

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber college. I'm Nathan Whitlock, a professor at Humber College and an editor at large 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 speak to Rai Reece, a professor in the Faculty of Social and Community Services about turning teaching challenges into opportunities for learning.

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast, Rai.

Rai Reece:

Thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock:

It's great to have you here. Before we get talking about this issue of learning from teaching mistakes, teaching challenges, I'll call them challenges, not mistakes for now, I want to just let us know what you do here at Humber. What's your role here?

Rai Reece:

Sure. So, I am a professor in the Faculty of Social And Community Services. I teach courses on the introduction into the Canadian Criminal Justice system, a course on community ethics and a course called Institutional Correctional Practices, which essentially is a course that teaches students about the inner workings around jails and prisons in Canada.

Nathan Whitlock:

Correct me if I'm wrong, you won an award recently for research?

Rai Reece:

I did. I did. Thank you. I'm very proud of the work that I was able to complete. This was an award, it was the Humber Research Excellence Award in 2018, and it was connected to a research project I did with incarcerated women at the Vane Correctional Center for women. And the research project specifically was doing an evaluation of the horticulture technician pre-apprenticeship program, it's a very long title.

Nathan Whitlock:

Wow. That is a mouthful.

Rai Reece:

It is a very long title. It is a unique program that women who are incarcerated at the jail get screened into and faculty from Humber go up there to teach and it is a program that works with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Peel-Halton region, the community workforce and development office. I think that I said that right, here at Humber. And women have the opportunity to get their level one apprenticeship certificates in landscape and horticulture. So, it's great. It's a good program that can help build skills. It's a college-based program and so I evaluated that program and I think it was a really great learning experience because I got to interview women who were inside. I worked with women inside for many years in some capacity. And I really got to talk about skills-based training and how important, it's so

incredibly important, that folks who are doing time are given tangible skills that they can use when they exit the system. So the research really was just an evaluation of that program, interviewing women who were in the program, who were incarcerated, interviewing folks who are associated with the program in the jail and folks who support women upon their release. And I'm really happy that I was able to have a Humber student as my research assistant. So that was a great learning and a great leadership opportunity for me to take a student inside and just another way of teaching that's outside of the classroom that I think is incredibly important.

Nathan Whitlock:

Yeah, it sounds like a whole learning circle.

Rai Reece:

It really was.

Nathan Whitlock:

And every part of that was sort of about learning.

Rai Reece:

It was hard, sometimes, too.

Nathan Whitlock:

Oh, I'm sure.

Rai Reece:

It was challenging and I think part of those challenges are learnings of course, pedagogically. And so it was an honor to get that award and I truly, really truly share it with the women that were so gracious in allowing us to come in and share time with them inside of the institution.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, I would actually love to do a whole podcast episode about that as well. But for now, we're going to talk about a different kind of learning experience. You recently participated in a workshop through your faculty about learning from teaching challenges. I was wondering if you tell us a little bit about that event, how it worked?

Rai Reece:

Yeah, absolutely. So that event was hosted by our teaching and learning group here at Humber and a number of our faculty, my coworkers are part of that group. And so the purpose of that day was really to have a few faculty members talk about things that have worked really well in the classroom, things that have not worked, and a solutions focus perspective. So what we did to address the things that didn't work, essentially.

Nathan Whitlock:

And what was the experience or the experiences that you focused on? The challenges, the challenge.

Rai Reece:

Some of the challenges, it was really great being a part of that panel because not only did I get to share the things that have not worked for me, but I got to learn from my coworkers and hear other experiences. So for me, one of the challenges I spoke about was just there's an assumption that we have all the answers as professors and as teachers, right? And when students ask us things or have questions and we don't know the answer, I think there is a lot of, for many of us, there could be some trepidation about saying you don't know. And so one of the things I did learn really early in my teaching career, particularly here at Humber, because they've been here now almost eight years, was when you go into the classroom and you just launch into the topic of the day or whatever the lecture is, it can be a bit jarring for students. Particularly with the courses I teach, we talk about some really hard hitting and some controversial topics. We talk about transphobia, we talk about homophobia, we talk about racism and sexism, Islamophobia. And so those are topics, theoretical and practical, that I believe you have to ease into. And my early years teaching here, I was so excited and really gung ho and I would go in and say, "Okay, today we're going to talk about, I don't know, Islamophobia." I'd just launch in and it would be a bit jarring for students.

Nathan Whitlock:

Sure.

Rai Reece:

One of the things I learned is I do something that's called a checkin and it really is for the first 10 or 15 minutes of the class, we talk about anything. It could be what we ate on the weekend, it could be a movie we saw, it can be something that's in the news, it can literally be anything and it doesn't have to be related to the course. And I found that it just eases students into relaxing a little bit before we tackle the topic or the lecture of the day. And I also find it's a nice time to talk about things that are important, but that might not necessarily fit into my course. So we can talk about, for example, my ethics course, I was going to say we talked about Trump, which is probably another whole issue. But it wasn't directly related to the topic of the day.

Nathan Whitlock:

I don't see how Trump relates to ethics at all. There is no connection there. [Laughter]

Rai Reece:

But what I remember, when he got elected, I wanted to talk about the impact and what his election meant. And our checkin was a really good time to like, "Hey, what do you folks think about this from a Canadian perspective or whatever." So I learned to do that over the years and I think it's worked really well.

Nathan Whitlock:

And can you think of a specific incident where you threw people into a discussion maybe they were not ready for or that you weren't ready for that got out of hand?

Rai Reece:

Yeah, I don't know if it's an incident, I can definitely give a topic for sure. Because my teaching pedagogy is very much grounded through an equity lens, very much grounded on equity lens and because so much of my work is around applied social justice inside of the classroom as well as outside, I would definitely say when we start talking about racism, that is a topic that people just ... Particularly anti-black racism, I

think that is a topic that folks are just uncomfortable talking about. And so I can definitely think in the earlier years when I would go on and talk about, "Okay, so this is what racism looks like and I know our classroom looks like the United Nations and that's great and this is a great country and however there are all these other things that happen that we don't talk about." And the students just weren't ready. They just were not ready. They hadn't had those conversations. They still were not open to having those conversations. They didn't know how to have those conversations because they'd never had poignant conversations about race and what it looks like in Canada. And so when I would start to contextualize it, "Well, hey, let's look at like Japanese internment camps here, or let's look at like the Chinese head tax, or indigenous folks." And then folks were like ... They didn't know what to do with it because they just didn't have the context or the framework for it. So I would say that that definitely is still a challenging topic to talk about. Another really challenging topic is in my institutional correctional practices course, the jails and prisons course that I talked to you about. And I have a whole section, a whole lecture on transphobia and trans-prisoners and students, they don't understand. They're not open. Some are, I shouldn't say as a homogenous group, they're not. But I think by and large, most are just not comfortable talking about trans-related issues. So it's really trying to get them to wrap their head around equity and rights and the problematics of incarceration for folks who identify as trans and what this could look like. So just those topics that they're not comfortable having conversations about. Really trying to make it relational to what their experience, not even their expensive, make it relational to what their jobs could look like post-graduation because we're a community justice program. So I'm like, "The likelihood is you are going to have clients or you're going to work with folks who don't look like you or have a different sexual orientation or whatever have you." So we have to learn to walk, to learn in and across difference in an equitable manner that supports human rights and like, our Charter rights. And sometimes, that's hard for them.

Nathan Whitlock:

It makes me think though, I mean some professors who may be listening to this may be thinking like, "Well, I'm not touching that. I'm not going to touch anything like that in my class because it will go off the deep end, the discussion will get away from me." Do you think teachers maybe should shy away from those topics till they're ready or do you think that it's good to take risks and find out what the weather's like in their class, what the comfort level is?

Rai Reece:

That's such a great question, Nathan, because we've had so many discussions at the faculty level and I think we're starting to have those discussions at an institutional level about how do you teach from an equitable lens if you're not comfortable yourself? Right? So I mean a lot of the discussions is like how do you answer a question around race as a white person with privilege if you've never really thought about it? And so my response to your question would be, I think inequity and things that are uncomfortable should always be addressed in the classroom. And that leads me to think about it's okay to say we don't know and I don't have the answers. I think students appreciate that level of humanity when it's brought into the classroom. I think there also are not enough supports for faculty that are struggling around some of the equitable issues that are very much part of our society and very much a reflection of our student body. And so the easy thing is to kind of be like, "Oh." Like we get uncomfortable, we don't address it, but then the students are left feeling like they were invalidated or their question or whatever their comment was negated. And I think that's worse than actually just confining saying, "You know what? I don't have that lens. I appreciate your question and here's what we're going to do as a class to try to find out or figure out." I think we do a greater disservice when we gloss over things and kind of, as you said, don't check the weather or the temperature in the classroom. And it's difficult. Equity issues

are challenging. It is. And so I can appreciate when folks say, "You know, I'm not comfortable talking about race because it's not my learned field." I can appreciate that, I can understand that. And if you're willing to work around allyship and equity, then that's a good thing. I think it's harder when it's like, "I'm uncomfortable about it, so I'm not going to address it at all." because the students have to, they don't have a choice because some of them live that experience. So for some of them-

Nathan Whitlock:

They're right in the middle.

Rai Reece:

They're right in the middle of it. And so I do think we have a responsibility as educators to do that work. I really think we do.

Nathan Whitlock:

And there's probably a point at which not addressing uncomfortable issues is a way of addressing them. You're addressing them in the negative.

Rai Reece:

Right, right.

Nathan Whitlock:

Leaving them out is you're saying, "This is all uncomfortable. We're just going to leave it out of our entire class."

Rai Reece:

We're just going to leave it out.

Nathan Whitlock:

Which probably feels very artificial, feels very problematic in itself. Do you feel that there should be ... I mean there are lots of workshops. There are lots of guest lecturers at Humber and there are lots of opportunities for faculty to educate themselves on those issues and become more comfortable. Do you feel that's something that should be ramped up or is it that faculty should take more advantage of those opportunities?

Rai Reece:

All those things? Yeah, so here's the interesting thing. I think Humber is, because we have the equity and diversity, the EDI, the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion Task Force here at Humber and I think they've been doing and have done incredible work. We have a very committed, I believe, Human Rights Office and a committed Dean, I really do. But here's the thing. If you don't want to do the work, because you can't mandate someone to teach equity, right? So if you don't want to do the work as an educator, I think that's where you get this fissure. Folks aren't comfortable, so then they don't want to do it. Or maybe they feel it's not applicable to what they're teaching and they don't go to the workshops. The workshops are there, the speakers are coming. So I think on the institutional level, I think the pieces are being put in place.

Rai Reece:

On the individual level, in terms of our responsibility, you can't force folks to do what they don't want to do. But that also is a part of what perpetuates the problem around lack of equity. And so as educators, I really believe in the promise of pedagogy. I really believe that you can educate in a way for social change and then, in a reciprocal manner, we too get so much back from our students when we are willing to be a little vulnerable in the classroom. I really think we do get so much back from them just as much as we can impart on them.

Nathan Whitlock:

Yeah. And probably being vulnerable in the classroom is one of the more difficult things.

Rai Reece:

Way more difficult.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, thank you so much for coming on NEXTcast.

Rai Reece:

Thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock:

And having this discussion.

Rai Reece:

Thanks so much. I appreciate your time.

Nathan Whitlock:

This episode of NEXTcast was edited by Kristin Valois from Humber Press. To listen to previous episodes of NEXTcast and to read issues as a magazine, go to humberpress.com. You can also find free downloadable transcripts of every NEXTcast episode at humberpress.com. To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to just let us know what you think, email humberpress@humber.ca. That's humberpress, all one word at humber.ca. Thanks and see you next time. That is still not a pun.