

## **NEXTcast 2.14: Christine Zupo and Students On Their Research Study**

*For the first time on NEXTcast, Nathan welcomes two students into the studio! Guelph-Humber students Alex Evans and Lexa Castellan join their professor, Christine Zupo, to discuss their experience participating in a TIF-funded research study.*

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 professor Christine Zupo as well as two of her students about research they conducted on student well-being.

Nathan Whitlock: So this is something of a first for this podcast. We've had multiple guests on before but this is A, the highest number of people we've had in one episode.

Nathan Whitlock: It's also the first time we've ever had students as guests, so welcome. I'm just sort of going to go around the room. First welcome, Christine. Thank you for coming.

Christine Zupo: Thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome, Lexa. All right, and welcome Alex.

Alex Evans: Thank you.

Nathan Whitlock: I know you've deliberately done this to confuse me by having these names so close together. Well, we're here to talk about a project that you all worked on as a group collectively and it was funded by the Teaching Innovation Fund. It was some research you did into intentional activities related to student well-being. Before we talk about the origins of that project, I just want you to define what are intentional activities? What does that term mean?

Christine Zupo: When we're talking about interventional activities, we're talking about actions or intentional ways of thinking that will increase positive emotions. And these positive emotions when experienced frequently create a stronger, more connected sense to subjective happiness or well-being.

Nathan Whitlock: Is it sort of a mindfulness idea? Is it related to that?

Christine Zupo: Yes, mindfulness is definitely a big part of it, but it goes beyond mindfulness, into interventions which are activities. So you

intentionally go out and create opportunities to experience positive emotions, such as making social connections, acts of kindness. So there's several different types.

Nathan Whitlock: And this is obviously a huge territory and really interesting place to start with a project. What inspired this project?

Christine Zupo: There's a lot of research that show that students are self-reporting high levels of anxiety, high levels of depression. And we, as an institution, want to be able to build in, into our teaching, building into our institution, so that we are automatically already thinking about helping students sort of, create a sense of wellness for themselves. So not necessarily waiting for good things in life to happen, but going out and creating good experiences and good things in your life.

Nathan Whitlock: Making a deliberate choice to seek these things out.

Christine Zupo: It also gives students a sense of their increased autonomy, in being able to create wellness for themselves. And I think that was key. So there might be many layers to anxiety and depression that students are feeling and many layers of support that they need. But we want to also think of ways within our teaching and in our practice, how we help students experience those positive emotions more frequently than the negative emotions.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, speaking of student autonomy, this was a project that was done with actual participation of students. And we have students here. So I want to bring Alexa and Alex into this conversation. So, my question is, how did you get involved? How did you come about being partners in this project?

Alex Evans: This is actually a part of our placement experience. So, with the University of Guelph-Humber every single year of our studies we get a placement opportunity, and we are really lucky in the early childhood studies programs that we have a really wide range of placements that we can experience. So for me, personally, I have been a student of Christine's for many years now. And last year, in one of her courses she was advertising this study and talking about this placement and I was really thrilled about the idea of doing research, especially with her, since I have been her student for so long.

Lexa Castellan: Yeah, my experience was different. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do in terms of my placement. I've done a lot of child care and a lot of working with kids, so I really wanted to look at

something that was still within our field but a different perspective. So it was actually suggested to me by the placement coordinator to work on research, and I thought it would be a lot of fun to do it with Christine especially because, I've again, had her throughout my years. And I always had a positive experience so I was excited.

Nathan Whitlock: Was it fun?

Alex Evans: Oh, amazing.

Lexa Castellan: Sometimes.

Lexa Castellan: Fun and interesting are my choice of words.

Nathan Whitlock: We are going to count that as a mixed reaction.

Alex Evans: Generally, very fun.

Lexa Castellan: It was rewarding.

Alex Evans: Rewarding is a very good way to describe this experience. Yeah. We learned a lot, especially about professional development. Some skills that we had going into this placement we really honed in on and defined sharing our experience here. Which I think is only going to help us moving forward with our careers.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, that sounds fantastic. I'm actually curious, what other things did you learn throughout this project? What were some of the outcomes? And were there some surprises that came out of this research?

Lexa Castellan: So a lot of what we found we were expecting to find. We knew that both positive interventions in nature were going to have a positive effect on the students. It was more just the margin in which we saw the improvements that were more surprising to us. So we noticed that in our indoor, non-intervention, we also had, had less of an increase than we did in outdoor. So even nature, just on its own, was a positive effect on the students.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, interesting.

Lexa Castellan: So that was..

Nathan Whitlock: Just being outside had already started to help.

- Alex Evans: Yeah. So with both of our control groups essentially, one of them was outdoor and one of them was indoor, and the group that was outdoor, they actually increased their margin of happiness double the indoor group. Which was amazing, and something that we expected, but not by that extent. It was a very, very cool and rewarding thing to see.
- Nathan Whitlock: In terms of the outcomes for you, Christina, as a teacher, what kind of things have you brought back to the class from doing this research?
- Christine Zupo: So, I think the most important element I'm learning from all the research and positive psychology and positive intervention is really ingrained in the relationship that you have with students. For example, with our project it was important for us to determine early on what all our goals were. Now what were we all aiming for, or why are we in this? So that while we are going through the steps, and while we are going through the project, we are making sure we are all successful. So that was really important, and we found out for ourselves that we are very...
- Alex Evans: Positively motivated.
- Christine Zupo: Pos-That's the term. Positively motivated. And we really believed in this research, and we really believed that by tweaking our thinking, that we can look for the positive and we could create positive experiences and positive emotions. Which in turn releases happy chemicals, and makes us overall well. So I think bringing that into the classroom is also very important, right? That that sense of relationship with your students...
- Nathan Whitlock: I'm wondering, Alex and Lexa, what did you discover about this process, about each other, about how you work, how you work with Christine, how you work as a team?
- Alex Evans: We were just really able to connect right from the beginning. Even from day one I never felt like I was a student in this position. I always felt like I was an equal contributor. Which I think really helped for our team dynamic. Lex and I always joked too, we were like two sides of the same coin. Besides, we share a name but it's where I lack, Lexa can help and pick up the slack and vice versa. And we are really compatible that way, I think? Which really helped the way we got things done. Christine was very supportive throughout the entire thing. We were always in communication and she was really great at giving feedback. Which again, is something

that really helped us and gave us confidence to move forward on our own.

Lexa Castellan: Yeah, I'd say that the most important thing we took away from this experience was a new found confidence in our ability to work together as professionals. Because when you're a student you don't really think of yourself as a professional, as much, so really honing in on those skills and being able to be like, "Yes, I am capable of doing this." And to lean on each other and work together as a team, that was really quite rewarding and quite important, I thought.

Nathan Whitlock: It's almost an interesting parallel to the research you were actually doing. I mean, you were a group yourselves. You were gaining in strength and gaining in confidence as you were doing this work. It makes me wonder if there was another control group of students working on another project that was not as rewarding and someone else is going to study it.

Lexa Castellan: Yeah we did speak about that, how a lot of the positive effects that we wanted other students to have, we also gained through this experience. So it was kind of like, also part of that. It was cool.

Nathan Whitlock: And in terms of sort of maximizing those positive effects for other faculty, for other professors who want to engage in this kind of research, especially in working with students, I'm wondering...all of you, what would you suggest are some things that they should replicate in terms of how you worked, how you collaborated, how you communicated?

Alex Evans: We think more students, especially in their undergraduate should be involved in research. We've learned so much through this experience. And I don't think I would've gained these skills otherwise if I had not done this. So, Lex and I especially are very passionate about teaching our fellow students about this kind of research and what we do, because most students don't really know research beyond researching for a paper, until they get to their masters and whatnot.

Alex Evans: I think having that really good team dynamic is really important. When Christine was really good with us in the beginning, where we were kind of unsure as for what to do, because this was our first time in the research field. And so she was very good at being very hands on at the beginning. Showing us the ropes. But also giving us freedom to kind of do things on our own. I even remember the first day Christine and I sat down to talk about this, she was like, we were talking about ideas and bouncing them around and right from

the beginning she was like, "That's a really great idea, we should do that. We should put that into the study." And that's kind of something that's continued through this entire study. And so I think having that support from your lead researcher is really essential for students.

Lexa Castellan: Yeah, I think it was important that we always were constantly in communication. That's what made it really work for us. If we ever had like an issue, or something we needed to move from one phase to the next, we would always meet together and be like, "Okay, so this is where we are at in the research, and this is where we need to go." And we kind of broke it down into steps. Because obviously when you look at it as a whole, it's a lot of work to do. But when we broke it down it became more manageable, and therefore it was a better experience for us.

Christine Zupo: And I think what I've really put into practice and learned for myself is that it's important to have the discussion early of, what are your fears, what are your hopes, what are your dreams, what do you believe in in terms of this research? And sort of get a general sense of where the students are at and keep that open dialogue really early so that you can monitor that. Monitor those fears, monitor those goals, and make sure, you know, they might change, right? So power was very fluid between us. So there were times in our research project where you had all the knowledge, right? And you'd come in and sit down with me and tell me with a lot of enthusiasm things that you were discovering and finding. And that was awesome to experience as an educator. It was awesome to see those skills really growing. And the confidence, right? And that inner dialogue changing, from where, "I don't think I can do this," to "I got this!" And I think that, for me, if nothing else, came out of this research, that was my intention for the students outcomes, for sure.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, I think we got this. I'm feeling much better myself. I'm feeling happier. How is everybody feeling? Is everyone feeling confident and assured? Great. Well, I want to thank you all for coming and allowing us to talk about this and sort of do this NEXTcast first. Thank you so much for coming.

Alex Evans: Thank you for having us.

Christine Zupo: Thank you for having us.

Nathan Whitlock: *NEXTcast* is produced by Kristin Valois for Humber Press, with the assistance of the Creative Productions Team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning. Special thanks to Santino PannoZZo.

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Nathan Whitlock: Thanks, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.