

Xchange Podcast – Episode 6

Transcript

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NICKI MONAHAN: Hello and welcome to Xchange, the podcast by faculty for faculty at the Teaching and Learning Exchange. I'm Nicki Monahan, faculty facilitator and coach, at the TLX.

MICHAEL AVIS: And I am Michael Avis, professor and faculty facilitator. Nicki, can you believe it's-- we're on episode six already? It seems like this is going by quickly? So, we're calling this one, "I've taken the workshops, now what?" And that's a big question we're going to explore today. How are you feeling these days?

NICKI MONAHAN: I am feeling all right, Mike. I think the last time we talked it was my dog who was desperately in need of a haircut and now it's me. But I'm not standing in front of a classroom every single day, so I guess that's okay. And how are you doing, Mike?

MICHAEL AVIS: Well, I'm good. My two eldest children are now on Zoom sessions with their kindergarten teachers.

NICKI MONAHAN: That sounds good, as long as you don't have to do all the homeschooling all yourself every single day right.

MICHAEL AVIS: That's right, that's right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Great. Well listen, Mike, I wanted to start out today's episode by giving a big shoutout to faculty who have been working so hard in the last few weeks. You and I have seen them jump on to MyLearning and, you know, really ramp up their professional development game. Whether it was filling in their learning gaps with Blackboard tools. Taking a short course on alternate delivery, which admittedly wasn't quite as short as some had anticipated. Or accessing all of the webinars, you know, UDL webinars, tech tools. We've seen people experimenting with Flipgrid and Piktocharts. And all of our faculty colleagues working to support each other on learning those things. And, you know, generally putting their hearts and souls into ensuring that this coming semester is a solid learning experience for their students. And so, we're in week one and Mike and I thought we'd focus on how to get the semester off to a good start. I don't golf, but I have friends who golf and they tell me there's this thing called a mulligan, which is if you hit a really bad shot you get to do it over. And that's one of the great things about teaching every semester, we get a fresh start and we get a chance to start anew and have a great beginning. So, Mike, as we begin a new spring/summer semester, what do you think are some of the most important things faculty should be focussing on just in their very first week of the new semester?

MICHAEL AVIS: Well, I think number one, I think faculty I'm not sure if they should be focussing on but they will be focussing on is nerves. You had this great theory a couple episodes ago about everything times 10 and I think probably there's quite a few faculty members who have

those, you know, those pre-class, before the class starts jitters, but multiply that times 10. So, I think that's the first thing that we need to sort of recognize.

NICKI MONAHAN: I think that's so true, Mike. I've been teaching for over 25 years and I always get a little bit anxious right before the start of a new semester. And I'm actually okay with that, for me it means I still really care about making sure that my students have a great learning experience and I'm not just dialling it in. So, yeah so, we've got to manage our jitters, but know that it's okay and it's actually part of the process of wanting to have a really good experience, so.

MICHAEL AVIS: And that's right. Because somebody told me, I'm not sure if it was you, but some other very wise person said that if you didn't feel nervous before doing something like entering your first class, then you weren't doing something right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: So, all these jitters that we're feeling is all part of the process.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: So, I think that's probably the number one thing that we should be recognizing and focusing on. I think another thing is now more than ever is creating that atmosphere on the first day is vital. Because we're not going to be physically in a room with someone or with our students, I think having those expectations and creating that atmosphere from the first day is so important. So, one example is I've seen lots of online classes where whether you're on Teams or whether you're on Blackboard, where the students-- all you see when you're teaching your class, and I'm using the air quotes for teaching as in sort of through video, all you're seeing are the icons or the initials of the students and you're not seeing anything going on except for that. So, when you want to create that expectation of engagement or you want to create that atmosphere, is that the way you want to teach for 14 weeks or for those people who are doing I guess 6 weeks splitting?

NICKI MONAHAN: Six-one-six.

MICHAEL AVIS: Six-one-six. So, you have to create a set of expectations of what you want your students to do and how you're going to have your students engage with you, and you have to start that from day one. So, don't allow them, I think, unless that you're okay with it, to just use the chat function. That might be effective in some ways, but also it creates a sense of distance. So, really trying to establish what your expectations are and how you're going to get your students to engage with you, I think is really important. Another thing that we need to keep in mind is it's okay to make mistakes. We are all content experts and that's why we're hired and that's why we do great jobs. But right now, we're in a discovery and experimentation phase of how do we take that expertise and how do we translate it to the students or give it to the students through online, through computer, through video chat, or whatever we're doing? And in that sense, we're all experimenting. We don't know the best way to do it but we're trying to figure it out. So, forgive yourself and allow yourself to make mistakes.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah, absolutely, Mike. And I think the students are trying to figure it out too, so.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. And one of the things, one of the new tools that have come up from Student Success is they've created a really good set of modules called Student Orientation to Online Learning. So, my last part about focus is focussing on your students. They might not know the best way to learn online, just like you might not know the best way to teach online. So, using that resource that's available for students is a really good way to sort of help them work through some of the issues that they're going to have while they're learning.

NICKI MONAHAN: Those are great ideas, Mike. And I think the student orientation to online learning is really important. For me, a big part of the beginning of any course is creating that positive climate for learning. And lots of our faculty have been learning about synchronous and asynchronous and making wise choices about what elements of the course are live and how well they're using the elements of Blackboard. But regardless of the synchronous or asynchronous component, welcoming students is really important. So, ultimately you need to have a welcome message on Blackboard also where you tell them how the course is going to work, and there are lots of different ways of doing that. Some faculty have produced short videoclips introducing themselves. I've heard a number of faculty say, you know, it was different ending the winter semester because we already knew our students. This time, we're meeting students for the very first time.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. Yeah, that's right.

NICKI MONAHAN: So, I think that welcome is really important. So, a videoclip can do that, a welcome message on Blackboard. And if you choose to do a synchronous Collaborate session, that's a really great place to welcome your students and invite them to connect with you, and with one another. And Mike, I know you have some good ideas on how to help students connect in a really, you know, low-risk, low stakes way in a Collaborate live session. And I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share some of those ideas.

MICHAEL AVIS: Sure, I've got a few. Some faculty are using Collaborate and some faculty are using Teams. But in any sort of synchronous session where all my students, all the students are going to be there, how do we sort of get away from the chat window and the blank screen? And there are a couple strategies that you can try. One of them is I found in my observations with faculty that getting students to actually use their video cameras can be challenging, and it might not be necessary. And you certainly don't want to force anyone to use a video camera. But I personally, I really like to see someone's face when I'm speaking to them and I really like to see them and their atmosphere and environment when I'm communicating with them. So, how can we encourage them to go past the chat window and use their audio and camera? So, one of the ways that I thought of was you're in the luxury of -- you have the luxury of them being in their homes where they're comfortable. So, maybe ask them to find an object in their house that they really like, that is their favourite object or the food they like to eat, or a book they like. And just have them to turn on their camera and show that object and just talk about what it is. That way the atmosphere is being created like it's okay to use the camera, I feel like I'm sharing something personal, not too personal. But that's a nice way to sort of create a little bit of

connection. You could also draw a picture, have them draw a picture of their favourite animal, have them draw a picture of something and have them share that on the video camera. It's just a sort of a way to show them to use their video. Another way is to use the breakout rooms on Collaborate or maybe break off into sort of subchannels on Teams. And allow them just to have a conversation amongst themselves about a topic that you choose. So, you could put up a question, have them answer the question. It doesn't even have to be about the course content, it can just be about the experiences they're having during the COVID pandemic. And just that way get them talking, get them sharing, be able to see them.

NICKI MONAHAN: Those are great ideas, Mike. And I know especially when people have big classes, you know, generally with the live, whatever videoconferencing platform you're using, Collaborate or Zoom. You know, we instruct faculty to say okay, you know, turn your mic off, turn your camera off, know where the chat box is. But I've had many faculty say to me; gosh, I feel like I'm talking out there in space. So, a judicious invitation one-by-one and maybe you have a class of 50 and you're just going to ask three or four students to do that, to introduce themselves. But you're right, getting that immediate connection, you with the students, the students with one another. And then the other important connection that needs to happen early on is connecting students to content. And, you know, while we're all learning new ways of working with our students, I think we're all in this business of teaching and learning because we're passionate about our content areas. So, I think one of the things that we want to have happen in that first week is to somehow communicate that passion and get students excited. Whatever you teach, you probably teach it because you care about it and you know a lot about it. And we're content experts ourselves, but --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: We want our students to get on board. So, I like to, you know, in the first week ask my students some, you know, big, juicy wicked questions to get them thinking about content areas or, you know, share a story or an anecdote from our industry work or our profession work, or our work outside the college. And then I think it's really important really early on to find out what they want to know about the subject. Because one of the ways to engage students in any course is to find out what they know already and what they want to know.

MICHAEL AVIS: M'hmm. And I just wanted to add one piece to the-- I love the big, juicy question. Whenever I'm teaching, I always have something on the board, so when they walk into class.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: They have something to think about and something to engage with before the class actually starts.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yes.

MICHAEL AVIS: And I've been in so many meetings in the last weeks where there's a bunch of people in a Teams meeting, no one is talking, there's nothing displayed on the screen, and

everyone is just sort of waiting for someone to say something. So, another little tip would be, create one of those really juicy questions. Have that slide ready to go 10 minutes before your class, so that when people are coming into the Collaborate session or the Team session, they have something that they can actually start to think about and ruminate and, you know, consider what that question means. So, I think that's a good --

NICKI MONAHAN: For sure. And we know that a lot of our students are, you know, really connected with music. I know faculty members who have --

MICHAEL AVIS: And that's great, yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: Have music playing at the beginning of their session. And one of the things they get their students to do is to take turns, you know --

MICHAEL AVIS: Bringing their own right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Bringing in their own.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: I've seen faculty members who start a class with just a cartoon or an image right up on a slide. And we know a lot of learners are really visual learners. So, thinking about those, and these are easy translation from a face-to-face to remote or online, but it's really all about generating some of that excitement and passion. You know, one of the other things that I think we really need to focus on in these beginning stages of a new semester are classroom norms. And classroom norms are things that happen whether we like it or not and it's really important for us to be intentional about them. You know norms get established. I remember my very first year, this is ancient history, teaching intro psych in a lecture hall, room 128 at the St. James campus. And I noticed who sat where on the very first class.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: And sure enough, every week for 14 weeks.

MICHAEL AVIS: That's where they sat, right.

NICKI MONAHAN: That's where they sat.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Right? We're kind of territorial people, we also often don't like a whole lot of change, but those are classroom norms. So, we want to be aware that if we are not thoughtful about classroom norms, they will establish themselves. So, now there are all kinds of norms. If you're teaching primarily asynchronously and using something for example like discussion boards, then norms will happen really quickly. And so, we want to encourage students to respond to each other thoughtfully and respond to each other respectfully. And then notice and pay attention to what might be happening. So, for example, you know, if you don't want to have to be the person who responds to every single comment on the discussion thread, don't jump in too soon because that can actually stifle student-to-student conversation. But, you

know, make sure that you're present and respond quickly to specific questions, especially about assignments. Because then you want your students to know that you're there. But pay attention to the kinds of norms that are establishing on discussion boards. And Mike, I know you've noticed in sessions that we've gone into, we've been invited by faculty members, some of the norms that kind of pop up in Collaborate. What have you noticed happens on Collaborate?

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. I agree 100% with the norms and being really explicit about them. And to be honest, specifically in online classes because there's a certain area, like there's a certain distance between-- I know as a student when I go into a classroom at George Brown, I'm sitting in a room and I am ready to learn because I'm in the environment of learning. However, when I'm sitting in my bedroom on my laptop or I'm in my kitchen, maybe I'm not sort of fully prepared for that learning. So, really being explicit in these are the norms in your online class, whether synchronous or asynchronous, and this is how behaviour should be, I think can help in the long run a lot.

NICKI MONAHAN: And a perfect example is, and you've already, you know, referred to the chat box, it may be that your choice is to have your students communicate with you through the chat box, in which case --

MICHAEL AVIS: Which is totally fine if that's your choice.

NICKI MONAHAN: For sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: That's right, yes.

NICKI MONAHAN: And be intentional about it.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: But if the only thing the students do is use the chat box and they do that for two weeks or three weeks, it's going to be really tough to get them to use the microphone, or to get them --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: To use videos. So, you know --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: If you have a small class, you could get everybody to take two seconds, turn on their mic, say their name, and one thing they're looking forward to learning in the class. Or maybe you're going to do something with the video. But those norms have to get established intentionally early on, otherwise they'll just happen.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, that's totally true. And I will admit something here for you and for everybody else, that I have my favourite pair of wireless headphones so I can be in meetings and be walking around my house doing other things while meetings are going on. And because there's not a lot of interaction and maybe not a lot of engagement, that becomes a norm for

me. Because I don't have -- a lot of those meetings haven't created an engagement where I'm sort of speaking back or I'm participating. So, again, you know, because that's sort of being allowed to happen, that becomes habit. We want to make sure the habits that we create are the habits that we want.

NICKI MONAHAN: Right. And I think it's always really important to give learners choice, but I also think there are ways that we can invite our learners into the conversation.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: And invite them into the learning experience. Since we're talking about first week, it's pretty standard practice in first week of face-to-face classes for faculty members to review the course outline.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yes, of course.

NICKI MONAHAN: What are your thoughts about how to use the course outline in the first week in maybe an online learning scenario?

MICHAEL AVIS: The dreaded course outline. Yes, I've seen many a time where they, you know, seven pages of very small text going through all the regulations and marking schemes of the course can be very daunting. But I would say, don't waste a lot of time on it, obviously go through the things that they need to go through. But the course outline is the perfect place for asynchronous learning. Give them what they absolutely need in that first week, give them the information that is vital, but don't go through the sort of minutiae of policies and things that they can sort of learn on their own. So, the synchronous time, if you're doing it synchronously, has to be very judicious and it has to be used for engagement, and hopefully for interaction. What you don't want is a three-hour lecture that you would do in your class to be replaced by a three-hour online learning experience. Because I could tell you if that happens your students are going to be on wireless headphones and wandering around the house doing all the things that I do in meetings, so.

NICKI MONAHAN: And, you know, Mike, one of the things that we've seen is that faculty members are getting really good at thinking about what are the tools that I have at my disposal? What should be asynchronous? What should be synchronous?

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, right.

NICKI MONAHAN: And really using those Collaborate live or Zoom session or Team sessions for that high-level engagement knowing of course that, you know, some students that there might be accessibility issues.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: People are dealing with, it's a high-bandwidth event, accessibility issues around if someone has a laptop. And remember, a lot of our students are accessing what we're doing through their phone. So, this is a time to be thoughtful, to make good choices, but remember whether you're face-to-face or online, that first week is really about connection,

connecting students to you, connecting students to one another, and connecting students to content, and getting them excited. And while we might start, as often all of us do, you know, with some nerves or some anxiety.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: We're really hoping that people are starting this new semester with some excitement, so.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, and --

NICKI MONAHAN: As we wrap up things; Mike, what are your final words?

MICHAEL AVIS: I would say, you've done the work, we've all been very impressed, everyone at the TLX has been so impressed with the work that faculty and Chairs, and everybody in the college has put in to making this happen. But now that that's done, let's just take a breath, let's slow down, let's remember why we're here. We love teaching, we love those moments with our students, so enjoy them and make mistakes and learn from each other and just enjoy your teaching. And let everything else sort of -- let everything else happen and just be in the moment.

NICKI MONAHAN: I love that, focus on the joy of teaching. So, have a great first week back everyone. Don't forget, get to know your students, give them an opportunity to get to know you. Stay positive and stay tuned for the next episode of Xchange, the TLX podcast for faculty and by faculty. Have a great night, Mike!

MICHAEL AVIS: Take care, Nicki.

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