ennie Mills 0:02

Welcome to this slightly different episode of The Listening at Warwick podcast. In this episode, the staff members of the team talk about what inspired the project, share some of their experiences and reflect on what they've learned.

Will 0:19

We just agree the order before we do it.

Jennie Mills 0:24

God we're a terrible shower aren't we, honestly . . .

Jim 0:30

hello, everybody, my name is Jim Judges. I'm a senior academic technologist at the University of Warwick, and I'm currently based in the central team, as well as supporting the work of the LDCU.

Jennie Mills 0:42

Hello, I'm Jennie Mills, I work in the Academic Development Centre.

Will 0:47

I'm Will Haywood and I'm in the Centre for Teacher Education where I teach on the PGCE courses. And I'm also deputy chair of the Faculty Education Committee.

Naomi 0:57

And I'm Naomi Waltham-Smith. I'm a reader in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies. And I'm the Chair of the Faculty of Social Sciences Education Committee.

Jennie Mills 1:07

And together, we created or inspired or kicked off the listening at Warwick podcast. And we just wanted to have a conversation today, invite you to listen in about what motivated us to get it going, and how we've experienced the process, what we've learned. Yeah, and just I guess, how we how we felt about it. So, let's let's start at the beginning, I think, well, it was your idea. In a long, long and difficult faculty committee meeting, a little message pops up, let's do a podcast,

Will 1:45

I think we were talking to the Education Committee was talking about how we could engage with student voice and reflect on what we've learned through our experiences of learning during the pandemic. And I sent a private message to Jennie and Naomi, I think during the meeting, about trying something based around the Radio 4 Listening Project, where they put individuals together as a pair, pair people up who sometimes they know, people know each other, sometimes they don't, and talk about a mutual interest. I thought maybe it could be interesting if we did that with students and academics, and hear what they have to say about their experiences teaching and learning during the pandemic.

Naomi 2:28

Yeah, and I mean, I just remember getting your message while and it was just music to my ears, if I can use that pun here, because I'm really obsessed with listening in the research that I do, and kind of, some community organising work I do outside of work. And here is someone proposing a project devoted to listening. And it's really what we need right now, you know, the debates around everything, with blended learning how the pandemic was impacting universities was, at times at least, quite heated. But I also think quite black and white, there was a lot of sloganising in the media, and having a project where we took the time to really listen to people, and how they felt about things, and just the nuances of their experiences of teaching and learning. That just seemed like a salve if you like for all of the hardened, character, brittle kind of debate that we were having. And that was exactly what we needed. So I was just delighted to see this. And for once I really wanted to respond immediately to a message or an email, instead of putting it off.

Jennie Mills 3:38

I remember, at the time, there were a lot of conversations happening, almost every sort of space you ventured into. there was a conversation of what's going to happen next, what's the newest normal gonna look like? What do we want to keep? What do we want to get rid of? But all these conversations, I mean, there's sort of endless duplication. But what was really missing to me in those conversations was was was the students and the student voice. And I think having that sort of different perspective to, to give us different insight into our experiences as academics and as educators to see how it felt from almost like the other side of the Team screen or the other side of the online assessment system. To me was was the bit that needed to be there. And this project, obviously, Will's great idea, inspired by a committee meeting, gave us an opportunity to do that. And then we very quickly roped in Jim. Jim, you invited in as a sort of expert consultant.

Jim 4:44

I think originally it would, I was promised it would involve about half an hour's work. And then x months later, here I am. But no, I was happy to be involved and as you know, and others may be aware, having produced a number of podcasts over the last year, I was definitely interested in the project. But I think what's special about this project, and certainly attracted me to it, was the fact that it was combining staff experience with student experience. And anything that gives voice to our students, and also gives us the opportunity to have a window into practice has to be a good thing. So I'm sure we'll go on to say, you know, what we've experienced and what we've found, but I was attracted to it just because of that, really. And it is also worth saying that one of the powerful things about this project has turned out to be that collaboration, not just the ability to hear what students think, but also the fact that we have been working alongside students, and as ever, they never fail to impress us and amaze us with their skill and talent.

Jennie Mills 5:49

That's great. Yes. And actually, the students that we've been working with the sort of expert, podcast creators and editors that we managed to recruit, are having a parallel conversation to this one. So it'll be interesting. Yeah, hopefully they don't come up with them, they were astounded by the sheer, sort of, lack of competence, incapable to work to deadlines . . .

Jim 6:12

I have a feeling that we may well, we may well be more complimentary, but then they will be about us, but good on them.

Jennie Mills 6:19

But they really did bring that, I mean, not just insight into the student perspective, but they brought a whole, sort of, wealth of experience in podcasting, that really enriched the project,

Will 6:33

 I'd say definitely, and rightly so that they, we brought them on as equal partners to us. And they took many of the editorial decisions and in the creation of these and, and hearing what they they came up with, has has been fantastic. And it's been a real privilege working alongside them and in in our team meetings and hearing the ideas that they've brought to the table, and their take on things as has been really, really valuable for me and a great learning experience as well.

Naomi 6:59

Yeah, I was gonna say what's really nice is that these conversations have as their object learning experiences, but also new kinds of learning, were taking place among the team involving us, and involving students in reflecting on that learning, but also doing these new forms of learning how to learn to learn, if that kind of makes sense. And I think we often think of it being more experienced teaching staff who show students how to how they should be learning to learn, this was a real case, I think, listening to the episodes with our students, team members, facilitating the conversations, it's just wonderful how they bring out a certain flavour or draw out a certain point. And I think I feel I was learning a lot about my own, like how to run a seminar, from listening to how they brought out the conversation in these interviews. So really, really wonderful experience, I think.

Will 8:02

We received a lot of feedback around teaching online and a lot of it was around module questionnaires or surveys, and there's numerical things of X amount believe this about something or, or the other, but there wasn't necessarily always the stories and deeper things behind those choices. And a lot of it was obvious to find would prefer to be face to face with I think we would all prefer to be face to face a lot a lot of the time. And it was listening to the Radio 4 sections that and the real rich conversations were had and you felt a real connection with the listeners and and you they is such a way that you've had an interest in what in, a vested interest in, in where they were going with their conversations, it was hopeful that we could get those sorts of conversations from students, from teachers. And that kind of the reactions of teachers and lecturers listening to the to what the students have to say as well was kind of where we're wanting to head for this, to give some kind of story behind the headlines that were coming from the feedback that we're receiving.

Jim 9:07

That's true. And then also, it's always interesting when we hear from others, students and staff to perhaps challenge our assumptions, and to hear things that we hadn't thought of that that's been good for me to just hear those different perspectives. And there is a danger in everything we do that sometimes we think we know what the answer is, but there are 1000s of different lived experiences. And it's good to tap into those.

Jennie Mills 9:32

I think there's another thing there that to sort of pick up on that, Jim is we think we know what the answer is, and therefore we frame the questions in a specific way. And I think there is something about, sort of, bringing people together setting them going in a conversation without necessarily giving them a preset structure or direction about where we wanted them to end up. Just see where the conversation took them which would enable us to maybe find out what questions we weren't asking? And what questions we might need to ask in future, if we were going to sort of use some of the experiences of a kind of very extreme, you know, one off pand-, hopefully one off pandemic, to inform where do we go next with blended learning or education in general. So I think it was that, sort of, creating space, not projecting our assumptions, not not writing the script, literally, and metaphorically, and just letting people talk, which also then enables you to get a sense of the context within which some of those attitudes to, or understanding of teaching and learning emerge. So I think, maybe sort of thinking ahead of what we did learn, but there's something about, you know, it's one thing to learn from a survey that students, you know, want lectures to be recorded, or they want to be back face to face, but when you hear the whys, and the individual that you said, in the lived experience that is kind of creating those opinions or emotions or perspectives, that's when you can start making sense of it. I mean, I suppose it's a difference between quantitative and qualitative data. But to me, that was the beauty of the project, is time, space, opportunity for perspectives, lived experience to sort of breathe and to be given life. Yeah, so that really, for me was the was one of the main aims, when I as I was going into it to create those opportunities.

Will 11:32

I was gonna say one of those things is that that informal feedback, that is one of the things that's really been lost this year, and the conversation as you're leaving the classroom with some of the students or about how something might have gone and picked them up, oh how did that activity work, or what what did you take from that? And, and some of those informal conversations with students and with other colleagues, as you bump into each other at meetings, which those that we've been all been having meetings and been teaching online, but those the pre-meeting the post-meeting conversations in the corridor over coffee, they've not been happening so much. And so this is, I think, for me, been a really interesting way of capturing some of those conversations that might have happened would, would we be bumping into each other and things.

Naomi 12:10

Think I was just gonna really say that, besides that informality, it's also what you were describing Jennie, the open-endedness of conversation. I actually got a colleague that I work with at Winchester who's a specialist in philosophy of education, who thinks about this question of conversation in the context of thinking about models of pedagogy. And I think this was helpful on both those levels, if you like the level of getting the student voice, of hearing about the student experience, but also how the modality of doing that may itself translate into teaching pedagogies and approaches that that we have, and the sort of proximity of the talking about teaching. But also, the experience of teaching and learning through this lens of conversation, I think is really is really interesting, because, as you say, conversation isn't structured, it doesn't frame the question like a survey might ever be to give us sort of sets of possible responses. The answer instead allows that sort of meandering path or to discover new avenues, and listening to some of the conversations that really came across how important it was in those conversations, that they kind of deviated maybe from where they expected to be. And they arrived at somewhere a little bit unexpected. But where there were real gems and real insights in that conversation.

Jennie Mills 13:38

I completely agree. And I think that that sort of takes me I guess, to the sort of knotty part of the process for me, which was not as anticipated getting people to talk because people seemed incredibly open as soon as they got in the sort of the listening space, which was, you know, a Team meeting, as everything was. So the getting them started and getting them talking wasn't wasn't challenging at all. But actually what was difficult is making the decisions about which bits to edit out. Because some of those you think, Oh, this is a digression. But actually they they did end up in a really interesting place with that digression, as you said, Naomi, that, you know, that's that's where the gems were hidden, I guess. So for me that the process element, the challenge was, how do you make this smaller when it's all so rich. I've got, live in huge envy of the Listening Project who get these conversations down to 10 minutes. So they must just be brutal, cold hearted individuals able to sort of chop stuff out. But that was my challenge with the process. I don't about how the rest of you felt about the actual doing of creating these things.

Jim 14:48

I think if I just say something about that, I think you're right to say that editing was definitely challenging because the conversations were flowing and natural and did evolve. So therefore, trying to whittle them down and remove bits was was quite challenging. And indeed, we realised didn't really, I think that having an hour or 50 minutes of conversation could could be a little bit too much to it to expect listener to tune into. And we made a conscious decision to perhaps not removed too much, but to divide those conversations into two. So we have part one and part two. So we didn't lose as much as we might have done if we, if we'd been a bit, sort of more drastic with our our editing. So that's one thing to say about the process.

Will 15:36

I know one of our worries that when we were getting to people who maybe hadn't met each other before and asking them to talk about the topic that they both said that they were mutually interesting with we were, are they going to be able to come up with enough things? Or do do we need prompts. And I know we talked about and put together some prompts and some maybe questions if if needed to help conversation flow. But I noticed my experience once, once the individual started talking, that was it, they found we got over 40 minutes of conversation, without any interruption from ourselves of just they navigated around subject, it was just fascinating, and a real privilege to be a fly on the wall, listening to it all unfold.

Naomi 16:18

I think it really struck me just how reflective lots of people have been, I think we all knew that was the case in pockets. But if you, if you just sort of took the media view of what education was like, at the moment, you would not think that anyone had any time to really have reflected at the degree of detail. But one of the things that's really clear is a kind of engine for these fluent conversations is that people are getting, you know, they're already been very reflexive about their learning experience, or what they think their student's learning experience is. But then, in the context of these spaces, that that reflection is really deepening, and you can see it playing out and hear it. And I think what is quite clear is that it's quite successful, you know, they seem to have been quite successful in many of these conversations in creating that kind of supportive space, where someone can take the risk, be free to be more critically reflexive, push their ideas a bit further. And you're seeing them being developed as people. So for instance, of this kind of teaching format, worked really well for me, perhaps it's something can be adaptive for others. And then they're beginning to probe even further, what was it about it that really works and was so successful? What about the the assumptions that we want to watch lots of video content? Well, actually, what was this interactive approach? Why was it more helpful? What did that do? And really sort of unpicking and some of the conversations and I think that that sense of yes, values, but also supportiveness, to be able to do that is really striking.

Jennie Mills 17:54

Yeah, I was struck, because most of the staff colleagues that came together didn't already know each other. They were strangers, they may be familiar names, they may have sort of sat at either end of the table at a committee meeting, but they were, They were largely unknown to each other. And what sort of, I don't know, really warmed my heart was that sort of, I guess, human instinct, maybe to find points of connection, and, and find points of convergence of the shared experience. So even when people were maybe, you know, sort of gently disagreeing with each other they would keep talking until they came round to a point where they were simpatico, you know, they were they were agreeing on a shared experience. And I think, to me, that was, that was, I guess, not surprising. But I'd read a lot about friendship conversations where you bring people together already friends, and they sort of get to the nub of things much more quickly. But in a conversation where people are already friends, there's a lot that goes unspoken, because you know each other already, whereas actually, you could see it almost I don't think the right metaphor, unrolling, unravelling, or sort of, I don't know, I'm waving my hands around. You can't see me this is this is a radio, but sort of sort of unravelling a tale, and sort of, bringing the other person into that.

Jim 19:18

I think so I enjoyed much of that, and was certainly impressed to see how folks from different departments, different experiences, were able to explore each other's experience. And and the compare and contrast was really interesting for me, because each of each side of the conversation, each person on each side would be asking, 'Is that what you experienced?' Or, 'how did you approach that?' And in actual fact, there was more difference than there was similarity in what people were doing, but nonetheless, they reached a shared understanding of what, what each other had done so that that was great to see and hear. But the other thing I'm thinking about there is this human side to conversation and storytelling, which is important here. And also there is the shared language of teaching isn't that. So that's the thing they had in common. And that teachers, when they get together, want to hear about each other's ideas, want to pick up on possibilities and ideas, and they're open to being inspired. So perhaps it's this language of teaching, and also the fact that all of us last year, and perhaps continue to be in this shared experience of whatever it is, the same boat,

Jennie Mills 20:38

Same storm, different boats, maybe.

Naomi 20:40

But I think I found it really interesting also, to see, obviously, we've all started to acquire new terminology and vocabulary and turns of phrase for describing what's going on. Some of these things may have been going on previously, but we didn't, you know, people were not talking about blended learning all the time, in the same way that we are now. But within these conversations, you can also see both the staff and the students when trying to reach that place of common understanding. So they've been quite inventive about the vocabulary that they use to describe experiences of teaching and learning, and trying to come up with ways of communicating their own experience to someone else where there isn't maybe already quite yet a clear repository of language for some of it. And you can see it's in its emergence other states. And I found that very interesting, especially when it came to editing work, because you maybe wanted to leave in those points where people were kind of clarifying, because we're in a, in a situation of still, I think, developing a clear shared vocabulary for explaining some of these experiences

Will 21:50

that similarity between the staff conversations, student conversations, one of the things that, that struck me in that some in some of the conversation between colleagues talking about getting to grips with technology, and then was mirrored by exactly the same conversations of students struggling with things from the other perspective and, and colleagues talking about how they found this, the students were quite forgiving when they had technology go wrong on them, or when they were stumbling through things. And then there was a mirrored student conversation, talking about exactly the same thing about all of our lectures, lecturers were struggling, and we were just messaging in the chat, don't, don't worry, it's okay, you've got this. And, and it was great to hear those those those, that from different departments, different colleagues, just the same conversations happening from different perspectives.

Jennie Mills 22:39

I think that's really, really true, and I guess it's related to that, but what really struck me was the sort of the levels of empathy on both both sides, if you like, not that they're on different sides, but the empathy that the students have for the work that lecturers were doing, and their appreciation of that, you know, not always uncritical, but they appreciated the work that was being done. And, and similarly, the, the colleagues that we we listened in on, they had that respect, and that appreciation of the difficulties, and the challenge, and the effort that students were, were committing to their, to their learning, especially during these difficult times. And and I think, I mean, that's exactly the sort of thing that does get lost on a survey. Because, you know, there's no box to take, you know, how empathetic are you towards your lecturer, maybe they should be. But that I found was was, you know, an unexpected delight to hear that, and to, because I sensed it, you know, I have conversations all the time with colleagues and with students, I kind of know it's there, but to have it presented in that way and to be able to listen to that was really, really powerful, I thought. So what else did we what else did we learn from from our eavesdropping?

Will 23:59

One of the conversations that I listened to the the both participants had asked to talk about the online assessment, the online exams process, and pretty soon those conversations moved from, from online assessment and, and the matters around that into the teaching and learning and teaching online, and just how inextricably linked the two things are just how in real life hand finger quotation marks and in normal times, we have to assessment is an integral part of you can't set some separate assessment from teaching and from learning, it's all integrated together in terms of the design, and in terms of how it then happens in in practice, and it's just just the similarity of it or shifting these things online. But it's no different. You can't talk about one thing without discussing the others and the interconnectivity of it all.

Jim 24:49

Think the other thing we've learned have been some, some practical matters and perhaps some unintended learning points. I've been well, interested and, and perhaps impressed with some of the practical ideas and ways of working that have evolved that suggests that there, there are benefits to what we have done, or what we've been forced to do in terms of online learning. So examples came out whereby tutors were talking about being able to more easily support students, because of the tools that they were using. And in some cases, almost counterintuitive, where students who had perhaps been shy to speak up in seminars and workshops, have felt more able eventually to contribute and be active. So getting a window into perhaps the affordances of some of these approaches that we probably wouldn't have chosen that that may well help us in the future.

Naomi 25:59

Well, being was one of the areas I think, where I thought I learned a lot, listening to both the student and the staff conversations. And it became really apparent and reflecting on them that maybe we're seeing a shift that we're going to think of well being rather than something that kind of supplements or sits on the side of education is something that is really built into the design of the learning experience. And of course, if you think about it, that's quite obvious when students are talking about the exhaustion of being online in front of their screen, and what impacts that inevitably will have on them possibly longer term as well. But then sort of building in things like signalling, if you're having a bad day, or other ways of supporting it, that maybe especially younger generations are used to maybe doing using emojis or like buttons, and so on to indicate that kind of level of support, the applause in Teams. And I think, yeah, you might get some of that within a classroom. But you can also see how digital format, especially when it's used in a way that's quite contiguous with kind of social media and instant messaging, that it can be a way of providing that that small sort of granular level of support, but it also struck me how much the teaching design, the structure of sessions, well being is really embedded in that. And I think these experiences have really highlighted that, for me,

Jennie Mills 27:27

and I think to build on that the centrality of socialness and that sort of human presence and the human interactions that can't be unteased from education that, you know, when we moved online, the social elements became, their importance became thrown into sharp relief, if you like you sort of suffered it from its absence and that you know, learning is essentially sort of a collaborative process or a shared endeavour. And I think that really came through both the student and the staff conversations, but maybe particularly with the student conversations and the sophistication with which they explored and express those ideas and began, we're already beginning to think through, actually, some of the things online were really good. And actually, we might lose those when we move back into the classroom. So coming back to Jim's point about, you know, putting your technological hand up in a Teams meeting might be a good way, if you're feeling a little bit reticent, or you know, not a very confident, or outgoing person, it just gives you an extra layer of formality, which can be helpful. And how would you bring that back into a classroom. And I thought that was that was really a different way to approach some of the same conversations that are happening at other places within the institution. But I never heard them framed in that way before. And I thought that was quite an interesting thing that maybe should go forward and be considered a little bit more deeply.

Naomi 28:56

I think that's really right. We talk a lot about buy-in as an institution about which parts of blended learning do we want to keep. And we often mean by that, like, which of the digital elements of teaching, but even this morning, someone rightly said, in committee and it's really reinforced by these conversations in our podcasts, I think that there are also lessons for how we do normal as it were face to face teaching that have come to the fore as a result of the kinds of experiences we've been thrown into. And this isn't simply a question, yeah, of which digital elements may be retained or modified, but also, how might we transform what we thought was a fairly settled pattern of in-classroom teaching?

Will 29:42

Definitely. And one of the points that I thought of when Jennie was talking before, was one of the students in the conversation. they repeatedly use the same phrase that learning is not a one way street in talking about in the first instance about online lectures and how that's they didn't find those more helpful than those the more dialogic sessions and online seminars with, and that's mirrors the similar conversations about going back to face to face it face to face teaching, and they talk about lecturers. It's not a one way street. And it's the interactive ones. And what how do we have interactivity and lectures and are lectures, the best way we could be teaching and on should be teaching? And it was great to hear some conversations about that come from the digital, but then look forward to do we want to be going back to to exactly the same model as before?

Jim 30:32

I think so if I could just say also that the whole project in the round has of course encouraged staff and students together to reflect on the teaching process, and I wonder without this type of approach and without this technology where else would these conversations happen so starting the ball rolling and having conversations about the experience of and process of teaching the technology isn’t so important because these conversations would need to happen whatever medium we are using perhaps so, I hope that these sorts of conversations will continue whatever the situation we’re having to teach in is.

Will 31:19

And it’s the importance of conversations that we’ve really drawn out through some of these conversations. And the point that you were making a few minutes ago Jennie about the that dialoguic and creative conversations, and the informal conversations.

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