

NEXTcast Season 1 Highlights Part 1

Before we start our second season of NEXTcast (first new episode on September 18!) we thought we'd release a couple of "best of" episodes, which pull together some highlights from the conversations we had with Humber faculty and staff in our first season. This episode is the first of two parts. Enjoy!

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press.

Nathan Whitlock: The new semester has just begun, so we thought we'd start with an icebreaker, meaning a couple of episodes consisting of moments from our first season of NEXTcast. In this first clip, The Centre for Teaching and Learning's Heidi Marsh tells us why testing our assumptions through research is so important.

Heidi Marsh: Sure, so yeah, it's one thing to say that I'm doing something great in my classroom, but it's great to have some data to kind of back that up to say, "No look, here's some evidence. This is what my students are telling me about the impact that I'm having." And sometimes you think why bother, if you have that gut feeling that what you're doing is really effective, but there's a story that I like to share.

Heidi Marsh: Early in my career, during my graduate studies, I was actually ... I did some research with orangutans. This is at the Toronto Zoo, and routinely zookeepers turn on the radio in the backroom to give the orangutans something to do, keep them enriched; they're really psychologically intelligent creatures, so they need some extra stimulation, so the zookeepers always turn on the radio. And at the time we were doing research with the orangutans using computers, so the orangutans could touch the computer, touch the touchscreen, and tell us what they knew, what they thought about things. And we thought hey, here's a cool opportunity; let's see what kind of music the orangutans prefer so then we can give them their choice in their enclosure.

Heidi Marsh: So we did this whole beautiful experiment. We had classical versus jazz versus rock and roll, and what would the orangutans pick? And every single orangutan, there was seven of them, had the exact same preference. Do you have any guesses?

Nathan Whitlock: Off the top of my head, I would say they maybe prefer classical as a soothing thing.

Heidi Marsh: So every single orangutan chose silence. So when we gave them a choice of any kind of music versus nothing, they wanted nothing.

Heidi Marsh: And so why? Like this story is to say innovation is a great thing, it's great to think that you're trying something new and you have a gut sense that it's working, but until you do research and gather evidence, you never really know for sure of the impact it's having.

Nathan Whitlock: In our next clip, the Arboretum's Alexandra Link tells us about Humber's new sustainable beekeeping program.

Alexandra Link: So many people these days, it's kind of become a fad to invent more hands-off hives. So these hives are meant for the casual beekeeper who wants honey without a lot of effort, and that's not what we're teaching in the course. In the course, we're really teaching people to get hands-on, get their hands dirty, understand the bees themselves; so their biology, their life cycle, their food, their habitat, what they need to survive, and the challenges they face. And it's beekeeping based on knowing your colony and caring about them.

Nathan Whitlock: So as with children, so with urban beekeepers; you know, you lay off the sugar and be prepared to get your hands dirty. That's the idea?

Alexandra Link: Absolutely! That's a great way of putting it.

Nathan Whitlock: So is there anything that you do at the Arboretum that helps sustain the bees? Do you have to kind of cultivate certain plants, or do anything extra to keep the bees happy or keep them healthy?

Alexandra Link: So one of the things we do, we have a beautiful wild meadow in the Arboretum and we really educate children, and students, and the public about the importance of having these wild spaces and of the plants that grow in them. And this wild meadow at the Arboretum is the main place where the bees get their food from, and it leads to the beautiful and unique taste of our honey.

Nathan Whitlock: In our third click, Media Foundations program coordinator Nicola Winstanley talks about an icebreaking exercise she likes to have new students do in their very first classes.

Nicola W.: I gave everyone ... Because I'm in a HIVE, I have a big, empty space in the middle of the room, so I get everyone to sit in the circle and we do the game where you have to remember everybody's name. And you do it by having your own name preceded by an adjective or a word, it doesn't have to be an adjective, with the same first letter. And then we go around one by one. And in a class of 35, it can take about an hour, and it's quite intense, and I talk them through it a lot.

Nicola W.: And I say, you know, parts of this will be boring, parts of this will make you nervous, and then I use it to talk a bit about memory and how memory works, and how they were able to do it. And it's quite ... It's sort of intimidating in a small way, and it's quite funny; some of the students come up with very funny things. And it is a long icebreaker where we all get together, and it also means by the end of the class, I know every single person's name. And so when I'm then putting groups together afterwards, I can just say, "James, Karen, and Matthew, you're gonna sit together now," rather than "Oh, you group of people." So I think there's a sense that we're a bit more kind of in it together because we already know each other a little bit.

Nathan Whitlock: Next, English professor Lara McInnis tells us about research she's done around student feedback, and how some students learn better by speaking and thinking aloud.

Lara McInnis: It was striking to us that what had been verbalized and noticed ... In many cases, it was actually contributing to an improvement in the writing subsequently.

Nathan Whitlock: So that act of just verbalizing the process almost, you know, awakened or engaged a different part of their brain, made it easier to retain?

Lara McInnis: Exactly, exactly. That's true.

Nathan Whitlock: That's how well I know brains, by the way. Using those technical terms; "a different part of the brain."

Lara McInnis: No, but that's the whole thing about thinking aloud, is that ... They call it reactivity actually, which is problematic when you're trying to study because the active of thinking out loud and verbalizing your thoughts may lead you in a different direction than what you were going to think without verbalizing it. So that's hard to measure and can be problematic when you're doing a study.

Lara McInnis: Nevertheless, just from a pedagogical standpoint, asking students to articulate or even write down what they notice between the two versions may actually help them apply those changes to improve their grammar in the future.

Nathan Whitlock: Think aloud protocols, I keep getting this image of like someone defusing a bomb and talking to someone through a headset. Like "I'm now going to cut the red wire. I'm now cutting the blue wire."

Lara McInnis: Exactly. Actually, I remember I had a professor who is quite a guru in sociocultural theory, and she talked about think aloud protocols with respect to mystery solving, and how when you read a mystery book, a detective often starts describing something like Sherlock Holmes would start articulating something and noticing things, which would prompt him to notice other things. And so that's what actually got my professor interested in that idea of reactivity and how what she calls languaging actually; thinking aloud actually contributes to thought.

Nathan Whitlock: In this next clip, the CTL's Bianca Sorbera and Katie Billard explain how universal design is better for everyone.

Bianca Sorbera: And just to use the example ... I mean, inclusive design is a principle that really historically has been a part of the architectural world, and so basically designing building that people can access. And so what we've done from the beginning, right, as opposed to going backwards and trying to put in accessible features. So from the very design phase, is how can we make sure we include the most users in this? And I think as we've developed this certificate, and over the year that it's taken us to develop this certificate, those are kind of the ideas that are in the back of our heads, is how can we make our curriculum the most user-friendly for the most users?

Katie Billard: Everything that you're designing is better for everybody. So you might design something with a particular need in mind, but then everyone benefits because of that design change that you made.

Katie Billard: And so the architectural equivalent to that is if you take a round doorknob and you turn it into a lever doorknob, maybe with the idea of someone who has arthritis in mind and that those round doorknobs are really hard if you don't have that dexterity, well in the end that lever doorknob is easier ... I mean, if your arms are full because you're carrying something, you can open it with an elbow. Like anyone can open that lever doorknob; it's not just that one particular need that you may have designed it for.

Katie Billard: So in the curriculum, it works the same way. You may include closed captioning for somebody who has a hearing impairment, but it helps everyone; it helps English language learners, it helps people who just have trouble focusing on something that is just an audio. And so that's this idea of taking inclusive design in architecture and bringing it into the world of education.

Bianca Sorbera: And it's not necessarily just so a specific group of people can benefit, as Katie was saying. It's so all of us can benefit.

Nathan Whitlock: Baking and Pastry Arts professor Douglas Smith has worked all over the world. We talked to Douglas about the influence his international experience has had in the classroom, and about the importance of cultural awareness in teaching.

Douglas Smith: When I started going overseas, I was the foreigner and I had to adapt to their culture. And even though I was knowledgeable in what I had to provide, I was still being the foreigner that had to learn from them; their culture, their ethics. Everything about their way of life, that I could fit in, in getting their comfort in allowing me to teach the knowledge that I had to teach to them.

Douglas Smith: So it's the same with international students. They're in a different culture, in a different setting, a different environment. The food is different, the language is different, the people are different. So I want them to feel comfortable in being able to learn what needs to be learned within the classroom. So I just kind of open up that area for them to have a safe zone, I guess you might say, in learning.

Nathan Whitlock: So because you had worked in all those places and had all those experiences, you were sort of able to put yourself in their shoes a little bit.

Douglas Smith: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And one thing I found important is that I have to allow my students here at Humber, the international students, to be able to have critical thinking. That's one thing in Taiwan; they don't have that privilege. They're not provided that opportunity. They don't have that space for them to absorb the information, to use critical thinking in what they've just learned. It's just the culture, it's just how it was. I couldn't change it, and I wasn't there to change it, but I needed to learn from their point of view how they did learn so I could adapt my teaching to that.

Douglas Smith: So now understanding how they learn, many international students, especially from Asia, have the same learning etiquette that they are not allowed the critical thinking, they are not allowed to ask questions. They don't ask questions, so I have to open up that door to make them feel comfortable. Yes, please ask me questions; yes, use your critical thinking towards this problem and give me your feedback on it. But they're not used to that. But I have learned from being overseas, this is an important part to allow the Humber international students.

Nathan Whitlock: In our final clip of this episode, Radio Broadcasting professor Paul Cross discusses how college class discussions can often look very different from what students are used to in high school.

Paul Cross: I've done a little bit of research on this, with what I called 'required preparation materials' that I wanted students to use to be ready for class. And I found particularly with first semester students who are fresh 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 or university classroom. And they cannot help, the writers of these movies and shows, 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."

Nathan Whitlock: Right, right.

Paul Cross: And so there's a culture of expectation, where I'm suggesting that we do something to prepare for class. 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.

Paul Cross: 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, and just try to encourage them to take ownership.

Nathan Whitlock: And that's it for part one of our Best of: Season One. NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning. This episode was edited by Kristin Valois. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or just to let us know what you think, email [humberpress](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca), all one word, [@humber.ca](https://twitter.com/humber.ca). That's humberpress@humber.ca. To learn more about the many 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, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.