

Talking Teaching: Season 04 Episode 02 Transcript

Please note: This interview was held over an international phone call. Some sections of Yong Zhou's responses are inaudible.

Genevieve Costigan:

Hello, I'm Genevieve Costigan. And welcome to Talking Teaching.

Yong Zhou:

This is a reflection of us focusing too much on the Economic being of students, we also have been trying to prepare Economical beings, to get a job, to drive the global economy, to gain global competitiveness. But we forget how to live together.

Genevieve Costigan:

In this episode, the Dean of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, professor Jim Watterston talks to Professor Yong Zhou, an international expert in the implications of globalisation, technology and leadership in education. In a unique innovation, Yong Zhou works for both the University of Kansas and the University of Melbourne. In this discussion, Jim and Yong examine what a post COVID world could look like for Education across the world, including how we educate young people to lead a purposeful life beyond just having a job. Over to you Jim.

Jim Watterston:

Okay. It's my pleasure to have Yong Zhou with us today. And it's great to have you online Yong. Thanks for, joining in the podcast.

Yong Zhou:

Thanks Jim, happy to be here.

Jim Watterston:

Can we start by talking about what, I think might be a bit of a post COVID phenomena, is that you've got this unique job now where you're paid by two Universities for six months of the year. It seems unique to me from the Higher Education perspective. So do you think this is a forerunner to innovative opportunities that might exist in employment in a post COVID world?

Yong Zhou:

I would hope so. I think this, we started the conversation about having two jobs before COVID become a pandemic. Before it spread across the globe, but I think it should be. I feel like this job has been great for me because I'm with two Universities, I have two groups of colleagues and it's complimentary.

Jim Watterston:

The other innovation around the job was, it was meant to be two lots of six months. We've now been able to blend that together. So just talk a little bit about how you manage your time over the sort of the course of the 12 month period.

Yong Zhou:

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You're absolutely right. I feel like I am with both Universities all the time because of COVID because the use of Zoom and we have all Universities closed up here in the US. I'm sure in Melbourne you're closed for a while. So I actually stay in Oregon, but I have more meetings now with colleagues actually from Melbourne and University Kansas. And I'm in Department meetings, with the University of Kansas all the time, really just to meet with a lot more people. Get to know a lot more people than before.

Jim Watterston:

So lets, move on to the substantive issue really that we wanted to talk about today, which is about how schools have coped during the pandemic and, what a post COVID world will look like in education. So can you give us your perception primarily from the US but other countries that you've engaged with, about how schools have coped with the changes that they've been required to make during COVID?

Yong Zhou:

Well, I think the big change for all schools, if you are looking across everywhere, US, China, the UK and Australia you mean to a certain degree is the addition of remote learning. Some places they are able to do. They have the technology to do online learning, but not every country, some African countries, even like China. And some, I think in Malaysia, Indonesia, not all of the countries can do fully online because that required a lot more technology, but this countries have done television programming or radio programming. It's an interesting, increase of remote learning. Basically, it's technology based. I think that's, quite precious to think about.

Yong Zhou:

So that's one big chance, and taking a big chance is that it's students and teachers experiencing all this lockdown learning or online learning. Which is the shotgun, Economic experts have been trying to convince schools that technology can be useful for 20, 30, 40 years. But this is the first time almost universally, every student and every teacher experienced to that and that experience is good, but they had that experience.

Yong Zhou:

Then the third one is that remote learning enabled students and teachers to understand, that learning can take place without being in the same confined classroom or without being at the same school time. So this has enabled students, parents, and teachers to access resources from beyond the classroom. It has enabled them to collaborate across classrooms even schools. It has also enabled the possibility of global collaboration for projects.

Jim Watterston:

Yeah. Sure. So just taking that a little bit further, you and I wrote an article in 2020, that was a little bit provocative that had the title, COVID-19 a catalyst for change or a retreat to the past. So I guess we were trying to speculate about what would happen in the post COVID era. What's your view in terms of the conversation that we're having now, are schools going to continue to move forward and use digital learning in a different way and have opportunities that they didn't have before? Or are we going to just wait until this is over and sort of retreat back to where we were before?

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Yong Zhou:

Well, Jim you and I actually wrote three articles together. So right now I think, it looks like there is light at the end of the tunnel. And with many schools eager to return to normal. Globally speaking, normal. I'm very concerned about the normal meaning they go back to school as if the pandemic never happened. So I think that we need to think about, can we not get rid of remote or online learning? Can we redevelop that into something bigger and more collaborative? Can we engage global collaboration and not as seriously as before, can we rethink about what we were arguing about?

Yong Zhou:

Students are the owners of their own learning. How can we help students now with the global access to resources and learning partners? Can we enable students to truly engage in personalized learning? To personalize learning. Can we also get our students to doing more project based learning since we have the global partnerships, can we also get our students to then not more actively, become social activists in promoting global changes. We've been thinking a lot about those issues, you and I.

Jim Watterston:

And so one of the things that sort of drove us to write those articles was the idea that pre COVID, there were already some deficiencies across large Education Systems throughout the world. And the idea was, that we were trying to develop was that, we needed to change anyway. And so COVID has helped us a little bit to catalyze that change, or at least think about things that we need to keep doing.

Jim Watterston:

So what hope do you think there is about making necessary changes around curriculum and your idea that of student agency and the other things that we talked about, what hope is there of pushing through this pandemic, not knowing when it's going to finish and also with the kind of issues that have arisen around well-being of teachers and, heavy workloads during this period, do you really think that we will be able to create the change required that we knew was necessary before COVID?

Yong Zhou:

Well, I'm sure Jim. I see a lot of teachers, parents are looking to create new learning possibilities. I think that's with the... We also see students are trying to become more leaders, but I don't know the percentage of that. I don't know how systems are ready. I think we have individuals on the ground who are already creating new learning possibilities, for example, those learning pods on Facebook. And there's different... Various many Institutions founded by parents. I think that's happening. But those may be benefiting just the upper middle class parents, not everybody.

Yong Zhou:

We also see a lot of the teachers, having conversations really almost every day, I would see them on Twitter rethinking about education, collaborating with each other. But the question is that, are systems ready. If systems. I think of going back, I think that's what's happening now in some US States they thinking about, well, we are worried about student learning loss. Let's give them more test. Let's bring back more standardized testing. From my observation, let's stop standardized testing. Or rethink standardized testing administer different ways. Don't force schools to teach to the test, don't have students to learn to the test. We might have some changes.

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Yong Zhou:

Another thing you and I kept talking about this is the School of Education. I know Melbourne Graduate School of Education has been leading new forms of assessment to do with innovation, but can we do more? I think this is a time for us probably, to think about more engagement with the schools, more engagement with them meeting the big changes. However, just purely from a fellow to say, are school education going, is education going to change. I am not sure, really. I think that needs good leadership. I'm concerned about leaders of Educational Systems, not thinking about this great crisis as a great opportunity to redo, rethink education.

Jim Watterston:

So your point about the Melbourne Graduate School of Education is right. We're, actually trying to reform and rethink our MTeach, Master of Teachers curriculum. And so that it is contextualized around a post pandemic environment. So, what is it about school systems that prevents them from being that flexible? Prevents them from really establishing those fundamental changes that most people would, whole heartedly support? How does systems sort of lose their way in that sense of being innovative and going forward?

Yong Zhou:

You know, if you think about Educational Systems, we tend to think about the Ministers or the Executive Directors or those people or Superintendents, they may be at the top trying to make big changes. But a lot of those big changes really happen in the classroom, happens in the school. Teachers and students are innovative if we can drive them to change, but the system itself like to prevent that. We like to promote one type of method, one type of peer level, one type of curriculum, one type of assessment. So therefore we constrain that innovation.

Yong Zhou:

I think we should really retreat from prescribing everything for our students. What if we only prescribe like the 30% of the curriculum for students and let's work on students besides the other 70%, that might be more valuable? The 30% percent is absolutely what we need, anyone to become a citizen, they have to have the common knowledge common skills and common understanding, common social values.

Yong Zhou:

And then let's think again about assessment. Do we have to test every student every year? Probably not. How about we try sampling the whole population, to try and understand the system quality. And even if we want to understand the student's progress. Why don't we test them every three years? But also now, when the COVID, what about, abroad, statewide, professional development for teachers? Get teachers to understand the new purpose of education, the new context of teaching, understand what helps students learn the best.

Jim Watterston:

So, in that response, you mentioned the "new purpose of education". So what, what will be the new purpose of education in a post pandemic world?

Yong Zhou:

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Well, I think the first thing which education has mentioned about, but no education system has seriously done is to educate children as human beings. I think of the pandemic. And also right now, the geopolitical fight with different countries. This is a reflection of us focusing too much on the economic being of students. Schools have been trying to prepare economical beings, to get a job, to drive the global economy, to gain global competitiveness.

Yong Zhou:

But we forget how to live together. With pandemic, we recognize we live in a globalized world. We got to worry about the kids in Africa, in Malaysia, in South America, every place we have to be able to live together. And this is something about humanity we have not figured out. And today we still have the nationalism driving Educational system to teach you to become enemies of other countries or, to defend yourself.

Yong Zhou:

I think that needs to change. We need to rethink about human values and as humanity, what it matters, we're not just blind, economical beings, trying to make a dollar here, a dollar there. The second thing this change is truly emphasizing the value of creativity, human beings in the future is unpredictable. We cannot just be memorizing existing answers to existing problems for tomorrow. We have to create new solutions, adapt to unpredictability, and that is what schools don't do. Schools right now, it's most schools, I would say, teach children the existing answers, how to solve an existing problem, but what we need is children living on uncertainty, living on unpredictability. And that's very important. I think those two things I would right now highlight as a part of the new purpose of education.

Jim Watterston:

Fantastic Answer. But I guess, as you were giving that answer and absolutely as we've been talking. What would you suggest to principals who are listening or school leaders who are listening to this podcast right now that they do in the short term to try and take back the agency? You mentioned before about innovation being better placed in the classroom than at the top of the system. So what would a principal sort of have to do now to start thinking about this new way of teaching, this new way of educating young people for a purposeful life, rather than just a job? Can you give us a few ideas about what people can do right now?

Yong Zhou:

I think right now the first thing, could we start by asking every school and every teacher to work with every student to ask us, what are you interested in, and what are you good at. To develop some form of strength based and passion driven learning and this partially, no, not entirely, but partially, that's one of the things I think we can do now. To get students to understand their strengths, their weaknesses, and understand that they can create value for others and others can create value for them. To teach about human interdependence. And the second thing is actually, could we engage our students in global projects?

Jim Watterston:

So in terms of advocating around national testing and some of those constraints that, for schools to be really focused on a very dense and deep curriculum, how do we advocate to Ministers and to

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System Leaders, to be able to create that space for the challenges that you outlined. And the opportunities that exist for schools then to sort of make a more personalized approach to individual learning, because engagement is a major issue. And there are lots of young people who have become slightly more disengaged during this pandemic and some who have thrived. But so how would you sort of support school leaders to use their capacity, to advocate to Systems and Governments about making some of those changes?

Yong Zhou:

One of the things I've tried to, bring to the attention of leaders is to look at educational reforms over the past 30 years, 40 years. We probably have not made the kind of just improvement as we wished, so that it gives us one piece of evidence to say what we did in educational research, investment, adjustment of the system. There had not been massive major changes but even if there were major changes, you tend to see, in terms of measures, were only measuring literacy and numeracy.

Yong Zhou:

And so, PISA hasn't changed much, (inaudible) hasn't changed much, that's the international study. NAPLAN hasn't changed that much, in the US NAEP, The National Assessment of Educational Program changing that much. So we should learn that it has not really worked well, even if it did work well, did we help our students gain the so-called 21st Century skills?

Yong Zhou:

I don't think we have that. I don't think we've done that. There's so much people talking about new skills, new knowledge, but not many schools are doing that. There's no assessment of that. We need to change that. So I keep looking to help our school leaders. If they are willing to look at the past, look at what the actions they've taken, how much improvement there has been? Not much. And also now we have this new opportunity to think about what the future actually needs.

Yong Zhou:

I think the pandemic has really accelerated the space of change, how, for example, remote work and global connection. So that's where we need to look and say, how about our students become globally connected, become more personalized, become the owner or owners. I know that of course we need teachers to be prepared. We also need teachers who understand, who can become personal consultants, advisors, mentors, to students. More than just being the instructor of knowledge and skills in the classroom.

Jim Watterston:

We could talk all day. There is so much here that we really need to rethink and quickly. But in talking about that globalized world and young people being able to participate inter culturally. The equity around access to technology is a really big issue. How can we provide that equity right across the world so that we can have a global society that interacts and learns any time anywhere? And, so what is it about that kind of obligation that I think, the more wealthier countries have to making sure that the whole world sort of progresses.

Yong Zhou:

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Well, thanks so much. That's why I have become quite concerned. Big businesses, are trying to, Google and Elon Musk those guys are trying to create a global network access. So maybe in five years, everybody in the world can have access to the internet, but then, of course, everybody needs devices. Then you need smart devices or computers, all those connections. I think all developed countries has that responsibility to help provide that access.

Yong Zhou:

And once that access is made. Education, educators from different places, have to dive in with that several hundred million students who don't have schools who don't have teachers. What are we gonna do? I think that's where globally speaking, developed countries, kids in developed countries can become teachers, tutors, mentors. That's how we change the whole world. I think developed countries cannot just be self-sufficient, wealthy by themselves. Our value has to at least partially be realized by helping others to develop their lives.

Jim Watterston:

Thanks Yong. I really appreciate it. As I said, it's been a great conversation. One that we haven't completed, I guess what I've learned from the pandemic was that teachers made the change. When we had to pivot to online learning it wasn't Ministers that it wasn't System Leaders. It all happened very quickly. And every teacher in every system across the world was able to find a new way of providing education to young people.

Jim Watterston:

And I think that's the exciting part. That's the bit that then gives us hope that we can continue to make the necessary changes because once teachers have the agency and have the capacity to undertake that innovation, then I think we really will see a different type of education emerging. So thank you for your time. It's been really great to talk to you again, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

Yong Zhou:

Thank you.

Genevieve Costigan:

Thank you so much, Jim and Yong for that insightful discussion Talking Teaching is produced by Zane Kingi, Karl Smith and myself. See you next time.