

## NEXTCast Season 2 Episode 4: Eileen DeCourcy's Vision for Teaching and Learning

In this episode, we speak with Eileen DeCourcy, Humber's departing Associate Vice-President, Teaching & Learning, about the development of The Centre for Teaching & Learning and her vision for postsecondary education.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTCast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I am Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. Every episode of NEXTCast we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber, both inside and outside the classroom. In this episode we talk to Eileen DeCourcy, Humber's Associate Vice-president for Teaching and Learning who recently announced that she'd be leaving the college after many years of spearheading and leading numerous significant projects and initiatives. We spoke to her about some of the work she's done here and about her vision for the future of postsecondary education.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTCast Eileen. We should start with a little full disclosure. Obviously you are my boss and you hired me for this, for my position, so I have to be a little bit careful about the questions I ask and-

Eileen DeCourcy: Not at all-

Nathan Whitlock: And the territory we head to.

Eileen DeCourcy: Not at all.

Nathan Whitlock: This would be a good chance for us to sort of have a kind of exit interview, to have a conversation about the work you've done here at Humber, your sort of vision of where things should be going in postsecondary education. But before we get into that, I was sort of wanting you to give us a little sense of what was your career before Humber and how did you end up here?

Eileen DeCourcy: Thanks Nathan and happy to be here, happy to have had the opportunity to work with you over the last number of years, and thank you for all of your innovations, particularly around NEXT and NEXTCast and the work that you've done with Humber Press.

Eileen DeCourcy: To answer your question, I have spent the last, and I'm going to be conservative here, about 27 some odd years in education and feel truly blessed because I've had an opportunity to work at the high school level with designing curriculum and working with students who would really

challenge the status quo around traditional learning and had an opportunity to learn from them to really start to think about how to be a creative educator.

Eileen DeCourcy: Then moving from a high school level into managing a number of different schools in adult and continuing education. That again was a real education for me because it really allowed me to start to think about and reflect on what is a meaningful learning experience for adults and what do they need when they come back to school in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. Of course, that's a very different experience than what we might have gone through when we were being educated ourselves. I had the opportunity to do that.

Eileen DeCourcy: All through that time I also had the opportunity to teach and I taught at the university level and I've worked in the college sector teaching in the college sector, and then eventually I did actually spend a couple of years working at a university. And when I saw this opportunity at Humber, originally I started as the Director of Professional Development. I was really intrigued by the opportunity to be able to work with educators and to share some of my insights and experiences in the hopes that we could create a better environment for adult learners, and it has been an absolutely tremendous experience working at Humber and I've been able to enjoy and learn from everybody who I've come in contact with.

Eileen DeCourcy: Again, luckily I've been able to work right across the system, high school, K-12 area, college sector, university sector, love the college sector, it's like my favourite place to be.

Nathan Whitlock: Why is that? Why particularly the college?

Eileen DeCourcy: Because the colleges are really focused on learning and they're focused on providing students with skills, with value, with enabling them to learn what they need to learn in order to get a job. That is really around helping people to increase their social economic status, to fulfill their dreams, to be able to hit the ground running.

Eileen DeCourcy: There's nothing wrong with the university. I don't want us to walk away from this interview saying that one is better than the other. There's certainly a place for university in the higher education sector. But what I find about colleges and polytechnics is the focus on learning and the focus on teaching, which is different in the universities. That's what attracted me to the college sector.

Eileen DeCourcy: I really, there is no wasted education. I really don't believe that any of our education whether you pursue a particular focus or not is wasted. If you're open, you learn to do something. Unfortunately not everybody has the means and the finances to be able to learn for the sake of learning on a continuous basis, and so many of our students as you know need to come in, do some short programming, pick up some skills, qualify themselves in some area and then get a job. That's the beauty of the colleges, is that you can come back as often you want and you can re-skill and learn new skills and change your focus and your career over a lifetime. So life-long learning and the ability to pop in and out of the educational sector is so important in today's age.

Nathan Whitlock: For sure. Specifically at Humber, I mean, you've headed up where we are right now which is The Centre for Teaching and Learning. I was sort of curious. I mean, I got here about four years ago so I've had a sense of how the CTL operates and it's changed and it's evolved. But I was wondering what your initial vision was for the CTL and what its mission should be?

Eileen DeCourcy: Again, when I initially started as the director of professional development, my mandate was really to help support faculty become the best teachers that they could possibly be, and in doing so that really helps student success. When we think about all of the supports that are put in place for students, they're absolutely amazing, but we know that the number one important relationship for any student in the learning process is the relationship with their teacher, mentor, faculty.

Eileen DeCourcy: I wanted to really support faculty becoming what would be a contemporary or modern teacher, and in doing so I really needed to look to faculty and say, what is it that you need? You are experts in your fields. We hire you because you are an amazing person in radio or you're an incredible plumber or you're a fantastic business person, whatever your specialty is. But what they didn't have and what they don't often have is a deep, not only a theoretical understanding of the learning process, but a practical tool kit around how to operate within the classroom and how to create the conditions for our students to learn and be successful.

Eileen DeCourcy: There's a number of easy things that faculty can do to help develop those relationships with the students early on to develop trust. Once you do that, then you can certainly help students move through the learning process a lot easier.

Eileen DeCourcy: My focus was really to help faculty with that, but I really needed to hear from faculty and say, "Okay, what do you think is a contemporary

practice? What are some of the challenges that you're experiencing in the classroom? What is your vision of yourself as a teacher because you need to be authentic."

Eileen DeCourcy: My outreach was important. So I did an extensive needs assessment with all of the faculty across the institution and they really said what they needed. They said that they needed more support in a number of different areas, they helped design the infrastructure around timing, days of the week when they would access certain supports and resources, and that was the initial build and then we just built from there over the years.

Eileen DeCourcy: I was very fortunate at Humber to be able to then hire amazing people who would come into work in The Centre for Teaching and Learning. While we started with one person, me, we were able to build after that. So we were able to hire some additional folks around technology. We were able to hire some additional support and resources around the scholarship of teaching and learning. We were able to allow faculty to get some additional support in exploring not just their scholarship but the publication piece, and that's where you came in, Nathan. So we built over the years.

Eileen DeCourcy: The vision was really to think about in a modern educational institution, what are the elements that a faculty member needs to be completely successful in a very complex classroom. We know that the classroom today is very different from the classroom of the past. We also know that students have a lot of challenges that they're facing. Many of our students have full-time jobs or part-time jobs because they need to also pay their bills while they're learning. Some of them have families. There's layers and layers of complexity in the student profile.

Eileen DeCourcy: So a faculty member really needs to not only figure out how to best deliver the content and help students learn the skills, but they also need to think about the human factor in all of this, what are the issues that students are dealing with, barriers, challenges, struggles every day of the week when they walk into the classroom. It is not easy being an educator in the 21st century, and I know we have amazing and talented faculty that do it beautifully every day and so we wanted to make sure we took direction from them.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. I mean, when people ask me who if they're not teachers and they don't know what goes on in a college or university, and they ask me what is a centre for teaching and learning, I always say it's sort of a combination of an academic gym full of trainers that show them how to

lift things except academically and like an R&D department. It's a combination of the two. Do you think that sort of fits or ... ?

Eileen DeCourcy: It does. I mean, I love that analogy. The other piece that was really important for me when creating The Centre for Teaching and Learning is to create an environment where faculty can come in to a safe place, experiment, learn some new skills, access resources, but also to share with each other. The idea of creating a broader network where you don't just need to come into The Centre for Teaching and Learning to actually pick up some skills or knowledge or information regarding teaching and learning, but if one of your peers does and then that peer passes it on, and we start to see a broadening of the capacity and competency across the institution, that to me that's a win-win too.

Eileen DeCourcy: It's around how can we set a vision for what teaching and learning looks like, articulate that broadly to the larger faculty population, enable folks to come in and learn those skills and share them broadly with their peers, and I think slowly what you see is over time you actually do see a change in the different types of methodologies that faculty use. Again, the peer-to-peer influence is incredibly strong.

Nathan Whitlock: And that is an ongoing process and it spreads organically. I mean you were saying about how colleges bring in these experts in their fields but they're not necessarily expert teachers and the sort of magic trick that the college does in the background and backstage is to have them appear before a class and be experts in the field and know how to speak to a class, know how to deliver these lessons and bring them along and have these discussions.

Nathan Whitlock: I mean, I have a friend who's an investigative reporter and is now teaching down at the Lakeshore campus and this is his first semester teaching. We were at a bar last night with our laptops open looking at Blackboard and I was showing him tricks that I have and he was showing me how he does his thing. So I sort of considered that like a satellite office of the CTL for one night at that bar.

Eileen DeCourcy: Absolutely.

Nathan Whitlock: But I was wondering, the CTL has grown and it's evolved over the years. Again, it went from just being you to being this team with all these different skills. I was wondering what are some of the initiatives that you've worked on, that you spearheaded, that you brought into being and some of the projects that you helped bring into existence? What are

some of the ones that you're most proud of, that you're most ... you'll keep pointing to those wherever you go?

Eileen DeCourcy: Yeah, well, thank you. I think that's a great question. There is absolutely a lot that I am proud of. As an example, we're sitting here in this creative studio which is a small room that is surrounded by green screen, wonderful audio equipment, video equipment, a Lightboard, and for those of you who don't know what a Lightboard is, I encourage you to come to the CTL and check out our Lightboard, because all of these innovations offer faculty the opportunity to be creative in their practice.

Eileen DeCourcy: This creative studio is a good example of something that I'm proud of. But the idea didn't necessarily initiate from me, and that's what I was trying to get at earlier, it's that faculty are very good at being able to say, what if this, and maybe can we try this. So I think the idea of taking the lead from faculty is always the important part of having a center for teaching and learning and an operation that is there to support the mission. The studio would be one thing that I'd be proud of because there's been a lot of really great content that has been created in this studio that students can refer to over and over and over again to help them learn in a just-in-time way.

Eileen DeCourcy: The other area that I believe that I would be really proud of as well is the work that we've done on the classroom redesign. Again, those ideas were born from faculty through the strategic planning consultation process for faculty, etc. We really need to think about what our physical structure looks like to support teaching and learning. And while the classroom doesn't make you necessarily ... the physical structure of the classroom doesn't necessarily make you a great teacher, it can inhibit great teaching and learning if you have major physical barriers.

Eileen DeCourcy: There was a lot of consultation and a lot of work done, but we are a leader in that classroom redesign across Ontario. And we have done some incredible things in that area with faculty, and I know that our department of scholarship of teaching learning has done some great research on the impact that it's had on both students and faculty behaviour. The evidence is there to say that it's made a difference to our students, so I'm very proud of that.

Eileen DeCourcy: The other thing that I'm also very proud of and again this idea came from faculty member Craig MacCallum who said, "We are really struggling with how to support students learn a specific set of skills, mainly resiliency, before they go out into the field of being a first responder." We started to

talk about ways in which we could actually help students learn those skills and the idea of assimilation and a virtual reality lab came up.

Eileen DeCourcy: So from there we created a virtual reality lab, state-of-the-art lab where we are actually now creating virtual reality content that includes biometric data so that we can actually see when a student is being stressed. Are they being overwhelmed by this particular learning experience? Are they being underwhelmed? So we know that we want to make sure that we're creating the conditions for students to learn so that they're actually in the right zone of development. So having that biometric feedback allows the faculty member to make some really good decisions around the teaching and learning process and also allows the teacher to be able to incrementally build skills over a longer period of time so you're not doing any harm in those first responder fields.

Eileen DeCourcy: So that one I'm particularly proud of. That has been highlighted and showcased across North America as a leading project through the EDUCAUSE Association as well as through the Horizon Report 2018. Again, so the best ideas are coming from faculty who are in the classroom and are dealing with very real situations around how to support students to become the best that they can be, and they have great ideas.

Eileen DeCourcy: Listening to faculty and listening to those that are really trying to make a difference is an important part of the process and I'm proud of that too. I'm proud that we've got a great staff who are open and really understand that their mission is to support that teaching and learning process, and that are many ways to do that. There is no one size fits all.

Nathan Whitlock: It's great that that idea coming from the faculty, they identify a gap, they identify a need, and they get that question of like how can we solve that, like do we have to just accept that this is just always going to be a problem or this is always going to be a challenge? Maybe there is a way to bridge that and help that out and there's the CTL to build that bridge.

Eileen DeCourcy: That's right.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, this has all been good news and this has all been the good stuff, but the sad thing is that you are moving on. I mean it's sad for Humber and for CTL but it's great for you because you're going on to a new challenge and new ... Where are you going and ... ?

Eileen DeCourcy: Thank you. Yes, so I'm heading off to St. Lawrence College to be their Senior Vice President Academic, and I'm very excited about the opportunity. It'll put me into a different role where I'll be able to again

support the teaching and learning and academic process. I'll be slightly different and I'm excited. It's going to be great. And St. Lawrence area is fantastic.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh yeah.

Eileen DeCourcy: Lots of gorgeous lakes and a thousand islands.

Nathan Whitlock: Your Instagram feed is going to be just amazing from now on. Oh, that's fantastic, and it's probably time that we should get out of your way because you have enormous amounts of work to do. It took a while but I'm glad we finally got you.

Eileen DeCourcy: Yeah, well thank you so much. I really do appreciate the opportunity to have this exit interview and I am going to continue to look at Humber and continue to find inspiration from Humber and continue to look at the CTL and watch the CTL because I know that the CTL will continue to do great, innovative and creative things that will inspire postsecondary across the sector for sure.

Nathan Whitlock: Thanks so much Eileen.

Eileen DeCourcy: Thank you.

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 Pannoza and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTCast or to just let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, @humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks and see you next time. That's still not a pun.