Podcast transcript

Learning Transformers: Episode 3

Interview with Jeanne Marie Iorio and Jayson Cooper

ARIS COLOGON: Learning Transformers, a podcast by the University of Melbourne on the future of online higher education, presented to you by the Learning Design team at the Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education - or MSPACE for short. This is a space where we build bridges between industry and academia, and we explore the transformation of online professional learning that prepares learners for future job markets.

In each episode, we'll hear expert perspectives on emerging trends, explore influences on learner workplace-readiness and competency, and gather insights that keep us not just responsive, but actively impactful as expert practitioners in the constantly evolving digital education landscape.

ANDREA LOU: Welcome to Learning Transformers. I'm your host of this episode, Andrea Lou, a learning designer at MSPACE. in this episode, we have the privilege of welcoming not one, but two interviewees: Jeanne Marie Iorio and Jayson Cooper, who have recently developed a very successful online course Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching and are highly experienced in the digitisation of learning experience in higher education. So a bit about Jeanne and Jayson:

Jeanne is an Associate Professor in early childhood education at Melbourne Graduate School of Education or MGSE. Her research, teaching, and writing focus on disrupting and rethinking accepted educational practices in early childhood and higher education.

Jayson is an arts-based researcher in early childhood, land-based education, and public pedagogy, as well as a lecturer in early childhood studies at MGSE. Welcome, Jeanne and Jayson.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: Thanks for having me, Andrea.

JAYSON COOPER: Yes, thanks Andrea.

ANDREA LOU: So, we'll start with some easier questions. We understand that you have the experience of creating an entirely online course recently, while most of the courses in the faculty or around the university are face to face. What are the pros and cons of having a completely online course?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: That's a great question. My biggest pro when it comes to online courses, I think, is about access, and it's directly related to access as equity. So being able to come to school from rural and regional areas and actually having access to those resources and the complexity of teaching and learning is critical to creating equity for people to be able to participate. What do you think Jayson?

JAYSON COOPER: I agree, Jeanne, and I think the way that we've conceptualised that accessibility for the online learning is through a very flexible asynchronous model of higher education, so the way that we conceptualise that is through an asynchronous flexible approach that suits students' needs. A lot of our students are working full time or parenting full time, so they have to have that freedom to choose when and how they do their study, and this is one of the big pros for online learning.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: When I was at the University of Hawaii, there was no access to completing early childhood degrees, especially because students were located in such rural areas, often there was only one electric power line on an island. And often when that went down, they wouldn't even have access, so it was really kind of working from that ground level grassroots idea of what that meant to be online, so we created this course. We made it asynchronous and online, because it was about exactly what you said. We had students who were teaching early childhood for many years

who needed to complete their degrees in order to keep their jobs, and this way they were able to come in after they worked for 12 hours, or they have four or five kids at home, and they could come in when it was convenient for them to engage with the work, and this really made a big difference ensuring that early years learners or young children had educators who were really understanding the cutting edge research that comes out of early childhood and how that relates to teaching and learning. I don't know if there's any cons…

JAYSON COOPER: Well, I have one. I think in general, we've talked quite large… talked from a big picture about online education, is that it can be very isolating for students, because they're doing it from their home. They are not having the traditional student experience on campus where there are groups and communities and things that you can be part of, so I think that's a big con for online learning, but that just creates an opportunity to rethink how we do our online pedagogies.

ANDREA LOU: Yes exactly. That's why we're having this discussion about online education, so we might be able to think about how we can improve online education as we are both passively and purposefully trying to engage students online and entering this post-pandemic world where everyone is getting used to studying online. So there will probably be quite a lot of academics who will listen to our podcast out there, so for those who might be interested in the process of developing an online course like you have done, could you please describe what your experience was like?

JAYSON COOPER: It was quite a fast experience, wasn't it, Jeanne? Like, from when we conceptualised the course to when we actually delivered, it was something like six months, eight months, so we were quite fast about the way that we did it, but I think there's some key ideas that hold our planning together which is foregrounding indigenous worldviews and perspectives and sustainability. And that's the through line that goes through all of our course, so almost like touch points that we can plan to.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I think that's really important to talk about 'cause those are the conceptual ideas that informed the course, and we had a very strong understanding of that. Those conceptual ideas inform some of the pedagogical practices that we implemented in the programme, and then we actually finally looked at the technical last, because we wanted conceptual ideas first, pedagogical that link to the conceptual, and then technical that supported the pedagogical and the conceptual. And in actuality, this is how you think about course design, whether it's online or on campus or a hybrid module or model where you're thinking about those three things together, and it's quite important to think about it in that way, so that you made good decisions about the technical part that are well informed by what you're conceptually and pedagogically trying to implement.

JAYSON COOPER: Some of those technical aspects that we use is multimodality. So often in higher education, students need to do a lot of reading, so we've tried to problematise that and rethink think that in a way that what are the other ways? What other modes can students respond through the technical so that they speaker ideas of the subject. We use things like Flipgrid which is a video discussion tool or Perusall which is a shared collaborative tool that helps you unpack meaning in readings. We create this idea of "learning together apart" which goes back to that idea that I was talking about before of "online learning can be a little bit isolating", so when we create this communities of practice through the technical, we're creating communities of practice. We are able to scaffold student learning through a range of modes and approaches.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I think an important technical part of the Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching at MGSE is the "collective model". So when Jason was talking about those ideas around the fact that online learning can be quite alone and individual, we wanted to build a course that understood that teaching and learning always happen in relation and in relationships. So what we did with an online asynchronous course which doesn't really seem to have a lot of I guess commitments to relationship, we actually built something called "the collective", and this means that every five students are placed in a "collective" with a staff mentor, so somebody on our staff who worked with them from day one all the way till the end of their programme, and they meet with them every few weeks, so they have these professional conversations together. They might talk about how subjects are linked across; they might talk about the learning outcomes from the course and how this is happening within the coursework that they're doing, but they also work with the students when they go out on their 60 days of placement, so they have that same relationship with the students, and then they have their relationship with industry through the staff mentor, and this is carried throughout the course, so by the time students finish, they have a strong relationship with somebody at MGSE as well as four other people within the course, so they build a professional relationship that they can then use in different ways after they graduate.

ANDREA LOU: This sounds like a great model for an online learning course or maybe a blended or hybrid learning course that people can learn from in the future, and even though we're not meeting each other and the whole pandemic thing has driven people apart, it looks like you have created a model that actually brings people together and strengthens this bond between people, which is exactly what we are trying to get out of it, and this real touch of human and this relation and interactivity is what we come to value which we may not have valued that much before the pandemic. So because you are the pioneer in this area within the University of Melbourne, for many academics who might be listening to this podcast right now, it might be a new thing to work with a learning designer. And when you were developing this online course, did you work with a learning designer? And what was that experience like?

JAYSON COOPER: Yes Andrea, I worked extensively with learning designers throughout the development of the course in not just the course but in the smaller areas of creating subjects and that material, so it was very beneficial to work with the learning designer, and I've got a number of reasons why. Because I think learning designers they bring to the project a toolkit of resources that we might not have as academics, and so we get to come together and bring our pedagogical intent and share that with the learning designer who can then think of new ways or other ways that we might be able to articulate that within the LMS itself. They bring that framework of the whole process and ideas that become fleshed out across the whole course, so not only in the subject do we have these structures but we've got it on a bigger scale across the whole course, and what that does is it creates a consistency for the student experience, so you know they move from one subject to the next subject, and there is the familiarity in the way that it's designed and the way that is communicated. And also the other benefits of working with the learning designers is that they bring a range of skills that we might not have in terms of like the technical as were mentioning before, so it might be creating videos. What we did with our subjects is we have these videos that happen each module. In our subjects, we have four modules per subject that got eight weeks, and each module has a video that introduces students into that. We didn't make those videos. It was the learning designers that constructed that for us, so it's these sorts of fine details that just give the LMS a little bit of a pop, a little bit of a bling and it's more attractive and aesthetically pleasing. And it guides students through the big ideas that we're exploring.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah, we do have a big group of dedicated team working on each project. It could be a subject or a micro credential, including the learning designer, video producers and educational technologists who work collaboratively on developing the Canvas pages and interactives on Canvas which might be quite helpful and providing a lot of additional value for our projects. So Jeanne what was your experience like?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I worked a lot as a reviewer for, I think, every subject that we created, which I think gave it some consistency, because I was reviewing across all the subjects rather than one or two, and we also had some other people reviewing within each of those subjects as well, so Jayson might look at multimodal literacies or somebody might look at another one, but I tried to keep consistent across that, and I found because I was I guess working more with the manager as well, that it was really about those milestones and timelines, but at the same time I think there had to be some flexibility, because while our faculty were working on the course, they were also teaching, and they were also leading other things, and so there had to be that flexibility with the learning designers and with the faculty on both sides, so sometimes there might be a timeline or milestone at a certain time, and it just wasn't possible, and so it was about that negotiation saying "look, this is what's happening now, this is what will do and I have to tell you that our faculty in early childhood they were so great at getting things done, even if they were like a little bit behind, the following week they would catch up, so I think it was quite a good experience in the fact that people were being flexible on both sides and that flexibility was quite important to the success of the program.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah flexibility is definitely what we're aiming for in both our work and also the courses that are developing here. So for those who have not worked with a learning designer before, do you have any tips or advice for them?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I think it's good to know what content you want to get across, and again that goes back to that conceptual and linking them to the pedagogical, because then you can say to the learning designer "this is what I want to achieve; how do we do that now with the technical", so see it's kind of bringing all of those back together, and I think we had some conversations often with our learning designers about that. What do you think Jayson?

JAYSON COOPER: I think you know being clear about our intentions, being open to communication, being willing to grow beyond our intentions as well and other ideas are put together through the collaboration process. I kind of think of it through an analogy, like we're an architect, the academic is an architect, and the learning designer is like the builders who actualise and bring those lofty ideas that we have together you know, and through that process we problem solve. And I think some advice that I would give to any academics who are working with learning designers is just to be transparent with all aspects of what you're intending to get from the course, you know how you want it to look, how you want it to behave you know, what modalities are you going to use, when and why, and what are your assessment tasks, and how does that fit in with the content you know, so it's all interconnected.

ANDREA LOU: Thank you Jason. I really like that analogy of the architect and builder. It's a really vivid illustration of the relation between the academic and learning designer.

JAYSON COOPER: And it's a very collaborative relationship I think, you know, that process.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah exactly. OK so maybe we have a chat about the assessment side of this. Because of this new online learning experience for most people, there might be some voices that's questioning the credibility and authenticity of assessments and online learning as a whole. So given this unconventional format of learning and assessment, how do we know that we have successfully educated someone?

JAYSON COOPER: I think that's a million dollar question almost in itself, but I like to think that if you were not asking students to repeat information back to us, rather we are encouraging that higher order thinking where they can synthesise that information and then deliver it back in new ways, so I think when you know when someone's understood something or has been educated, I don't know that's even the right language to use, but you know when someone gets something, that's when they are able to successfully communicate that back through a range of ways. I think to go back to our discussion that we had a bit earlier about flexibility and accessibility is… to do that you gotta have assessment tasks that are accessible in a wide range of approaches that you can approach them in a wide range of ways, and accessibility in the sense that you know for our course in our course we have students who are all over Australia across the 500 traditional lands of First Nations Australia, and so the accessibility means that the assessment tasks need to connect to those places, and the flexibility also means that the students can approach the assessment tasks in an open-ended way that then speaks to their life stories and their life ways and their relatedness to the tasks.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I think a lot of our students go into classrooms, and they actually use the knowledge that they are generating in their coursework. And we find that their mentor teachers are coming back in either joining our program or they're interested in hearing more information, and so that's an interesting idea that our students are going out into the community and what they're learning is being recognised, and they are able to fully articulate those ideas to somebody else which I think is another indication that their understanding the complexity of teaching and learning. In addition, our group that graduated they all got jobs, and many of them got jobs in the centres where they went for their placements, so I mean that's I think another way to show that students are understanding and what they're bringing from the course and from what their understanding is being applied in the classroom.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah, employability and this development of professional skill is definitely an essential part of our online learning, especially for professional learning that takes place in high education nowadays. We have definitely entered this era of live longer anywhere everyone is continuously seeking development, either personal or professional, to build a lifelong career or maybe to pursue a new career. So maybe that will let us rethink about higher education. Given that we are moving more and more subjects and courses online, and given people's need and demand for this continuous and lifelong learning, what do you think will tertiary education and universities be like in the future?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: Andrea, I think this is a great question, because universities have changed over the years. In the 1960s, universities were places where people went to find themselves or to understand what their philosophy was on life or their identity or you know exploring new ideas, and I think universities have slowly transitioned into a neoliberal context where students are viewed as customers, academics are viewed as service providers, and administrators are looked at as you know the managers or the CEOs or who are kind of making decisions that deal with bottom line or deal with market, so all of these decisions I think will impact what online courses look like. Now online in many ways has been a way to generate income for universities, which I think has been necessary with deregulation of universities, so this idea that you can easily get a lot of people in and you don't have to be held to that usual traditional schedule of semester one entry and you know completing your course, people are seeing online as continuous enrolment constantly bringing in more and more students and seeing that is, I would say income driven, so this idea that it will generate funds for the university, and so that becomes quite complex, because around conceptual ideas and pedagogical ideas coming together may be kind of come to the side, because it's really more about how can we get somebody through very quickly in a way that they can go and function and have a job and you know be employed, but at the same time, are there ways to do it so that we don't let go of some of those amazing pieces of content or questions or time, right?

Because a lot of time, time is important to thinking and questioning and finding out how do we think about those ideas, so I think there has to be a shift, and I use these words the shift toward seeing students and academics and administrators as public intellectuals, and when I'm talking about a public intellectual, I'm not talking about somebody who sits outside of society and just distracts, I'm talking about a public intellectual who is right in the middle of all of that who's thinking about or questioning ideas that are often the large ideas that exist in society, so they're questioning, they're rethinking and they're often resisting, so all of these things are coming together in order to create something new, something responsive to issues in the world or connected, so it's this idea of making higher education connected to local and global communities, working towards the common good, so how do subjects in courses work towards the common good? And I really feel like, and Jayson you can tell me if I'm wrong, but I really feel like the Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching has been about working towards the common good.

JAYSON COOPER: Yes, I would agree.

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: I also think it's about empowering teachers as agents of change, which is something that we really I think put to the forefront by first foregrounding First Nations worldviews and then by thinking about what it means to be a sustainable development implementer right? What does it mean to contribute to your local community and what does it look like for children and families and communities and teachers all coming together in these new ways? I mean even our assessments are aligned so that they can they can empower early childhood centres or communities, because they're about looking for those ideas of foregrounding First Nations worldviews or sustainability and then having the

students think about how those ideas can be put into practice or offer ways to improve in early childhood centres, policies or structures in order to reflect those ideas, so I think it's directly related to that, and it goes beyond even just a classroom, because we ask students to think about policy and policy changes, and what policies need to change to raise the status of an early childhood professional? You know these are big discussions that are always happening, and even thinking from a different perspective, right? We've moved the research that students work on or do within the course or read about are not just that usual research that's about "well if we spend a dollar in early childhood here, then you're less likely to go to gaol, right?" We're actually looking at alternative research, research that actually reflects children as citizens of the now who are contributing to their communities, so it's kind of very actionable which again is disrupting that grand narrative that children are deficit.

JAYSON COOPER: Also on from that, if we think about our learners not as children but our learners as capable and contributing citizens as well, that's a big thing, so we're asking if we ask that of ourselves as teachers, then we have to see that of ourselves as well, so there's a lot of growth and transparency in the way that teaching and learning happens in the Graduate Diploma, so the teacher doesn't own all power and responsibility over knowledge, it is co-constructed, shared learning that happens through… It's very generative in the way that we do it, and each term that we teach these subjects, they're never quite the same, because of those dynamics.

ANDREA LOU: Right, looks like we need to strike the right balance between this neoliberalism or marketisation of higher education and the very core that you would love to deliver in high education, even though it's in online learning. I can hear your passion in which you were talking about just now Jeanne, about this connectivity about the impact that students can make on the community through this online learning experience, so there is something that remains unchanged even though we are facing this dynamic change all over the world, so in the face of this inevitable changes that is towards the digitalization of online education in the higher ed, what remains unchanged in high ed and what stays unaffected as the essence or core of higher education?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO:I think what's important here is that we think about what the purpose of education is in general, and really unfortunately the purpose of education is about maintaining the status quote, which is quite a negative way we think about education, but often education was created in that way, and so I think what has to stay or what has to change is disruption of, that and disruption only happens when we think about alternative narratives. When we when we disrupt the grand narratives, that's what education is about, but not just destruction it's also about rethinking, rethinking in ways that are responsive to children, families and communities, and how those issues that impact him every day are part of learning and teaching.

JAYSON COOPER: Jeanne, you've made me think back to Paula Freire who has put radical ideas about education since the 70s and was still grappling with a lot of them in many ways, and I think what we've discussed as part of that, but he has these five ideas in his work, and they're to embrace humility, and teaching begins with students, and there's hope and I know you've done a lot of work around hope, Jeanne, so if we we're capable contributing lifelong learners, when there's faith and students, they're autonomous individuals deserving respect, and then love, to bring love into our pedagogies in our work you know, so we have respect for our communities of practice in the work that we do together. It's not an individualistic approach, it's a collective shared thing which education is. And then lastly is critical thinking where we question the ways we are giving space for students to be and to do their thinking, and I think those ideas and much of Freire's is work still speaks to a lot of the way we can do education in the 21st century, whether online, hybrid, or face to face.

ANDREA LOU: That's a really good summary of this idea Jayson, so with or without this digitization of higher ed or this pandemic, every domain or every discipline area still has a lot of changes to be made, like you have said just now Jeanne, we still need to rethink and maybe disrupt the status quo of each industry or each discipline that we're working on, so in your area which is early childhood education, what do you think online education can help you maybe accelerate or assist you in this process of rethinking or disrupting the status quo and making some positive changes that you would like to see in this area?

JEANNE MARIE IORIO: Yeah, this is another hard question. I think it goes back to what we talked about at the beginning where we're thinking about equity and what does equity look like, and it's about accessibility. I think the pandemic made visible really what the limitations are in our education system. Children with privilege didn't really suffer within the pandemic I think, whereas children without privilege suffered quite a bit, like in the United states I know that there were children who weren't going to school so they weren't being fed, you know, basic needs were pushed aside, they just didn't have them, so if we think about it that way and we understand that we want to have equity, in what ways can higher education play a role in that? And it's about understanding and teaching and learning is relational, it's about teachers understanding that they are agents of change and their positioned to be activists and advocates for children and families and communities, and I think it's about teaching teachers, so creating teacher education programs that aren't prescriptive, that aren't about intervention, but rather about a response, about co-participation, that there isn't a cookie cutter way to teach, but that we come to teaching where we bring our experiences, we bring our identities, we

bring our struggles, we bring our triumphs, we bring all of these things and that these are in relation to the children, families, communities, local places where we work, and so whether it's online, whether it's in person, holding those ideas right at the centre of how we're doing teaching and learning and knowing that teaching learning is political, it's ethical and it's relational, understanding those things, I think, can transverse, whether it's online, hybrid, any of those things, I think it's about holding those conceptual ideas, those values, holding on to them and then understanding how we can pedagogically and technically implement them.

ANDREA LOU: I love this humanistic idea in what you have described just now, so whether we study online or face to face, what stays at the core of education is still this relation relationship building and the connectivity between people and this human care that we can provide through education, so even though we're looking at a little screen every day, we're so used to it now, we still need to remember that behind each little screen is a real person needing care, needing the usual interaction and the bond that we used to have in the pre-covid era, so maybe that is something we need to amplify or at least maintain in this online world. What do you think, Jayson?

JAYSON COOPER: I agree. I like to see my role as a teacher when I'm teaching online is working with relationships you know, understanding my students, what their contexts are, how I can best support them through those contexts, because as we said earlier, we're catering to a lot of different life ways out there in the world, a lot of different contexts our students are living, whether they're being parenting or they're working, or they're changing their career, so there's a lot of contexts that are coming into the online space and a lot of support that needs to happen, so my role as a teacher isn't really one where I'm telling people what to do, but I'm rather listening and I'm engaging in this in this what we refer to as the "pedagogy of listening" with our students through the technologies that we set up in their LMS, through our "collectives" that we spoke about earlier, so it's really a relational approach, so online learning isn't this distant thing, it's just another community like much of our modern life is where we have physical lives but we also have digital lives, and we're finding the interface between those.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah, like any tool, we should think about ways to amplify the pros and reduce the cons and I really love that phrase of the pedagogy of listening.

JAYSON COOPER: That's Carla Rinaldi, that's not my initial idea, I acknowledge that.

ANDREA LOU: Thank you, so for those who are listening to this podcast right now, if you're interested in any tools or any ideas that Jeanne and Jayson have introduced today, we will list them on our website where you can find a number of resources that you might be interested in in the future.

Well it's been such a delight to talk with you today, Jeanne and Jayson. I'm sure this is far from enough time for us to learn from you. I really enjoyed our conversation today, so I'm very excited for this episode to air.

And for those who are listening to this episode right now, if you would like to listen to more episodes, please head to our website omny.fm/shows/learningtransformers. Thanks so much for listening and we will see you next time on Learning Transformers.

Resources:
Flipgrid https://info.flipgrid.com/
Perusall https://www.perusall.com/
Pedagogy of listening Carla Rinaldi: Rinaldi, C. (2021). In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning. Routledge.
Castiglia, C. (2017). The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times. NYU Press.
Demand the Impossible - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyAw9j1YUuE&ab_channel=bigideasfest
Freire, P. (2021). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed.* Bloomsbury Publishing.
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