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Victoria Ward in conversation Transcript

Roger Firman

Hello, my name is Roger Firman from the UK Association for Accessible Formats, thank you for joining us today.

It is my immense pleasure to welcome Victoria Ward, from New College Worcester, as our guest. The theme is teaching, and preparing for exams. Victoria, glad you could be with us today.

Victoria Ward

Thank you, Roger. Glad to be with you.

Roger

Can we begin with what drew you to music before your time at New College?

Victoria

What drew me to music? Well, I was introduced to the cello at the age of nine, and this was an era when instrumental lessons were provided free of charge during the school day, and I took to it really well. Within a couple of years I got to grade five, and then my teacher encouraged me

to apply to the Birmingham School of Music as it was then, the Junior Department which I attended on Saturdays. I was really fortunate and I played in two youth orchestras with my parents giving up their Friday nights and all day Saturday to chauffeur me about. I was very lucky and I went on to take a music degree where I was introduced to electronic music and that's something else in which I have a very keen interest, and I've always enjoyed playing.

For a long time I played in a semi-professional string quartet. Let me say it's always given me great joy and it's something I very much wanted to give back, hence me going into teaching. I started off teaching in mainstream, And I'm really grateful that I've always taught in schools where music has very much been valued.

Roger

Can you recall what attracted you to apply to join New College Worcester?

Victoria

Well, I had been working at a very large and successful mainstream comprehensive, which I thoroughly enjoyed. However, I wanted some creative development, so I started looking around for a local Head of Department post. A job came up at NCW, I had never heard of NCW. I didn't know a single thing about vision impairment, but I just went for it. I thought, well, I'll give it a go. I didn't know anything about the world I was entering. I didn't expect to be offered the job. And when they did offer it, I was pretty amazed. I remember being told at the time that I'd be entering a very small pond, and they were right on that one. anyway, I haven't looke back. I thoroughly loved teaching at New College Worcester.

Roger

From what you have said, I am guessing this was your first introduction to the world of braille and braille music?

Victoria

It was very much in at the deep end. When I first started, I would pick up a piece of braille and I couldn't even tell you if it was the right way up. Back then, all the students worked in hardcopy braille, I started in the year 2000, quite a while ago. I distinctly remember not liking the feeling of not being able to read what the students were writing. I felt illiterate, and that was a real incentive to learn, that went for braille music too. I had to learn the basics very quickly. I remember sitting with print music on one side and braille music on the other, and literally working through cell-by-cell. I had some marvellous students who helped me a lot and also really supportive colleagues.

Back then we had Duxbury So we could produce resources electronically, but we still used the Perkins a lot and we used to thermoform our hardcopy. Any mistakes, I had to try and squash the dots and try and resolve the situation. Anyway, I really enjoyed learning braille and it's a good job too because at the end of my first year I remember having to transcribe exam scripts so I needed to get to grips with it quickly.

Roger

With your work of teaching music, what were your impressions in understanding how blind musicians create and learn music, and did you feel there are any differences with how sighted musicians make music? Perhaps you could touch on the teaching and learning of braille music too?

Victoria

If I start off in general, my first impressions were in terms of Lower School Key Stage Three lessons. I pretty much thought I could teach the same lesson as I had taught in mainstream and certainly in terms of content, and that's what I did, because music is primarily an auditory experience, so much of it was the same. Then it became apparent to me that there were some differences.

By and large, the students that I've worked with have an absolutely amazing sense of pitch, and they are a lot less self-conscious than the students I'd experienced in mainstream. I've always done a lot of singing in my lessons, I'm a big believer in using the voice and at NCW, some of the classes had been quite small, but I still did a lot of singing and a lot of part singing, I always have. I've been able to do four-part rounds with one voice to a part, and that's something that I wouldn't have been able to do in mainstream. They would just have been too embarrassed, too self-conscious, And we're talking boys as well. They're really up for it.

You've got to consider the loss of incidental learning. Many of the students that I see at NCW haven't had access to actual instruments. So when I'm looking at world Music, I try and get my hands on a real sitar, and when we look at orchestral instruments, things like bassoons, and oboes, they're pretty hard to come by. The students might recognise the sound, but they don't know how it's produced or what the instrument is actually like, so I try to spend some time exploring different instruments, and as much as possible, get my hands on the real thing. One of the things so far that's eluded me is bagpipes, because I just don't know anyone that has bagpipes. So if there's anyone out there, please get in touch.

I remember I had a student once who taught himself how to play the guitar, and I was pretty amazed because they had obviously done it aurally, but they held the guitar flat on their lap because they had never seen how it should be played. They pressed their fingers vertically downwards. They did a pretty good job actually, but it was unconventional. I use a lot of percussion in my lessons. And you know, you just take it for granted that students will know how to bounce a beater on say, a metallophone, but actually I've met a lot of students who need to be taught how to bounce the beater on the xylophone or metallophone.

I do a lot of work also with graphic scores, tactile graphic scores, creating them, and realising music from them. Some students have never accessed notation, and I've actually encountered some students who didn't realise that music could be notated.

I realised another thing to think about was that a lot of our students find rhythm very tricky. I'm not talking about learning rhythms, but working rhythm out through notation. I think we take for granted just how pictorial print music is with its neatly grouped beats that make rhythms so much easier to work out.

A lot of our students do have perfect pitch, they have a really good sense of pitch and a lot of them don't need to think about it. They don't think in intervals, they just hear a note and know what note it is. They haven't got to work it out, so that means that some of the strategies I used in mainstream don't quite relate. I'd say mostly the students really keep me on my toes. I've encountered some students who have absolutely superhuman skills. And in mainstream I might have come across maybe one student in five years with perfect pitch, at NCW There will always be a significant number of students who have perfect pitch, and the choir is just great. It stays in tune and we can tackle some really challenging music.

But we do have students who may have some learning difficulties in some areas, but they may be truly amazing at music. We've had some brilliant pianists who can improvise in any style and any key. We've had several students achieve Performance Diplomas on the piano and their spatial awareness in leaping across the piano keys is absolutely remarkable.

In terms of extracurricular music, I have seen a bit of a change over the years. The choir has always been very, very strong, but I would say there are fewer traditional ensembles. I used to have a recorder group and we had a brass band. Now there's a jazz group, and our rock school. If you think about it, those are based on an aural tradition. The groups where lots of pre-learning is involved are probably less prevalent now.

we have a musical theatre group and that remains very strong and when you consider at the moment we've only got seventy-three students, I'd

say about thirty are in the musical theatre group, so actually approaching half the school, I think that's really good.

Another thing that is very different is being totally reliant on memory. Now, of course, sighted musicians may be able to sight-read, but actually this makes them pretty lazy at remembering things. Some of our students might take a lot longer to learn something, but once it's there, it's really secure. I remember actually being totally chastised by my students for referring to music and performing. And they challenged me to abandon it. It was quite liberating and very scary, But it did make me focus more on the listening.

At this point I can recall a story. I said earlier that I used to play semi-professionally in a string quartet. I remember turning up to play at a wedding and the person who organised the music folders had forgotten to bring the cello music, so I had to do the entire thing from memory. So we started with Pachelbel's Cannon and then we had to plough on with the harder stuff and I just bring that to mind. I think about the students because actually it's quite a skill and I think it's a really good one.

I have obviously students who are learning to read braille music, and sometimes I have students who can read the notes but really struggle to memorise it. The ones who cope best are the ones who can internalise it. They can think it into music, so they imagine the sound, and those students, I think, tend to progress a lot more quickly than those who can't.

I Encourage them to spot patterns and to sing as well as play. Having said that, there doesn't seem to be one strategy which suits everyone. You need an individual response and approach.

Roger

As you travelled this road, were you conscious of how the examination process might be different, or not, for blind musicians?

Victoria

Well, this is a topic very dear to my heart because I have always felt that this is misunderstood.

The whole point of modified papers is to make the exam accessible and we don't want things to be made easier. As you know, the qualification needs to have integrity. I'm thinking particularly about music here, so with things like the Skeleton Score questions, that's where a student follows just an outline of a score as they listen to the music and they have to write answers about that music. And it is usually something that they won't have seen before.

The print papers are designed specifically to be helpful to the sighted student, so it will have things like boxes around certain parts. It can have brackets; it will have little prompts and reminders. All of which get transcribed into braille, and I think that gets in the way of the notes.

I Don't actually think it's equitable to transcribe every single thing that's in the print into the braille because it clutters things up and complicates things.

To expand on this, the layout and some of the signs used in the exam papers might be unfamiliar to the student, because there's just simply not the same access to past papers as there is for sighted students. Also, when you think about it, a Skeleton Score exercise is designed to be read and answered whilst the music is playing. The sighted candidate can write with their silent pencil, you know, and jot down answers in the moment. Not so with the brailist, it's a very different way of working. The music has to be stopped so that the brailist can type on the Perkins or listen to their speech software, they won't be able to scan the page and glean all the helpful clues that sighted candidates can see at a glance. If I were to conduct the test as an aural exercise with my A-level students, they would absolutely fly through it.

They can usually spot cadences, keys, identify a chromatic chord in an instant. But they may really struggle with the skeleton score exercise

and these are students who can read braille music just for an example, when asked to write out the notes in a missing section of the melody.

It can take them quite a while to work out exactly which missing notes they're being asked to notate, and yet it might be really obvious to the sighted candidate whose eyes would just go straight to the blank bit and will know exactly in a moment which part of the question is being referred to. It's just simply not the same process for the brailist.

Also, you've got to consider the whole notion of extra time, and that's another thing that's very often misunderstood. It's absolutely the case that reading braille music will take a lot longer, an A-level music exam is already quite long and if you give a student 100% extra time it can create enormously long exams that are really fatiguing. A lot of the preparation I think is about exam techniques. I practiced a past paper question recently with my A-level students and I asked them to compare and contrast two sections of a movement and it just took them ages to do simply because they were juggling a Question Paper, two volumes from the score and writing their answers down as well. There's just a lot of bulky stuff to contend with.

If you think about the GCSE Listening Exam, there are usually gaps, timed gaps between the audio. Often there's a bit of confusion about how the extra time is to be distributed there. A student might not need or might not want the extra time on every question, but there might be one question where they want quadruple time.

Another thing to consider is they might want to write down an answer while the extract is playing in the same way that a sighted candidate would. So they need the music to be stopped to do that. As long as they don't get any extra hearings, then that's perfectly acceptable. But the students need training in this. They need those self advocacy skills to be able to say to their invigilator who operates the audio, I need it stopping here, and that takes some confidence.

Another thing to consider is the A-level set works. Now the board that we use requires the students to study two whole Symphonies in detail. You may think that the exam boards would Commission these to be put into braille, no, we have to pay for them to be transcribed. That is a significant expense running into several thousands of pounds. We can't

pass that cost on. We understand how important it is for students to be able to access the scores. What I'll say is that it certainly doesn't encourage other schools to provide braille scores, not if it's prohibitively expensive.

At the end of the day, I think mostly you have to really focus on exam techniques. And some of the time is spent talking to the students, is it really worth spending ten minutes reading 4 multiple choice rhythms for just one mark? Sometimes I tell the students to take an educated guess and move on. It's all about tactics I'm afraid. And again, it might be very obvious to the candidate reading the notes in the print, it might be clear in the multiple choice where the differences are. In the braille, you're just looking at a load of dots, and you can only see what's under the finger. So it all takes a lot longer. It's just not equitable in that sense, I don't think.

Roger

In your role as Strategic Lead for VI education, have you observed any significant changes in what is expected from exams nowadays than, say twenty years ago?

Victoria

Well, firstly, I think it is important to say that exam boards have been very keen to get it right, and from our experience, certainly the quality of modification has really significantly improved in recent years.

In terms of access, when I first started there was a much, much more limited choice of font size with N 24 bold being the largest size available, whereas now students can have it in N 36, which I think is really large and a little unmanageable actually. They can also have an electronic paper which I think is a good move and much more in keeping with their usual method of working for many.

Most students these days word process answers whereas twenty years ago, most would be brailled on a Perkins and then transcribed. With braille music, the answers do still tend to be done on a Perkins, although

I do have students who can input their braille into a Word document, and I can read it as braille dots.

Exam boards are much tighter now about requiring to evidence the need for access arrangements. So for instance, if you say the student needs 100% extra time, you have to have the evidence for that. Twenty years ago we had blanket permission for whatever access arrangements we felt appropriate for the students, but now each student has an individual application for each paper, which is a lot more admin, but that's just how it is.

In terms of exam content, I don't think the style of questions has changed significantly. For music, there's still a coursework element and for composing, students can produce scores electronically using MuseScore with NV Access, although this does need teaching. Some students come to us with very little Windows experience. And there isn't any score writing software that is compatible with braille notes, of which I'm aware.

I think importantly, teaching and learning has moved away from spoon feeding, in favour of teaching students the skills they need to be independent learners, and I think that is really important. It's more than just getting the students through an exam, they need to be able to survive in the big wide world, and sometimes we have students who've had too much done for them, and actually that isn't a kindness.

Roger

What does NCW do to ensure its teaching staff are fully equipped to deliver curriculum requirements across all subjects?

Victoria

Well, all the teachers here are QTVI, and it's a mandatory qualification for anyone who teaches groups, to children and young people with a vision impairment. So all are experienced subject specialists, as well as

QTVIs, which I think makes us pretty special. I say special with a small "s" so I don't regard us as your typical and special school. I think of us as being more like a comprehensive school whose students are all VI. We follow the national curriculum and make every subject accessible, and the VI skills are both integrated and interwoven, all our teachers read braille.

Also, we have quite an emphasis on supporting students using speech software, so we try to have a rolling program of CPD to keep our skills up-to-date. We've got quite an active outreach department, and I think that helps us to keep our skills current. I think as an institution, it's really healthy for us to be as outward looking as possible, and that helps keep us up-to-date with things we want our students to have, like a toolkit of approaches so they can choose the right tool for the job depending on the situation. So sometimes they might want to just listen to their speech and that is fine. And then if they need to see the detail to read how things are spelled, then they can use their braille. We've got a much bigger emphasis on e-braille now, and I think that's been Absolutely Fabulous, it's opened up more possibilities, and actually I think is helping to preserve braille. It's portable and it's easy to access. So I think that's really important.

Roger

Have you found major differences between the examination Boards and if so what are your thoughts as to whether this is or could be a contributory factor for blind and vision-impaired candidates?

Victoria

It's interesting really. A few years ago, we were all forced to have a change and that's when all the exam boards revised their syllabi, and so we had to have a good look at the different boards. We went for the board that had the Fewest and the most straightforward set works, and also we looked at how frequently those set works might change because as I said, it was such a big investment getting them put into braille.

There isn't meant to be one exam board that is easier or harder. When you kind of stand back and look at it, they all involve some elements of analysis, performing, and composing, certainly at music. Usually there's quite an element of choice. As I said before, it's a lack of past papers that is really the problem, and incidentally, we went with eduqas and I think they've been really good in terms of supporting us as a college and in their communication. So I think that's also key for us that there is someone that you can connect with and have a question answered and have a dialogue. And as I said, I think that is something that is quite important.

Roger

Does the College teach students how to prepare electronic documents, Word for instance, for best accessibility and usability?

Victoria

Yes, we do that. we also model good practice as a school. So all our electronic documents have to hit certain criteria to make sure that they're fully accessible and we try and do that right across everything. So we've got some governors who are VI, and I think it's really important that we as much as possible model good practice.

Roger

What challenges does the College face in preparing students for life after NCW?

Victoria

Gosh, that's a huge question. First of all, I think it's really important that our curriculum is really broad. Within our curriculum, I'm really proud that we champion subjects like Art, PE, and Drama. That gives them a real breadth and preparation for life, and every subject is important.

I talk about arts, it's not just about teaching art. They plug gaps in incidental learning. They get to access objects that you wouldn't normally see, things like skulls, and shells. It helps students overcome tactile defensive issues, develops fine Motor skills.

I always say PE is more than just PE. It's absolutely essential for our young people in developing their proprioception, vestibular development, posture, strength, stamina, self-esteem, and social skills.

Drama is all about spatial awareness, body language, facial expressions, helps with social interactions. Students can role play, they can interact and deal with issues in a safe and managed way.

Science, they get to learn about the world around them through hands-on experiments.

Computer science too. Lots of our students really excel in languages, we buck the trend there as well because they seem to be really high achieving. I think it's focusing on speaking, listening in the target language. Also we've branched out into Welsh and Russian.

I think our USP is that the students can access the whole curriculum and they're not constrained. But we've also got that additional layer, Roger. Exam results are not everything. We want them to be independent and to have good social skills, independent living skills, IT, mobility, and braille, all absolutely essentials of our VI curriculum. As I said before, we're very pro braille and we keep repeating the link between braille literacy and employability, and I talked earlier about that toolkit of approach, we want our students to be able to touch type, and to understand windows-based systems as these are most prevalent in the workplace. We have a huge focus on careers education. I think that's absolutely vital and we've got really high aspirations. We look for good role models, so we often invite former students in to talk about their journeys, and it's really important to me that we employ VI staff. I think that's absolutely imperative and Roger, I haven't finished. We've got our

waking day curriculum so that the learning doesn't stop when school day ends. We have really committed care staff who reinforced those independent living skills, and the activities team where the students get to experience really amazing activities that develop confidence, self-esteem and just give them experience they might not have had the opportunity to have.

I'm sorry if that sounds like a blatant advert for NCW, but I just think it is an amazing place which may not be for everyone and we couldn't take everyone, but I think that's why our outreach is so important. We can share some expertise and again, that's a two-way process. I wouldn't want us to exist as an isolated bubble.

Roger

It's fantastic to hear of all those really positive things and that's a wonderful note on which to end.

In closing, I would like to thank you Victoria for being with us today and for your very thoughtful answers in this very complex and changing area, And it's been lovely having you as our guest and to be able to learn what's going on at NCW and how things have changed and developed over time, and going into the future.

Victoria

It's a pleasure. Thank you very much for inviting me, Roger.

Roger

Thank you very much. Until next time, till our next webinar, from us all. Thank you very much for joining us and goodbye.