

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 11: Bernie Monette on Breaking Down Barriers Between Programs

In this episode, we talk to Bernie Monette, the program coordinator for the Web Development program at Humber College, about an experiment in multi-disciplinary learning in which students from two different programs take the same class simultaneously.

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.

Nathan Whitlock: This episode, we speak to Bernie Monette, the program coordinator for the Web Development Program offered through the School of Media Studies and Information Technology. We'll be talking to Bernie about a new classroom initiative he has helped put together in which students from two different programs take the same course simultaneously and approach the same subject matter from two different angles.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Bernie. I've been getting told by a few people about this initiative that you've been working on that's sort of really interesting. It's almost an experiment with having two classes or students from two different courses taking the same class simultaneously. I was wondering if you'd tell us a little bit more about that.

Bernie M.: Sure. So, I'm the program coordinator of the Web Development Program and it's a postgraduate certificate. So we take students who've had at least one complete, a post-secondary education experience, and we train them up to become web developers. So, we provide ... The curriculum for the program provides what we think is a complete package, so it's not just programming, but it's also understanding the business logic of web development, the project management, information architecture, usability, accessibility for people with disabilities and along with, you know, highly complex programming.

Bernie M.: And this year there's a new program at Humber called the User Experience Design and User Experience Design is also a post-graduate certificate and it is taking similar students into user experience. So user experience is heavily research based. It is about looking at digital interactions from the user perspective.

Bernie M.: So how will people actually use these things and how do you know what kind of users are you after and that sort of thing. So both courses or both programs have a class called Information Architecture and Information

Architecture is about contents. So what do you do with content? What content do you have? What content do you need? What do you call things? What's the sequence of the interaction that you want to do?

Bernie M.: In other words, it's really the fundamentals of the experience. So since both courses, or sorry, both programs have an information architecture class, I was approached to teach it for the user experience people, but as a coordinator I have only so much time and so what we thought we would do is combine the two classes because it's the same topic, and then sort of create genuinely multidisciplinary teams amongst both student groups.

Bernie M.: We have big teams, but we have teams that incorporate the web development students on one side and the user experience design students on the other. So this is going ... We've been looking at the way we deliver courses at Humber. We've been considering how can we break down barriers and get away from ... You know, what are on the surface administrative decisions, not curriculum decisions? So, this was part of that. It was an experiment.

Bernie M.: You know, when you ask us, you know, what did you hope to achieve? It's like, well, we wanted to see if we could do it in the first place. And then we have no data points, so we were hoping to use this to collect a series of data points to see, you know, if we can break down this one barrier between, from one program to the next, what would it look like?

Nathan Whitlock: And do the students know that they are guinea pigs in this course?

Bernie M.: Oh, yeah. We we told them the purpose of it and the benefits to them of being involved in something like this. Multidisciplinary teams are the best teams because the idea is you creating a shared vision, you're managing a consensus, as to what this thing is supposed to look like and how is it supposed to operate. And if you visited industries, some of them are very much, you know, we have developers and they work at one table and we have designers, they work at another and they only come together every now and then. And it tends to be there are big walls or barriers between the disciplines. And so what we're trying to do is really get rid of those barriers and give everybody a voice, you know, at the table, because it's really the conversation that counts, not the output.

Bernie M.: It's how you have assembled things. It's how you've agreed to communicate. It's all these things that are much more important than saying, "Oh, okay, this is going to look exactly like this."

Nathan Whitlock: And just that idea of having all those teams work together. I mean, that's applicable across the board. I mean, marketing and sales and advertising but also publishing in magazines. The website versus the print side versus the, you know, all of those are starting to break down.

Bernie M.: There's a lot of convergence. Every industry has a need to develop a good understanding of how to use the web and digital media to put out their message. And so what we're trying to do and our employers tell us this too, you know, so what we'll do is we'll bring grads from previous years in to come and talk to the students and it's sort of like bring your boss to school day, because they'll often come in with their boss.

Bernie M.: And so, you know, what they tell us is that they appreciate the technical skills that Humber students have. They almost take those as a given, right? There may be a test or something like that to evaluate problem solving skills, but they sort of say, "Well, if you've graduated from the program, we expect that you have good programming, technical skills." What they're really looking for is cultural fit. So, what kind of person are you to work with? Do you rub people the wrong way or do you never answer emails? How do you communicate?

Bernie M.: These are the things that really make the difference for them in feeling that they've made a good hire. And so a lot of that is, you know, they feel very good about students coming from Humber because, you know, my students are always working in teams, right? And so, web development becomes more of a social exercise than it becomes a technical exercise. And when they actually do start working, they've mastered this already, right? And they just fit right into the teams that they've been put onto, once they start working.

Nathan Whitlock: So it's the soft skills. It's actually like ... It feels very tech-y and it feels very, you know, technological. But it's actually building these soft skills into the learning. Do you, I mean, there's a lot of programs and a lot of schools at Humber already have partnerships and work together on certain things. But do you think this is a model that could be used across the college?

Bernie M.: Well, my thing is, at this point, we're looking at different ways of delivering the curriculum and how do we make something that is more, that has this level of sophistication that we want, but is more flexible in its delivery and its thinking, right? You know, how do we maintain the rigor of our programs but be flexible in our mindsets so that, a whole, a much wider variety of students can come in and succeed through our programs?

Bernie M.: That's what my thinking has been about it, you know, and we've been, the School of Media Studies, we've been doing a number of things over the last couple of years. So this is one of them, not necessarily a very big one. We spent a lot of time working on what's called a common first year.

Bernie M.: So the idea is that we will teach, you know, the basic skills across different programs and bring all the students together and sort of let them experience these things, not based on a program but more based on the subject matter, and I believe the business school has been doing something similar with theirs as well. And so it was hard, different programs feel strongly that, you know, we're teaching something according to the needs of our discipline, but we're also trying to look at this and say, "Well, what are the core things that people need to do?"

Bernie M.: And then, you know, later on in a program we can say, "Okay, this is what you need to know about this particular topic that's specific what we do." And so that's been ... you know, it's been interesting.

Bernie M.: It's been interesting from a curriculum development point of view. It's been interesting from a scheduling point of view. It's been interesting from, you know, remediation for students who might not do very well or students who need accommodation and, but we go back to sort of my fundamental position on something like this is, you know, why don't we just try it and see what happens? Right?

Bernie M.: And I think as long as we're compassionate towards the students and we are not sort of, you know, hidebound by our rules, we can run these sorts of things where we don't know how it's gonna work and if we let compassion be our guide, then even if things go wrong with this, we can still make sure that the students get what they have been promised, through the course outline and by being at Humber, right?

Bernie M.: And so often it requires a much more ... I mean, students will come to you and they're very upset or they're very worried, right? And so, a lot of the stuff that we do is how do we reduce the worry because worry itself is useless, right? And so we can reduce the worry and reduce the fear and then all of a sudden, their performance improves significantly. And so, even though we might say, "Well, you know, it's an experiment, we don't know what we're getting." We can make sure that the students know what they need to know leaving the program or leaving the course.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thank you very much, Bernie.

Bernie M.: You're welcome.

Nathan Whitlock: This has been great.

Bernie M.: Oh, wow.

Nathan Whitlock: Thank you for coming on NEXTcast.

Bernie M.: Yeah. Well, you're very welcome. Any time. I have many well-formed opinions about teaching.

Nathan Whitlock: We will be getting them in the process of time. Thanks so much.

Bernie M.: You're very welcome.

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, Allison LaSorda, Darren Richards and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think, email HumberPress, all one word, @Humber.ca. That's HumberPress@Humber.ca.

Nathan Whitlock: 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 Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.