

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 3: Nicola Winstanley and the Benefit of Team-Building Exercises

An interview with Nicola Winstanley, program coordinator for the Media Foundations program, about using team-building exercises in class to engage students.

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 Nicola Winstanley, a professor at Humber, and the program coordinator for the Media Foundations program. We'll be talking to Nicola about using team building activities to engage students.

Nathan Whitlock: Hello Nicola, welcome to NEXTcast.

Nicola Winstanley: Hi, thanks for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: We're gonna be talking about some ideas around team building exercises in class.

Nathan Whitlock: (singing)

Nathan Whitlock: I have to admit, when I was a student in high school, whenever the teacher would offer some sort of group work or team building exercises, I was very resistant. When you were in high school in New Zealand, were you very enthusiastic when it came to group work or team building?

Nicola Winstanley: My personal bent is not to be in a group. I'm a big control freak and I prefer being on my own, but I know that that's pretty much never possible in work anyway.

Nathan Whitlock: Going back as a little as far when you crossed the border from student to teacher, to professor, when you first started teaching, were you incorporating group work and these team building exercises early on or was it something that you came to?

Nicola Winstanley: The more I've been teaching, the more I've incorporated group work and that's partly because of my understanding of how things are working in my classroom. Also, because I try to teach in the HIVES now and it lends itself to that more, so I just have a lot of group activities as I go. I always had the sense that it was good in formative exercises to work with other

people and that students would get a lot from the people around them. There are two camps, those things you do in class that are exercises or activities, and in then things that you're asking students to take away and work on, or with some kind of structure that they'll get for a grade, and obviously those things create more challenges and can be more problematic.

Nathan Whitlock: I don't know if you've found this, I've found this in some of the teaching I've done, students are often very sociable, they wanna talk to each other, they want to look at each other's phones, see what each other ... What they're doing in class, but when you actually formally announce that there's gonna be group work, often times, especially early on, they resist that, there's a collective groan. That changes later on, but why do you think there's that resistance?

Nicola Winstanley: Honestly it's quite strange. I would say that was true about five years ago, and if I did a stop/start and continue with my students at that point, I would get lots of people saying, "Less group work." Some would say more, but generally it would be less group work. In the cohorts we have now, it's gone completely the other way. So I would say 80-90% of the students in my class ask for group work, say they prefer working with other people and like doing work together. So I don't know if that's because they have had more practice at school, that it has become more a thing in elementary and high school. Some people are still resistant or they feel socially awkward, sometimes they resist it because they have to talk to people they don't know.

Nicola Winstanley: I try really hard in all my classes to do a lot of ice breakers early on, and I do a big one in my first class that's quite silly and takes a long time, and I do it ... later I will shuffle them into different groups and I'll remind them to introduce themselves to each other, I'll give them time to just talk to each other for a few minutes before they start the activity. We have an assumption maybe that they all already know each other and that's not really the case because pretty early on students will sit in their own little groups and they might be comfortable working with their friends, but I like to mix it up a little bit. Those that are resistant, if you mix it enough, hopefully they'll be drawn in by those who aren't.

Nathan Whitlock: You mentioned that you do a silly one in the first class, can you describe it a little bit?

Nicola Winstanley: Well it's quite common. I get everyone, because I'm in a hive, I have a big empty space in the middle of the room so I get everyone to sit in a circle and we do the game where you have to remember everybody's name,

and you do it by having your own name preceded by an adjective or a word that doesn't have to be an adjective with the same first letter. Then we go around one by one, and in a class of 35, it can take about an hour, and it's quite intense, and I talk them through it a lot. I say, "Parts of this will be boring, parts of this will make you nervous." And then I use it to talk a bit about memory and how memory works, and how they were able to do it, and it's intimidating in a small way, and it's quite funny, and some of the students come up with very funny things, and it is a long icebreaker where we all get together, and it also means by the end of the class I know every single person's name.

Nicola Winstanley: So when I'm then putting groups together afterwards I can just say, "James, Karen, and Matthew you're going to sit together now." Rather than, "Oh, you group of people." So I think there's a sense that we're a bit more in it together, because we already know each other a little bit.

Nathan Whitlock: So if you and I were to do this icebreaker, what would be your adjective?

Nicola Winstanley: I always use the adjective narwhal, because I talk about using novelty to help people remember. So the stranger something is, the better you'll remember it. But, of course, because of my accent none of them really know what I'm saying. They're like, "A what? A Nawa? What?"

Nathan Whitlock: A narwhal? As in the whale?

Nicola Winstanley: A narwhal, yeah. So I say, "The fish with the horn."

Nathan Whitlock: Okay.

Nicola Winstanley: Then sometimes someone will sing the song from the meme, but it depends.

Nathan Whitlock: Wow. So what kind of things do you find that the students get out of this? How does this improve their engagement, improve the class?

Nicola Winstanley: Well, we do lots of, because my class is a metacognitive class, we do a bunch of weird stuff. So one of the first things we do in the very first class is I give them the critical path and then I test them on it and I say, "Now I'm going to give you a test." And that's always fun times, and I ask them to do it by themselves, and they usually maybe most students can answer three out of ten questions from something they've just read. So we also use it to talk about reading and how to read and how to read with attention, and then I say, "Now in your group you have 10 minutes. Compare your answers, see if you can fill in the rest. See if you can

remember something that somebody else didn't." And once they've got together and put it together, they might end up with maybe eight out of ten, and then we do the whole class as a big group, and as a whole class we can get all the answers.

Nicola Winstanley: So it's this little iconic demonstration that everyone has something to bring to the table, and everyone brings a piece of knowledge, and that your classmates may know different things to you, but you can still be useful and supportive to one another, and as a group you're much more powerful.

Nathan Whitlock: So you're obviously sort of a master at this, at getting students to work together and engage with each other, but some professors are still learning how to do this, are still very reluctant. Where can they get some ideas on things they can do in their classes?

Nicola Winstanley: Well, CTL has lots of resources to use, books, and tips, and people. I also get a lot of ideas from my colleagues all the time. So lots of people are very good at this, and everyone has some tricks that they use and things that work for them. So it's good I think just to talk through ... Sometimes things don't work, and I'll do a group activity, and it's groaning and moaning, and it's just generally resistant and pretty awful, and it's really important I think not to pretend that that doesn't happen, but I will take that away and say to a person I teach with, maybe Anne [Zbitnew] or something, like, "Oh, I did this group thing and it totally bombed. I don't really know what happened." And we might talk it through and try and figure out how to fix it, or what to do better next time.

Nicola Winstanley: So that reflective process is really important I think, rather than just forging ahead and going, "Oh, that group didn't work because the students are just in a mad mood." Or whatever. It's normally something to do with the way that you've structured it, and you try things and they don't always work, that's life.

Nathan Whitlock: Is there a common quality to any of the things that don't work? Like is there an ingredient that you need to leave out of group work?

Nicola Winstanley: I really believe in anything and teaching at this ... We're teaching adults essentially, that sort of a punitive attitude, or ordering people around, or getting annoyed with them when they don't do exactly what you want, or any of those will just increase resistance. So to make it funny, to have lots of group work where the stakes are really low, like that test I do, and I do that again in a slightly different way, where there's really no negative

repercussions, and so they can find some comfort, but also get the lesson that they can learn a lot from that situation is really important.

Nathan Whitlock: So you mentioned you didn't do a lot of this as a student, and you mention you're a control freak. But let's imagine you were a high school student again, knowing what you know now about the way classes work and the way you teach, do you think you'd be a little less resistant, or do you think you'd be more an enthusiastic joiner?

Nicola Winstanley: I think I'd be more enthusiastic. I know even now in my work, and my life generally, other things that I collaborate on, I can see more clearly when things are group-like. So I'm a writer and I say to students, because they say, "I just want to work by myself." And I say, "You know, you think of writing as the most solitary occupation, and it never is. There are always at least two other people involved with you somehow. They're editing, or reading, or giving you suggestions. You're thinking about your audience, and that's a group as well, that's another body of people that you have to respond to. So you really need to reflect on how you will fit into a group and what your role is." And I think having some structure and metacognition around the group is really helpful.

Nicola Winstanley: So coming into a group and really trying to figure out what are the strengths of the different groups members, and so it doesn't necessarily make sense to say, "Well, you all need to go and research, and you all need to write, and you all need to present." Because that's not actually what happens in real life. We work to our strengths, and if you give students some of that freedom to go, "Oh yeah, I really like to make the slides." It makes sense and they can see how it fits together in a professional way.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thank you very much Narwhal Nicola.

Nicola Winstanley: Thank you.

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. 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. To learn more about the workshops, teaching certificates, and other support offered through The Centre for Teaching and Learning, and to read NEXT magazine, go to humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning. Thanks for listening, see you next time. That's not a pun.

