# Transcript- Xchange Forum Podcast with Rusa Jeramic

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PATRICIA ROBINSON: Hi everyone and welcome to the XChange forum podcast. I'm Patricia Robinson, Faculty Facilitator with the TLX, and in this podcast series, I've been having a lot of different discussions with a lot of different faculty colleagues from across the college. And today, I'm really excited to be talking to Rusa Jeremic from the School of Social and Community Services. So, before we begin our discussion, can you tell us a bit about yourself and your role at the college?

RUSA JEREMIC: Sure. Thanks, Patty. I'm a longtime listener and first time being on the podcast. I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me. So, my name is Rusa Jeremic and I am a full-time faculty professor in the Community Worker program. And these days, I'm focusing mostly on courses, teaching courses like human rights, campaign and community organizing, community development, and so on.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Okay, great. And, so how would you describe the context of your classes?

RUSA JEREMIC: So, in the Community Worker program, we actually find that we have a large number of students who are mature students, so they're coming back to school with lived experience. We have second career professionals. So, coming back after, you know, doing a pivot on their careers. We have newcomers and immigrants. And also, of course, we have some folks who are coming straight out of high school, but I would say we have larger than average percentage of mix of adults in our classes and we have a tremendous amount of different lived experiences, which actually makes for very vibrant, exciting, classrooms where all of the students have opportunities to learn from each other and each other's experiences.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, yes, our -- our program is very experiential and hands-on and gives them lots of opportunities to interact with each other. So, we kind of really feel blessed that we have such a wonderful mix of students.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm. Okay, and so that makes me think of -- so, because it's so experiential and hands-on, and you provide so many opportunities for your students to interact with one another, how -- how do you do that in the online environment? So, how do you -- how do you support that interaction amongst the students and with yourself and where they can actually share their life experiences around the subject matter and learn together as a group? How do you -- how do you build that community and opportunities to interact in the online environment?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah, that's great. So, yeah, building community is such a key component of our program and I'm sure many other programs at the college, and has been a key concern for me as we've moved forward into online all the time environment. So, I've actually tried to build our community in the classroom through a lot of experiments, I guess, you know, as we've kind of gone into the online world. But, you know, I did start off all of my classes in the fall. So, we have a two-year program, so we're with the students for two years. So, especially for the students entering into their first semester, I started off with an assignment. So, it was a grade -- there was a grade attached to it -- which was to do an introduction video on Flipgrid. So, using Flipgrid, because Flipgrid also allows for captioning, which is really important of course. So, they did an assignment where they -- I had an introductory video, then they responded and I, you know, I had the usual kind of questions for them, and then I also asked them to comment. I encouraged them strongly to watch all the videos, but I asked them to comment on at least two other peer's videos so that people would feel a sense of interaction. And the grade really was just a completion grade. It was an encouragement grade to get them to actually overcome their shyness and pull out the camera. So, I found that was fairly successful and it was a great tool for them later, as they were -- through the semester, as they began to work in groups. They could always go back. You know, if they were put in a group, they could go back and watch the videos and connect with the folks that they were working with.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm. And, so you mentioned about, you know, using the camera to introduce themselves. So, so is -- having your students on camera, is that an important part of your program?

RUSA JEREMIC: Well, it's not. I would say that if we want to build community, it's really helpful to be on camera. One. Two, for me, I try and encourage them. So, there are some assignments, like doing a presentation, where I do say you need to be on camera. They have lots of warning and they get support. And I do explain it in the context of the world we're in now. Right? So, you know, our program, many of the activities and exercises -- before the pandemic and now -- replicate the workplace. So, the idea is to replicate the workplace. And I feel that they, for some of them, they really need to get over the hurdle of being seen on camera. And they need to do that, not for me, because, you know, although it helps me a lot, I'm sure every teacher loves that. Right? Like, it helps us connect with our students. But for themselves and for, even when they're searching for field placements, now the reality is that they're going to be highly likely interviewed on camera for their field placements. Never mind for future employment and thinking about those shifts where probably we will be seeing more and more activities online. So, it's an ideal learning moment for them, I feel we're in a safe space, where they can come on camera and be comfortable with seeing themselves. I think that's the key to being on camera for all of us is being comfortable with seeing ourselves and be comfortable with our imperfections. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yes. Yes.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, there are a number of different activities that I try to encourage them, and some of them are graded, to come on camera.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: I would say one of the neat things that's happened in my efforts to try and build community, and I do that through also having some fun in the online classroom, is that I've actually seen them also join in in the sort of fun activities that I do. So, for example, most people who know me, know I have a cat and he ends up figuring promptly in my classroom sessions, whether I like it or not. So, he has been embraced by the students. You know, I do a poll in the very first class, which is a -- are you a cat person or a dog person? In one of my classes, we discovered we had a snake person [Laughter] in the class. And she quite willingly came on camera and showed us the snake. Introduced the snake.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Wow.

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah, it was quite something. Quite interesting. But people need to feel comfortable. And so, I found that, you know, if people feel comfortable and relaxed and they see me comfortable and relaxed, you know, kind of fiddling around and stuff, they're more likely to also join in. We also ended up doing this thing -- it just kind of evolved this year -- where, I tend to -- I started wearing hats, different hats, to class. Probably it started in the winter when it was cold. And so, then the students themselves also started wearing their silly hats they had in their house and coming on camera to show everybody. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, this was just totally evolved, impromptu. It takes us two minutes at the beginning of the class. Sometimes people want to share. It's great, right? Because it connects them to each other, which makes -- which makes their lives a lot easier. Right? In terms of the online classroom, but also working together and being in community because it is community work. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right. And probably gives them some fun memories to think about after the class is done. Right? Like, remember that time Rusa wore, you know, that orange hat or whatever. Right?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yes.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, yeah, so, it provides some good memories -- some fun memories -- of your class.

RUSA JEREMIC: Yes, exactly. I've also tried to do -- so, I've tried to do, like, a scavenger hunt with them. And we've done Bingo. So, these were -- these were sometimes icebreakers that we did in the classroom and I figured out how to do them online. Right? So, sometimes some things can't really be adapted to online, but most things can. You just need to shift them. Right? And you need to be thinking outside the box. And I found, like with the Bingo, which is a great icebreaker in the first day of class, also helped them to get to know each other and also just have those conversations which might be a little awkward, right, in the beginning.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: For sure.

RUSA JEREMIC: And it's online. It might be harder to connect, but if you -- if you feel comfortable and you sort of know people through their Flipgrid videos, then doing this icebreaker Bingo, then, when you're put into a group, you're more likely to go on camera to speak to your peers to connect with them and be less hesitant or shy about it.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm. Great ideas. And so, that's kind of, you know, things that you've been doing at the beginning of class or in the first few weeks of class. So, what other strategies have you used to kind of maintain that sense of community?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah, so we've been -- a lot of the work that we do, some of it does continue. So, the hats has continued. It's -- I think we're in week 11 now. So, I've got one picked out for this week. You know, the hats continue, the cat -- the interest in the cat. I wear cat t-shirts for them as well. Some of that stuff continues. But I also found that certain tools that are available to us, like Padlet, actually really helps for them to engage in group activities, which, in the classes that I teach, there is a lot of group activities that the collaborate small groups aren't conducive to. There are some that there are. That work there. Just going into discuss something or answer some specific questions. But if you really want -- if you have activities where students are engaging with the material, I find that Padlet is actually quite brilliant because they can open up a Padlet on their own screens and they can all work on it together at the same time. I mean, it gets konky if everyone is trying to move it at the same time of course, but you get the sense of what I'm saying. So, we've been able to do some of the timeline type of exercises, a graded scavenger hunt exercise that I used to do. They used to do it face-to-face. So, they would actually -- it's for human rights class and they would walk around the college, the campus -- Saint James Campus -- and look for certain elements that demonstrate, let's say, the college respects human rights or fulfills human rights. And so, I was trying to figure out how to adapt it to online and I started doing different kinds of searches online to see where students could actually have the same search of questions. So, they're learning about GBC's relationship with human rights law and obligations at the same time as they are able to do it online. So, they are still getting an experience and they're still research. It's just not physical, walking around research. It's online research. And I think it was quite interesting. You know, some of the questions connected to policies, so they were able to look up specific elements of George Brown policies, and they were able to learn. So, they were able to learn about, you know, a little bit more about the relationship there and the policy statements on anti-racism, for example.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: And also, have an enjoyable time, I think. You know?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right. Yeah, and they're doing it in groups, so they're not just by themselves, researching in isolation, but they're actually collaborating with their peers on this as well.

RUSA JEREMIC: Correct. Yeah. And then, they can answer the questions together right there. And the other thing that I quite enjoy about Padlet is that you can engage with it in different formats. So, you can actually post a video response. You can do audio. So, in one assignment that I had students do, I actually asked them, rather than writing an essay, I asked them to actually create a Padlet. And I think I gave them some parameters, like two video, one audio, or vice versa. And then, of course, you could put in text, but I also asked them to put in images.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, a self-reflection piece.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: And it was brilliant. It was great. And for me, like, one of the things that I'm always trying to do about with online is I'm actually explain -- I like to explain to them why we're doing something like this. Right? So, this is key for me because it's not just about -- for me, it's not just about teaching. How can we be great online teachers, but it's also, how can we teach our students skills and techniques and tools that they can take into their workplaces. And I actually feel like Padlet could be -- has great potential as a community work type of tool if you're working with groups of people in any context in community work across the sector. You can create these, you know, these types of activities, icebreakers, even working, you know, if you're working policy or something, you can use a tool like Padlet. And so, I try to explain to students as well, you know, want them to be on camera, why we're using Padlet, just so they understand that part of the objective is for them to gain digital literacy skills.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right. And that's amazing. So, so, yeah. So, you're using these tools to teach them and you're creating these learning experiences for them, but in having them use that Padlet assignment or, you know, a Flipgrid assignment where they are on camera, those are all tools that they can use in their future workplace as well. So, right, that's really amazing. And do you collect -- like, how do your students respond to these types of activities? Do you collect feedback from them throughout the course or, like, how are your students responding to these ways of engaging in your content?

RUSA JEREMIC: Good question. I -- So, I try -- as I kind of put out there, I try to create a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom and I do encourage students to do check-ins with me and I do check-ins with them. So, I created a chart for the week four, like a week four check-in. I think it was week five for me. You know, what should we continue doing? What should I? What should I continue doing? What should I stop? What should I start? And, you know, using that tool in Collaborate is quite good. Like, the eBoard because it's anonymous. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: And I tell them that. It's anonymous. You can feel free to write your honest feedback.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, they do it live, while you're in the class?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yes.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Oh, amazing. Okay.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, they do it live and we talk about it.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, as they were doing it, I was commenting on it. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: Because in one of my classes, for example, you know, like, sometimes the students will complain about group work. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: Don't like group work. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

RUSA JEREMIC: And in the one -- one of the classes that I was teaching in the fall, there is actually no group work. Except for group activities, there isn't any group assignments. So, one person wrote "group assignments" and I was like, well, there actually, in this class, there isn't any group assignments. So, as they were writing things, I was kind of responding to them. And I was able to, in the moment, also, like, make commitments to them. Like, for example, that was when one of the students asked -- suggested Cahoot. Let's use Cahoot. Because they had used it in another classroom. And I said, I said, I will check out Cahoot. I haven't -- I haven't used it yet, but let me check it out. And then, the next week, I created a Cahoot quiz for them and they loved it. They loved it. And I actually love it, too. So, in my class, what we do -- so, to encourage participation again, you know, I know that some students are insecure. They don't want to write their name down, so I tell them pick any name. Any name you want.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

RUSA JEREMIC: And so, we had, like, you know, I don't know, we had Val Kilmer. We had someone who said I am not Rusa was their name. Some people used their real name, but a lot of people, you know, used whatever their nicknames were. We don't know who they are. Right? And it was kind of funny because we did it for a few weeks. I think the fact that they could be anonymous because, again, it's about their learning. Right? It's not for me to -- I'm not grading them. It's for them to practice. So, it encourages their participation, but we're also having a little bit of fun. And then, for those few weeks, we had these, you know, funny names. Like, Val Kilmer one week and Val Kilmer refused to reveal who they were. Right? [Laughter] Every week, they refused to -- the winner refused to reveal themselves, which is great, actually. It's perfectly fine.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, this was on the Cahoot, where you could choose any names? Right? In the game?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah. Yeah. Write in your name and so I told them beforehand, you know, if you want, you can use your own name, but you don't have to.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah.

RUSA JEREMIC: You can use any name you want.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: And Val Kilmer was a winner? Was winning the top of the charts?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah. Yeah. And I think someone picked Frank, which is my cat's name. You know? You know, so they had fun with it. Right? And then, and they did engage. Right? They did engage and these were -- I actually do enjoy these game type of things and I know, like, I think all instructors who've used them have gotten positive responses because they enjoy, I don't know, they enjoy that fun. Right? But it's also a good way to review material. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Totally.

RUSA JEREMIC: That class in particular, we had pitches at the end so they had to come on camera. And again, I explained to them the context that we discussed already and I gave them some tips on how you want to be on camera. Like, what do you want to have behind you? You, you know, because you're doing a presentation, I suggest you may want to stand. You know, we talked about all of these different, you know, tips, right, on how to present yourself professionally on camera. And honestly, it was so great. It was so great because everybody did it. You know?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Nice.

RUSA JEREMIC: Like, nobody had camera problems that day, so --

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Nice.

RUSA JEREMIC: And everybody took the opportunity to practice. You know? So, that's really what it was about, is really taking that opportunity to practice and they did. And some of them dressed, you know, very professionally. It was great. And the other great thing was that it was such a nice way to end the class, too, because the students could see each other. Right? So, you could see each other. The chat was full of kudos for everybody after they presented. It was really, really successful. I felt really, really pleased with that afterwards.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Nice. That's so nice. So, what about -- have you received any suggestions from your students, like, when you're collected feedback? Like, so you've talked about bringing Cahoot. Is there anything else that you maybe changed or brought in as a result of a student feedback or a student comment?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yes. So, I think -- I actually think it is important for us to be open to students and to help -- I think it alleviates any anxiety that they may have around being successful online in whatever context, but it also shows that we're real. You know? And we're also, you know, learning as we go and adapting as we go. And it's interesting. So, I mentioned that, you know, in our program, a lot of students -- well, they're put into groups all the time in every class. Right? And, usually, for the most part, it's random. But this term, for one of my classes, they have a project that they work on basically from week two or week three and so I allow them to choose their partner. So, it's a duo that works on this project to present it at the end of the class and so it's a bit scaffolded and we talk about the elements a lot as we go. So, normally, I guess, or, I don't know if normally is the right word, but in the face-to-face classroom, I would say this and they would be happy because they could be with, you know, choose their friend and they didn't have to be, and it wasn't random. And most people would be happy and we would always make sure that everybody was paired off or, you know, there was no one left. You know?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: Left out. And so, that would always work and I never really considered it. I thought they'll be happy. Right? I'm going to tell them this and they'll be happy. So, when I shared this with the classes online, they actually, there was a couple of students that said to me, you know, I'm a bit concerned. I don't really known people. I don't know how I'm going to choose a partner and, you know, I don't know what people are interested in, if they're interested in my issue. Anyways, so it seemed to be creating a lot of anxiety for students. So, I said, "Leave it with me. I'm going to come back with a process for next week." And what I decided to do was -- and I spent almost, you know, at least an hour, if not more of the class, like a three-hour class, so I spent probably half the class on this, but i think it was really worth it. Also, for community building, is we ended up doing a speed dating type of activity, where I gave them a couple of questions. So, obviously, introduce yourself and then, what is your passion, what social issue are you interested in, because they were going to be working on social issues, and why.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: And also, the third question was your working style. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Okay. Okay.

RUSA JEREMIC: You know, are you going to do this all at midnight the day before?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right. Are you a procrastinator?

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah. I mean, who knows what kind of conversations they had. But I, and then I purposefully, but that's why it took so long, is I purposely put them into pairs. Right? So, obviously, it's going to take a long time to give -- and give them enough time to talk to each other and then switch them out of those groups into new groups.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

RUSA JEREMIC: Mostly, they were in pairs. Sometimes I put them in groups of three. As they had started getting to know each other, I, you know, I switched it up. Anyways, I did different numbers and stuff, but I did dedicate that time. And at first, to be honest, I didn't want to because I, you know, I always think about the content. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah. Right. Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: But I'm really happy I did, because for them, they actually, again, got to know each other, build that community, which you can see in the chat now. They're thanking each other when somebody reports back from a little group. You know, if somebody says something in the chat, they're being supported by their peers. Like, I can see that community is there.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Nice.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, it was worth it. Right? So, they were able to find, for the most part, you know, able to find partners that whose interests aligned with them or whose working styles -- one of the questions. You know? They still got to choose their own partners. But again, another opportunity to get to know each other because they're going to be working together for two years. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right. Right. So, that -- so that hour, hour and a half, has really gone a long way towards, you know, sustaining your students' interest in the course and probably their motivation to attend your synchronous sessions all the time when the peers that they know are going to be there. And then, yeah, like, it sets a good foundation for their -- for their next year as well.

RUSA JEREMIC: Yeah, I think so. I hope so. I think for me, the lesson was really to be open. Also, to hearing their responses and trying to figure out how to respond. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right. Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: You know, how to be responsive to that and not just sort of go with my own plan.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: Right? And so, that was a good lesson for me, too, as well. Right? So --

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Right.

RUSA JEREMIC: Because I think it did have a great payoff for them and ultimately for me, right, as well.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, that's the thing, right, we're all learners in this new environment now. So, it's not like, you know, yes, we can be content experts, but in terms of the learning platforms, you know, there's -- there's so many tech tools out there. There's so many things we can try and ways of doing things. So, so you're right. It's so good to be open minded and get other ideas about how to do things and try things out. So, that's so great. So, just before we end this podcast, do you have any advice? Maybe one piece of advice or one other tip you would share with anyone? Well, with us, I mean. Not anyone. With us. [Laughter]

RUSA JEREMIC: You know what? I think -- I think that it's hard to say. Right? Like, I think that it's okay to fail as teachers. Sometimes I think we feel this pressure to have everything perfect and have it all laid out and this is how the class is going to go. And I really do think it's okay to fail and I actually think for the students to see us fail gives them self-confidence to try. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yes. Yes.

RUSA JEREMIC: Try and fail. Try and fail. Right?

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yes.

RUSA JEREMIC: So, maybe that's what I would say. It's okay to be you and it's okay to fail.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah, nice. That's great. Thank you so much Rusa. I really appreciate your time. And, yeah, I appreciate that message. Right? So, trying things out in a safe space I think really goes a long way to building students' confidence as well as ours.

RUSA JEREMIC: Yes, for sure.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Thank you so much, Rusa.

RUSA JEREMIC: Thanks.

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