

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 8: Sarah Nieman on Real-World Learning

In this episode, we talk to Sarah Nieman, a recent Humber graduate and current member of the college's Institutional Learning Outcomes project, about the benefits of real-world learning.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is 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 speak to Sarah Nieman, a recent Humber graduate, who now works on Humber's Institutional Learning Outcomes Project. We'll be talking to Sarah about the importance of real-world learning and her own experiences making the transition from Humber student to Humber staff.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast Sarah. To start off, I was wondering if you could tell us very briefly about the kind of work you do now at Humber.

Sarah Nieman: Sure. So I'm a part of The Institutional Learning Outcomes Project, which is part of the current academic plan. Essentially what I'm doing is ... We're kind of joining this movement of higher-education institutions and industries around the world in identifying what are known as 21st-century skills. These skills are soft skills as opposed to hard skills, so they're developed ... Or they're identified in order to help graduates move in a volatile and rapidly-changing world.

Sarah Nieman: So technical skills change with technology and you know, they might be obsolete the next few years but soft skills are there in order to help students really navigate their lives and adapt to the changes that they have no control over.

Nathan Whitlock: And of course podcasting is one of those essential skills that will never go out of ... Never become obsolete.

Sarah Nieman: Definitely.

Nathan Whitlock: And before you began working on this project, which I think you started about six months ago, is that about right?

Sarah Nieman: Almost six months exactly. Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: Before that, and this again in a sense of full disclosure, you were in a program that I teach in called Professional Writing and Communications.

Sarah Nieman: I was.

Nathan Whitlock: You were a student there.

Sarah Nieman: Yes.

Nathan Whitlock: But I wanna take you back a little bit further than that, when you were in university, when you were getting your degree. What kind of practical experience did you have with writing and editing and communications?

Sarah Nieman: Very little.

Nathan Whitlock: Very little.

Sarah Nieman: I mean, I have a Master's degree, so I kind of have gone through the process of writing drafts and editing and you know, adhering to style guides and those kinds of things. But in terms of practical, useful skills that would actually work in quote unquote the real world I had very little and that's actually why I took the program.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Sarah Nieman: To try to get up to date.

Nathan Whitlock: So for the most part, you had a Master's, so you've done a lot of writing, but it was probably more theoretical and-

Sarah Nieman: Very theoretical.

Nathan Whitlock: Only ever read by a professor or a teaching assistant.

Sarah Nieman: Definitely. Like I think the content that I wrote could have been practical but I would have no way to know how to actually apply it.

Nathan Whitlock: So the one thing I know about the PWC program that it ... Something that it shares, it has in common with many programs, if not most programs offered at Humber, there is a real emphasis on real-world learning, where you do things that actually correspond with things you would do in your industry, out in a real job, and in many cases you're actually doing things in the real world. You're actually partnering with industry, with people, with industry partners.

Nathan Whitlock: In the PWC course there were a lot of opportunities for that, you know, to pitch editors, to network with other editors and writers and journalists

and so forth and you even worked on a real project for an organization. How do you feel those kinds of opportunities helped you in the job you have now?

Sarah Nieman: I think being able to interact with people who are working in the positions that I might one day want to, like I see myself in, was really good with gaining confidence in my own abilities and also just being able to see kind of what kinds of things and skills that you need in order to get to whatever point you want to be at. Networking was definitely something that I really wish I had taken more advantage of.

Sarah Nieman: But I know there might be some hesitancy in a lot of students to do that because it seems like such a daunting task, but it's so important to be able to you know, strike up a conversation with somebody that might actually be able to help you on your path.

Nathan Whitlock: And it's interesting because now you're working on, as you say, these soft skills-

Sarah Nyman: Yep. Exactly.

Nathan Whitlock: That's an essential soft skill, the idea-

Sarah Nyman: Definitely. Communication is right there.

Nathan Whitlock: Yeah. The ability to just walk up to somebody and say, "Hey. We work in the same field."

Sarah Nieman: Yeah, exactly. And with the project that we worked on with our real-life clients, which was the International Festival of Authors, having the ability to interact with a live client who is giving us the type of feedback that we would be given if we were ourselves working on a real-life project and just going through that whole process, gaining that transferable skills that we can use in the future, it was definitely ... It made everything worth it.

Nathan Whitlock: Yeah.

Sarah Nieman: Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock: And it's not always, I mean, I'm not telling tales out of school here, but it's not always a positive experience in the sense of when you're dealing with a real client, they have ... They can be challenging because they have very specific needs whereas if you were doing this only theoretically or with a partner in your class it would always feel like, "I'm only gonna get

good feedback. I'm only gonna get positive feedback. I'm only get supported fully." Whereas a live client might say, "That's not what I need. I need something completely different. This is wrong."

Sarah Nieman: Yeah, I think an assignment that might be created solely internally for the purposes of maybe demonstrating various skills would give you all the information that you need transparently, whereas when you're interacting with a real client, they might think they know what they need or they don't disclose certain information that you need and so you have to be able to adapt to that and kind of figure out how to work your way through it.

Nathan Whitlock: The analogy I always think of in these situations is people I know who play music and I play a bit of music. But there's a very different thing when you're playing in your bedroom or in your basement and then you go to play with other people and all these things you were sure you mastered, suddenly you get revealed all of your vulnerabilities and all your blind spots and the things you kind of skipped over, so dealing with actual real-world situations show you where those blind spots are.

Sarah Nieman: Exactly. And seeing how other people view the exact same subject in so many different ways kind of widens your view on everything.

Nathan Whitlock: So here's a slightly difficult question which is, or maybe an uncomfortable question, how do you feel you handle those? You mention the networking with something you thought you might've focused on a little more, but how do you think you handled it in the moment?

Sarah Nieman: Not very well in all honesty.

Nathan Whitlock: Thank you for your honesty.

Sarah Nieman: Yeah. I knew that the networking bit and kind of the interactions with industry people was part of the reason why I did apply to the program in the first place, but ... And I guess, I don't know what I was hoping. I was hoping that I would magically become like this really outgoing person who could just power through. But regardless of how I actually behaved and acted in those situations, just having the opportunities to do it was really the big thing for me and even just being in that environment and kind of seeing how these kinds of things work so that in the future maybe when I am more ready to get out there be a little more assertive, I'd feel a little more comfortable doing it.

Nathan Whitlock: And some students, I mean like yourself, when they first come up against these, you know, their first offer, these opportunities, they get a little shy or they get a little nervous either because that's just their personality or because they're use to that other kind of learning which is all classroom, all theoretical, and now it's for real, or it's close to for real as we can get. What advice would you give to a student like that who's kind of encountering that for the first time and feeling a little shy?

Sarah Nieman: I think the biggest thing is not to feel ashamed that you're shy. Recognize that it is a part of you and you shouldn't ... Don't try to get out of your comfort zone for the sake of getting out of your comfort zone. I think taking things in baby steps as well is real important. Going to an event with people you're comfortable with, with friends, maybe one of them is a little more outgoing and can kind of break the ice for you. I think that is really beneficial.

Sarah Nieman: Being in this learning environment, I mean, it is just that right? It's a learning environment and you have to recognize that it's a safe space to take risks but just don't get in over your head, I think. Like don't feel like you have to. Everybody is different and in the real world people with different personalities and qualities are needed in various differing ways, so don't think that your shyness is necessarily a hindrance to your ultimate success.

Nathan Whitlock: That's good advice too. I think the idea that even in the real world some people are still shy and they do fine.

Sarah Nieman: Mm-hmm. Exactly. Just have to find what works for you.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. That's advice for students. What about faculty? I mean, again, many Humber programs do this, they incorporate these kind of real-world scenarios or industry partnerships or they connect with people. Do you feel like this is something faculty should always try to incorporate?

Sarah Nieman: Definitely. I think it's what makes an institution like Humber valuable to its students especially in the post-grad programs, like the one that I took where university graduates who had no practical experience, everything was theoretical and the reason why we took these programs was to get that and to get a taste of what the real world, quote unquote, actually is and how to, kind of, how to behave in it and how to interact with it. So I think that's really important for faculty to make sure that they keep on giving these opportunities to students.

Nathan Whitlock: And I just have one more question for you which is who was your favorite teacher in the program? I'm kidding. You don't have to answer that. You absolutely do not have to answer that. Thank you so much Sarah. This has been great.

Sarah Nieman: It's been fantastic.

Nathan Whitlock: And welcome to the quote unquote real world.

Sarah Nieman: Thanks.

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. To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTCast or to let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, at 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. Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.