the insights, of editing that book, 20 years ago, was just the importance of collaboration. If you want things to change, you can't expect people to do it just on their own. It's important to find ways to work together. So I certainly highly value this kind of collaborative way of working. So I think there are lots of ways, it partly depends on what people want to run with. So I'm certainly keen to discuss with various people: come and talk to me, come into my office, set up a Teams meeting, and it'd be nice to find ways forward. One immediate initiative, that we've got going on is timed with the Flexible Learning Programme because the University has announced a series of Flexible Learning Pilots.

JC: That's right, yeah.

PK: I'm closely involved with Mandi and with Juup in the School, looking what we can do to support colleagues and put projects together for those pilot proposals.

JC: Yes.

PK: And it's important we don't just do things on our own as an isolated colleague, putting a proposal in, but finding ways to work with other colleagues as an integral part of that sort of activity. So, that's the first key one. Now we're also looking at the possibility of more of a collective in SALC in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures. They have a Teaching Innovation Collective, discussing the possibility of doing something, not necessary the same but something similar whether it's more informal or more action learning focused as a way of bringing people together and I know another colleague was saying that new staff can feel isolated when they just moved into the University because with the increase in remote working, it's harder to come together and I'm giving this podcast from my home rather than from my work building. And so rather than being on the doorstep on campus, so people do have flexibility to work in different places.

JC: Yeah, sure.

PK: It does mean that we need to be more intentional in finding ways to come together if we want to develop the infrastructure of excellence and support in teaching and learning. And so those are a few things, I mean, funding does make a big difference. I mean in order to get things to happen. So when I was in the University from 2000 to 2007, I was closely involved in securing funds for Inquiry Based Learning. And that certainly made a big difference to many people's experience of Teaching Excellence across the University. So I'm certain in-tune to the importance of funds like the Flexible Learning Programme in drawing people together.

JC: Okay. And so, in terms of sharing innovation, it's also like, talking about, practical sharing of how people are using different technology and approaches and tools, and kind of course unit design. Is that one kind of aspect?

PK: Yes, and I'll just pick up on course design.

JC: Yeah.

PK: Because I mean, it's one thing I've seen that's worked quite valuably across the sector in that many institutions use curriculum design framework for learning design frameworks. You may have heard of the ABC model, for instance, for learning design and its use in other parts of the University and in different places as well. I'm sure some colleagues have used it in the School but finding ways to support people in a structured manner, can make a big difference and you can build in the digital side more strongly into a model like ABC. The ABC is based on some, some work that (Professor) Diana Laurillard did and she's well known for her education technology as an area of expertise. And its built-in viewing and reviewing how digital technologies fit into one's educational offer to students is an important part of that model, to finding ways to offer a more structured way of engaging with each other. And many of these kinds of processes also bring people together as an integral part of curriculum design rather than expecting someone to go off into a corner on their own and design their own course unit and that's it, or their own programme even, but having process elements that help bring people together as an integral part of a programme design. We have that with Size and Shape and there is certainly a design process as part of Size and Shape. That doesn't cover all of the curriculum design work that's going on in the School by any means does it?

JC: Yeah, and just to mention within our own eLearning team, we now have three dedicated colleagues who are learning designers. There's Helen Perkins, Charlotte Warden and Alastair Wehbeh. And their role is to work with academics in programme development and looking at learning design for new units.

PK: Yes, so working with those kinds of colleagues as an important part of the social way of working in the School, so it's great to have staff in the School who have got that kind of role in that capacity to work on course design work.

JC: Okay, And what about the role that students themselves can play in, in their learning rather than seeing working together something that's just limited to staff. How do you think students could be involved?

PK: Student involvement, student engagement, student partnership, they're all essential aren't they for students to be on board with what they're learning? And I know student satisfaction is one concern in the School at the moment, but I think finding ways to take responsibility on the part of students as an important part of what it means to educate and I certainly see education as quite closely being involved in helping students develop critical capacity for agency in their own lives and their own work but at least from some of my own research. For instance, I'm working on a research paper at the moment, which looks at how to develop students capacity to work with others and take forward new initiatives and agency in conjunction with others, in a way that challenges the status quo and might help address global challenges. The sustainable environment as a major challenge or issues of equity.

JC: Yeah, sure. Yeah.

PK: So those are, those are quite a few things. I think giving students the agency in their studies, is an important part of that, together, not just on their own and finding ways to work with assessment, for instance, I think will be quite important. That students take responsibility and how they shape their assessment, how they respond to a task rather than just responding in the obvious way, they should be encouraged to find ways to respond to assessment tasks they're given in ways that engage quite fully with their education.

JC: Okay, okay. Yeah sure. That's great. And I was just wondering about the other Digital Chairs in the other Schools. Are you working closely with them at the moment? I know in SALC, they have Mairead don't they who is the Digital Chair for SALC?

PK: Yes, that's right. Mairead has been appointed in SALC and we also have another Digital Chair: Sarah Dyer in SEED.

JC: Oh that's right.

PK: So we've got two in SEED. I'm told that that one measure of success for my role will be if the other Schools that haven't appointed Digital Chairs want to appoint one or are clambering over the furniture in order to appoint other Digital Chairs. So, we'll have to have some of these coming out from our roles and then the other Schools may go ahead and appoint in due course.

JC: Yeah. Okay.

PK: So Mairead and Sarah and I will be talking. I've talked to both Sarah and Mairead already and it's great to see what they're both planning and thinking about and it's been great to see that in the early days that I've just started now.

JC: Yeah. And then just going back to talking about students in the School and being a part of this process. Is there anyway we can kind of measure the impact that this is going to have and how educators in the School can draw students into all of this kind of process in a, you know, more fully.

PK: I think one thing that is, certainly connecting with students' ultimate interest or fundamental concerns - things that matter to them.

JC: Yeah.

PK: So employability is certainly a major concern for students. Being able to get work or good quality work afterwards.

JC: Yeah.

PK: You know the environment, doing education in a way that enables students to take forward actions in their own lives, in relation to their own studies. So by connecting with students' interest is for me is a fundamental aspect of working with students in the School. But the process doesn't matter and engaging with the processes we have, for our students is an important part of life in the School. I'll certainly be looking to see if we can find ways to extend those. If there's ideas that colleagues have it'd be great to talk to you about those. We have various processes in place already. So it would be fascinating to see what other ways there are to bring students in certainly with the pilot projects, flexible learning programme, students are encouraged to be involved in those and it'll be good to know to build on things that are going on.

JC: Yeah. I'm just wondering about sharing and working together and sharing innovation and excellence in teaching learning, but not just in our Faculty but across the Faculties, or are we just kind of looking at doing that within our own Faculty and across our own Schools at the moment? Because I know that for my own work, we're doing a lot of work at the moment in Extended Reality and looking at new technologies we can use for teaching and learning and we've started to kind of work with other staff members who are interested in the same subject, but in different Faculties. Do you think that's what you might become involved in? Or you just going to focus on our own Faculty at the moment?

PK: Well, the immediate priority is SEED, is the School, but in engaging with SALC and colleagues there, and Mairead. And the Flexible Learning Programme is across the whole institution. Yeah, I know Manchester University is a vast institution and it's hard to do things across the whole institution sometimes because there are so many staff and so many students.

JC: Yeah.

PK: So finding ways forward where you've got a reason to engage with someone else is often what's needed. So augmented reality, extended reality, it's great to have reasons to engage with different colleagues and generative AI I think will be another one. Uses of generative AI mean for me, I find that even more exciting than extended reality in terms of the possibilities the way, it might transform education.

JC: Yeah.

PK: My original doctorate, my PhD is actually in neural networks. I got that 30 years ago and moving to educational research shortly afterwards - immediately afterwards in fact, after my doctorate. And it is taking some time for some of these things to hit into education, but it's great to see the interest and the buzz that's coming out around generative AI now and there's lots of things we can do with our students to help develop the way they take responsibility for their education, rather than necessarily to see it primarily as an issue of student integrity and catching students cheating for instance. There's lots of things, because professions will be using - are using - generative AI already, as an integral part of professional practice and it's important that our students are at the forefront of that kind of activity and are ready to engage when they go into their professional lives.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Oh great. Okay, so what are the key takeaways want people to have from listening to this podcast? What do you, what do you think you want to emphasise for staff?

PK: Education doesn't have to be the way it is now. I think innovation is for me an important focus and finding ways to stay refreshed, to stay energized. An important part of sustaining a career for the longer term, as an educator in the University doesn't mean wholesale change every year, but I think it's important that we find ways to stay fresh, stay engaged, to join colleagues, swap ideas, update things to make use of new digital tools when they're available to help our students engage with the way the world is, the digital infrastructure. And to do that together because technology can be isolating and we need to find ways to come together alongside using digital tools to make sure that that doesn't happen. Certainly a key capacity for our students to better work with other people in their future professional lives to make a difference for people around them because the School is certainly centred quite heavily on students, on starting making an impact in the lives of others in different disciplines in the School, are all about that. That's why I went into education after my doctorate, rather than moving into the into the City or I had an offer for accountancy work. I decided I wanted to be an educator in order to make an impact and to make a difference. And it certainly has sustained me in my career over the years. It does make a difference

JC: And I guess, technology is evolving all the time. It's, you know, is constantly new and new innovations in teaching and learning. So I guess it's in students and staff interest to keep, you know,

on top of what's the latest developments and what's going on. If staff, can improve their digital skills and students can leave University with a good wealth of digital skills and hopefully they go on into using those and applying those in employment or further education.

PK: Yes. Great. Thank you very much for the discussion Jonny. It's been great to talk to you, and it's great to join the School this time, and to be involved in what's going on.

JC: Yeah, thank you Peter. Thanks for joining us.

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