

[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. In this episode we talk to professors Arun Dhanota and Dan Rowe about the documentary film they created as a teaching and training tool. Welcome to *NEXTcast*, Arun and Dan.

[Arun Dhanota](#): Hi, thank you.

[Dan Rowe](#): Thanks for having us.

[Nathan Whitlock](#): Well thank you for being here. You are fresh off the premiere of your joint project, which is a documentary feature. It was recently screened at Humber. In fact, when we're recording this, it was screened yesterday. Before we sort of get into the film itself, I was wondering if we could kinda go back and if you could tell me a little bit about how you first started working together, because you teach in different programs. How did that collaboration begin?

[Dan Rowe](#): Well and it was all Arun's idea, and sort of outreach. Then we started talking, and when I heard the idea I thought it was a really good idea. I could tell how passionate you were about the idea, and how much you cared and believed that this sort of thing could really be useful to all sorts of students, but certainly the students in your program. It was clear to me, at least, that I thought it could as well. That made me want to try to be a part of it.

[Arun Dhanota](#): Yeah. Dan was very receptive, and brought his media industry experience to some of the things that I was looking for. I think just from the get-go we just understood each other right off the bat, that it just helped this project flow.

[Nathan Whitlock](#): And Arun, so Dan mentioned the idea. You had the idea. What-

[Arun Dhanota](#): What was the idea?

[Nathan Whitlock](#): ... exactly was the idea?

[Arun Dhanota](#): So I teach in the Police Foundations program, and we're always trying to find ways to equip our students for what's gonna happen when they go out into the field, especially looking at community service and relationship building, and building trust. We already know that mental health is a big issue these days ... well always, but. So, I was looking for something that you could hear the lived experience of people who have gone through this, or are still with it.

Both addictions and mental illness. What I was finding was very limited. There were a couple YouTube videos here and there, but I couldn't find anything concrete that I could bring into the classroom. I had made a documentary last year, and it was just one of those things where it's like well if I can't find it, why not create it? But what I was really looking to do was create some kind of a resource for the college, students, and the community, that ... the ones who actually go through a crisis, they should be part of the dialogue on what help and support looks like. It's absolutely vital to hear from them. As much as we're so appreciative of all the support available to people, we can't forget that they are also part of the equation. I think I just wanted to bring that in some way, shape, or form.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) And the end result was a documentary film, as I mentioned, so what's it called and what exactly is it about?

[Dan Rowe:](#) Sure, it's called *The Struggle Back*, and it's about 30 minutes long. It's basically the unvarnished stories of three men ... sort of the crux of it, I guess, is their experiences with mental illness and addictions, but then also their experiences and their interactions with the police, primarily, and the criminal justice system more broadly. Again, as Arun was saying, we really wanted to allow these men to share their experiences in a way that was sort of unadorned by other things. We didn't bring in any stats, no sort of background things. We didn't get the other side of the story...

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) It's unmediated. It's direct from their-

[Dan Rowe:](#) ... yeah, I mean obviously the conversations we had with them were very long, and so they had to be pared down, but the idea was they're sitting there, telling you about these things that they've gone through, and how it made them feel at the time, and how it still makes them feel.

[Arun Dhanota:](#) And part of that also is like what could they tell us, faculty, students, and future service providers? When you're out there working with people, what should you be aware of? So I think we tried to just make it come full circle as it possibly could.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) There was a talk at Humber a couple years ago by Jesse Wentz, who's a filmmaker and a cultural critic, movie critic, about Indigenous representation in film, and Hollywood, and history. He made a comment related to the idea of cultural appropriation, specifically in regard to Indigenous issues that I thought was really interesting, and I'm gonna actually butcher it because I'm paraphrasing him, but the phrase he used was something like, "If

it's about us, not without us." The idea of if it's an Indigenous story, it has to be made with the full collaboration of Indigenous people. What you did sounds a bit similar in the idea of you're working in this realm, and it's about these people, so the idea is to actually have their voices speak directly. Was that part of the thinking?

[Arun Dhanota:](#) Yes. I think that was the whole thing that drove why Dan and I met over this project. We were just looking for individuals who could at least *try* to be the voice of everyone who, unfortunately, goes through these kinds of experiences. But yes, I remember, I think I told Dan right upfront, like I'm not interested in any kind of counselor, doctor, we don't want anything like that. We really want to hear the people who are still experiencing this, because at the end of the day, you want to help someone, you've got to understand them. You can't understand them if you don't talk to the person that's going through it.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) Right. And of course, you work in two different departments, and so there was this collaboration between those two programs, those two departments. But you also worked with students, to actually build the film, to create the film. How did that work? How did the student involvement happen?

[Arun Dhanota:](#) It's marvelous.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) It went well?

[Arun Dhanota:](#) It was really great.

[Dan Rowe:](#) It went very well.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) What students were involved and how did they get involved?

[Dan Rowe:](#) Sure. We had two students from each program. They were paid for their work through The Centre for Teaching & Learning, and Applied Research and Innovation. We had a sense of students that we thought would be a good fit, but we sort of opened it up to any students to apply. One thing I know, whenever there's chances for students to write or do stories about whatever it is they're interested in, mental illness is one of the things they gravitate to, especially ... and it may have something to do with some of the classes I teach, which are focused on things like social issues and stuff, but they come up over and over again, so I know that it's an issue that they care about, have in many cases personal connections to, and want to sort of better understand. So there was no shortage of students that were interested in that buy-in, and then-

[Arun Dhanota](#): We went through a lot of interviews actually.

[Dan Rowe](#): ... yeah, and a lot of really good candidates. Part of it was also thinking like which of the four students, ultimately, would work well together. Would they work well as a team? Like that classic sort of just, who's gonna be able to handle this? But then also a really big part of the project, especially in the early stages, was making the connections with the agency that we worked with, that connected us to some of the participants, the people in the film itself, and getting them to feel comfortable opening up to us and the students that were involved, and then eventually being comfortable telling their story in this way. In the early stages it was a lot of just like going, meeting in an office, and sitting and talking to them, and just having conversations. Not even necessarily conversations about ... it was just like, "Where did you grow up in the city?"

[Dan Rowe](#): "What school did you go to?" Just feeling like it was a lot of ... we'd have a really good meeting for 90 minutes, and we're like we didn't really, we just kind of chatted. We think they-

[Arun Dhanota](#): We just hung out.

[Dan Rowe](#): ... liked this a bit more, and feel a bit more comfortable. So we needed students who were able to sort of manage that. Feel comfortable, and to also make the participants feel comfortable, build that rapport.

[Nathan Whitlock](#): You mentioned one of the original ideas was to use this as a teaching resource in your courses. How is that going to work now? Now that you have the film, now that it exists, how will it work as a resource?

[Arun Dhanota](#): For the Police Foundations program we have a course called Community Response to Social Issues, and that's one of the things with the Police Foundations program, is that we don't have a lot of opportunity for students to leave the classroom and go outside and do meaningful work. Part of making this kind of film was to bring the outside into the classroom. Anyhow, what we're gonna be doing ... well in the summer, I'll be testing it out, we'll be using the film in that class. We are going to be using that film for the Addictions and Mental Health program here at Humber. I believe there's a course called Social Issues for Journalism that you guys will be using it in, and then our partner, the Regeneration Community Services, they're using it as a training tool for their staff and volunteers. We're in the process of working ... or, we will be eventually meeting with a couple of more community agencies to see if this film could be used

as a training tool for them. But I am looking to make it a permanent fixture for that one particular PFP course. And then just open it up to whoever feels that they could use that film, in whichever capacity they need. So the next step is to make it public, and we're gonna work on how to do that.

[Nathan Whitlock](#): Well I hope that in the very near future it's much more widely available, other courses pick it up, that it becomes a tool not just in your programs but in multiple Humber programs, and I wanted to thank you both for doing this podcast.

[Arun Dhanota](#): Thanks for having us.

[Dan Rowe](#): Thanks a lot.

[Nathan Whitlock](#): *NEXT*cast is produced by Kristin Valois for Humber Press, with the assistance of the Creative Productions Team at The Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo. To listen to previous episodes of *NEXT*cast, and to read issues of *NEXT* magazine, go to humberpress.com. You can also find free downloadable transcripts of every *NEXT*cast episode at humberpress.com. To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXT*cast, or to just let us know what you think, email [humberpress](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca), all one word, @humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.