

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 7: Paul Cross on Preparing New Students for Postsecondary Learning

We speak to Radio Broadcasting professor Paul Cross about the challenges of preparing new students for postsecondary learning.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, and editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. Every episode we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation both inside and outside the classroom. This episode we talk to Paul Cross, the program coordinator for Humber's Broadcast Radio program. We'll be talking to Paul about getting new students ready for post-secondary learning.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Paul. I was wondering if you could tell me briefly about the work you do here at Humber College.

Paul Cross: Sure. I'm a professor in the School of Media Studies. I teach courses in the Radio Broadcasting diploma program and I coordinate the post graduate, the graduate certificate Radio Broadcasting program. Most of the courses I teach are about radio news, but I also teach courses about other types of radio production that involve interviewing and music and drama and various kinds of radio production.

Nathan Whitlock: I want to talk to you a little bit about the idea of students coming into Humber straight from high school and making that transition to postsecondary education, but I want to take you back to when you were doing that. Now when you made that transition, do you remember freaking out over it or did you handle it like a pro?

Paul Cross: Well, I'll say I handled it like a pro. I probably freaked out a little bit. I went from high school into college and right straight into a radio and broadcasting program, a three year program. It was what I really wanted to do so I would say in the sense of saying handled like a pro I was diving into something that I had been waiting years to do. So I don't think it was a difficult transition. I don't think of it a lot of a transition really at all except I drove to classes every day instead of walking.

Nathan Whitlock: So you didn't have that sort of first semester crash that some people experience where they suddenly find themselves out on their own and having to do the stuff on their own?

Paul Cross: Not that I recall.

Nathan Whitlock: In your own teaching career, how often have you taught first year students? You mentioned you had the program formatted for post-grad program but in terms of students coming straight out of high school how much teaching do you do for that?

Paul Cross: I see students in the diploma program who would be right out of high school. I see them in their first semester. I see them in their first semester and in their second semester.

Nathan Whitlock: And when you're teaching those students, what are the kinds of patterns you see? What are the kinds of behaviour that you see that often happens in that first semester with new students?

Paul Cross: I've discussed the transition into postsecondary education with some students. And one of the things I think I see is I'm trying to get them to grasp the idea that it's no longer about knowing the right answer to try to pass a test. It's rather about thinking about the things we're discussing in class and to actually participate in discussion and put your ideas out there, and then your work is going to be in how you can apply the ideas and the skills that went with the ideas and the ideas that go with the skills how you can apply that now to the work that you're going to submit in your assignment. And someone was saying to me the other day, a student was telling me how they felt in high school they had been taught in order to pass a test. And I'm saying this is not what we're doing here. The classroom discussion, the skills we work on together, the ideas we talk about are to help you now to inform what you're going to create to show me how you're grasping these skills by submitting your assignment.

Nathan Whitlock: This idea that came up actually in our previous episode in my conversation with Douglas Smith in the context of students coming from other cultures where they're not permitted to question the teacher. It's more the teacher gives them content. They recite the content back. So it takes them a little while to get used to the idea of, "Oh, we can ask questions. We can discuss this stuff. We can use critical thinking." But that's interesting it also comes up in the idea of someone coming out of high school and seeing this is like a checklist that I do this, boom, boom, boom, get the grade and I'm done. How do you break them out of that? What kind of strategies do you use?

Paul Cross: Well, I offer them, I would say, a number of learning materials that I think are helpful that I hope will get them to think about what comes out of class and how to apply it. So I don't use a textbook. There's no textbook that would accurately, in my view, portray the things we need to know

about doing news specifically for radio specifically in Canada. There just isn't one.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. Right.

Paul Cross: So I write a lot of resources that I provide to students. I write word documents, resources, I call them, that are maybe a guide on how to do a particular function in a newsroom, how to apply a particular skill, things you need to think about to go with a certain piece of information such as how to safely report a legal story about a crime kind of thing. I will do podcasts where I'll record them, produce them in my office that might be just me or might be me pulling some audio from other places and dropping in things to illustrate the point I'm making. And I create resources such as instructional videos. Sometimes little hand held things I shoot on an iPhone and drop in the Blackboard. Sometimes bigger pieces I produce in the studio and use Lightboard technology to explain a skill. So I try to put those out there.

Paul Cross: And I also keep in mind that more and more, I would say, with first semester students particularly who've chosen to study in my area and my area happens to be radio, I remind myself I need to introduce them to radio more than I ever have in the past because people listen to different types of audio in so many different ways today, because I cannot assume that I'm talking to a room in which everyone had the radio on this morning. I have to bring some radio to start the discussion.

Nathan Whitlock: And this will be the same thing for teaching students television. As in television broadcasting, you have to explain what television is.

Paul Cross: Probably so and ...

Nathan Whitlock: What a broadcast is.

Paul Cross: And yet also I compared studying music. I say don't come to class with an empty guitar case. Be aware of what's going on. Don't tell me you don't listen because that's like saying I'm studying music and I might get a guitar someday. Come with your head full of it. But along with that, here is a particular piece that I recorded today or last night. Something I've heard in the last 24 hours that I want us to listen to and examine and think about. Here's the critical thinking part that I'm also trying to get them to apply is now tell me what's happening in this piece we're listening to. Don't tell me what stories we heard. We can all tell what stories we heard. Tell me what was happening that the newscast did the

report of the people involved were doing in that story. What skills were they applying that we've discussed here in class.

Nathan Whitlock: And you mentioned all these resources that you provide to the students. I guess the idea there is the greater variety and gives them more entry points for that critical thinking for that discussion as opposed to just having a textbook chapter that they have to kind of process and regurgitate and answer a few questions on. Having all these different entry points allows them to say, "Oh, wait a minute, I have a slightly different take on this than I might have if you'd just presented to me as a block of information."

Paul Cross: I would hope so. And I would hope that when they use them then that helps them connect better with the idea that we've been discussing because it's written in the same language. It's not trying to compare a textbook to what was said in class. It's written in the same language as was used in class. And whether it's in print form or audio form or video form, it relates directly to what we did in class and I hope they can better draw the connections that way. And they seem to appreciate and enjoy those resources when they use them. If they use them, they invariably say that they were useful.

Nathan Whitlock: I was actually going to ask you about that in terms of student reaction. You said that they tend to appreciate that if they engage with the material. Do you find that there is some resistance at least initially to that idea that, wait we're not just pulling this out of a text book and regurgitating, we have to actively engage with all these different materials.

Paul Cross: Yes. I would say so. I've done a little bit of research on this with what I call required preparation materials that I wanted students to use to be ready for class. I found particularly with first semester students who are fresh from out of post-secondary, they didn't expect to need to do anything to prepare for class. And I will often say when I'm explaining why I want students to use some material to prepare, I'll say, You know, think of any Hollywood movie or any big TV type series you've watched where there's a scene in a college university classroom. And they cannot help the writers of these movies. They cannot help but have a scene where a bell goes or something and the professor says to the room, "For next week read this chapter." And so there's a cultural expectation that I'm suggesting that we do something to prepare for class.

Paul Cross: So what I'm asking you now is to get with the idea that in Blackboard the learning system there will always be something for you to help you get

ready for next class. So when we start to discuss it, you already have an idea of something that goes with. And we'll have more examples in class, but there's something here for you to be able to say, "I know something about this area that we're going to be discussing." Likewise, there will be a follow-up piece in Blackboard for most classes that say, "Here are some notes from class that go with our discussion today."

Paul Cross: But yes, to the question of whether it's resistance or whether it's just lack of exposure to the idea of wanting to prepare for class, the preparation levels the participation in use of the required preparation material was not great and through follow-up interviews and discussion I come to the conclusion that for a lot of first year students requiring advanced preparation is just not going to happen. It's not something that's in their realm. It's not in their world yet. They haven't adjusted to the idea and some are going to say, "I don't have time to prepare. I do my learning in class. Don't ask me to do stuff outside. I'm busy then. My life is going on."

Paul Cross: And so certainly in terms of you asked me earlier about my time in college, that's a 180 degrees opposite of what I anticipated in college. I expected when I left that I've got work now. I've got a lot of work to do based on what we've been doing in classes today. Now I've got to get down to it. And I have things to do to prepare for next class, but that is not perhaps in keeping with the way a lot of students think today.

Nathan Whitlock: So how do you break through that and also how does any professor sort of break through that way of thinking, through that conception of class as a thing that's either on or off?

Paul Cross: I think it's a discussion you need to have with students early in the semester. One of the students involved in the research project suggested the professor should tell us that in this course Blackboard is your best friend. And I thought about that and I thought, I always tell you stuff is there. So I went to class one day and I said, "By the way, in this course Blackboard is your best friend. There always will be something for you in Blackboard to help you follow up a class or help you prepare for a class." So I think you have to have that discussion and I try to give students some idea of my expectations of them as students. I go over the course outline and say, "Here's my social contract with you. I will deliver these outcomes. You will be able to do these things if you take part in this course and participate fully. But here's what I need you to know about what I expect from you. Here's how I conduct classes. There's always something available in Blackboard. There are always clear instructions on an assignment if you go to the site and read the instructions."

Paul Cross: And just try to encourage them to take ownership and responsibility and some control of their learning by using those materials and knowing, "Yeah, there's always something there. I should check it. I should go back and check. I'm wondering what's our style for writing this type of piece. You're right. The professor said there's a resource in Blackboard. I could just look it up and see it there. I could look it up." And I try to get them to make that connection of use the resource. It's going to be there all semester. Our skills are accumulative. We are building along the way. When you get down to assignment six there might be a resource that was posted around the time of assignment two that still makes sense because I've told you they're all building. You could go back and refer to that one and make sure you're still following the kind of approach that we're looking for.

Nathan Whitlock: And I'm sure that must be an ongoing conversation too, not just a first class or first week discussion. It's probably comes up throughout the course.

Paul Cross: It does. It does. Almost every class I remind students there's something in Blackboard or there will be or there is or did you use this or did you see that because here's another example now that we're gonna talk about in class.

Nathan Whitlock: Blackboard is your best friend.

Paul Cross: Blackboard is your best friend.

Nathan Whitlock: That's a great concept.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thank you very much, Paul. This has been great. And I will say we've had many great discussions in here but you have by far the best podcast voice we've had in a guest so far. So thank you very much.

Paul Cross: Well, thank you, Nathan.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College. Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Allison LaSorda, Darren Richards, and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, [@humber.ca](https://twitter.com/humber.ca). That's humberpress@humber.ca. To learn more about the workshops, teaching certificates, and other support offered through The Centre for Teaching

and Learning and to read issues of NEXT magazine, go to humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning.

Nathan Whitlock: Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.

Paul Cross: Blackboard is your best friend.