Joyful Influencers: A day at the University of Greenwich Learning and Teaching Festival

To quote Ferris Bueller, *'Life Moves Pretty Fast. If You Don't Stop And Look Around Once In A While, You Could Miss It'* and with the daily treadmill of meetings, teaching, marking, researching and the need to consider and plan for quality assurance, educational performance and regulation, nowhere is this more true than in Higher Education. A 5am start, a long train journey South and being packed onto a Tube on a hot, sweaty Thursday morning might not seem like the obvious starting point for a day of reflection. However, in reality it was the starting point for a festival where so many themes came together to signpost the way forward for our Teaching and Learning and our assessment practices.

The day started with some joyful learning from the first keynote speaker, something that can get lost in a morass of targets, plans and initiatives. The idea that learning should somehow be fun, engaging and indeed joyful was delivered with panache and a simplicity of message that posed so many questions. We talk so much about the student experience but do we ever mention joy when we consider this or do we focus merely on the ensuring that the student is given a first class learning experience often measured by a myriad of numbers or so-called metrics? The joy associated with an assessment that focused upon the sewing of a button contrasted with the solemnity of team meetings that scrutinise patterns of assessments and regulations. It is not that the latter isn't important, it is that the danger is that the concept of joy has been submerged. The question we asked ourselves was how much of this is our responsibility? Can we turn these discussions into ones where joy is present? The keynote speech suggests we can.

And on to Gen Z, a reoccurring presence throughout the day and a generation who having grown up with TikTok, Insta and Snapchat, are having to wrestle with university systems that have barely changed in decades. The concept of the academic influencer resonated with this generation, an academic who inspires, motivates and who provides learning in a package that chimes with the digital world as well as the real world that Gen Z inhabits. The questions this led to were both illuminating and disturbing. Can most academics replicate the charismatic delivery of the near Gen Z lecturer presenter, or can we find a middle ground that encompasses the digital literacy expected and the traditional approaches often used?

This digital literacy has become ever more important post-COVID. The pandemic has acted as an accelerator for so many trends identified in the sector over the last decade. The need for hybrid courses, the declining attendance at traditional lectures and the shift of the learning community online, all of these factors were noted before 2020 but in the last three years they have now become fundamental to the design of programmes. This has required a change in mindset when designing programmes. In some areas this has happened successfully with extended inductions, designed to foster community in a more natural way than the rather forced 'Fresher's Week' used in the past being commonplace now. However, in other areas, most notably in the assessment process, the learning experience to ensure that the previous educational experiences of Gen Z are recognised, is often neglected.

As the second keynote speaker asserted, the startling growth in the use of AI is likely to act as a firestarter for change. Previously denied or rejected, it is increasingly clear that it needs to be embraced and shaped within universities. The opportunities that AI offers to students who need support with their studies, as well as the clamour from employers to ensure that graduates are well versed in the technology, means that the technology needs to be put at the centre of programme design and especially the assessment of learning. The sector has

been talking for many years about the need for [authentic assessment](#) but it is clear that we have now reached a stage where we have no choice but to ensure that the way we assess our students is inextricably linked to the questions they are likely to face when employed after their degree has been finished. This push comes from both the proliferation of new forms of AI but also from Gen Z students themselves who need to know how things apply to the real world.

So, as the long journey back home starts, what next? We are now living in a world where we are trying to [differentiate AI](#) writing from human writing whilst meeting the needs of a generation of students who are both digitally literate and for whom community is often virtual rather than physical. This is set against a backdrop of [declining attendances](#) and an increased demand for a hybrid approach to learning. At the same time the cry is for academics to become educational influencers. When these factors are thrown into the day-to-day turmoil they can feel daunting but on a hot Summer's day it felt like an exciting new challenge, the possibility of redefining teaching and learning was motivating rather than overwhelming. Joyful indeed.

As we ponder the next iteration of Higher Education, the possibilities for improving teaching, learning and assessment for Gen Z appear endless; ""The Question Isn't, 'What Are We Going To Do?' The Question Is, 'What Aren't We Going To Do?'" (Bueller, 1986).

Reference:

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986) (Film) John Hughes, USA, Paramount Pictures