

Creating Joyful Assessment with Stephanie Sodero, recorded October 2023
Transcript

Intro: Welcome to the Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, where we talk to staff in the Faculty of Humanities about what works well in teaching, assessment and student support.

In this episode Sarah Dyer, our Digital Chair in Education, chats to Stephanie Sodero about joyful assessment.

Stephanie is a lecturer in Climate Change and Health in our Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute here in Manchester.

Sarah and Stephanie discuss setting assessments that allow students to engage with academic material emotionally, intellectually and creatively, and that are a joy to mark.

Sarah starts by asking Stephanie about the assessment set in her courses, Vital Mobilities and Disaster Mobilities.

Sarah Dyer (SD): Can you tell me a little bit about what you ask your students to do for this assessment?

Stephanie Sodero (SS): Sure, so I teach two courses related to climate change. One is undergrad and one is post-grad, and for my assessments that are two components. One is writing an academic research essay on a very specific targeted topic of the student's own choosing. And then complimenting that I asked the students to develop a creative project based on their essay. So, reading through their essay what was a salient point, what was something that really struck them that maybe they shared with a roommate or a family member, something they learned, a statistic, an anecdote, something that really struck their imagination and kind of changed the building blocks of their mind. And I asked them to pick that thing and identify a target audience. Who needs to hear this thing beyond your roommate and your mom? And what is the best way to communicate this message to your target audience? So, a target audience could range from say elementary school, a class of elementary school, primary school children, to the UN secretary-general. The target audience can be whomever, but what's the appropriate message and medium for that target audience?

SD: I love that, and I love the way that it's building on the kind of academic. It's about this kind of spark and taking that and relating to it in a different way and thinking about communication. And so, what then do they submit for that assessment?

SS: Anything and everything seems to be the theme so far, so students have made jewellery. They have done paintings. They've created videos and skits. Written songs. This year we had a student, she wrote her own song and performed it live in front of the class, singing in front of a class and playing her guitar. So, a huge range of things. Another student held a dinner party where essentially her friends were invited and given a ticket and they were either at a high-income table globally or a low-income table globally. So, tons of ideas far beyond what I could come up with myself and it really plays on the students' interests. So, it allows them to invest a different part of themselves in the learning.

SD: That's amazing and it's sparked lots of, like have you read this? or have you thought about this? But I guess one of the things I'm thinking is that lots of people listening to this would be like, how on earth do you mark that? So, kind of what practically do you do to both communicate to students what it is you're looking for, but also then to come up with the number that you give them as a mark?

SS: Yeah, that's a question that the students have as well. How do we assess this? And I think it's interesting how, there's something about that that students are not as concerned with how we mark an essay, how I mark an essay. They have more familiarity with that, but there is a degree of subjectivity, of course involved in marking an academic essay within a certain grade bracket. So, I think it's interesting that the students, it indicates how unfamiliar they are with this type of assessment. But essentially from class number one, I introduce the two assessments and how they will be evaluated, and I come back to this regularly throughout the semester so that the students are acclimatised. And essentially there's four components. So, with the submitted project, can I tell, is it apparent who the target audience is? What the key message is? Those are the big ones. And then, what medium did they choose? Is that appropriate? And what is the overall impact? And that gets a bit more quality component of it. So those are the four components that I convey to the students.

SD: That's fantastic. And do you get a lot of people kind of emailing you or coming to office hours?

SS: Yes, I encourage the students very much to come to my office hours and just have a little, like a relaxed brainstorm chat, where we get just to spin our minds in a productive way for a few, you know, 10 minutes and just imagine some different possibilities. We do that in the class. I get them to do it in pair work, so just sharing with another classmate. What are you thinking at this very early stage? Working up to later in the semester doing a five-minute presentation to the class. This is what I'm thinking. How does this sound? Do

you have any other ideas? I really encourage the idea of collaborative learning and getting feedback on what they're doing and that this is not about working in isolation. This is about soliciting input from others on your essay and on your creative project to make it stronger.

SD: Yeah, and I love that because it's an assessment and it's a kind of an approach to assessment that's very much more modelling the kinds of ways that we work once we leave university. That we do get feedback, we do share our ideas, we do learn from each other. So, I think that's amazing. And I also love that it's about this kind of creative response. I'm not imagining everyone is always authentic, but it kind of invites an authentic reaction to the material and it kind of puts me in mind of a book called *The Creative University* which is by Anke Schwittay in Sussex and she teaches development and she talks about how she started using creative methods because she felt that she was, you know, she got lots of students who are really concerned and interested about social justice and really kind of what she was giving them were these, you know this kind of being critical in a way that is like a kind of performance of concern but actually isn't about really engaging with kind of 'what now?' Individually 'what now?' but also kind of for us as a societies. And she felt like students were prompted to write essays which rehearsed a kind of performance of concern and that is very depressing, you know, for everybody. And it's not really what we want education to be about. It certainly doesn't really help anyone. So, I mean, I really hear echoes of that approach in what you're doing.

I was wondering if there were other things that you think, or if you agree, but then also for other things you think students get out of it?

SS: Yeah, there's so much there. Thanks for mentioning that book, I will be looking that up. I worked for an environmental nonprofit for a number of years. And so, there's very much the sense that what we're learning and researching - how do we communicate that to a policymaker, to a politician, in a concise and engaging way? And so that very much informed this approach. And I think your point about authenticity and heart, I think that's one of the things I saw most strongly about this approach and the projects submitted by students, is the heart came through. It was such a joyful experience and I think that that was enabled because the students are, they pick their own topic. So, there is no predetermined topic, if they're interested in fast fashion and climate change, if they're interested in eating local and climate change. They can pick that thing that they've always been curious about and explore it. And then pair it with something that they enjoy doing - sewing, singing - someone made a rap video. Whatever it is, and combining the medium and that topic just results in something really powerful and that comes through at the end of the semester. We have a Climate Gallery where the students in the class present their work to each other. And the students, I mean, it's a wonderful like three-hour experience. It's also exhausting, and the students are a bit run out at the end. They're are so impressed by what their colleagues have done, they've learned so much and it can be a bit overwhelming all in one go.

One thing I'm thinking of doing is having some kind of public presentation of the projects to take that engagement to a further level.

SD: Oh, that would be amazing. Let me know because I'd love to come.

SS: Something at the Whitworth, or, you know, I just think it would be a great experience. Maybe a trial run in the classroom just with their peers and then opening it up to students who are interested.

SD: Yeah, I know, that sounds great. And I've worked with people who've done the same, women that I worked with who did kind of creative projects around gender violence in Palestine and Israel, and they had an exhibition and as well, which again was that kind of what you're describing, like the emotion, the cathartic sense of having been through and learned together, and kind of really engaged all of the all of the kind of bits of, you know, they're doing things, feeling things, thinking things, and those all being legitimate ways to engage with material. I mean, you've talked about it being a bit exhausting. I was wondering if there are other challenges for you in structuring things this way?

SS: I think building it in from the outset of the course design really helped facilitate things. So, each week the students have required readings, but they also have a required creative project. So, I'll suggest a creative project that exists out in the world for them to engage with and we discuss that in class each week. So, what was the key message? Who is the target audience? What worked well? What could work better? You know, is this feasible for you to do as a student or is this, you know, high budget operation? That's really helped. I think one thing that I will do this coming semester is talk through two or three concrete projects from past years. And give the students a sense of what was involved in each project and an indication of the mark that project would have earned. Some of the students create multiple components that fit together into a cohesive complex whole. And other students do something simpler, still impactful but simpler, and I think one of the concerns raised this year - what's the scope supposed to be? How sophisticated or big is this supposed to be? So, I'll provide more clarity on that. But otherwise, it's joyful. It's just a wonderful experience. That we're creating together and presenting what the students create. Builds community, fosters a sense of class solidarity and yeah, it doesn't feel challenging. I look forward to doing it. It feels fun.

SD: Yeah, that's wonderful. What's your experience of marking these assessments?

SS: So, the experience of marking assessment. It's really fun. So, we have this Climate Gallery in the classroom, and I'll bring a snack for the students, and we'll have a dance break and I try to create a warm environment recognizing that they're all sharing something creative. Also, this year, I had a hedgehog that I picked up at a local Oxfam store who could be a support animal for anyone who's feeling nervous about coming up. When the students present, I make some notes as they present and then later, I sit down and mark. And that marking it takes much less time than marking an essay just because the the projects themselves, I give them a three to five minute limit on the experience that they create, so as compared to reading that 3000-word essay, engaging with to a 3 to 5 minute experience is much shorter and so makes marking much faster and it's also much more fun overall. And another challenge in terms of marking is, I have not yet figured out how AI intersects with this. So, I understand that people can ask AI essentially for an idea on a creative project that links sea level rise and refugees in Bangladesh and AI will spit out something. I have not yet figured out how I will mark projects with that new dimension.

SD: For me, this is actually a perfect project for the AI world because it's iterative, it's based on feedback. So yes, that might be a way of coming up with ideas, just as kind of random conversations might be way of coming up with ideas, but it's actually about what then people do with those ideas, how they respond to feedback from you, from each other, from this structured process. In a way it's much less AI-able than an essay where you know, so I think all of the stuff that I'm reading around working with AI and is working about how we have to assess process, not kind of outcome. And although you are assessing the outcome, you've got this kind of structured process that you're taking people through which is actually very embedded. You couldn't just come in at the last minute, feed the props into ChatGPT and get the answer. That wouldn't work.

The idea that you can design assessment that's joyful and you look forward to teaching to, is really lovely, you know, we all want a bit of that.

So, if somebody was thinking about introducing an assessment that's kind of creative in this way or has that kind of flexibility. Or even just moving away from an essay, so thinking more widely about the kinds of things they could ask students to do. Where would you suggest that they might begin? What kind of questions do they need to think about?

SS: That's a great question. I think consider the root 'why' of it. So why a creative project? So not a creative project just for the sake of it, even though that maybe have its own benefits. But why? What skills do you want your students to develop? Is it communication to non-academic audiences, communication with non-academic audiences. Are there certain skill sets that you think would be useful in terms of nonverbal communication. Yeah, target audiences outside of the classroom who would genuinely benefit from initiatives done by the students. So, for example, if there are local school groups or a shelter for women and other folks, is there a community partnership? Is there a partner in the

community who could almost come in and give a remit to the students? What do they need? And ask the students to design something for that.

SD: I mean, I guess I'm also hearing when you describe what you do, how structured it is. So, you know, I think sometimes people hear 'creative' and they think that means like "off you go and be creative" but it sounds like you've got this really structured process that supports students through it. You've got really clear rationale of why - that actually out there in the real world people do use creative practice to communicate on these issues. And also, that you can point to examples. You say you have students go away and look at real world examples of these things and engage with them and come back. So, it just feels like it's a really well supported, well-structured process. And also, it builds on that academic essay as well because I think sometimes people hear 'creative project' and they think it's a bit of a free-for-all but actually it's much more structured than it would be if you were teaching to an essay. It's got those kind of supports and that built-in feedback and it's building that community that also gives feedback. So, in a sense it actually might be the opposite of what people think when they hear 'creative assessment'.

SS: Yeah, I never thought of that before, but I think you're right. I intentionally, there's a lot of hand-holding or support that goes on for the creative project. There's more support provided for the creative project than the essay, from lecture 1 and in fact students approached me, this is probably what I've received the most emails on, is "I'm thinking of taking your course next semester and I see that there's a creative project and this scares me. Can you provide some guidance, some thoughts, what does this entail?" and then I'm able to send them a link to the Climate Gallery of the students' work from past years, and I think that assuages their concerns.

SD: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention?

SS: One final thing I'd mention is just, as these are Climate Change courses, I pick the creative approach because we need creativity in dealing with climate change and I really wanted to engender that in the students' thinking, that we need multiple approaches to tackling climate change, and everyone can contribute to that. And I wanted to give them a sense of that doing things the same old way isn't going to do the trick for climate change. And so, I hope that they could feel that in their bones by doing these creative projects.

SD: That's brilliant and again, it's that authenticity, isn't it? Like the reason that you're being asked to do this is because it absolutely is what is needed for this problem out there in the world. My daughters always have projects where they have to then dye them in tea, you

know, to make it look old. Could we do something that's not involved history of dying bits of paper with tea? It's not as a kind of add-on. It absolutely gets to the core of the thing that you're asking people to think about. Yeah, it sounds amazing. I'd like to do your module.

SS: Thank you very much.

Outro: Thanks so much for joining us for this episode of the Good Practice in Teaching podcast from the University of Manchester.

In the podcast description you'll find a link to Stephanie's Climate Gallery website, where she showcases her students' work. You'll also find a link to Stephanie's blog post in our Good Practice Library. There's also a link to the book 'Creative Universities', that Sarah mentions towards the start of this episode.

Links:

[Stephanie's Climate Gallery website](#)

[Body Art, Apps and Parties: Stephanie's blog post in the Good Practice Library](#)

[Creative Universities by Anke Schwittay](#)