

TLX Xchange Forum Podcast – Charlene Dunstan

[Music]

[Patricia Robinson:] Hi everyone! And welcome to the Xchange Forum Podcast. It's Patricia Robinson here again with the TLX and in this series, I've been having discussions with our faculty colleagues from across the college. And today I'm really happy to have with me, Charlene Dunstan. And she's a Coordinator and Professor in the Social Service Worker Program in the School of Community Services and Health Sciences. So, Charlene, thank you so much for joining me today and can you begin by telling us a bit about your role at the college?

[Charlene Dunstan:] Oh, Hi, Patricia! And thank you for inviting me. This is great that we have this sort of informal/formal way of connecting with each other. I love that we can reach across our programs and do this. So I thank you for inviting me to that. My role in the college as you said is, I am a Professor in the Social Service Worker Program and have been for the last just over 10 years. I'm also Coordinator in the program and in that role of Coordinator we sort of get to, get the privilege of helping students navigate through the backend a little bit more of the administrative questions and to provide administrative support to our particular program. So I'm juggling both of those roles right now as well as I'm teaching a couple of sections of Deconstructing Internalized Oppression and Privilege this semester so those are all the things that are on my plate right now.

[Patricia Robinson:] Amazing. That's pretty big, pretty big job. And I feel like I should actually attend your classes as well. I think we all have a lot to learn about, about that. But I do have one big question to ask you today and it is in two parts. So I'll just begin. The big question is what have you been learning since transitioning to fully online teaching? And so the first part of this question is what have you been learning about yourself and I'll ask you the second part later.

[Charlene Dunstan:] What I've learnt about myself is when this first started, I had to really think about how am I going, how am I going to make this transition and what is it going to look like for my students? And in order to do that, the first thing I did was actually take a look, take a deep dive into thinking about how I learn and how I need to because of, because of the transition we're making, I'm like, well, I'm going to have to learn a lot over a short amount of time. So how do I learn? Focusing on what I do well and the method that I would need to incorporate to be able to, to do that. Right. So we all know people, some people are visual learners, some people are auditory learners, but sometimes we don't, we don't give ourselves consideration for that. And so, you know, you may go to a workshop and you're just, you're not, it's not impacting the way that you, you need it to or you're not absorbing it the way that you need it to. Sometimes it's about, well, stepping back and saying, "Well, I'm, I'm, I'm a doer. I need to be able to sit down with that piece of software and look around on it. So while they're telling me about it, that might not be the place where it impacts but it's when I'm doing it that I'll, that I'll make the connections." Right. So figuring out, well, where are the places that I'm going to be able to absorb that material

best was a big thing for me. And also, again, like I said, trying to focus on what I then do well, not trying to do what works for everybody else but doing what legitimately works for me because you talk to your colleagues and you, you hear all the great things that people are doing, "Oh, I'm using this or I'm doing this and I'm incorporating that." And sometimes we look at that and say, "How come I can't do that?" I don't necessarily have to do that, right, I can do, I can do something else that I really do well. So it's not about replicating everything else out there that people are doing amazing but finding the things that I do amazing, right.

[Patricia Robinson:] And I think, I think that's a good point, too, because, you know, if we compare ourselves to others and, and, you know, we can get overwhelmed by all the different things that people are doing, trying, trying to be like them, right, it can be really overwhelming. And I like how you talked about, you know, you're really starting with looking at, you know what are your strengths and then focusing on developing those further rather than, you know, maybe spending a ton of time trying to learn things that might be a struggle.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yep. Exactly. And I, and my thing was also embracing the tech that I already use. So I've been able to incorporate a couple of new things as well but also doing that deep dive into tech that we already use like PowerPoint. I know now that I was using a mere fraction of the capabilities of PowerPoint. But now I use, I narrate my PowerPoints; I use the voice to, voice to text, the closed captioning that can be done directly into PowerPoint; I use the animations and the transitions and all of that kind of great stuff and I'm really embracing that much more. So it's not that we have to introduce all these new things but maybe just do a deeper, like I said, a deeper dive into the things that we already have access to and the things we already feel comfortable in but, but learning it to its full capacity.

[Patricia Robinson:] Mm-hmm. Right. That sounds like a great idea. And so what else, what else have you learnt about yourself do you think?

[Charlene Dunstan:] I think that what I've learnt about myself is that I really do, the things about being face-to-face is about those connections that you have with your colleagues but the thing, when we're at school, they sometimes don't feel as purposeful. Right. You see someone in the hallway so you say hi and you see someone and you know that you have those connections to them every day but now, you know, as we all sit in our living rooms or our, you know, our home offices, it becomes much more important to make those connections purposeful. Right, and actually reach out to our colleagues. And, and share knowledge, right. So there are, like I said, there are things that other people are doing. We can reach out to each other and, and find out, "How's it going for you? What are you, what are you doing in your classrooms? This is what I'm doing in my classrooms." So having those conversations be much more purposeful and much more fulsome. Right. So that's, what I, so, in, in seeing that, what I've learnt about myself, again, is that I'm an ambivert and I use the term ambivert meaning I'm not fully an introvert and I'm not fully an extrovert. And, and at my core, people would know me, who know me would think, "How is that possible?" That I actually feel more like I'm an introvert and I mean that in the way that traditionally, we think about it as people who are either outgoing or people who are shy

but for, it's about where you get your energy, right. Where are the places that, how are the places that you rejuvenate yourself? And for me, to be that extrovert, to be that prof who is out there and engaging and pulling things from students and making those connections and being on, right, to be on requires me also to have significance of, significant amounts of time where I can just sit down and reflect and just be in on myself. Have a cup of tea and sit and enjoy my own company, right. So when I can do that, it allows me to, to be that energy, have that energy, and that is so much more important for my students. So I found that in doing that piece of self-care and embracing that introvert in me, it actually makes me a better professor because I, it allows me to bring that energy to the class and sort of get over that hump of I may not have people with their, their cameras on or I may not, you know, it may just be the interactions maybe predominantly in the chat. But I'm going to bring that energy anyway and being able to sort of massage that inner introvert allows me to, to step it up a notch, step it up the notch that we need to online.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. I think, and like that's such an important point is that, I mean, it does take a whole different kind of energy to be teaching online than it does in the classroom. And, you know, when we're teaching in the class, we use our body language, we use gestures, we use, you know, other ways of communicating besides speaking, right. And we use that and there's this energy that's, you know, built amongst the students as well. And it's so different online, right. It's so hard to generate that. So, yeah, I mean, that makes a lot of sense about how, you know, you're really kind of taking care of yourself first and then that allows you to bring that energy to your students because, yeah, many students don't have their cameras on or, you know, they're not able to participate in a way, you know, that, that feels right for them, like they're participating in different ways than they would be in the classroom as well. So, yeah, that, that makes a lot of sense. So I do have another question. As I said, it's the same question, the big question. So the second part of my big question is so how has what you've learnt about yourself contributed to or impacted your teaching since this transition to fully online? So you did mention a bit about, you know, the knowledge about yourself as an ambivert and the energy but is there anything else that you would say about what you've learnt and how it's impacted your teaching?

[Charlene Dunstan:] I think that given the fast turnaround that we had to do to come online, what I learnt and what I've, I've brought to this is that there are things that we have to let go, right. And it was, it was coming to this cognitive sort of leap that really made going online a little bit less anxiety-provoking for me because at first, our team had just gone through a big huge program review and we re, reformatted our whole program and we were really energized about it. This is years in the making that, that we had been working on this. And it was all supposed to roll out this year. And then all of a sudden, not so much. Right.

[Patricia Robinson:] Oh, my gosh.

[Charlene Dunstan:] It was, yeah! And it was heartbreaking!

[Patricia Robinson:] I was like, what?

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yeah, we're like, but, but, I had this thing –

[Patricia Robinson:] Wait.

[Charlene Dunstan:] -- and so, and so we clung to it to a certain extent saying, "But how am I going to take this and put it online?" And, "How am I going to take this evaluation and make it, and do it online?" And that cognitive shift that I, that I'm talking about is when I finally, when it's finally snapped for me that do not take this course and squish it to online. You need to make a new course. Right. And once I let go of that, right, once I stopped fighting to put that square peg into a round hole and keep taking that square peg out and whittling off a little bit extra and trying to put it in that round hole and say, "Nah, it still doesn't fit." And whittling it off and like, "Charlene, can you just please go get a round peg? Can you just stop?"

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. And that's so much more time consuming, right, by just trying to make, change the peg, right?

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yes! It was so much, and, and, this, and it felt unsatisfying, right. It will never, that peg, you might get it in but it will never look as pretty, right.

[Patricia Robinson:] And that's all that work that you had done. Right. All that work that you had done in this, you know, change, like making those changes to the program after your program review, you know, it makes sense that, you know, you would, that would be the go-to, right, to try to fit this amazing product that you've made, this new curriculum and just trying to put it in. But yeah, as you're trying to change it and modify it for online, it's, you know, I'm sure very stress-producing.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yeah! It becomes this pale comparison, right, to what you really want it to be. And I'm like, well, then don't, why, why do that? You know, why not make something new and bright and shiny? Right. And I know that it seems like it feels like it would be a lot of work but it, it, it's work, to be sure, but it wasn't the same kind of work. And like I said, it didn't have the same kind of anxiety attached to it. Right.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. And you already had, you know, you already had your outcomes, you know, you had, you know, at the end of the course, these are the things that the students need to know, understand, be able to do, right, or to, to apply or produce?

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yep. Exactly. So like for example, part of that letting go was saying, "Instead of looking at how am I going to put this assignment online or how am I going to do this particular activity online was to look at the actual outcome." So it's not about replicating that assignment but looking at how am I going to get at that outcome in this online format? Right. So one, in my, that same course that I'm telling you that I teach this, this semester, Deconstructing Internalized Oppression, I, I always, in that class, I consider the class the party and then what happens in the hallway was the afterparty. So we would have great discussions in class and then, you know, I would have to run out of class because, well, you know, whatever class is coming in after us and they're kicking us out. And there was always this thing that would happen where I would end up sitting in the hallway on a bench outside the classroom with, you know, seven, 10 students and we would continue the conversation, right. And I was like, so one of the things that I said is, "How am I going to, that is something that is really an added value to the course so how am

I going to be able to replicate that? How am I going to be able to do that in an online format?" Okay. So, so yeah, I wanted to capture that sort of salon, that sort of exchange of intellectual ideas that was happening in, in the hallways, those aha moments and them struggling and trying to unpack that information. So one of the things that I did was, I've, I've, I brought that into the, into the online space by having discussion groups and having the discussion groups be small discussion groups, groups of five. Not breakout rooms but actual discussion groups that the students got a question every week, they would start a thread, and they would reply to the question and reply back to each other and be able to have those conversations. And I would be able to come in, give them some feedback, have that interaction still occur in that online space and have that still fulfil the, the learning outcomes that I want to, that I want to have happen. So it's not that, it's something that I would have never have even thought about introducing in any kind of formal way to the classroom but in thinking about maximizing the online space that, that has now been opened up to me and instead of that salon happening to the few, seven, 10 students who had time after class to stick around, this is actually something now that I've been able to incorporate and bring to all the students. So that kernel, that thing that I was going to miss the most about face-to-face, one of the things that I was going to miss the most, I don't have to miss it anymore. Right.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's amazing because, and also, like you said, like it's not, you know, our students have lives outside of school, right, so probably you had a lot more than those seven or 10 who wanted to stay after and talk about these ideas and, and, you know, share what they've discovered or what it represents for them in their own lives. And, you know, people have jobs to go to or kids to take care of or whatever, right. But yeah, by, by creating that space, that sort of learning space in your online environment, everyone can participate regardless of where they are, what time it is, and so that's amazing. So you're providing that opportunity for everyone to participate in this salon or, you know, afterparty, after the, the content of the course is, is taught.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yep, yep. It's like, and like I said, I use afterparty because it's always like, you know, you have the party and then you have the people who stay after the party to help clean the kitchen. And those are, and those are the conversations that are the best, right.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's when everybody gets really deep, right, they get really deep into the [inaudible].

[Charlene Dunstan:] Exactly! So that's where, you know, that's what I really wanted to, to capture. And the response from the students has been really, really great about that. So even in the aftertimes, I know we talk about the before times, but in the after times when we come out on the other side of that, that's probably something that I'm going to keep even in some way, shape, or form, even when we go back to face-to-face teaching.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah. That's amazing. And so, and I want to ask you just a little bit, so the discussion group, so you mentioned they, so they're not breakout groups, you have these set, like, set groups based within Blackboard for the discussion. And then the students are in groups of five. And then they have time to kind of, just with their small

group, right? Just to sort of break down the ideas of what they're learning, talk about them, answer the questions that you pose. And then they, do they share back with the larger group after?

[Charlene Dunstan:] They, so, they don't actually share back with, well, the share back in the, in, with the larger group is something that happens in the, like, in the course of the lecture class for that week.

[Patricia Robinson:] Got it.

[Charlene Dunstan:] So the thing about the breakout rooms is that happens in real time immediately but I will, say, put up the discussion question in the small groups on the Monday and students will have until the Thursday to, to create their response. And it's only after they create their response, then do they get to see everybody else's responses, right.

[Patricia Robinson:] Okay, okay. That's great.

[Charlene Dunstan:] So I want them to be, I want their opinion and their analysis of it to happen in just based on, no, no pressure, no, oh, what did someone else say? I should echo that. It's their pure kind of response and reaction. And oftentimes, the questions are just, they're reflection questions. They're not, they're not, you know, this is right, this is wrong, but it's a reflection of, of their own social location in the space that they, they move in in the world. So it's about being able to have that, be able to speak your truth in a, in a nonjudgmental kind of way and then be able to have a conversation about it with your peers. I know that a lot of people will open a big discussion board that's open to the whole class but I feel like those, it, sometimes that intimacy that we know that small group conversations yield a kind of different thing.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's right. That's right. And people are more willing to take kind of more willing like in general, most people are more willing to open up, be a bit more vulnerable in the smaller group setting as well.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Exactly. Exactly. And because this is a group that follows them throughout the course, because students aren't getting that kind of interaction with each other, this is another way for them to create community if you will. And be able to really see, see people outside of, outside of their, the small interactions that they may have just in the chat.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right, right.

[Charlene Dunstan:] And, and it allows me to, again, pop in, give them comments, give them feedback in very small bite size kinds of ways that for me as well feel much more manageable.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right, right. And you can probably get to know your individual students much better this way than if you're just dealing with them as one large group of students.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Yes, yes. Exactly. So that's one of the gifts of Blackboard [laughs].

[Patricia Robinson:] Thanks great. And I like how you, you know, you think about how you're going to bring this back into your face-to-face class as well. And I think that's, you know, that's, that's such a great way to look at this, right. So, so yes, we are stuck in this pandemic right now and we are constrained in certain things we can do but also, it's an opportunity to, to try something new and, you know, take that learning back with us in the classroom, right, and hopefully make the best of both worlds when we're back face-to-face. So just before we end the podcast, I have another little question, not part of the big question. Do you have any tips that you could share for how you are staying positive or maintaining a positive outlook as we're continuing this, you know, work from home, teaching online situation?

[Charlene Dunstan:] I think the one tip that I would give and I think I've sort of echoed this throughout the podcast is like just give yourself a break [laughs], you know, really like be more gentle to ourselves. We're going to make missteps. You know, for a lot of our programs, we are not online programs, we are programs who have had to go online, right. So it's not going to be perfect and it's really going to be bumpy and the technology is going to be wonky and, you know, we're going to press, you know, leave instead of open up the classroom and that, those kinds of things are going to happen. You know, Blackboard is going to go down in the middle of your course and you've got to come back and go, "Okay, so that happened." And just be, we have to be much more gentle and much more kind to ourselves in this and I think that's part of staying positive is knowing that we're not going to break the industry with that one little, you know, misstep or the thing that didn't, we tried something online and it didn't go over as well as, as we thought. Right. It's not going to, it's not like the industry is going to suffer from that. And sometimes I think that because we are, we are professors and we are faculty, because we really embrace the learning and want to pass on that knowledge, but just because it's not pristine doesn't mean it's not good.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. Right.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Right. So we need to give ourselves that, that little, that little piece of room and pat ourselves on the back, right. Every day that we show up and we do the best we can, that is a good day.

[Patricia Robinson:] Nice [laughs]. I, I really, I really appreciate that sentiment. And thank you so much, Charlene, for joining me today and I really appreciate it. And this has been a lot of fun talking to you and hopefully we can go out for a coffee or a walk in the neighbourhood when this is all over.

[Charlene Dunstan:] I'm going to hold you to that! I'm going to come find you [laughs]. And not in the hallways [laughs].

[Patricia Robinson:] That's right.

[Charlene Dunstan:] I'm going to come find you in an authentic, meaningful way.

[Patricia Robinson:] Nice. That will be so great. Thank you so much, Charlene.

[Charlene Dunstan:] Thank you, Patty.

[Music]