Putting King's Online podcast
Episode 9: Season 1 highlights

Putting King's Online, a podcast exploring the process of designing online learning courses from the team which creates them.

I'm your host Rachele Wall and in each episode of Putting King's Online, I'll be talking to my colleagues about their roles here at King's College London, within the Online and Professional Executive Education team. We'll be delving into the processes of creating online courses. From ideation to delivery, inclusive design, accessibility and where we stand in the wider online learning community.

Introduction
Rachele

Hi everyone, thanks so much for joining me today for the last episode of Season 1 of PKO. We started this podcast amidst the backdrop of a global pandemic, at a time when the UK was heading into another national lockdown.

Engaging in the process of delivering online learning content is one that schools, colleges and universities, and arguably businesses all over the world, have had no choice but to go along with. Many had mixed feelings about how effective this type of learning can be and frustrations with the timeline at which they had to get familiar with this method of teaching fast.

With that in mind we wanted to share our experiences as a team who have been teaching online long before the pandemic, but have similarly over the years also experienced the steep learning curve that comes with creating online courses that can be just as effective as those taught face to face, but that also tap into the growing flexibility that students have come to need in their busy lives.

In this episode we'll be looking back over the highlights of season 1. How we as a team adapted to the need for more effective and practical online learning solutions as a result of COVID. How creative thinking, problem-solving and collaboration have come to shape our approaches to delivering learning experiences. And in some ways most importantly, being involved in wider conversations and practises surrounding a universal need for better understanding of accessible, diverse and inclusive design and delivery practises. By no means do we have all the answers, but to do better for our students we want to open up these conversations and talk about how we can be better.

[MUSIC]

PART 1

Rachele

Creating online courses takes a lot of work from many different people who wear many different hats, from understanding how to shape that content for an online audience, to the effective use of media and graphics and the importance of the technology we use to facilitate these experiences.

Over the past year as a team we've had many discussions around best practise and what we can do to alter the way we work to accommodate the evolving changes to learning as a result of the pandemic.

In the next few clips you'll hear from Louise who spoke about making better use of our learning design system for the wider college. Dan, who spoke of challenges and solutions to creating media without access to studios and equipment. And Danielle reflected on why online learning can be a lifeline for students with a variety of access needs.

[MUSIC]

Louise

I do, absolutely, and I think the more different technologies that people get used to using, the more people will change the way they teach because they have some exposure to it now, they have some ideas of this would also work for my face-to-face students. Equally, just thinking about how much are we going to end up doing lectures going forward? When I say we, I mean, higher education in general.

Will this result in a change in how education is delivered, where instead of students going to live lectures, they'll get recorded lectures and then they will actually spend their face-to-face time doing something much more focused and engaged and interactive? I don't know. I don't know where all of this is going to go. But I think the more people get used to different modes of teaching, the more it's all going to blend together, and I think ultimately, we're looking at education that is much more blended in general.

Blended is such a wishy-washy term that can mean so many different things, but I do think we're going to see a lot more of face-to-face students engaging online as well as in the classroom. I suspect that online learning is going to keep growing because we know that some of the face-to-face students have gone, "Actually, this really works me. This is really convenient." I think the appetite for technology is going to grow. Now, there's also going to be the backlash of, "This was really isolating, this was really hard. I didn't like this", but I think the really useful things will come out of it and people will keep the things that worked. We're going to see a lot of change going forward even once all of this is over. We just can't go back to the way things used to be because people's thoughts have started changing about different aspects for better or for worse.

Dan

I've been teaching a skills forge course on home educational media production, and there's been a huge demand for that course and it has been extended twice now so there's just more and more demand. I think it's going to make academics ultimately more confident in producing their own media which can only be a good thing in my

book. I think it's going to mean that we'll see more content shot by academics and teaching staff within courses, such as short feedback videos and other videos of that sort. I think four different formats or types that's fairly easy to produce at home, such as standard talking head video, video lectures, and how best to approach those, and interviews and discussions and also audio recording as well.

I think having more stuff generated by academics and teaching staff, I think it will just make the course feel like more of a live experience. I think it'll help give students more of a feeling of connection with the teaching staff as well. It might also have this knock-on effect that in future specialist teams like our own, will be able to focus more on producing more complex, high production value media pieces that will add more value to courses rather than thinking about things that might be able to be self-produced I suppose.

Danielle

One of the reasons that I got into online learning and I wanted to work in online learning is that I felt like it really opened the doors for different people to be able to access higher education. You didn't have to have like a very specific lifestyle to be able to do it. If you could learn online, you could be living anywhere and you could be working at the same time and you could have caregiving responsibilities.

PART 2

Rachele

In getting to know different people within the team and what their roles entail have highlighted some overlapping qualities and approaches to the work that has become an integral part of how we create our courses. A few things that came up frequently was the notion of creativity and collaboration as a driving force behind the work we do.

In these next few clips you'll hear from Jas about the importance of facilitating that creativity through project management and Bobbie, who really highlighted the importance of collaboration in making sure that we are all working towards the very best learning experience for our students.

[MUSIC]

Jas

But specifically for King's and for King's Online, I think the main part of being a Project Manager is about facilitating creativity. The process of developing online learning is incredibly creative, and we work with a number of creative people, creative teams, creative expertise, and the process to put the learning online for students is very creative in the way that we collaborate and work with academics.

So, I guess my job as a Project Manager is really about facilitating that creativity, making sure that we're getting the best out of those people, to create a great experience for students. But also about helping to get the best out of the project and the best out of the situation to help develop those creative people further, and to help us keep up to date with the trends in technology and in the trends in online learning.

Bobbie

Yeah, I think it's really important that we have an idea of the entire process of learning a course from start to finish. Perhaps in editorial work, you would usually work on one article as an individual piece of content, but we have to be aware of almost an entire journey of learning which the student is going to be doing. We need to make sure that the course in its entirety is being translated through our platform.

This really requires knowledge and interaction with all areas of our department, as it isn't just based on one piece of text we're copy editing, but as mentioned, involves functionality and the UX design system, etc. Content-specific though, I do think we're still in a rare position where we work so closely with academic content without actually being a faculty member. That's not to say that we change the content that the academics provide us with, and the Instructional Designers inform the content more than we do, but we're still there to highlight if anything they have intended to say hasn't translated well or if any general mistakes are there.

This can be as simple as suggestions and changes to grammar, to things which are subject-specific, or issues with content which may not be accessibility friendly. Our role really does deal with the whole scope of elements and that diversity makes it super interesting and it's almost like product development, more than it is copy editing sometimes.

PART 3

Rachele

One of the key take-aways I learnt from every episode is that our student base reaches far and wide. Our students also come from different backgrounds, different cultures and with different sets of needs when it comes to how and where they learn.

With this in mind we wanted to open up the dialogue around topics of inclusivity and accessibility, both as an ongoing approach to improving our practises, but also in response to a world that is rapidly evolving and demanding a more fairness around how we view and treat each other.

In these next clips you'll hear from Abi who highlights the importance of diverse and inclusive visual design, Danielle reflects on how our team grapples with questions and best practises around accessibility. Toral speaks candidly about how teams should be doing more to make work places more inclusive and diverse, and Gayatri who reflects on the work still to be done on diversity and inclusion practises.

[MUSIC]

Abi

I think representation is really important within design and I think it's really important that people are able to see themselves. Especially when you've got more technical subjects where some people may be underrepresented, then I think it's really important to show a wide range of characters within your visual design or within the images that you use. It's definitely a conversation that we've had within the team of e-Learning Visual Designers about how we make our design more inclusive and more representative. I think that it is across a number of fields of

representations in terms of ethnicity, in terms of gender, in terms of body shape as well. I think that there's a default that we really try and avoid of the white male skinny character.

Danielle

Yeah. I think that's a really good point, one of the things I did when I was quite new to this role immediately is I wanted to get a sense of how people on the team felt about accessibility already, and how confident they felt in practicing it. And so I sent out a survey questionnaire, and I'm going to send out another basically a duplicate one at the end of March to see if there has been any shift.

But one of the things that really struck me is that I included a variety of statements about accessibility, and asked people how far they agreed with it, and what they thought. One of the most overwhelming responses I got is that most people thought that accessibility is really complicated. That struck me because it was across the board. People who thought they had had some experience with accessibility, people who felt that they hadn't, different roles.

Most people agreed that they felt that accessibility is pretty complicated. I think there's an extent to which that's true, especially once you start digging into the really technical side, and you're trying to think about how to structure code, and balance different things. But there's also an extent to which accessibility is, in some ways quite straightforward. It's just about creating really understandable, and easy to use interfaces. I think it's important to recognise that maybe accessibility feels complicated because it's complex, if that makes any sense at all.

Toral

My history is something that has compelled me so far to never really speak about how I felt about the role of race, and gender, and sexuality, etc, in a workplace. I guess I'm an immigrant is how I would be probably referred to even though I had rights of a British citizen when I was born, but I was born in a different country, in an African country actually. I'm of Indian descent, I'm a woman, I'm a person of colour. When I moved to England, I had to assimilate and just integrate, and I never really talk about how I am actually different. That's carried through a lot into work places as well.

I can understand how fellow colleagues would be reluctant to speak about any issues they may be facing or things they might want to be talking about that they feel they can't so, I can understand that's a very scary place to put up your hand and say, "Oh, I have something to say", and quite frankly, I didn't say anything at OPEE until we had Anna who was the director of OPEE, who put that out there in order to understand how her colleagues were thinking about these issues.

Gayatri

Right now, one of the most important things we can do as a committee, and as an office is to understand that we're not experts, and that we need to do all we can to keep listening, and learning and adapting. The D&I committee itself, with all the work that we want to do within this next year, we still only really represent one bit of the population. The committee itself isn't that diverse yet. So just understanding that it takes different people, varying amounts of time to engage, and to know that it's an initiative for everyone, and as Toral said, one of the most important things that we can continue to do is to provide a safe space, a voice to those who need

someone to speak up for them and continue researching and learning and sharing knowledge.

PART 4

Rachele

Of all the intracises attached to delivering the ultimate online learning experience, at the end of the day it comes down to the student. Each episode in the series sought to understand how people and ideologies come together, and what they all have in common is a desire to create a learning experience that is well designed and thought out, effective, fit for purpose and hopefully enjoyable.

We'll finish off the episode by hearing from George and Abi who both spoke of understanding the needs of students as a driving force behind the media and graphics they create. And Jas and Sarah who talk about the flexibility of online learning, adapting to COVID, and how we as a team have tried to create a holistic learning experience that fits with the wider excellence that comes from a Kings College London degree or qualification.

[MUSIC]

George

In terms of differences like you mentioned, the most obvious one would probably be the content. At the end of the day, we are making educational videos and our target audience is students. As much as we have to engage them visually and making sure that there are no distractions, nothing jarring with the actual video itself, we have to make sure that it's as clear as possible and the message that's being put across is going to be adhered to by the students and they're going to thrive upon what we actually create.

Abi

Yeah, exactly. That's the thing, we actually do know quite a lot about our students now as a result of the user research. It's quite interesting having such specific information about your audience as a designer. Because I think when you're designing in a commercial setting, your audience is obviously a lot broader. Whereas here it's quite a targeted audience. You know that they're experts in a particular field and you know they have a certain level of understanding and a certain expectation as well of what they're going to be consuming in the online learning.

Sarah

The challenge for us and I think for everyone in the team, the real difference this time around was having to adopt almost rapid design methodologies. Whereas before, we work on very bespoke online programs, we work with academics traditionally that have already been bought into online, and they're generally quite enthusiastic, they want to give it a go, and the programs are deliberately designed for online learners. Whereas in the COVID world, we're working with academics that have been thrown in the deep end, perhaps never even thought they would be working in an online world, perhaps may be a bit skeptical about online, a bit doubtful about it, is it considered inferior? Those sorts of thought processes that some of our faculty may have had, and you've got that coupled with the speed at which we had to work. It was definitely

very challenging in the sense that I think the time element of it was the toughest bit for us.

Generally speaking, most instructional designers are real reflective thinkers. We like time where we'll sit and ponder and reflect on is this the right way to do something? Why are we doing this? We ask a lot of questions and we had to just speed up that process and get very pragmatic very quickly around that.

On the flip side of that, the challenge itself was very rewarding. We have some amazing members of faculty and academics in King's generally, we've got to work with programs that were not necessarily already bought into the King's Online projects. We got to work with a wider field of disciplines and colleagues across the schools. Which for us I think all of us as IDs, we have a learning curve. We enjoy our job if we're learning, and we're always learning, and we're always open to learning. This was just another opportunity to learn more from other people that perhaps we wouldn't have had that interaction with, a whole range of people when we worked closely with external IDs as well at times on what were deemed priority modules, and learned a lot from each other, I think.

Jas

Exactly. I also think, with the way that we've developed, so with the way that our head of innovation has developed the new design system, which overlays our learning management system to create a cohesive experience for all students, and a navigation system that cuts away all of the difficulties, and challenges, and niggles that students use to have. We're creating a much more unified experience, but also a really, really good quality experience in terms of just how a student learns, regardless of what content or teaching materials is applied to it or uploaded into it.

Conclusion

Rachele

And thats a wrap on Season 1! Thanks so much for listening, please keep your eyes and ears peeled for season 2 coming soon. All resources for all episodes can be found on our website at www.kcl.ac.uk/putting-kings-online. Please go back and listen to your favourite episodes, share with your friends and colleagues. A quick reminder that Putting King's Online is on Soundcloud, Spotify, apple podcasts, stitcher and acast.

Until next time, thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Rachele

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