

NEXTcast 2.9: Cheryl Mitchell and Entrepreneurship Research

In this episode, we speak to Humber Business School professor Cheryl Mitchell about research she has done into the manner in which students approach projects in entrepreneurship.

[Note: this is the first episode recorded outside the CTL studio and with our new remote microphone, so the sound is a bit rougher than usual.]

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to *NEXTcast*, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. On *NEXTcast*, we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber both inside and outside the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: In this episode, we sit down with Cheryl Mitchell, a program coordinator and professor in the business school, to talk about a research project related to student entrepreneurship.

Nathan Whitlock: Thanks for coming, Cheryl. Thanks for being on the podcast.

Cheryl Mitchell: Thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: You work in the business school, mostly in the area of entrepreneurship. You work with students, and you work at the Centre for Entrepreneurship. What exactly is it about entrepreneurship and that whole idea that you love, that connects with you?

Cheryl Mitchell: I like the fact that people have an opportunity, whether it's students or people in the community, have the opportunity to follow their passion, something that they're passionate about, that they want to pursue as a career option possibly, and working with them to get them to that next step, to help them and support them. I really like that idea of them creating their own future, really.

Nathan Whitlock: Mm-hmm (affirmative). We've done stories in *NEXT Magazine*, and we've talked to teachers who've worked with students on projects that kind of blossomed into things that some of them brought to places like *Dragon's Den*, or have created actual viable businesses out of it. Is that fun to see the seeds of these projects start, and then grow, and then grow into actual projects?

Cheryl Mitchell: Absolutely. Absolutely. You see them from when they just had the idea, to now they actually have a viable business that they're working on and making a living on it. Some are still doing it part time, but others are actually doing it on a full-time basis.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, that's very cool to see that stuff.

Cheryl Mitchell: It is.

Nathan Whitlock: It always impresses me when someone ... It starts off as a class project and then, four years later, that's their living. They've built it up. In terms of entrepreneurship, you've actually been working on a project, a research project, through the Teaching Innovation Fund called Beyond the Pitch. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that.

Cheryl Mitchell: Sure. It's a project that I wanted to look into, because I teach entrepreneurship. I was looking at teaching them entrepreneurship, looking at engagement more so. In the past, I looked across Humber, so I worked on a project where I looked across a landscape of Humber and all of the programs that teach entrepreneurship and how they teach it.

Cheryl Mitchell: How they typically teach it, and this was going back probably five or six years ago now, but at the time it was more through a business plan or through a pitch, or a combination thereof. That's the way they taught it, a business plan and a pitch. Really, there was no other ways that I saw that people were teaching it.

Cheryl Mitchell: I thought, "Oh, I wonder if there's more engaging ways for people to teach entrepreneurship rather than those two learning activities," and that's kind of where the idea came from.

Nathan Whitlock: Was that a very sort of standard template? Did you find that it was just sort of limited in what the students could learn, or what were the limitations of that?

Cheryl Mitchell: A lot of it was feedback or observation from the students. Students don't like to do ... Well, business plans are long, very detailed, and very cumbersome. Students didn't like so much doing them, especially those students who were in an entrepreneurship course who were never even going to think about starting their own business, but they had to go through the project for the class.

Cheryl Mitchell: Pitches...students, they typically didn't like to stand up in front of the class, and some of them did a Dragon's Den type style in their

classroom, where they would pitch to a panel of judges, and they would score them. I mean, there are other ways that were incorporated in some of the classes, like guest speakers coming in, that type of thing, but for the most part, it was typically the pitches and the business plans.

Cheryl Mitchell: I thought there are other ways to get students more engaged than just the writing and the pitching.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. What were some of those ways that you found or you discovered?

Cheryl Mitchell: What I had done is I still kept the two learning activities, the business plan and the pitches, but I actually incorporated four other learning activities into the class. One of them was a focus group. One of them was a pop-up shop. The other one was they had to do a lean canvas, and the other one was a funding campaign.

Cheryl Mitchell: In addition to the two, business plan and pitch, these other four learning activities I incorporated into the class to see which ones engaged them the most, got them the most involved, the most excited about their business idea that they were working on.

Nathan Whitlock: You said they got most excited about it, so that was the kind of reception you were getting when you opened it up to these other modes of pitching or modes of kind of thinking about their project?

Cheryl Mitchell: Yeah. They knew right off the bat which assignments they had to do. They had to do the six different assignments plus a final presentation kind of on their journey of entrepreneurship. But the six ones, they could do them in any order. I didn't tell them that they had to do the lean canvas first, or I didn't tell them they had to do the business plan first.

Cheryl Mitchell: I actually gave the groups or the individuals, however they decided to move forward, the option of doing whatever assignment they felt, because in real life, and you're starting your business, everyone's going to start it a little bit differently. They might start it with a business plan, or they might just start it with an idea and then go out and ask people what they think about the idea.

Cheryl Mitchell: I wanted to kind of structure it that way, where they had a date for an assignment one, and a date for assignment two, but they chose which assignment one and assignment two was. Then after they had completed the assignment, there was a reflection activity. They would measure how engaged they were with the particular activity,

what they liked about it, what they didn't like. It was a questionnaire that they had to complete after every learning activity.

Nathan Whitlock: It was almost more modular instead of chronological. They still had to go through all those steps, but they could decide which they wanted to focus on first, and then move to the next one.

Cheryl Mitchell: Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: Now, you worked on this project. You researched this new approach to teaching students about entrepreneurship. Then you took your results, you presented them at Humber Showcase, as well as the Annual Conference for the Society of Teaching & Learning In Higher Education at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning in Norway. What was that experience like? What was the kind of feedback you were getting? What was it like to present these results?

Cheryl Mitchell: It was great. It was great, and I presented them in different ways at the different venues. I did them in the form of a presentation. I also did a poster presentation. But the feedback was positive and very enlightening, from the audience members at each of those areas or each of those venues. Very positive, and people had an interest or, "Well, what were students more engaged in," and, "What was the feedback," and, "Why do you think students ..." Students didn't like pitches, which I knew going into it, but it was definitely a result in here as well. They would ask, "Why do students not like to do pitches?"

Cheryl Mitchell: It definitely initiated a conversation about entrepreneurship and teaching it and what helps them, what helps students the best. There was a lot of positive feedback, yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: In terms of moving forward, what do you think are the next steps for this research? What do you want to do with this project moving forward? How do you want to build upon it?

Cheryl Mitchell: My hope is to do a publication, a writing publication in a journal, with the results there. That's a priority for me. Then also I have made changes in some of the learning activities in my own classroom, and I have been sharing it. I do run a Community of Practice for entrepreneurship here at Humber as well, and I've been sharing some of the results there, but also some of the learning activities that I do within the classroom throughout there. That's my hope.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. It's something we always like to ask people who are doing this kind of research, whether through the Teaching Innovation Fund or on their own or through another program, is what kind of advice would you give to another faculty member who wants to do something like this but is maybe new to the whole idea of researching their own practice or researching teaching practice? Are there obstacles they can look out for that maybe you stumbled over? What kind of tips would you give them?

Cheryl Mitchell: Well, first of all, I'd tell them to do it.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay. That's pretty quick.

Cheryl Mitchell: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it makes you look a little bit differently at the way you're teaching in the classroom, and it helps you to engage the students a little bit more, or maybe provide more options, or look at other options that might be viable in your own classroom.

Cheryl Mitchell: I think the support of The Centre for Teaching & Learning is fantastic. They were there throughout the whole process, guiding, providing support, providing resources, meeting up, those touchpoints. It was really great to have them there as well as part of the support, and to help guide you throughout the process. I would say absolutely do it, yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thanks very much for talking to us, Cheryl. This has been great.

Cheryl Mitchell: Okay. Well, thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: *NEXT*cast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at the Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo and Kristin Valois. To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXT*cast 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.