NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 5: Bianca Sorbera and Katie Billard on Inclusive Design

We speak to The Centre for Teaching and Learning's Bianca Sorbera and Katie Billard about designing courses that work for everyone.

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. This week, we have two guests on NEXTcast, both from The Centre for Teaching and Learning. Katie Billard is a teaching and learning specialist at the CTL and Bianca Sorbera is the manager of the CTL's teacher training programs. We'll be talking to Katie and Bianca about the CTL's new Inclusive Design Certificate.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Bianca and Katie. This is actually the first time we've had two guests simultaneously on the podcast. So this is a first. Before we start talking about the Inclusive Design Certificate, I thought I'd get you to tell us a little bit about your roles at the CTL. Katie, what do you do here?

Katie: Well, I do one on one faculty development. So working with faculty on developing their teaching. I do some workshops developing and facilitating and then of course, the Inclusive Design Certificates. I am a co-coordinator of that.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, great. And Bianca?

Bianca: So I am the manager of teacher training programs at The Centre for Teaching and Learning. And I take care of all of the certificates that we offer in a professional development capacity, everything from the Teaching Effectiveness Certificate to the Culturally Inclusive to our newly entered Inclusive Design Certificate. And I also, do many workshops and facilitate a lot of one on one with faculty.

Nathan Whitlock: You know I mentioned that we are here to talk about the Inclusive Design Certificate, it is this new piece that you've put together. What is it and how does it work?

Bianca: Well I guess, what we've done is we've really looked at the learners in our classroom and we've taken all the fundamentals of teaching and learning. So everything from engaging students, planning instruction, assessing

learning and then, we've added some technology components and we've added the component of learner variability and how do we address that learner variability in our classroom? And how do we ensure that we're reaching the most, the biggest audience, if you will.

Katie: Yeah. I'd say, it really boils down to trying to give faculty the tools to craft effective educational experiences for their students. And the way that it's set up is, several modules, so it typically runs one three hour session per week. And we have it divided into foundations, then how do we engage students, how do we plan instruction, how do we assess learning and then finally, the technology piece that Bianca spoke about. And after they've completed that learn part of the certificate, they're able to then meet with one of us, so Bianca and I are the current facilitators. They'll meet with one of us for a one on one coaching session and then at the very end, they have a culminating task, that's reflective, that will allow them to create something based in inclusive design that they can actually use in their practice.

Bianca: And I think, just to add to what Katie's saying, some of the principles that we kind of focused on when we were developing this certificate, really include a focus on equity, collaboration, flexibility and accountability in the classroom environment. And so, those are kind of the founding principles, if you will, of how we approached the curriculum piece for this certificate. We also focus on a one ... Sorry. We move away from the traditional one size fits all approach to teaching and learning. And we really try to hone in on, how can we reach that individual learner in our class or how can we reach the most learners in our classroom?

Nathan Whitlock: And that seems to be a thread that kind of goes through a lot of what the CTL does and a lot of what Humber kind of talks about, which is that idea of not having one size fits all. So why is something like this necessary? I mean were teachers asking for this or was this seen as something that needed to be brought in? Or ...

Katie: Yes, yes and yes, wouldn't you say?

Bianca: Definitely. Definitely.

Katie: Yeah, I mean there has definitely have been requests for this because this is something that we here, as educators, that we're supposed to be doing something along these lines, making things more accessible to students, but we don't always have the tools, the practical tools, to implement that. There's also legal reasons why. So soon, we'll be legally obligated to have everything as accessible as possible, so we're trying to get ahead of

that and really empower Humber faculty to start designing things inclusively right now.

Bianca: And similarly, I mean, I feel like we're in a bit of an era of accommodations when it comes to learner variability. And I think what this certificate strives to do is to be more proactive as opposed to reactive. I feel like sometimes accommodations tend to be a bit reactive when it comes to learning and addressing student needs, whereas this certificate we try to take you from the very beginning, the planning process of your curriculum and we try to say, "Okay. Who is this curriculum including and who is it excluding?" And then, address those gaps and try to, I'm not saying do away with accommodations, I think we'll always need accommodations, but perhaps lessen the need for accommodations with students and just make sure that we're hitting the needs of all those learners in our classroom.

Katie: Yeah, I think, sorry. I think one of the things that is a big limiter when it comes to providing this accessibility is, time. So for faculty, time is a resource that we always feel we don't have enough of and our thought is that, an inclusively designed curriculum, it is more sustainable and manageable for faculty because rather than creating something and then having to adopt it and accommodate in many different ways each term, depending on who you have in your class. Instead, you design it upfront in a way that already is accessible to all of those students, they can all learn, they can show what they've learned in a way that doesn't require all of those changes that can be time consuming and really daunting.

Bianca: Yeah. And we're not saying that, you shouldn't reflect on your curriculum and change it, there's always room ...

Katie: Absolutely.

Bianca: For changing, definitely and especially once you meet your students, right, you're gonna make adjustments. But I think what this tries to do initially is prevent you, as an educator, from doing all that extra work, right, because it takes, like Katie was saying, takes more time to go back and try to retrofit something as opposed to develop it in a very robust way from the beginning.

Nathan Whitlock: That makes sense. That kinda goes back to that faculty wanting this, wanting these tools because if you have a few hundred professors who are trying to figure out ways and they're all individually coming up with ways to make their courses more inclusive, they're each taking up that time to do it. Whereas, if you had these tools ready available for them,

there's a whole chunk of time gone, they don't have to spend all that time developing this on their own and creating the wheel, you know? Inventing the wheel each time.

Bianca: That's right.

Bianca: That's right. And just to use the example, I mean inclusive design is a principle that really, historically, has been a part of the architectural world and so basically, designing buildings that people can access. And so what we've done, from the beginning, right, and as opposed to going backwards and trying to put in accessible features. So from the very design phase is, how can we make sure we include the most users in this and I think, as we've developed this certificate and over the year that it's taken us to develop this certificate, those are the ... Those are kind of the ideas that are in the back of our heads is how can we make our curriculum the most user friendly for the most users?

Katie: At this point, like I keep bringing up accessibility, which sometimes pigeonholes us a little bit as accommodation based like for people who have ... But it's really so much bigger than that. It's that everything that you're designing is making ... It's better for everybody. So you might design something with a particular need in mind, but then everyone benefits because of that design change that you made. And so, the architectural equivalent to that is, if you take a round doorknob and you turn it into a lever doorknob, maybe with the idea of someone who has arthritis in mind and that those round doorknobs are really hard if you don't have that dexterity. Well in the end, that lever doorknob is easier, I mean if your arms are full because you're carrying something, you can open it with an elbow, like anyone can open that lever doorknob, it's not just that one particular need that you may have designed it for.

Katie: So in the curriculum it works the same way, you may include close captioning for somebody who has a hearing impairment, but it helps everyone. It helps English language learners, it helps people who just have trouble focusing on something that is just an audio. And so that's this idea of taking inclusive design and architecture and bringing it into the world of education.

Bianca: And it's not necessarily just so a specific group of people can benefit, as Katie was saying, it's so all of us can benefit. Right?

Nathan Whitlock: And that's interesting because that ... Even just thinking in terms of architecture, I think a lot of people who are of a certain age, like me,

remember the idea of accessibility first kind of coming into our consciousness with the idea of ramps.

Katie: Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: Wheelchair ramps, accessibility ramps and that feels like a real add-on. It's an addition, you've built a building full of stairs and spiral staircases and kind of forbidding corners and so forth and then you add a ramp. Whereas, this is starting from the ... Going beyond that ... Starting from the beginning and actually making it accessible everybody instead of having to just sorta add this thing on, this component on at the end.

Katie: Exactly. Start with ramps.

Nathan Whitlock: Start with ramps.

Katie: Because they're easier for everybody.

Bianca: Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. But in ... You could also have sliding doors.

Katie: Yeah.

Bianca: Right, exactly.

Nathan Whitlock: Which everyone benefits from and everyone likes, but no one thinks in terms of accessibility.

Katie: Exactly.

Nathan Whitlock: They just think in terms of, "I like sliding doors."

Bianca: Yeah or this morning when I had 17 bags in my hand, coming in from the parking lot and I needed somebody to hold the door for me and ...

Nathan Whitlock: What did you have in those bags? What do you have and why were bringing 17 bags in?

Bianca: There were about four.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay.

Bianca:	So there were about four bags, with my teaching and learning tools I guess, I don't know. And now I'm sounding like a geek. But anyways, basically yeah, I needed help opening the door and you press a button and there it is. So it's not just helping one subset of the population, it's potentially helping everybody. And I think that's the lens that we take for this certificate is that, we're all implicated in inclusive design and we can all benefit from it.
Katie:	And one of our mantras is, ban the average. So instead of thinking, "Okay, this is the average student and we'll design it this way", we ban that because the reality is, everybody has variability. Variability is the normal thing, so you plan to have options in every aspect and that will then improve the experience for everyone.
Nathan Whitlock:	You mentioned that at certain point, the laws are changing around accessibility to around inclusiveness and that all teachers are gonna have to have these tools at hand and have these kind of skills when they're building their courses, when they're designing their courses. But in the mean time, right now for people actually listening to this, are there people ... Are there specific things people can do in their classes as they're putting together their classes and programs and courses right now?
Bianca:	Great question.
Katie:	Yeah.
Bianca:	I think if we go back to that universal design for learning framework, we can really kinda see in different areas that we can really make our curriculum that more robust. So for example, multiple means of representing the material that we present in our classroom, are we presenting our material in one way on a PowerPoint, for example. Not to say that PowerPoint's a bad thing, but it's only one way of being able to share knowledge and information. So what are some other ways that we can capture the rest of the audience? Could we offer them an opportunity to view a video? Could we offer them an opportunity to listen to a podcast on their way to class? Could we offer them more visuals for example? And could we offer them choice for the matter, right? So, if somebody does wanna do a deeper dive into a particular nuanced area of the curriculum, they can.
Bianca:	And so what it does then, is it ... You're teaching ... You're trying to kinda cast the net wide and bring in all those students.

Katie:	But also, are you giving students different ways of communicating? So are you always asking them to verbally bring up their questions or do you provide options for them to maybe anonymously write questions to speak with just one other person versus the whole class? Are you giving them things that they can do so that they're not required to be extroverted and fast processors of information in order to participate in your class? And the other thing is, providing options within assessment. So you may already have some ideas of different ways that you could assess students, could you provide options within the same assignment? So could you have something that allows a student to write an essay or create a video? Something as simple as that to begin with is a great place to start.
Katie:	And then if you come to the certificate, we can give a few more ideas and make sure that you're doing it, maybe a bit more thoroughly, but I think it's really important to realize you can start this process with one step. You don't have to revamp your entire curriculum, you can just think about providing one more option in each class that you're doing and it can be quite small to begin with, but you'll see really big dividends.
Nathan Whitlock:	Well thank you very much, Bianca and Katie, for helping me ban the average in having my first two guests NEXTcast. Thanks very much for helping out with this.
Bianca:	Thanks for having us, Nathan.
Nathan Whitlock:	NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College.
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Nathan Whitlock:	To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, at 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.
Nathan Whitlock:	Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.