

NEXTcast Season 2 Episode 1: Steve Cober on the Transmedia Fellowship

In this episode, the first official episode of our second season, we talk to Media Studies professor and program coordinator Steve Cober about the great Transmedia Fellowship project he helped oversee this past summer.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber college. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. In this episode, we talk to Steve Cober, who teaches in Humber School of Media Studies, about the interactive installation he helped create as part of the Transmedia Fellowship.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Steve.

Steve Cober: Thanks for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: You wear a lot of hats. I've seen your LinkedIn page, you have a lot of different titles. I was wondering if you could sort of give us a brief look at stuff you do, but also specifically what you do here at Humber?

Steve Cober: Yeah. I have a background in fine art and interactive design. I worked for many years in advertising and marketing, and have been an entrepreneur since about the age of 17. I've had a T-shirt company, but probably my biggest sort of success as I guess a business man would be a company called Magic Pony, which was like a creative hub for art and design, and Toronto's creative community, which kind of led me to work at Humber in kind of a multi-disciplinary sense.

Steve Cober: At Humber, I teach in the graphic design stream, focused on experience design, thinking about how we would take visual literacy, or visual communications and expand it into new areas. I am the program coordinator at VADA, an art foundation. Looking at the art side of things and how we facilitate like a really intense two year program for young creatives, and then this summer, I recently did, co produced the Transmedia Fellowship.

Nathan Whitlock: And that's what we're here to talk about today.

Steve Cober: Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: This Transmedia Fellowship, I wonder if you could just give us a sense of what exactly is that fellowship? What does it entail?

Steve Cober: The spark that kind of gave birth to the Transmedia Fellowship was the idea that we have an entire student body, who have an amazing range of experiences and come from multiple backgrounds, but also are in a wide range of programs, that often don't get a chance to cross over or collaborate.

Steve Cober: As you know, when you get out of school and you work in any circumstance, you work with people from different disciplines. You might be in advertising, but you also work with people who have english literature backgrounds, or have financial backgrounds and that kind of thing. The Transmedia Fellowship is an opportunity for five students to work with people around the same level of experience, from different programs and create something original.

Nathan Whitlock: And how are those students selected? Are they selected by faculty, do they try for it? Is there an application?

Steve Cober: Yeah, there's applications. We advertise on social media, and through the traditional Humber channels, as well as contacting professors to introduce the program to classes, and it's really offered to students from everywhere in the school of media studies, to apply, and then there's interviews and portfolio reviews, and the goal of those reviews is to pick students that have kind of some commonalities with their skillsets, but also are different enough to have interesting combinations and collaboration potential.

Nathan Whitlock: What do the students get? I mean, is it a paid fellowship?

Steve Cober: Yeah, it's a paid fellowship.

Nathan Whitlock: Is there a bag of swag at the end?

Steve Cober: Oh, no, no, no. I think everybody's got enough Humber swag. You do get swag if you want it, though. No, it's a paid, it's a job. It's a paid job, but what's unique about it is that the students are mostly led, like self directed. It's a unique opportunity to have a paid position to possibly work in an unconventional way, with all the support of the school. It's not like you're going to a job and you have to do three weeks of training to know how to do it, or you don't have support. It's like there's two, there's basically, under Ainsworth, the associate Dean, and myself as a producer, and Nooreen Hussain as a producer, we help the students figure out what the project could be.

Steve Cober: Our goal is really to make sure that the students can come out of it with an incredible work experience, and a really cool portfolio project. Stretch goal is that the project has enough, I guess impact or potential, that it could be developed, whether through research grants, or be used in other departments, or somehow grow into the larger part of like Humber life.

Nathan Whitlock: Right, it's not something that should just end the moment the fellowship's over?

Steve Cober: Yeah, the goal isn't to just have the project be "14 weeks, thank you, we got it done," it's actually to look at it not only as, almost a case study for an unconventional kind of education program where it really does work off of students' experience, not only in real life, like whether they've had jobs, or whether they've just traveled, or had some other kind of education, but also for the skills that they're learning at school.

Nathan Whitlock: Let's talk about the project that they did this summer. Let's ... how did it look, what was it?

Steve Cober: Yeah, the project was called "TOgether," and it came out of the cohort's interest in thinking about Toronto, and the multiculturalism, and the way it is to be in Toronto, where quite often, you know, you're living there, you're existing there, but there's a certain distance between us, and thinking about how do we connect with people. And I mean the norm right now would be through your phone, you know? You look at other people's lives through Instagram.

Steve Cober: And we're like, yeah, but you're not really involved, and it's not that personal. There's still technology in the way.

Nathan Whitlock: It's filtered.

Steve Cober: It's filtered, and we were like, what would happen if we could use technology to get through that filter, and technology is the facilitator of like an actual moment, or an actual story that people would share?

Steve Cober: We wanted to take it out, we wanted to do a project that was about connecting people spontaneously, and especially in public. Quite often in public, you sit on the bus. You might look at someone, but generally, you have your head down, and as Canadians, we're polite, and it may even be just because of our way of being multicultural is to give other people space, as opposed to being in their face or anything like that. And we're

like, well, everyone has a story to tell, so how can we create, design a circumstance, for people to connect?

Steve Cober: We made a booth, like a public booth, almost like a two person confessional booth, and we ... we visually designed it around conversations. The motif was a speech bubble, and the idea that we're going to share a story within the same speech bubble, and we built a physical booth, and that ... that actually required, you know, graphic design, interface design, how you stage something. At what point do you engage people personally, and then you shift them over to technology?

Steve Cober: We had to choose how we use traditional audio/video, how we recorded it, and then using an app to lead the participants through the stages of it. Ideally, it was kind of a conversation machine, in which two strangers, or two people that kind of know each other get together and choose a question and it isn't an interview situation, where they sit across from each other and ask, they share that question, and they answer it together. One person, and it's always interesting when you look at the question, and the people have to discuss who goes first?

Steve Cober: You know, and it really is about people just spontaneously being comfortable together, in a space that's kind of neutral, and there's no judgment, and they can be themselves.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, I should say as in the interest of full disclosure, for one thing, Kristin Valois who helps with this podcast and is sitting quietly in this room, she helped with that installation, and also, I did one of the sit downs, with, not with a stranger, but with someone I worked with, with a friend, Cheryl Pinto, and I will admit that Cheryl and I were both sort of reluctant participants. We were like, okay, all right, we heard we had to do six minutes. We can do six minutes, fine. Maybe we'll do three minutes.

Nathan Whitlock: We got kicked out after 20. We were finally told, "enough," and I think our question was something to do with, I can't even remember it, honestly. It was something about when do you know how to trust somebody, it got into some weird zone of trust and vulnerability, and it worked. We were shocked.

Steve Cober: Yeah, one of the biggest discoveries that we found, like we did two iterations. We did a very rough one, with just like foam core and hand drawn elements, and then a more formal one, and in the informal one, the first iteration, people came away ... because we did a post event questionnaire and got people's feedback on their experience, we thought most people might want to watch the video afterwards, after we edit,

and they were like, "No, I actually just loved what happened." And that's enough, that it happened, and we were like, Oh, this is incredible. Human, analog experience, that has a meaningful connection.

Nathan Whitlock: You actually forget, I can say as someone who's done it, you actually forget that you're being filmed. You're only aware for the first 60 seconds or so, and then you just, it goes out of your mind.

Steve Cober: Yeah, and then you're with someone.

Nathan Whitlock: Yeah, yeah. Have you had a chance to look at all these videos, at all the conversations?

Steve Cober: Yeah, yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: What were some of the odder things that you, what were some of the highlights? Let's start with odd, and then we can go to beautiful, let's say.

Steve Cober: One really interesting kind of transformation happened, where two people came, who both work at Humber, in different departments, had never met, but had shared a spin class for the last year. And they were like, "I've seen you so many times, and we've never spoken!" Because you know, in sort of day to day, you wouldn't.

Steve Cober: We'd love to develop it further as a platform, for Humber. Like the TOgether project could be something that could be adapted to other programs. Shown in different context, or even be part like, we kind of ... you know, as the project, as we saw the results of the project, so many ideas came out of that, where we're like, "Oh, if we partnered with Ignite, it could be a way for new students to Humber to connect," like during the first week. It could be a way to document students' experience at the school and all of that. We would like to think that there's a really bright future for it.

Nathan Whitlock: It's got life well beyond this fellowship.

Steve Cober: Yeah. Yeah, or even thinking about maybe the next fellowship carries that project and further develops it, you know? And thinking about how that project could also use support from say, industrial design, you know, to help build it. Any other departments, like digital community, or PR marketing, it could actually be valuable, even as a work study, or as some way to unite, have this project be a commonality between all the different departments.

Nathan Whitlock: And once you start looking at it that way, as something that could bring in all these different specialties, academic specialties and disciplines, it's almost infinite, you know?

Steve Cober: Yeah, absolutely.

Nathan Whitlock: And then you get the business school to monetize it, and we all get rich.

Steve Cober: Oh yeah, for sure, for sure.

Nathan Whitlock: We all get rich and we ...

Steve Cober: Yeah, but I mean, originally when we were dreaming big, we were thinking of having it at say, Pride, or at Union Station, or it could be part of Luminato, and thinking of all the ways that it would connect. Not only like the project, but Humber, and have an interesting, unique way of representing our school in these larger cultural contexts.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, like I said, it's a fantastic project, and I'm actually really excited to see where it goes, and what happens to it. Thank you so much for telling us about it, Steve.

Steve Cober: Yeah, and for anybody out there that's listening, if you want to try it out, we have a modified version of it available at Culture Days, at the Lakeshore Campus on September 29th, which is a Saturday in the Welcome Centre, on the second floor.

Nathan Whitlock: Great. And I also encourage people to try it.

Steve Cober: Cool.

Nathan Whitlock: Thanks a lot.

Steve Cober: Thanks for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning. This episode was edited by Kristin Valois. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo, and Eileen DeCourcy. To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to just let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, at humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks, and see you next time, that's still not a pun.