

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, talked to Shirantha Beddage, a Juno nominated musician, as well as a professor in the faculty of media and creative arts. We sit down with Shirantha to discuss his use of technology in the classroom. Welcome to Next Cast, Shirantha.

Shirantha B.: Thanks very much for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: I'm curious. This is your first time on the podcast. I was wondering if you could just sort of tell us what program you teach in and what classes you teach.

Shirantha B.: I teach in the bachelor of music program. I teach courses in music theory, first and second year courses, which are core courses. This year I'm also teaching the B band, which is the second level, 18 piece big band within the bachelor of music program. Also, I teach a music pedagogy, which is a third and fourth year music elective, not this year, but I usually teach that course as well.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. And we're actually going to be talking today a little about tech, using tech in the classroom, because you're a bit of an enthusiast for using tech.

Shirantha B.: I think nerd is the correct term.

Nathan Whitlock: I was trying to talk around it. I was dancing around it. In fact, you are ... What is the official designation with Apple? You're an Apple educator? Is that the-

Shirantha B.: Apple distinguished educator. Yes.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, I forgot the distinguished. I apologize. How did that come about? What does that mean, and how did that come about?

Shirantha B.: Well, it was somewhat random. I was looking on the Apple website one day and I stumbled upon this program. I may have encountered it because of other people who are educators who have blogged about this program in the past and applied for the program. We do a biannual application cycle. They don't actually tell you much about it before you apply, because it's Apple, and they keep everything under wraps. So, I sent in a video of myself using technology in my classrooms, using the iPad, using my MacBook for various purposes, and I sent it to them. They said, "Great. You're accepted into this program."

Shirantha B.: They invited me to the Canadian Academy, which was in 2017, and then back to the Global Academy, which was in 2018, where I got to go to Austin, Texas and connect with about 350 educators from about 35 different countries and actually meet some of the people who create the programs that we use, like

Keynote and GarageBand, and the people who are actually responsible for the development of those software programs, as well as connect with other educators, music educators and otherwise. It's a pretty neat community of people.

Nathan Whitlock: And how was that? How was it meeting these other people who are the actual people who are making these programs?

Shirantha B.: It's a little bit odd. They're very nice people, but it's a strange, out of body experience in a way to kind of have a chat one-on-one with these people who you think are probably not as approachable as they are. The ability to be able to rap with them and hear about the new features that they're developing, but also give them feedback directly and say, "Hey. What about this?", is a very unique opportunity that I think outside of this would be almost impossible for me to have that time to just connect with them. So, it was pretty great.

Nathan Whitlock: And were they open to your ideas for changes?

Shirantha B.: They were. I mean, it was interesting. I approached the GarageBand head and said, "Hey. What about adding music notation into GarageBand for iOS?" That's actually just something that I've heard from a lot of educators as something that they would like to see in the music area. I don't actually use GarageBand as much as I do a Logic or other programs in my classes, but I was the first person to chat with John Danty, The developer of GarageBand, during the weekend. He wasn't as receptive to it, because I think they want to keep this program a very simple, but by the end of the week all the music educators had basically wrapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hey. John, what about this?", And he was like, "Okay. Okay. We'll look into it." I mean, even if nothing comes of it, at least it's on his radar now, which is an amazing thing.

Nathan Whitlock: There may be at some point in extension, an added app, something to add onto GarageBand keynote and GarageBand?

Shirantha B.: Yeah. I hope that my name is attached into the plugin. Yeah. That would be nice.

Nathan Whitlock: So, you mentioned using an iPad and your Mac book. Are those your primary tools in the classroom, your educational tools?

Shirantha B.: Yeah. Absolutely. I use the MacBook these days as more or less a classroom preparation and organizational tool. I use it to make all my lesson plans with a program called OmniOutliner, which is a wonderful tool to organize my thoughts. I build my classroom presentations for my theory classes and my education classes in Keynote. Then once that's done, I send it all over to my iPad. Then when I walk into the classroom, I have everything on my iPad and I've loaded my presentations into a program called GoodNotes, which is an amazing notebooking app, but also has great presentation features for teachers that

allows you to mark up slides and things in a very analytical way that you don't get to do with the stock apps that you would have on your machine, at least not on a Mac. So, that's the way I do it. I found that just sort of simplifying things and just walking into the classroom with one device, as opposed to two, has made my life a lot easier. That's taken a while, but it's nice to just have the limitation of one thing.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. When you say it's taken a while, I mean, how did you get started? Were you a kind of tech geek as a child, or is this something you came to more recently?

Shirantha B.: Yeah. I mean, Commodore 64 and onwards. I was very Intuit as a kid and was always interested in experimenting with it. I think the reason that I got into it in a classroom was because I saw a need to have a bit more clarity. My first gig as a teacher, when I was teaching in Georgia, I used a lot of overhead projectors, as every music theory teacher I'm sure has done some point, because it's an opportunity to get very analytical, and you make a transparency of your sheet music, and you put it on the slide, and you get out your red pen, and you mark it up, and then that's that. But when I got to Humber, I saw the poor overhead projectors sitting dusty in the side of the room and I realized that I had to come up with something a little better. That's when the iPad kind of was introduced to me as a tool, and I realized quickly that it's a much better solution to that problem, because not only can you be analytical, you can be super detailed. You can zoom in. You can zoom out. You can use the camera. You can capture things and post them later for your students to review. There's many advantages of this particular approach over the analog way that I was doing it before.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. And yet your primary musical instrument is the baritone saxophone. Is that correct?

Shirantha B.: Yep.

Nathan Whitlock: It looks very complicated, but it's not like you are the master of a keytar or something that's massively tech enabled and sophisticated.

Shirantha B.: Yeah. That's true. Y.

Nathan Whitlock: You inhabit these two worlds.

Shirantha B.: Yeah. For a lot of musicians I think there's a decidedly analog process to just sitting in a room by yourself and figuring out how your instrument works. There's no substitute for that. That's an interesting world to straddle as well, because I think within our program we're a pretty analog program. We have classes in music production and things like that, which are very technology focused, but in my courses I think the best weapon my students are going to bring to the table is a piece of sheet music, paper, and a pencil. That's going to

be the primary tool to enhance their learning as a student. I have conversations with them at the beginning of the semester about technology, because I feel like they probably know the potential of those technologies to enhance their learning, as well as distract them and detract from it. So, I feel like being upfront with them about it and saying, "Look, if you feel like you're going to do a better job as a student taking notes on an iPad or using your phone and recording your lectures, let's have a conversation about that, and I'm open to it, but if you feel like that's going to be more of a distraction for you than not, just bring some manuscript paper, and a pencil, and an eraser to class with you and you'll be just fine. That's typically what most of my students do.

Nathan Whitlock: They go pen and paper?

Shirantha B. : Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: I was going to ask you about the reception that the students have to these tech enabled classes that you do. In terms of you bringing that material, in terms of you presenting the material, how do they receive that?

Shirantha B.: They receive it well. I mean, what I typically do is when I'm being very analytical in a music theory class, I will make some copies of the sheet music that we're analyzing for the day and looking at. We'll play through it. We'll sing it. We'll do things to kind of get them involved with the music all in a more visceral kind of emotional way. We'll talk about the background of the song. We'll maybe watch a video or something that engages them in the process of actually being in it. Then when I get out my Apple pencil and start marking up a slide, they often tend to do the same thing. They get in with it, and then they start marking it up as I'm doing, but I don't also want that to be the end of it. I want to turn them then loose on something that's related, give them another project, and get them to do some group work and analytical work themselves, just so that they can practice those skills in a similar way that I've been modeling it for them. So, they seem to be responding to it well, and it's a good tool for them to engage in the classroom discussion, as well as review later. The other thing that I really love doing is using the camera. With GoodNotes, as an example, when I'm presenting a lecture and the students are doing some work, I can just walk over to one of the students and say, "Hey. Do you mind if I snap a picture of this?" I snap a picture, and then instantly their work is up on the screen in front of everybody. During the term I just try to pick on everyone in a good natured way, as much as I can, just to let them know that you know it's okay. I'm not doing this to make a fool of you if you make a mistake. I'm just doing this to show an example of work, and I'm picking you because I think you're doing something well, and we can talk about that. Even if you've made a mistake, it's just an opportunity to have a conversation about it and a dialogue.

Nathan Whitlock: Speaking of mistakes, you mentioned you've kind of determined that using one device per class is simpler, more efficient, cleaner. Was that a process of trial

and error? Were there moments where you found, oh, I've over tech'd this class, or I'm using the wrong thing or I'm using the wrong tool for the wrong practice?

Shirantha B.: Yeah. I just like to have the minimum amount of distraction for myself as a teacher that I can manage and still get the job done effectively. I just don't want to have to deal with this dongle, and that dongle, and this thing to charge, and this thing to charge, and this thing to plug in. If I can do it with one device, all the better. The struggle for me then is I wish I could do all that I need to do on one device. I wish that I could just use my MacBook or my iPad for absolutely everything. But for me it's a much more efficient process to sit down with my computer, prep it all, sync it all into one drive, and pull it down to the other device, and just make it simple for myself in the classroom. But it's just because I'm a pretty easily distracted person that I like to simplify things for myself. If I can be more calm about that process in the classroom, I'm probably going to come off as more relaxed and loose when I'm teaching, which is I think a good thing.

Nathan Whitlock: I've done this myself, where I've gone, you know, prepared a classroom, prepared a lesson plan, and I thought, "I should introduce some other things to kind of keep them interested, keep them engaged," and I'll throw in a survey, throw in a poll, throw in this, throw in a video. Then sometimes it works really well. Sometimes it works really organically, and then sometimes I feel like, "Oh. I've overdone this. I've over-thought this, and all I'm doing is just kind of hammering them with, look at this, look over there, look over here, look over there." Is that kind of advice you would give to a professor who wants to bring in more tech, to kind of keep it organic, to kind of keep it natural?

Shirantha B.: Yes. I think there's always got to be room for play. I think at the end of the day, if we leave the room for a bit of spontaneity in the classroom, that's a very good thing. If the students know that you're able to react and to respond to them in the moment and that there isn't so much that you have programmed that is going to interfere with that flow, for me that's a much more comfortable solution. Again, I have pretty small class sizes. I have the luxury of being able to have dialogue with each and every one of them every day. I can walk around and see how my students are doing. Hopefully they don't feel like they're a number in the room, but for me to be able to react and respond to questions and do things in the moment, I have to make sure that I've got enough wiggle room in what I've prepared that it isn't so tech doubt or so programmed that there isn't the room for that improvisation to happen in the moment.

Nathan Whitlock: You're currently doing a secondment with the teaching and learning support team. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing there?

Shirantha B.: Yeah. So, this year I'm involved in what I'm calling a video teaching toolkits project. The idea behind it stems from the concept that ... I did a creative

project a few years ago with a hybrid course that I taught for music theory a few years ago, where I started making sort of a video library to accompany the online lessons that I was making for my music theory course, and the students really enjoyed them. They really appreciated them. The teachers started using them in their own classes, the other teachers in the same course, and actually they still use them. So, I realized that this was an interesting way to be able to communicate for my own students, and I started thinking about the idea of how to incorporate a video series for my colleagues in different faculties. They're all relating to the idea of teaching with technology. So, right now I'm working on various videos. I'm talking about Blackboard. I'm talking about office 365. I'm talking about Panopto, Humber's new video streaming service, which is actually what I'm using to make all of these videos. It's a great tool that I've really been enjoying using. I'm looking at iPads. I'm looking at Mac specific stuff. I'm creating videos specific to the music department, but I'm also creating videos with the hope that they'll be shared with other colleagues outside of the music department. I'm trying to keep them as general as possible, so that people will be able to look at them and even though they may not have anything to do with music or any music background, will be able to take something from them and say, "Okay. This is an area that I could incorporate into my classroom." We all have common threads that bind us together as teachers, no matter what subject we're teaching. So, I realized that it was an opportunity to be able to share some of my pedagogical perspectives with different people, but through the lens of the technology. So, it's not so much how to use the tool, but why to use the tool.

Nathan Whitlock: I guess that's always the big question, not just, again, not just throwing things at students because you have them, because they're in your toolbox, but picking your moments.

Shirantha B.: Exactly and picking the right tool for the job, if a tool is even needed. Right? It really just depends on what the problem is that you're trying to solve. If there are teachers out there who are curious about using various technologies, of which there are an infinite number to choose from now coming up every week it seems like, that's the advice that I would give is figure out the problem that you're trying to solve, if there in fact is a problem that you're trying to solve, and how a particular technology might help to solve that issue. Then just be willing to invest a little bit of time outside of class, just like a musician is practicing their instrument, to try and practice the technology, so that you can still maintain a flow of teaching with this tool when you get in front of students, and it's not holding you back or bogging you down.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, you are a musician. I was hoping we would end this with 10 minutes of freeform jazz improvisation on a baritone sax, but you don't seem to have brought your instrument with you today, so instead I would just say thank you very much for coming onto NEXTcast.

Shirantha B.: You're welcome. It's a pleasure.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Kristin Valois for Humber Press. To listen to previous episodes of NEXTcast and to read issues of next 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, @Humber.ca. Thanks and see you next time. That is still not a pun.