

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 6: Douglas Smith on Teaching with an International Perspective

We speak to Baking and Pastry Arts professor Douglas Smith on bringing an international perspective to the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, 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: Our guest on this episode of NEXTcast is Douglas Smith, a professor of Baking and Pastry Arts at Humber's School of Hospitality, Recreation, and Tourism. We'll be talking to Douglas about bringing an international perspective into the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Douglas. So, tell me briefly about the work you do at Humber and in the culinary program.

Douglas Smith: I work in the baking and pastry department, which is part of the culinary program, and it's an exciting field because in the hospitality industry there are always openings and opportunities for students to go into the food service or the pastry industry, because there's always people, you always need to eat. So, there's never really a shortage of any opportunities for them to do that.

Nathan Whitlock: And I mean, I would actually love to talk to you about baking for an hour, because I'm not very good at it, at all. I actually wanted to talk to you today about the idea of bringing in an international perspective into the classroom. Humber is a very internationally-minded institution, not just the student body, obviously, is from all over the world, but, the faculty also is from a lot of different places, has experience in a lot of different places, and has worked in a lot of different places.

Nathan Whitlock: You yourself have had a lot of international experience and I thought you could - I wonder if you could just sort of summarize that a little bit, some of the places you've worked.

Douglas Smith: Being in the industry for a number of years, I won't say how many, I'll show my age. I've traveled the world extensively. I think nine different countries I've worked in. So, in those positions, I've worked in major hotel corporations, as a, in a senior management position. So, I've actually been doing teaching to employees of certain components. So, in a way, not in a school environment, I'm in a learning environment, but in a hotel

area, but still have to provide knowledge and training, and teaching to individuals.

Douglas Smith: So, I look at that as part of an experience and support that helps me in my role in an educational institution to do the same thing, maybe in a different context, but I'm still teaching.

Nathan Whitlock: Right, and when you started teaching at Humber, and when you started teaching in the baking program - when did you first start thinking about that knowledge that you had gained, and that experience you gained internationally would be useful in the classroom? - And you could share that with your students a little bit.

Douglas Smith: Well, I'm just going into my tenth year here at Humber, so I would probably say, maybe in my second or third year teaching at Humber, this-realizing that I have international students in my class started me thinking on - taking me back into situations where I had in a different country teaching employees that were of a different culture and how I taught them for them to understand. So, maybe about the second or third year, I'm bringing that, I guess knowledge or concepts, techniques of what I used in the hotel industry now into my classroom to ensure that my students who are international citizens - to ensure that they grasp the knowledge. They had their comfort zone to absorb and to learn without feeling ousted, without feeling maybe intimidated in front of their peers.

Nathan Whitlock: And were you noticing or encountering some similar conflicts, or similar situations in the classroom that you had experienced or encountered working internationally?

Douglas Smith: Well, I'm going to use myself in a narrative perspective that I, when I started going overseas, I was the foreigner and I had to adapt to their culture and even though I was knowledgeable in what I had to provide, I was still being the foreigner that had to learn from them - their culture, their ethics. Everything about their way of life that I could fit in, in getting their comforts and allowing me to teach the knowledge that I had to teach to them.

Douglas Smith: So, it's the same with international students. They're in a different culture and in a different setting, different environment. The food is different. The language is different. The people are different. So, I want them to feel comfortable being able to learn what needs to be learned within the classroom. So, I just kind of open up that area for them to have a safe zone, I guess you might say in learning.

Nathan Whitlock: So, because you had worked in all those places and had all those experiences, you were sort of able to put yourself in their shoes a little bit.

Douglas Smith: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely - because myself, my latest position was teaching at a university in Taiwan. So, even though I'm the professor, I'm still the foreigner going into their culture and being the first time over there, three, or was it four years ago I was, my first time in Taiwan teaching at the university, I didn't - I took for granted what the students should know and how they should behave because of my upbringing and experience here at Humber. But, it's totally the opposite. I had to change my approach in teaching to the students exactly how I have taken that approach that I learned in Taiwan back here to Humber, to give that same approach to the international students so they feel the same way as how I felt after I was in Taiwan.

Nathan Whitlock: Can you think of like a specific example of something that you brought or that you learned teaching in Taiwan that you've encountered here as well - and you thought a-ha, this is what I need to think about or do?

Douglas Smith: Well, I, one thing I found important is that I have to allow my students here at Humber to, the international students, to be able to have critical thinking. That's one thing in Taiwan - they don't have that privilege. They're not provided that opportunity. They don't have that space for them to absorb the information to use critical thinking in what they just learned. It's just the culture. It's just how it was. I couldn't change it. I wasn't there to change it. But, I needed to learn from their point of view how they did learn so I could adapt my teaching to that.

Douglas Smith: So, now understanding how they learn, many international students, especially from Asia have the same, I guess the same learning etiquette that they are not allowed the critical thinking. They are not allowed to ask questions. They don't ask questions. So, I have to open up that door to make them feel comfortable.

Douglas Smith: Yes, please ask me questions. Yes, use your critical thinking approach towards this problem and give me your feedback on it, but they're not used to that. But, I'm learning, or not that I'm learning - I have learned from being overseas, this is an important part to allow the Humber international students.

Nathan Whitlock: So, in that specific case, it's almost a sense of the students would feel disrespectful. They would feel it's your job to be the expert and tell them what to do.

Douglas Smith: Yes, absolutely, and that's what it is in Asia, as that the students don't ask questions because it shows a lack of disrespect to the teacher.

Douglas Smith: And number two - it shows a little bit of un-comfort amongst their peers that they might be belittled and be demonstrated, put on a pedestal that, how come you don't know that knowledge? Why don't you know the answer? So, they don't want to be ridiculed by their peers. So, they keep very quiet in that sense.

Douglas Smith: So, this is the part I found the most challenging to work with while I was there. So, being back here at Humber and understanding that cultural background of the students, I need to find different methods and techniques to open up that, again that door that they feel comfortable to ask questions. It's not uncommon to ask your teacher a bunch of questions in front of your peers - that's how we learn.

Nathan Whitlock: That's interesting. I actually teach in a post-grad course at the Lake and it's a different cultural situation, but it's a similar situation in that these are students who have done a university degree and are used to having classes sitting in these big lecture halls where the teacher talks for three hours nonstop, and they just take notes and then that's it. Then if they want to discuss anything, they can make office time or an appointment outside of class.

Nathan Whitlock: So, it takes me a while to kind of convince them that they can do that in the class. They don't have to sit and quietly take notes. They can, I mean, I love that they do, but they are, they need to be an active part of that class as well. And I even, I don't call it lectures, I call them discussions - we're going to discuss this, this topic, and they always sort of wonder at first - Why do you keep calling them discussions? It's a lecture.

Nathan Whitlock: And I'm like no-no. I really do want you to speak up.

Douglas Smith: To participate.

Nathan Whitlock: Yeah.

Douglas Smith: To get involved in the conversation.

Nathan Whitlock: It's their class too. They need to get more out of it.

Nathan Whitlock: So, I'm curious - how do you find the students respond when you bring that approach?

Douglas Smith: It's not easy. It's in fact, when I started this approach about my second - it's the second year of teaching at Humber, and I was fortunate enough to have international students in all my classes, which I still do. But, I think it was maybe the following year or at least in their second semester that the students would start to feel comfortable that they could open up and begin to ask the teacher questions, and begin to communicate, and be part of a conversation within a topic field.

Douglas Smith: And the other thing that I learned as well was going in the first time in teaching at university, I kind of look at it as experiential learning. So, I had no idea what I was getting into. So, my experience was supporting and promoting my learning of all these different hurdles and barriers that I came across. But, I got over all of them, but that was the learning curve for me.

Douglas Smith: So, having done that, I tried to break down those barriers and some of those hurdles for the students who are here. And I can empathize with how they learn here at Humber.

Nathan Whitlock: So, I am personally, woefully, untraveled. I've only ever been to two continents, including the one I was born on and live on. I'm sure most faculty travel much more than I do, but, even for the ones who travel I'm sure they - many haven't had the same depth of experience that you've had where you actually taught in Taiwan and worked in all these other countries. But, for a teacher who has a number of international students in their class and wants to do the same kind of things you're doing, bringing those same kind of tools - what are things they can do short of getting on a plane and moving to another country for 18 months?

Douglas Smith: Well, they need to be, I guess culturally adaptive and understand cultural experiences of their students in their classrooms - where they come from. I think it's not too much to ask if I go into starting a semester and I see I have some students from India, some from China, some from Brazil, I would take it upon myself to do a bit of research on the customs and the culture of those, of the people of those countries, and try to incorporate some knowledge of what I learned by doing some research into my discussions with the students so they can see that - wow, I do know a little bit about them. I know where they come from. I understand their schooling process and how they learn.

Douglas Smith: So, if I can demonstrate that knowledge to them a little bit, it allows them to be comfortable. Allows them to be more open to me and I think the biggest thing is trust. So, having trust between the student and the professor is a huge bonus and a plus for both parties.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay, thank you very much Douglas.

Douglas Smith: 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.

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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.