

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. As you might've guessed, this is a very different episode of NEXTcast. That's because Humber College is currently closed due to the threat from the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting next week all remaining classes for the Winter 2020 semester will be completed online. This is something that's happening across Canada and North America at a lot of post-secondary institutions and it's an understatement to say that this is not an easy task. To help Humber faculty move their courses online, the teaching and learning support team at Humber have created a learning continuity kit that contains information on all aspects of online learning.

Nathan Whitlock:

The learning continuity kit provides webinars, tips, resources and places for faculty to share information. In this episode, I speak via Skype to two of the senior members of the teaching and learning support team, Heidi Marsh, the director of scholarship of teaching and learning, technically the executive producer of this podcast, and Mark Ihnat, the director of digital learning at Humber. Welcome to NEXTcast, Heidi and Mark. How are you both handling the situation so far?

Heidi Marsh:

Well, I guess we are entering this new era the same way as everybody else, learning new tools. I've now personally mastered Microsoft Teams and so it's been a lot of adjusting to new ways of doing things. But overall, I'm doing pretty well and I think the team has been really rallying around each other, which has been great to see.

Mark Ihnat:

Yeah, I think for me, obviously we have to be concerned and think about what's happening outside of our own walls, but the spirit of the team and I think of Heidi and myself has been fantastic. We're really excited to help faculty and I think at the end of the day, that's kind of the messaging that we want to get out there. And students and it's really about working together for common goal. I think we're seeing a lot of that and we're seeing a lot of faculty start to realize that there is a ton of great opportunities beyond the classroom. So we're having great conversations and I think that's helping everybody's spirit.

Heidi Marsh:

I'm also wearing sweatpants every day, which is heaven.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, I did want to ask very quickly, how are you both sort of personally handling the situation? Do you have enough toilet paper? Are you running out of podcasts and books to read?

Mark Ihnat:

You've had time to read books? Are you crazy?

Nathan Whitlock:

Obviously like Archie Andrews comics.

Mark Ihnat:

I've got a stack of those actually. Yeah. No, on my end things are good. I've got a command center here waiting to go. Heidi and I kind of joked yesterday about getting all of our teams to kind of take photographs of their own personal command centers and we'll put a collage together with what the team looks like. But like I said, you've got to find some levity in the situation sometimes, right? So toilet papers good, command center's good. I've been pulling out stuff I haven't touched in a while. The microphone I barely use at home, so pulling out the old gear and plugging everything in has been kind of fun.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, I've developed a basement studio here in my house. I'm surrounded by pillows and blankets to try to deaden the sound.

Heidi Marsh:

Yeah, I'll say for me the very first day working at home I basically did all of the what not to do's. So I was in bed. I had the news on all day.

Mark Ihnat:

Oh my gosh.

Heidi Marsh:

I didn't go outside. But I caught myself. I really realized quickly this is not going to work. This is going to be a while like this and we've got to figure out ways to make this, it's not going to be the same as going into work, but we still need to think about it in a way of getting a routine that's going to support effective communication and being able to connect with people. Also of course looking out for your own mental wellness. So I've been getting outside more now, which is great. And yes, I also, I have a command center. My husband's also working from home so the dining room is now our shared office and for the most part it's going well.

Nathan Whitlock:

I wanted to talk to you both about this learning continuity kit and I also wanted to thank you for sort of spearheading this and putting this all together. Before I ask you what exactly's in it, I wanted to know what's the idea behind it and how did it all come together?

Mark Ihnat:

Yeah, so there's a happy coincidence here. So back in the fall we started working on a, it was called a snow day kit, but really it was a learning continuity kit. The goal was that we had faculty and an associate dean come to us and say, "Listen, when a snow day happens, why are we totally shutting down? Isn't there an opportunity still to have some learning happening?" And we said, "Absolutely." So we built out this kit and we actually were piloting it in January with about six or seven faculty with great results in terms of ... Anecdotally they were coming back to us saying, "We love this, we're trying new things." So when this hit us in late February, early March, we saw an opportunity.

Mark Ihnat:

I mean this not in terms of getting recognized, but an opportunity to support the college and we grabbed that kit and we said, "We've got sort of a baseline here." Now, what we had with that kit, what

we have now is worlds apart. I mean we've had just a tremendous team kind of attack it and beef it up and really make it more than it was. But we had a good starting point, which was nice, but it was a kind of a happy, lucky coincidence.

Heidi Marsh:

Yeah, and I'll add on just again, full kudos to all of our team members because literally a week ago, so we are now Thursday, so I think maybe as of last Wednesday, and maybe I'm a little bit off there, but the kit was essentially a three day, a three page PDF document. So the fact that it's turned into what it's turned into in that timeline, we essentially had the beta version of the website launched ...

Mark Ihnat:

I thought it was Thursday.

Heidi Marsh:

... by the end of the day on Friday.

Mark Ihnat:

Yeah. Thursday, Friday. It's the fast website that's ever been built at Humber.

Heidi Marsh:

Yeah. Yeah. So really Thursday, Friday were just really insanely busy and hectic pulling all of these things together. But again, we have an amazing team and we're so lucky to have them.

Nathan Whitlock:

So what exactly is in this kit? When someone goes there, what, what's the first thing they're going to see and what's the kind of things that they can draw on?

Heidi Marsh:

Yeah, so the idea for the main page was to make it as simple as possible. We're all working in this new reality and it's happened very quickly. So we wanted to make it a place where faculty could just go and say, "This is what I want to do." Okay, here are the resources. So you basically see I want to and then a bunch of tiles saying different things. I want to move my lectures online. I want to support group projects and presentations. I want to talk to someone for help. I want to get some virtual training. Then so you click one of those tiles and then that will take you to a plethora of other resources. Then of course there's also an educational technology bank with some more specific tools and solutions as well as additional resources and FAQs.

Mark Ihnat:

It's almost become a little addictive to be honest. The number of ideas that have come in and suggestions from the community, internal and external of Humber, from the team itself. We probably hit a couple of days where we'll have 50 people say, "Let's add these 20 new things." So now there are difficult decisions to make around how do we put good content in there that is accessible and something that faculty can actually quickly access and understand as opposed to loading them up with, here are 400 new ideas? So we've tried to, I think really find a difficult or a good balance between what is needed, what is required and what can be done in this amount of time. I think faculty have appreciated

that. We're sort of really kind of focused on getting them up and ready, but knowing that there's more to come from them and from us over the next number of weeks.

Heidi Marsh:

Yeah, and if you know me, you know that I'm a total data nerd. So I've been watching the analytics on the site every day. So we're well above 7,000 visits and over 4,000 unique people looking at the site. So we're also using those analytics to improve the tool. So it came up that we wanted to replace one of the tiles that had originally been there with a different one so we actually used the analytics to determine which of the resources wasn't being used very much and was maybe not the most helpful and the most urgent and kick that one out. So it's been fun on that side of things too.

Nathan Whitlock:

That less urgent tile was how to create podcasts in your basement. Is that correct?

Heidi Marsh:

No, it was actually group discussions, but we didn't lose that content altogether. We just moved it into the group projects and presentations.

Mark Ihnat:

Yeah, and that's it. It's tweaking. A lot of this has been we'll have a 40 minute conversation with a faculty member who is potentially stressed and a bit panicky and at the end of the 40 minutes they are much calmer and ready to go. But during that 40 minute conversation, a whole bunch of ideas have popped into both of our heads. Then it's a matter of going back to the team and saying, "This faculty member mentioned something about A, B and C. Do we have anything on that?" And then we'll look the kit and we'll realize that it might be missing or it might be tweaked or simplified. So we've been really kind of crowdsourcing it, informally crowdsourcing that kit. Then Heidi and the team had a great idea around adding a Padlet option to the kit so that others can just sort of say, "Here's what I'm doing. Let's post it there so the others can see it." So using opensource material, crowdsourcing, leveraging the skills of our team and listening to our faculty has been really, really important.

Nathan Whitlock:

And you mentioned that there's that idea which is important, that this is not a static document. This isn't some sort of just PDF that people download. It's constantly being updated based on input from faculty. How long do you envision that process going? Is there a point where you feel you do need to sort of cut it off or is this going to be an ongoing process?

Heidi Marsh:

I think at least for the near future, so this week, next week, the week beyond, we will continue to update it as we're hearing back from people. A lot of these things are like, these are our suggestions, these are some solutions that might work, but also what I anticipate is going to happen is that next week faculty are going to start living this reality with their students and through that process they're going to come up with their own amazing ideas and suggestions. We don't want to lose those. We want to make sure that we're hearing from those solutions, that we can share those with others as well and really amplify people's ideas across the Humber teaching and learning community. So I would expect for the next couple of weeks anyway we'll continue to keep adding and improving.

Nathan Whitlock:

And faculty who do want to make suggestions, let's say they start teaching a course online, they get into the midst of it next week and they find some of these resources need to be updated or something needs to be added. What's the best way to get in touch with you? Do they just email you directly or is there a central place they can make suggestions?

Mark Ihnat:

That's a great question. I think right now a lot of this is just sort of on the fly. So we are getting a lot of conversations or getting a lot of emails from faculty directly to Heidi, myself or a team member. Then we're having daily meetings and some of those ideas are floating back that way. Some of it's coming from the Padlet. So when we see a great suggestion up there, we'll kind of take a look at it and then see what we can do with that and see if it's been covered already or if there's another alternative source or resource that we need to put in. I don't think we formalized it just yet. I would suggest we're not there yet, right? This is really about tempering, making sure that people, the planning stages of what remote learning and lesson delivery are going to look like over the next three plus weeks potentially.

Mark Ihnat:

So to me that's our strategy. I think as we move into weeks two, three, four and beyond, we're going to fine tune and focus and we're also going to get faculty who are going to get more and more comfortable. So we might even have sections that become a little bit more complex, right? So I remember last week, and Heidi, you can correct me if I'm wrong, we had conversations around what should be in the kit and topics like UDL would come up, universal design for learning. We sort of said, "Well, wait a minute. That might be the next phase, right?" Right now we're about does my camera work? Do I know how to have a virtual conversation or discussion board?

Mark Ihnat:

Where do the quizzes exist? How can I modify my quizzes? What can I do for alternative assessments? Then we'll kind of get them established and then move into that next phase. So there are a lot of great conversations I think that are still going to happen and continue to happen and I suspect faculty will continue to come back to us to keep revising their plans, revising their strategies.

Nathan Whitlock:

Beyond this, the learning continuity kit, what are some principles that faculty should keep in mind when next week they are actually teaching online and they're putting out these materials?

Heidi Marsh:

So the number one most important message that we are trying to convey to faculty is this is a time to be kind, a time to be kind to yourself and to your students. Things probably aren't going to go perfectly and that's okay. This is not a time to become a master wizard of online teaching. This is a time to survive in challenging circumstances, adapt as best as you can. And that's going to be the case for your students too. So everybody needs to just be patient.

Mark Ihnat:

Take a breath.

Heidi Marsh:

Be flexible. Yes, exactly. Be flexible and just take things one day at a time. I would suggest for the first week with your students, do less instead of more. Give your students time to adapt to learning online. Yeah, again, the goal here is not to completely redesign your course top to bottom and master all of these new tech tools, although there are lots of great ones out there. It's a time to just do what you need to do to get your students through the course and if faculty at the end of this experience say, "That wasn't so bad. I think that's a win."

Mark Ihnat:

One thing I'd like to add is what we're currently working on, a student learning kit. So we've had some, a number of inquiries from faculty and administrators asking us about what about the student side of the house? If we can get the faculty up to where we want them to be, that's wonderful, but once the students join in, what tools are available to them? What supports are available to them? So we are hoping to launch a student learning kit by tomorrow. We're tweaking it right now and it's going to focus on preparing to learn online tools, free tools that are available to our students, talking to someone for help in Blackboard and other supports. Very similar to the structure of the faculty side, but now we're going to shift gears a little bit and have a student side so that they don't feel the anxiety and the pressures of being a remote learner.

Heidi Marsh:

And sorry, I have one last thing to add as well, and this is a very pragmatic tip, but by far what we've heard the most from faculty in terms of areas of need right now is the use of the Blackboard Collaborate Tool for hosting real time discussions and lectures with your students. Our webinars on this topic have been flooded. There've been over 100 people tuning in online.

Mark Ihnat:

Per session.

Heidi Marsh:

Right, per session. So one thing that we're asking is if you are a faculty member that feels pretty comfortable with this kind of thing, offer to sit in on the class of one of your colleagues who is maybe not so comfortable. Offer to take part in their first class online with them, just to be there to support them. It's nice to have a friend in the room when you're, room, virtual room, for your first session.

Heidi Marsh:

So where possible, if you know of a colleague that's not maybe as strong and as familiar with Blackboard Collaborate and you feel pretty comfortable, offer to sit in and just be there for them. It's a small thing that you can do to really make a big difference. We're of course going to offer our team to do that as well, but we don't have that many people compared to the number of faculty. So wherever there are faculty that can help with this, that would be a huge help to have the community.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, thanks to you both for doing this. These are fantastic tips. This is all great information. I love the idea of a student learning kit. It does really speak to the idea that as much nervousness and difficulty that faculty might have converting their courses into an online course, the students are having probably

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more difficulty adjusting to this. They didn't register for an online course. They wanted to meet real people and real teachers and engage one-to-one. So the idea of being kind and be patient also, I think it's super important. So thank you for that. I hope you both stay well and I hope you all stay well and thanks again for doing this.

Heidi Marsh:

Absolutely.

Mark Ihnat:

Thank you.

Heidi Marsh:

Our pleasure. We're all in this together.

Mark Ihnat:

Absolutely.

Nathan Whitlock:

This episode of NEXTcast was produced by me in my basement for Humber Press. Special thanks to Kristin Valois and Meaghan Strimas. To listen to previous episodes of NEXTcast and to read issues of the 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 just let us know what you think, email humberpress@humber.ca. That's humberpress, all one word, [@humber.ca](https://twitter.com/humber.ca). Please remember to wash your hands. Thanks and see you next time. That it's still not a pun. Seriously, wash your hands.