

## NEXTcast Season 1, Episode 1: Heidi Marsh and the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning

An interview with Dr. Heidi Marsh, Humber College's Director of Scholarship for Teaching & Learning, about ways to improve teaching practices through research, and about what kind of music orangutans prefer.

**Nathan Whitlock:** Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. Every episode we talk to some of the faculty and staff, who are leading innovation both inside and outside the classroom. Our guest on this episode of NEXTcast is Heidi Marsh, director of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or SOTL, at Humber College. Heidi works out of The Centre for Teaching and Learning, where she and her team are building a culture of research and scholarly inquiry at Humber.

**Nathan Whitlock:** Hello Heidi, welcome to NEXTcast. So the idea of studying how people teach and learn, it sounds a little meta, so maybe you can explain it for me and for our listeners a little better. What exactly is the scholarship of teaching and learning?

**Heidi Marsh:** So we can think about great teachers, we know that there are all kinds of amazing things going on in Humber's classrooms. Often a distinction that's made is there is exemplary teaching and then there's scholarly teaching and that's really when you start to look toward the teaching and learning literature to try and improve your practice or use evidence to inform your decisions, but when we talk about the scholarship of teaching and learning, that takes it to a whole other level. So now you're not only consuming the teaching and learning literature, but you're also contributing to it. So you are actually gathering evidence about your teaching and the impact that it's having, and sharing that out with the rest of the teaching and learning community, so that you're elevating not only the level of teaching in your classroom, but that of everybody else as well.

**Nathan Whitlock:** So the idea is that you would be studying what you're doing in the classroom and then other people would use your results to create benchmarks or how does that process work?

**Heidi Marsh:** Sure. Yeah, it's one thing to say that I'm doing something great in my classroom, but it's great to have some data to kind of back that up. To say, no look, here's some evidence. This is what my students are telling

me about the impact that I'm having. Sometimes I think, you think why bother, if you have that gut feeling that what you're doing is really effective, but there's a story that I like to share. Early in my career, during my graduate studies, I was actually, I did some research with orangutans, and so routinely, this is at the Toronto zoo, routinely zoo keepers turn on the radio in the back room to give the orangutans something to do, keep them enriched. They're really psychologically intelligent creatures, so they need some extra stimulation. So the zookeepers always turn on the radio and at the time we were doing research with the orangutans using computers, so the orangutans could touch the computer, touch the touch screen and tell us what they knew, what they thought about things, and we thought, "Hey heres a cool opportunity. Let's see what kind of music the orangutans prefer, so then we can give them their choice in their enclosure." So we did this whole beautiful experiment. We had classical versus jazz versus rock and roll, and what would the orangutans pick? Every single orangutan, there was seven of them, had the exact same preference. Do you have any guesses?

Nathan Whitlock: I would, off the top of my head, I would say they maybe prefer classical as a soothing thing?

Heidi Marsh: So every single orangutan chose silence. So when we gave them a choice of any kind of music versus nothing, they wanted nothing. So why I like this story, is to say innovation is a great thing. It's great to think that you're trying something new and you have a gut sense that it's working, but until you do research and gather evidence, you never really know for sure the impact it's having. Sometimes in the projects that we support with faculty, they also find out other things that they didn't know were going on. So they are trying something new in their teaching, let's say to enhance student engagement in the classroom, but it ends up having all these other by products that they might otherwise not have known about if they'd never taken the time to ask.

Nathan Whitlock: Well you've made the case for why someone should consider doing this kind of research, doing this kind of scholarship, but I guess the next question, and it's probably a little trickier, is the idea of how. I mean the idea of doing research simultaneous to doing all your teaching and all your marking, that can seem a little bit daunting to someone who hasn't done it before. How do you help people get started and how do you get them on the way and get them into this mode of thinking?

Heidi Marsh: Faculty at Humber have a really wide variety in terms of their research experience and their research background. So I work with faculty that have PhD's and have been doing research in their fields for decades, and I

work with faculty that have literally never done research at all. So they are absolutely experts in their field, but they've never been involved in research in any way. So my team's goal is to meet faculty wherever they are along that spectrum. So we try to support people right through the research process, from the spark of an idea, helping them to develop that into a research plan, helping them to actually conduct the research in terms of administrative support, helping them to recruit their students and get their students excited about the project, all the way through to data analysis and to sharing their research story at the end of it.

Nathan Whitlock: Tell me a little bit about that team. How does that, who do you have working with you and what are their specialties, what do they do?

Heidi Marsh: So I'm lucky to work with four amazing Humber graduates, one current Humber student, all from Humber's research analyst post graduate certificate program. They're amazingly talented people. They're supportive. They have great people skills as well. So they are great in their interactions with faculty. We take a team approach to looking at faculty research ideas, help them to develop a plan. So we get together and share our feedback as a team back to the faculty and it's really a back and forth iterative approach to help get the project plan to a place where the faculty member is really excited about it, our team is really excited about it, and the school is really excited about it.

Nathan Whitlock: Can you tell me about some of the things that you do and that you have ongoing that would help faculty who want to enter this world into research and inquiry?

Heidi Marsh: Sure. So I divide our initiatives into two broad categories. One is supporting research in action and building some capacity there and the other is to support the dissemination of knowledge once the faculty have a research story to tell. On the first side, the biggest piece is the teaching innovation fund. This is a comprehensive support package for faculty. So it does involve money, we have \$1,200 per investigator. So faculty are encouraged to pair up in teams of two or three so that they can pool that money together for a larger sum. The innovation fund is a lump sum of money, but its also support from the team.

Heidi Marsh: So we take a social approach to it. We want faculty to also network with other faculty and share ideas and offer some peer review to one another, and then we are again, we offer support throughout the process in terms of helping to develop ideas, helping to conduct the research, helping to analyze the results. Sometimes its hard to envision what this research might look like, so a great way to get inspired is to go listen to other

faculty tell their research stories. So we have the Humber SOTL Lunch and Learn series, where about once a month, faculty come and share their research story and that's as much to learn about their research project, but also what it was like to go through the process. It usually turns into a really engaging dialogue between faculty, talking about their experiences both as teachers and as researchers.

Heidi Marsh: Another really impactful initiative that we've started up is the scholarly writing bootcamps. This is a chance for faculty to go off campus together as a community of writers for three days, and we really just spend the day, from morning until evening, quietly writing in a room together with structured breaks. So we follow best practices in terms of being productive academic writers. This is a time to make some real progress on a writing process that you may have been putting off for a long time and it's also a chance to connect with other faculty that you might not have otherwise met, across the college, that are also engaged in scholarly writing.

Heidi Marsh: The other big piece is our teaching and learning scholarly journal. So that's the journal of innovation in polytechnic education or JIPE, this is an online, open access, peer reviewed journal and it's a chance for faculty, not just Humber faculty, it's open to scholars from across the country and indeed the world, to showcase their research on teaching and learning and to engage and again contribute to that scholarly conversation about what it means to be a really effective teacher.

Nathan Whitlock: You had mentioned that you run workshops where faculty come and they share their own experiences doing research. What's an example of a project that you were really excited to read the results of and that you thought was really cool?

Heidi Marsh: One cool project that actually relates to what we're doing right now, is by Mark Whale. He and his co-investigators had been using podcasts in their teaching and they wanted to find out whether that was actually effective. So whether students liked the podcasts that they were using, but also what made a good podcast, what style of podcast did they like, what was an appropriate length of podcast, how many students were actually listening to them, and was that impacting what they were getting out of the podcast in terms of their knowledge and understanding.

Nathan Whitlock: Before I let you go, I need to ask you about the logo for SOTL, it's a light bulb. Why did you choose a light bulb for the logo?

Heidi Marsh: We actually agonized over the choice of a logo for quite a while. The one we settled on is, if you look closely it's actually, it's a light bulb, but it's also sort of a spring. So why we liked that is because the innovation fund is about ideas, first and foremost. It's about a burning question you've had about teaching and learning for a long time and exploring that idea. Having an idea spark a question and then the spring piece is that we like to see the innovation fund as a launching pad for those idea. So helping faculty to take their ideas and let their ideas take off.

Nathan Whitlock: Thank you very much Heidi. Thanks for telling us about the scholarship of teaching and learning, and obviously any faculty who want to get involved in this, how do they get in touch with you?

Heidi Marsh: We love talking about research. Coming to the SOTL Lunch and Learn sessions or the Humber research series is a great way to connect with other faculty. At the end of the day, I think those faculty conversations are really important, but I'm happy to sit down and talk about research with faculty any time. It's just a matter of emailing or calling or even just dropping by the CTL.

Nathan Whitlock: Thank you very much, Heidi.

Heidi Marsh: My pleasure.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College. Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Alison LaSorda, Darren Richards, and Eileen DeCourcy. To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think, email [humberpress](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca), all one word, at [Humber.ca](http://Humber.ca), that's [humberpress@humber.ca](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca). To learn more about the workshops, teaching certificates, and other support offered through The Centre for Teaching and Learning, and to read issues of NEXT magazine, go to [Humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning](http://Humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning). Thanks for listening, see you next time. That's not a pun.