

Xchange Podcast – Episode 7

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MICHAEL AVIS: Hi, everybody. Welcome back to Xchange, the podcast for faculty by faculty. It's been a long challenging few months here in Toronto and at George Brown College but we have persevered and we're raring to go for another academic year. I'm Michael Avis, faculty facilitator at the Teaching and Learning Exchange we call the TLX and I'm joined here as usual by my colleague, Nicki Monahan. How's it going, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: Hey, Mike. It's great to be with you again. I'm Nicki Monahan, faculty facilitator and coach with the TLX. Yes, it was a different kind of summer for most of us but one of the things that I love about being an educator is that we get to celebrate New Year's at least twice a year. For me, September always brings that fresh start feeling so in this episode of Xchange, we're going to discuss what's new with the TLX and some Happy New Year strategies for creating positive, online learning communities.

MICHAEL AVIS: So, hold tight everybody.

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MICHAEL AVIS: So, welcome back. There are some-- there are lots of new things going on at the TLX that we want to update you on before we get started with talking about our Happy New Year's wishes. One thing is, Nicki, we have expanded as---

NICKI MONAHAN: We have indeed.

MICHAEL AVIS: As this-- as the pandemic has gone on, we've realized how important it is for us to have lots of able people here. We have added some new TLX champions and associates to the team who hopefully we'll be introducing throughout our new season of Xchange. We'll be introducing them in the next couple months. They can come and talk to you on this pod. But Nicki, you're working specifically with champions and associates just to sort of get them oriented to how we do things at the TLX.

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: Can you say a little bit about their roles?

NICKI MONAHAN: I'm happy to, Mike. So, sure. In our efforts to ensure that all faculty have the support that they need, the TLX has expanded to TLX 2.0. So in June, our first new associates joined the core team. And this summer, Valerie Scovill and Adeesha Hack designed the incredible Course Builder Summer Institute.

MICHAEL AVIS: Incredible---

NICKI MONAHAN: With tons---

MICHAEL AVIS: Incredible is right?

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. It was amazing. They did a great job and hundreds of faculty participated in building or re-working online courses, implementing fundamental principles of backwards design. So we're really happy to bring Val Scovill and Adeesha Hack and all their incredible expertise into the team.

MICHAEL AVIS: Absolutely. Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: And then in August, two new associates came on board and they're currently expanding the reach of the TLX. Melissa Teles comes from the Child and Youth Care program. And she's got an interest and expertise in teaching with compassion, community partnerships and equity and anti-racist education focus. And we're really delighted to have her with us. And then Joanna Friend from Early Childhood Education brings her unique perspectives on disability, accessibility, accommodation and Universal Design for Learning. And she's going to join with many, many other learning consultants; Ravinder Brar's UDL, Universal Design for Learning pilot project.

MICHAEL AVIS: You know, Nicki, one of the things that---

NICKI MONAHAN: So---

MICHAEL AVIS: One of things that I sort of jump in there-- one of things I really appreciate about all these new associates and champions is, just as you mentioned all the wide-ranging expertise they bring, the new vision that they bring; all of those things I think, it's just gonna make our team so much stronger.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. And there's lots of work to do so we're really delighted that we have, you know, this, this increased capacity. So in addition to the, the associates who, who, who spent a fair bit of their SWF time with us, we also have some new champions. And the champions are kind of embedded in their divisions and they're ready to support the work of the TLX and meet the learning needs of their respective faculty members. So we've got 10 of them and when I work with them, I always say it's like coaching an All-star team; we couldn't ask for a better group. So, Jeffrey Reffo and William Woolrich come from Community Services and they're already doing some amazing work with their teams. Carolyn Deeth and Alicia Marshall have joined us from the Health Sciences area. We've got a threesome of Lindsay Wilson, Margrit Talpalaru and Kate Taylor and they're our CPLS colleagues. Alma Kasneci, math teacher extraordinaire, is working with faculty from the Centre for Construction and Engineering Technology. And then finally, last but not least, Jason Inniss and Paul Araujo come-- join us from the Centre for Hospitality and Culinary Arts. And they are already all busy supporting colleagues in their divisions and they're basically our ears to the ground to ensure that their faculty know what the TLX is doing but also that we at the TLX are aware of the learning needs of faculty from across the entire college.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, that's great. So, basically what the-- what the champions are gonna be doing is sort of-- you can correct me if I'm wrong-- but they're gonna be kind of listening to what

the needs are of those specific divisions and then communicating with us and we are seeing how we can sort of help support that in a bigger-- in a bigger way. Is that about right?

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah, that's the one side of it and the other side of it is that they're working directly to provide peer support to faculty in their areas and also let faculty in their areas know what's available through the TLX; whether it's workshops, webinars, consultation, coaching.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: So, it's kind of a two-way communication system that we've got going.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, an All-star team indeed. That's great.

(laughing)

MICHAEL AVIS: So there's been a few other things have been happening, as you mentioned, the Summer Institute Course Builder. We had over 400, I believe, participants in that. And I just think that was such--- and I did a couple sections myself and it was such a great experience to have 30, 40-- my last one, I even had 70 faculty in their-- thinking about their teaching, thinking about how they're gonna engage their students. It was a really worthwhile project. And thanks again to Adeesha and Val for getting that going. eLTI and the Blackboard people and all of those, those folks who've been working really hard. They've had an unprecedented number of workshops, office hours and tickets that they've been working on so---

NICKI MONAHAN: And they continue to be really busy. We hear about them working day and night and on weekends to respond to those Blackboard faculty support tickets so yeah, our faculty couldn't, couldn't survive without them, that's for sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: Shout-out to their hard work, no doubt about it. And we've also got Ian Wigglesworth. So he's the Associate Vice President, Academic and he's sort of taken the-- taken the lead in the TLX right now and he's really helped to lead to the growth and expansion of the TLX. So we want to thank him and make sure that, you know, people are aware that, sort of, Ian is, is really helping push this forward. So with all this hard---

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. We could call Ian the champion of champions.

MICHAEL AVIS: Absolutely.

NICKI MONAHAN: So, he helps us make this happen, for sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: So, with all this hard work, we can't forget what we're here for. And after all that we've talked about this summer, let's bring it back to basics here, Nikki. So-- and that's working with faculty on how to connect with their learners and create the best learning environment possible. We have such a challenge right now because of---

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: Where we are and, and, and most people teaching online, it's really a big challenge to sort of create that community that we would normally have and just walking into a classroom and saying hi to people. It's not quite that easy anymore. So we've come up with a few things that faculty might want to consider within your first couple weeks of your online teaching about how you can sort of create that community. So the strategies that we will propose to ensure that you're creating a positive environment for online learning come directly from feedback. So we asked students and I think there were a few surveys done by Strategy and Innovation over the year to, to ask them about their online learning experiences in the spring and to say what it-- what it is that they really value and what do they want.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. Feedback from our students is absolutely vital for keeping us on track about what they need to be successful. So, first things first, we're going to assume by now that you've already warmly welcomed your students to a new semester. But let's not forget, it's never too late to welcome newcomers. And students are facing unprecedented challenges so there might be some students who are just logging on to their Blackboard shells for the first time or maybe they missed their first Collaborate session. So let's not forget to, to welcome people as they arrive.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, indeed. I mean-- and we're at the end of week one. We're recording this on the Friday of the end of the first week. But you're-- our goal to create that environment is never-ending. It doesn't happen only in week one and then stop in week two. It's something that we want to sort of continue to do throughout the entire-- your entire term, the 14 weeks. So in addition to appreciating these, you know, the first positive connections with faculty, one of the things that learners have told us about is clear communication and connection with faculty were really important to their success. And there's a few ways that we can do that. One of them is creating a sense of community with people reaching out and staying connected. It's really difficult at times to, to stay connected through a computer and a lot of people are actually using their phones as well to do this. And how do we create that sort of connection? One of the things is easy networking. So, we want to create a network so that we're constantly in contact with them whether it's through email, through Teams, through chat, through messages, through Blackboard. But we probably have to spend a little bit more time thinking about how we connect with them and stay connected in the online environment. One of the ways is also creating a community of learners. So how do we engage the students to talk to each other and not just direct everything to us but create communities where students can work together, can communicate together, can trouble shoot together, think critically together? So that all comes with creating this, this community and the connection. And another thing is, what we're doing is modeling for students what they're going to be doing when they're in their careers. So, I'm not sure where we're going to go as far as online learning but certainly connecting and meeting people digitally and doing meetings digitally is something that's going to happen. So by creating this environment, we're helping them learn for their future careers.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely, Mike. And that community can happen asynchronously, synchronously so we students appreciate when they have a chance to participate in discussion boards or group work or creative problem solving or, or things where they get to know their peers and, and that reduces that sense of isolation. We've also heard from our students that they really appreciate what they would call a, a positive and caring environment. And they define that

as really responsible faculty who are flexible and communicative. So now more than ever, you know, providing multiple ways for students to be able to demonstrate that they're achieving outcomes; flexibility in terms of assignments; and flexibility in terms of deadlines and due dates is probably more important than ever.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Students also tell us that they notice when faculty tell them directly that they care about their success.

MICHAEL AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: We want to be really transparent. We're here to help you be successful and that's a message that we can't say often enough. And finally, because these are such unusual and, you know, we've heard this word many times, unprecedented times, but our students do really want to know that we understand that they're dealing with particular challenges and some of those challenges are, you know, economic uncertainties; maybe internet difficulties--

MICHAEL AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: Difficulties accessing their devices. We know students have told us that dealing with violence in their homes and parenting and caring for people who are not well. So, I think that caring is acknowledging and empathizing with our students that we know these are hard times--

MICHAEL AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: And we're with you and we want you to be successful.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. It's, it's, it's kind of hard to imagine that we're actually in their homes when we're doing our classes, right? Like, normally, we would have them in our space but now we're in their space so we, you're right. To really be flexible and positive about that is really important.

NICKI MONAHAN: And respectful of privacy

MICHAEL AVIS: Of course.

NICKI MONAHAN: And so, you know, maybe inviting people if they choose to, to be on camera but also recognizing that some of our students are in situations that---

MICHAEL AVIS: Sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: That don't create ideal learning environments. So being really caring about what's happening for our students is important.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. And another thing they, they say that they really want to be successful is the relevance and clarity.

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: Is everything needs to be clear, relevant, punctual. I think because of, again, where we are, their time is really, really precious right now. A lot of them are working odd hours. As you said, they're at home, so they don't-- might not have a lot of time. Maybe they're sharing their computer with siblings and they only have a certain amount of time. That means that that time is really, really important to them. So being clear on the expectations of the course, the expectations of assignments, it's really important to them. Due dates and schedules need to be really specific and relevant. So one of the ways we can do that is use the calendar option in Blackboard

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: Where everything is laid out from the very beginning and if you're going into week two, getting those assignments up and saying, 'this is the exact date that it's due', so if they can start to schedule all their work, I think for them that they've said that that's actually really important as well.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. We know for all of us time management is a critical skill these days.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. So, I mean, those were three things that, that we-- we at the TLX sort of came up with as simple tools-- not so simple but key tools and key ideas on how to sort of create and start to create that community. You're gonna find the link below if you're listening on YouTube or, or if you-- through a podcast in the description, you're gonna find a link to a tip sheet created by Ian Craine, one of our-- one of our instructional designers on how to create the welcome environment for learning and it give some tools and some practices that you can do to sort of create what we talked about; the relevance and the clarity, the positive environment for learning and the community. So click on that when you're finished here and you can sort of take a look at it in more detail.

NICKI MONAHAN: Thanks. So, Mike-- and these resources we're trying to make available in as many ways as possible so that our faculty can really create great environments for learners. So, it's always great to talk to you, Mike. Let's-- everybody put all of our energy into making it a great semester. Your students are counting on you to create great environments for learning. So stay tuned for our next episode of Xchange.

MICHAEL AVIS: Bye bye, everybody and we'll see you in a couple weeks.

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