NEXTcast 2.16: Daniel Bear on Drugs Research

In this episode we speak with Daniel Bear, a professor in Humber's Criminal Justice degree program, about research into attitudes towards cannabis education that he conducted with a team of students.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to *NEXT*cast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. On *NEXT*cast, 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 talk to Daniel Bear, a professor in Humber's Criminal Justice degree program about research into attitudes towards cannabis education that he did with a team of students.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to *NEXT*cast, Daniel.

Daniel Bear: Thanks so much for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: Over the past year, you've been working on a project. It's actually led by a student team, called *Making Decisions About Cannabis*. We have a great Q&A with you about this project in our upcoming issue of *NEXT* Magazine. I want to talk to you a little bit more about how that all came together and the whole process. But before we get to that, I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about your background in terms of this kind of research.

Daniel Bear: Sure. I've been working in drugs policy for about 15 years now, and I got into drugs policy for a couple of reasons. In part, because I grew up in Los Angeles during really what was the height of the crack wars in the late 80s and early 90s. Back then, drugs were always portrayed as this huge evil, and drug users were bad people, and drug dealers were bad people. It was a very one-dimensional portrayal of the issue. As I got older, I started to see the complexity of the situation, and how socioeconomic factors came into play, and how systematic trauma and all these other things informed why people got into drug use and drug dealing, and how systematic legal issues and economic issues forced people into selling drugs and sort of seeing the bigger picture of it.

Daniel Bear: I realized it was one of those things where the rabbit hole just kept going and going. It was at the nexus of all these other issues, so it was a great place to be if you wanted to study the world. I've studied policing. I've studied medical cannabis issues. I've looked

at incarceration related issues. It's been a great field to situate myself in just to really have a way of examining all these different challenges in the world through the idea of drugs.

Nathan Whitlock: This project that I mentioned that you've been doing over this past year, how did that come about? What was the sort of genesis of it?

Daniel Bear: I'd been looking for a project to get involved with around the legalization of cannabis. We knew this was coming for a while since the Liberal government was elected. Seeing the policy come to fruition through Bill C-45, seeing the task force before that that developed some recommendations, I realized that one of the things that I didn't have a good grasp of was not what the best practices were in terms of drug education for young people and things like that. But I didn't understand how young people were making the decisions about where and when and how to use cannabis. They'd been some research out there, but I felt as a researcher, it was an area that I hadn't tackled before, that hadn't been tackled sufficiently from my mind, and it hadn't been tackled in a newly legalized framework.

Daniel Bear: I thought it was great opportunity to talk to young people about where they're getting their information about cannabis, to talk to them about how they decide, should I use a vaporizer? Should I smoke a joint? Things like this. What are the actual sources of information feeding that knowledge? Because that way, we can create better evidence-informed education materials to use with them.

Nathan Whitlock: You clearly have been doing this kind of work for a long time, for a decade at least, but this project in particular was very much student-led.

Daniel Bear: Yes. This project relied on three really outstanding research assistants who were tasked with leading the focus groups. In a large research project, or really any big research project, you wouldn't necessarily have the research assistants lead the focus groups or lead the interviews, especially when they're undergraduates. But I was fortunate in that. I think our program does a lot of good prep work for getting students ready to collect data. All the students in the CJ degree do a senior thesis project, and so they've all had research methods work, and they've done some of that work themselves. But letting them take the lead on this was necessary because we were talking to students, and it would be a touch-awkward if the professor that they had potentially the last semester was the one answering the questions.

Daniel Bear: And so having these young women lead the focus groups really opened up the discussion and I think provided a level of frankness and a level of connection that I wouldn't have been able necessarily to have. Students see themselves in the researcher, and I think they're a bit more willing to get into that sacred element a bit quicker and a bit more openly than if it's the professor sitting across the table from you.

Nathan Whitlock: Are you able to give their names of these three young women who-?

Daniel Bear: Yes, of course. It's Simone Barnaby, Holly Winton, and Vanessa Kay, and they're all criminal justice degree students. Simone and Vanessa are just about to graduate, and Holly's just about to start her fourth year.

Nathan Whitlock: I wonder having them running these focus groups, which as you say is not the usual method or the usual process, I wonder if you learned something yourself from delegating that responsibility and watching them do it and going back over that data that they brought in?

Daniel Bear: Yes. I mean, I really turned a lot over to them in a way that I have not in previous work. They did a lot of the literature review. They ran the focus groups. They led on the analysis and the development of the coding framework. As someone who has never had a lot of money in the research that he's doing, I've always had to shoulder a lot of the work. Seeing other people so competently and so effectively take on the work, and being able to sit back a bit and see the bigger picture of the research was both a really freeing experience for me and being able to digest things a bit differently than ever had. But it was also really gratifying to see students that I had taught several times over the years stand up so readily to the challenges placed in front of them and to work together and to engage with one another in a manner that showed a really high degree of professionalism in most cases. It was really great as a teacher to see, "Oh, wait. They're actually doing this stuff outside of the "classroom" that I wanted them to be able to do." It was very gratifying in that regard.

Nathan Whitlock: It was almost like instant validation for your teaching, instant-

Daniel Bear: A bit, yes. It sounds a bit self-centered when you put it like that, but we don't get to see our students when they go out into the field whether for placements or once they graduate. We hear back from some of them from time to time, or we hear back from employers

that are PAC meetings, but to really have such a visible and clear indication of the quality of the work that they're capable of, really gratifying.

Nathan Whitlock: What kind of advice would you give to other faculty even here at Humber who want to understand the topic a little more?

Daniel Bear: The advice I would give to faculty is that this may seem like a public health issue or drugs issue, but Deloitte has estimated that within a few years, this is going to be a $22 billion a year industry. That's going to include tourism, it's going to include journalism, it's going to include public health issues, it's going to include many facets of our economy. While only about 20-ish to 15% of adults are going to be consuming cannabis on any sort of regular basis compared to about 80% plus who consume alcohol, we're still going to see a massive impact on our economy and a massive impact on the types of jobs that are available. I think that faculty need to look at the cannabis-specific issue as one where there are jobs that are going to be created that have not necessarily been there in the legal marketplace before, and they need to think about how they're preparing their students to engage in that.

Daniel Bear: I don't think they're particularly different roles than many of the other roles that are out there. If you're going to be going into business analytics, well, the business analytics for a cannabis company is not going to be that terribly different than other places. I think you can start building that in with case studies and working into your own schooling. I would say there's another side of it, which is harm reduction and concern about opiates and the overdose crisis. I'm actually running a research project on that as well right now, and I think faculty there need to think about how the issues of opiates, drug addiction, and the fear that many people are experiencing around that can be brought into their classroom to help talk about issues of not just the drug itself, but how we treat people in our community, how we think about issues of stigma, how we prepare ourselves to respond to crises.

Daniel Bear: I think there's huge issues in the overdose crisis beyond simply the fact that people are dying of overdoses, which are increasingly related to fentanyl. I think there's a lot of opportunity to think about and reflect as teachers how we engage with people in stigmatized groups and other communities, even if we don't see opiates and those issues being directly related to our own classroom work.

Nathan Whitlock: It does seem like one of those areas are a bit like gender issues or consent education where it's not just a matter of, well, now this is

legal and this is not, so we're all done discussing it. It opens a whole new universe of discussions and learning and opportunities really.

Daniel Bear: Exactly, yes. I think what we're seeing right now is, as I said earlier, massive societal shifts at very quick pace that we're not used to. I mean, as human society, we've progressed quite a bit over the last few thousand years, but it's taken a long time. The speed at which we're moving now requires that I think we as educators have to confront these challenging and emerging topics like the overdose epidemic in a way that maybe was seen to be outside of our wheelhouse. But it's really something we all need to be engaged with in order to make sure that students get that information before they encounter that issue in the world.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, speaking of the future and where we're headed, I was curious what the future of this actual project is and where you're taking this research. I'm assuming massive societal shifts isn't quite in the plan, but what do you have planned for this research?

Daniel Bear: This research is coming with me to Paris by the time this airs, and I'll be presenting at The International Society for the Study of Drugs Policy, and going over with colleagues from around the world how Canadian postsecondary students may be talking about making their decisions about cannabis use. We're also going to be engaging with this idea with a report published for the school. We're hoping to do some publishing. One of the key things we wanted to do was use this information to help inform some of the drugs education materials that are out there. We've got some partnerships lined up that will allow us to help take this information and infuse it into drugs education material that will be used at colleges and universities across Canada.

Daniel Bear: We'll also be presenting at Humber Showcase on June 6th. That's going to incorporate a bit of the research, but it's also going to be just a bit of my own work and analysis on what's happened since legalization. Last year, I did a presentation just ahead of legalization, and people had tons of questions, really engaged, and we're hoping to sort of repeat that success again.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, I hope you do, and thanks for letting us know what's going on with this. Thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Daniel Bear: Thank you. It's been great.

Nathan Whitlock: *NEXT*cast is produced by Kristin Valois for Humber Press, with the assistance of the Creative Productions Team at The Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo. To listen to previous episodes of *NEXT*cast and to read issues of *NEXT* Magazine, go to humberpress.com. You can also find free downloadable transcripts of every *NEXT*cast episode at humberpress.com.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXT*cast, or to just let us know what you think, email Humberpress@humber.ca. That's Humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.