

Actuaries as Educators with Amanda Aitken

Interview Transcript

Julia Lessing: Hi, everyone. Today we're talking with Amanda Aitken. Amanda is an Actuarial Educator at the Actuaries Institute, with over 20 years experience as an actuary in general, insurance and worker's comp schemes. Amanda joined the Institute's education team in 2018 to develop and teach the CMP communication, modeling and professionalism subject. She has a special interest in data analytics now data science (we're calling it!) and is currently the Chief Examiner of the Data Science Applications subject. She's a member of the Data Science Practice Committee and the Data Science Education Faculty. Amanda, thank you so much for joining us today.

Amanda Aitken: Oh, my pleasure, Julia. Well, I'm excited about talking to you.

JL: Really excited about hearing your story about being an actuary and an educator as well. So I wonder if we can start, Amanda, if you can tell us a little bit about your current role as an Actuarial Educator.

AA: Okay. Well, yes, I joined the actuarial education team at the Institute 4.5 years ago. As you said, I started teaching the Communication, Modelling and Professionalism subject. That was the first subject I taught. And now I'm teaching the Data Science Applications subject. So that's been a really interesting journey. I've had to learn a whole lot in pulling the materials together for that subject.

And my role involves running tutorials to help students get across all the detail in the modules, answering questions for them on the discussion forum, writing their assignments in their exams, marking. Well, I don't do the marking myself, actually, so we have volunteers, volunteer actuaries who do the marking and I just oversee that process to make sure that it's sort of fair for all students.

And yep we've got a good process going. So yeah, there's always a lot to do. I feel like there's, you know, one thing after the other that has to be done throughout the semester, but it's always interesting and exciting.

JL: Sounds like a really interesting, but also a really unique role for an actuary, Amanda. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about why you became an actuary to start with and then how you ended up becoming an educator after that?

AA: Yeah. Okay. So I have my grandmother to thank for becoming an actuary. When I was in year 12 or all throughout school, I suppose I'd always really liked maths and did quite well at maths and my grandmother was reading an article in the newspaper about the top ranked jobs, and I think actuaries at the time was at the top of the list in terms of pay and work conditions and I suppose career satisfaction.

So she mentioned it to me and I'd never heard of actuarial studies or becoming an actuary before and I didn't really know what else I wanted to do. I think early on I wanted to be a news anchor. That was my aspiration very early on.

JL: A news anchor!

AA: That never really went anywhere. And so, yeah, I just thought I'd try it. So I studied commerce and law and quickly discovered that the law part of it was not for me, but focused on the commerce and specialising in actuarial. So I worked as an actuary for about 20 years. I think, maybe just under. And what I realised is that in all the roles that I'd had as an actuary, one of the things that I'd really loved was explaining things to others or sort of running education sessions.

I remember when I used to work at WorkSafe I ran an actuarial 101 session. So for some of our medical staff or claims staff who didn't really know anything about the actuarial valuations, we ran these sessions to help them understand how what they did when they're making decisions about claims can actually impact the cost of the scheme.

And I loved that, just loved being able to explain something that I had in my head to someone else and add value for them. So that's when I started reflecting on maybe wanting to move into education. And when I say that early on, I wanted to be a news anchor, woman or man. I mean, I did seriously think about that when I was about ten years old or something, because I'd just like performing, I guess was what led me to that.

But I had also always thought that I might want to be a teacher and my mum actually qualified as a teacher and worked for a few years before she had my sister and me. Yes, I thought about teaching as well, but I think it was my mum that talked me out of it and said, "Oh no you don't get paid much to teach."

"You go along with what Nana suggested and be an actuary." Yeah, I guess I'd always had that in the back of my mind. So yeah, and I had a sort of midlife crisis and tried to work out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. That's when I thought, Oh, maybe I should go back to that idea that I really do enjoy teaching.

But at the same time, I didn't want to lose all the years of sort of effort and knowledge that I'd gained in the actuarial area. So when I saw the ad for Actuarial Educators that the

Institute was running, I thought that could be perfect, because then I'm able to do teaching, but actually still calling on all that actuarial expertise that I've gained.

So I'm not sort of just wasting all of those things.

JL: Yeah, it sounds like the perfect blend of your desire to teach and to explain things to people and to be able to use those skills, but also to hold onto the big investment that you've made in your actuarial career and to also share that actuarial knowledge that's come with 20 years of practice as well.

Yeah, really that's such a big valuable asset that you've got and so much knowledge and experience that you've got to share and to teach our next generation of actuaries as well.

AA: Yeah. So, you know, I was very lucky that that opportunity came up really just at the right time for me.

JL: Yeah, amazing. And you've shared with me before, Amanda, that when you were a young girl, you were also featured in a documentary around bullying, which was a really great, really great piece of work. Did you ever consider going into acting instead of actuarial?

AA: Oh, I don't think I was ever good enough to really consider taking it on as a career path. But I loved acting and I think whenever I see a stage show in particular, I always wish that I was behind the curtains with all the other actors, you know, being part of it. So, I don't know, maybe one day I'll take up, I'll join a local theater company or something.

JL: And so you're so you really, you really enjoy that performance side of work. Whether it's in your work or in your personal life and being able to present and perform, I suppose. I think it's a really valuable skill for actuaries as we're trying to get our messages across, whether or not we're teaching the next generation of actuaries or whether we're presenting to clients, that ability to convey our messages through our words and our presentations is a really important skill for all actuaries to have.

AA: Yeah, absolutely. And I think for a lot of actuaries, it doesn't come naturally. We often like playing with the numbers and maybe being behind the scenes a little bit and not having to talk to other people. I have seen studies into personalities of actuaries, and we're obviously not all the same. But I think for a lot of us, maybe we do tend to be a little bit more introverted and a bit less comfortable talking with a range of different people.

But it is really important for actuaries to be able to explain what they've done, because otherwise I think the complexity of what we're working on, if we can't explain it, then it really means nothing to a lot of people. It adds no value.

JL: Yeah. The value is in being able to communicate that complexity in a way that people can not just understand it, but know what to do with it, and really to be able to take action based on our advice and our work.

AA: Absolutely. And on a selfish side, you know, we also need to be able to communicate well, just to be able to promote the brand, 'actuary' so that more about what actuaries do and are interested in getting us engaged to help them.

JL: Absolutely. Absolutely. And so hopefully more young people coming through and, you know, will know about the actuarial profession. And lucky for you, your grandmother found that ad and was able to share that with you so here you are. So, Amanda, you're really shaping the next wave of actuaries with the work that you're doing as an Actuarial Educator with the Institute.

I wonder who's shaped - aside from your grandmother giving you the idea to become an actuary - Can you tell us a little bit about who's shaped and mentored and inspired you and your career over the years?

AA: Yeah, there are a few different people that come to mind at all stages of my life, I guess. And the very first one that I think of was my Grade six maths teacher. And he was a bit of a- I mean, I didn't find him scary, but some students found him a bit scary looking. I think he was aware of that.

And I remember the very first day of school, I had to go home early. I think I had conjunctivitis and then I was away from school the day after and he actually called my mum and said, Oh, I'm really worried that maybe I've scared Amanda off. Some students can find me a bit scary looking and I was like, Not at all.

I really have conjunctivitis. Anyway, that's just something I always remember about him, but he's just such an inspiring person. So he firstly, I think, helped to bring out my love of math, which my dad had already instilled in me. And I remember that we spent so much time in class building all these different shapes. Yeah, 3D shapes basically.

And it was so much fun, but we learned so much as well. So it really just taught us to have fun with maths. But I also remember little mini lectures he would give us about, you know, the risks of smoking and drinking and things like that. Just really casual little comments

he'd throw in and so sort of inspiring or formed some of my early ideas around I don't know, like acting ethically as well.

JL: Some of your values maybe.

AA: Yeah, definitely. So, yeah. I'll always remember Mr. Thomas, I think my best teacher at school. Inspiring. And then I mentioned my dad. So definitely my dad is a big mentor in my life. My dad is a civil engineer, has successfully run his own business for many years. He sort of encouraged me to get into my own business at one point and said, I'll never look back and I guess that's true I'm always glad that I tried it, but that in the end I wanted to do something different.

JL: Well, I am too, Amanda. I am too. Because that's where we met when you started your business and I was starting my business and we were able to share notes and compare notes. And so I'm glad that you did that, too, because that's how we met.

AA: That's very true. Yeah. And my dad is definitely my moral compass. And he's always the person I go to whenever I get stuck with things as well as my mum, I've always looked to both of them for advice on what the right thing to do is. And then more on an actuarial front, I guess my first manager at work, Mark Barda, he just had such a good attitude to having an open door policy.

And I remember he used to say, there is no such thing as a silly question. So it just really encouraged us to be inquisitive and ask questions and not feel worried about sounding stupid. I suppose if we ask the wrong question and he's now moved to Israel and has a really interesting job over there. But yeah, we've managed to stay in contact over the years, which is really good.

And then if I think to much more recently, another actuary, Martin Mulcare, I don't know if he considers himself the mentor to me, but I consider him a mentor and particularly when I started teaching the Communication, Modelling and Professionalism subject, Martin had previously run the Professionalism Course, so he was a fantastic sounding board for me in teaching the subject.

Yeah, also talking about any sort of ethical issues that came up or interesting things that I'd been thinking about that I needed to bounce the idea off of someone else. So yeah, lots of different people I think have inspired me and mentored me throughout my career, whether they knew it or not.

JL: Whether they knew it or not. Isn't that interesting, Amanda, because those first managers that we have really shape us, don't they? And it sounds like your first manager at work really shaped who you were and how you showed up as an actuary and what was okay to say how it was okay to behave and what was okay to do.

And such a powerful, a powerful role and certainly, Martin, I know I've had lots of conversations with him over the years as well. What a wonderful sounding board and so much, so much knowledge and experience, but also so much generosity and he's willing to share his experience and to be able to help guide and mentor others as well.

AA: Absolutely. And he's such a good listener as well. It taught me in any sort of conversation to hold back and let the other person speak first. But he would actually even prompt me to speak first, like if he were having a reflection on how the semester had gone, he would always start with, How do you think the semester went, Amanda?

Where as I was coming along, thinking Martin was just going to tell me what worked, what didn't work, but really puts it back on you to think about it but is very good at then listening to what you have to say.

JL: Very skilled at active listening, which is such a such a powerful skill for all of us, not just for actuaries.

AA: Definitely, and yeah, learned a lot about active listening when I did your course. So I became more aware of other people who are very good listeners already.

JL: Such a, such a powerful but underrated skill in something that we don't always learn at home when we're growing up, but really powerful in so many different situations.

AA: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And to say that at home that we don't learn it. I think I guess it depends on your family dynamic, but often I think at home when you're growing up as a child, you just having to fight to be heard sometimes on top of your siblings or on top of other things, your parents are thinking about, or so yeah, we probably practice more sort of speaking up as opposed to sitting back and listening.

But again, maybe that was just my family dynamic.

JL: I think all families are different, aren't they? And as I keep saying to my children, unfortunately, you got human parents, not highly skilled trained, qualified parents, you just got us.

AA: As do my children.

JL: We're all doing our best. So really interesting, Amanda, to hear that the people that have inspired and shaped you over the years had some kind of teaching capacities. So your sixth grade maths teacher, your dad as a teacher and supporter of your career, your first manager and Martin Mulcare as well, that all those four people that you've described have had some kind of teaching or mentoring role for you and that now you're doing that for other actuaries as well.

AA: Yeah, I hadn't thought about like that. But yeah. Yeah.

JL: So finally, Amanda, I just wanted to ask you, if there's actuaries out there who are looking at you and thinking, well, I'm an actuary, but I also have that sort of teaching aspiration. What advice would you have for actuaries who are wanting to keep their actuarial qualifications or maybe not even, but to sort of build on that and use that to have a teaching career in some capacity?

AA: Yeah. Well, I guess if actuaries are interested in moving into the education area, then there are lots of volunteer opportunities they could try out first. So if they're not quite ready to leave their current role and join the Institute's education team, then they might volunteer to scrutineer assignments. I'd have a go at assignment or the exam for a particular subject that interests them.

They can get involved in marking. They could get involved as a member of the education faculty for each of the subjects that we run. So that's basically a group of qualified actuaries that oversee the different subjects that we provide within the Institute. So that might be a nice, soft way to sort of test out what they think about getting involved, at least with the Institute in Education.

JL: And because I'm a huge fan of volunteering, I mean, I talk about this all the time that if you're wanting to build your career, volunteering is a great way to build those skills that you might not be ready to do at work. Or maybe you're not ready to make that career leap just yet. If people were wanting to do those kinds of get involved in that kind of

volunteering, that education volunteering, what's the best way for them to do that is, is that they advertised or should they get in touch with you?

What's the best way for people to do that?

AA: If actuaries aren't already seeing the weekly bulletin that goes out from the Institute, then make sure that they get in contact with the Institute because we usually advertise for all of those roles. Yeah. And otherwise just reach out to education@actuaries.asn.au and get that. If you say that you're interested in volunteering, you'll go straight on the list.

We're always looking for new volunteers and enthusiastic volunteers. So I guess another option, which is something that I tried by accident, I guess, in the workplace, is to look for opportunities to teach in the workplace or to run different sessions, to share your knowledge with others, particularly if you're in an actuarial team and working with non actuarial teams.

Sometimes we take for granted that the things that are in our heads are obvious to others as well and often they really aren't. So we talk about actuarial liabilities and other people in non actuarial teams probably have no idea what we're talking about unless they've taken a particular interest or been in the organization for a long time. Or even then, I think they might have been in the organization for a really long time.

Heard lots of people talking about these big numbers related to liability valuations, but not really understood what they mean. So yeah, it takes some initiative and offer to run a lunchtime session that just goes through the basics of what is a liability? Why do we care about it? What does it mean for you in your role? That can be a really nice way to practice those teaching skills as well and feel good about having some knowledge to share with others.

I think for me that's probably one of the reasons I like teaching the most. It's a really selfish reason, but it makes me feel a bit better about myself if I if others say to me, Oh, that's really interesting, I feel like I've learned something, then I think I've got some value to add because I've been able to help someone else.

So yeah, definitely look for those opportunities in your organisation or even within your community, I suppose. Yeah. And the only thing that I can think of is that it's taken me a while to learn this, and I probably don't quite believe this message fully myself. But I keep telling myself that you don't have to know everything to be a good teacher.

I think we assume that in order to teach a subject, we have to be an expert on every aspect of that topic. And if we're not, then we can't possibly be a good teacher. But I think often we know a lot more than what we give ourselves credit for, and usually a lot more than students who are enrolling in a subject that you might be teaching.

And I think the key is to be open minded and always be willing to learn more and not be afraid to have a question that comes your way that you have to say. Actually, I'm not really

sure I need to look into this a bit more, and I guess that even applies to work as an actuary. Sometimes we feel that we need to know everything about, you know, anything to do with whatever number we're reporting on.

But sometimes it is okay to say, actually, that's a great question, I'm not sure I'll get back to you. So definitely applies in teaching as well. And most of the time I think most of my learning comes from trying to answer questions that students ask. Those really good questions that you think, Yeah, I hadn't really thought about that before. Let me look into it for you.

JL: So, that's happened to you then. Amanda, you found yourself wondering whether or not you've got the skills or the knowledge to teach some of these subjects. But then as you get into it, you find that you're learning and everyone's learning and it's okay to not feel like you need to know everything before you can teach that content.

AA: Absolutely. Yeah. And I definitely learn something new every semester too. Mostly off the back of questions that students ask me.

JL: Amazing because you're teaching data science, nearly said data analytics. Data science, yeah. I mean, that really wasn't taught when we were certainly not when we were undergraduates. But even as part of our fellowship exams, we, we didn't learn those. We didn't learn how to code. Well not really we didn't learned some of the modern analytical techniques that actuaries are using now.

So that what was that like for you, learning how to do those things that maybe weren't part of your own education and then being able to teach those that content as well?

AA: It's interesting because when I started to do online courses years ago, but before this role, even just because I had a self interest to learn a bit more, we did learn so much of the foundational aspects of data science at universities, all the statistical subjects that we took, they are the foundations of all the, you know, modern machine learning techniques now.

So I think when I started to learn more about some of the more modern techniques, I thought Oh okay I remember that from uni, but we have this idea that we didn't learn any of it at university. So I think we actually got quite a good grounding in many of the statistical concepts at university, but then for a lot of us we didn't then use them in the workplace.

I'd reflected on that a lot more recently and with others in my team as well, that we learn so much about statistics at university. And then at least for me, a lot of those concepts I

didn't end up applying at work. You know, some of the applications at work were actually a lot simpler than some of the fundamentals that we learned at university.

So I guess I did feel that a lot of it was there in the back of my head somewhere, and it didn't take much to bring it to the forefront and then it wasn't too big a leap to then go forward into okay with that foundational knowledge, these are the sorts of models that you can build and this is how you evaluate those models.

JL: Mm hmm. That's good to know. So that's and that's probably quite reassuring for some of the more experienced actuaries who are wondering whether or not they have the skills to use some of those modern techniques that maybe the foundations are already there. It's just a matter of learning some new tools and other things.

AA: Definitely. Yeah.

JL: Wonderful. So, Amanda, you've talked to us a bit about what it's like to be an Actuarial Educator. You've told us some of the how you got into this role. You've also told us who's shaped and inspired you over the years as well, and you've given some tips on how people can get involved in education roles, whether they're actually moving into one of those roles, but also whether they want to just do a little bit of volunteering in the space on the side to get in touch with the Institute or through that Monday bulletin to find opportunities to help.

So thank you so much for your time today. It's been really wonderful hearing about your journey into education and it sounds like you're absolutely in your element in this new role. It's not so new anymore, but having moved into an educator role an Actuarial Educator role.

AA: Yeah. Thank you. And I really enjoyed the discussion and I'm looking forward to doing some teaching alongside you soon too, Julia.

JL: I'm looking forward to that too, Amanda. All right. Thanks. Amanda and we'll put the contact details in the notes below as well for anyone wanting to get involved in those volunteer opportunities as well. Thanks so much for your time, Amanda.

AA: All right. Thank you.