



Transcript: John - learning technologist

What is your current role?

My current role is learning technologist at a university on the south coast. The brief of the job is to support teaching at the university with technological solutions. Typically that means IT; typically that means something web based. And so it would not be entirely inaccurate to say I was a web developer, in a business context that is what I would be called, but, of course, obviously I'm focused on teaching and learning.

Can you briefly connect it to your PhD?

Not really there is no linear connection between the two. There are continuities there in that before I had done my undergraduate degree I had done a diploma in audiovisual communications or multi media back in the 1990s and so I had always had one eye vaguely on multi media things even throughout my PhD. But it was quite a jump going from the PhD into some kind of other employment. There wasn't a directly linear connection there.

Do you think the PhD is essential for the job that you are doing?

A PhD is. My particular subject, not necessarily, but if you are going to be working in the university, and if you are going to be dealing with teaching and learning generally, I think you do have to have been through the process yourself. To really understand what the obstacles are you have to have surmounted them yourself at some point, I think. And then there is the broader question of the culture of universities and so on and so forth. I think it is helpful to know the training but that is probably less vital. I think the main thing is that you have been through that process, and probably the hard way, to discover where it can go wrong.

In your current job, can you talk a bit about the satisfactions of that. What do you enjoy about it?

I like it a lot. I like overall what the job is trying to do which is the most important thing, I think. I like the fact that it is about teaching, it is about trying to keep the traditional values of the university afloat. That sounds a bit negative. Trying to preserve the traditional values of the university like integrity, like accuracy, like research, in a very shifting period; and making sure that all of those things get done in the best possible way, using the technologies that we've got. And so the overall aim, I'm really keen on. The people are a big plus. This is one of the things I like about universities, I like university people; and also the tech is a big plus actually. I think in a commercial environment what they want is somebody who does one little technical thing very well. So if you are a computer guy you work on one little piece of Java code and then you specialise in it more than that and then finally you specialise in one application library developed by some guy in California and you work on three methods in that. I think it is probably quite a grind or at least it would be for me. In the university environment it is much more exploratory, it is: we've got particular things we want to achieve and how do we achieve that? Go out and find out. And so it is still a process of intellectual discovery. I think that is probably what motivated me all the way through the undergraduate degree right until today and so it is quite vital to me to keep having that.

Is there something different about being in a department that isn't an academic department, which makes your experience of the university either positive or negative?

I am not sure that it differs that much actually. Every time I was working purely within an academic department in classics getting 10 academics in a room including myself was just like herding cats. I mean they always had these very strongly held opinions for very good reasons that would take ages to unpick and it could be quite difficult getting any kind of consensus. Moving outside into a non-academic context doesn't really change that, to be honest. I think academics have got more in common with each other than they do with anyone outside academe and so it doesn't matter if it is a sciences or humanities academic, the general approach is quite similar. And in some ways there are advantages you get exposed to. I've had to do a little genomics research, and other things like that, in order to see how to support teaching in genomics and so that is on the plus side.

In terms of a change in culture or focus, not a great deal actually. I do miss the subject matter sometimes, it is nice to work on your own little patch of ground and I've noticed that my sort of pet projects around the

university converge a little bit with what I used to study. But it hasn't been as large a shift as I thought it might be.

I think where I would like it to lead is into something that, for want of a better term, I would call digital publishing by which I mean non-fiction academic publishing. As somebody who has been in and out of the university system, more in that out, I have always had questions about the university system. I find it interesting that there seems to be this degree of flexibility opening up in who publishes what, when, and what constitutes knowledge. And I think the university presses are trying to get to grips with that they may not be doing the best possible job and it is an area that nobody seems to have an expertise in, simply because the territory is still undefined. And so something I would like to get into, is how you publish things that are high quality information; and how you make those things findable for researchers and how you get people understanding those things if they are not researchers but they have to know this information. And so it is the mission of the university. Whether or not that happens outside the university infrastructures is a little bit up in the air right now but that is the sort of general area I would like to be looking at. That is a vague and undefined answer but that is because it is a vague and undefined area!