

TLX Xchange Forum Podcast – Mary Symonds

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PATRICIA ROBINSON: Hi everyone, and welcome to Xchange, the TLX podcast for faculty by faculty. I'm Patricia Robinson, faculty facilitator with the TLX, and I'm hosting a new segment of Xchange called Xchange Forum in which I interview our faculty colleagues from across the college. So today I'm joined by Mary Symonds who is a coordinator and professor in the Office Administration Program, Health Services in the Health Sciences Department. So, Mary, can you tell me a bit about your role at the college?

MARY SYMONDS: Hi Patricia! Sure! I'm a faculty member and the program coordinator and -- in the S135 Office Administration, Health Services Program. And we're located at the Waterfront Campus, and I've been here at George Brown for almost eight years.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Okay, great! I should also say thank you for joining me, which I forgot to say. So, thank you for taking the time to do this podcast with me.

MARY SYMONDS: You're most welcome.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: And so, I just have some questions that I'm going to ask you, and, you know, as we are in the midst of this pandemic, you know, and it's soon going to be coming up on one year. But we have all been making adjustments to our work lives and our home lives, and I just wanted to ask you what are some things that you've been learning about yourself as a result of all this craziness?

MARY SYMONDS: I know, I can't believe it's a year, pretty much. Yeah, it's -- I've found that I'm actually a lot more capable than I even realized I was, and I'm really used to juggling a lot of things at the same time, like I think we all are. But I realized I was able to handle even more than came my way, both professionally and personally. And the whole part of having to immediately transition from in-class to online way back in March in 2020, it had to literally be immediate, so there was no time to waste, and everyone was feeling really scared and so uncertain at that time. We had to keep the flow of the course going as best as we could for the sake of the students, and it really was a mad scramble to get everything online, keep everything just moving along, and I really feel everyone did the best they could.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Everything was, like you said, so uncertain and, you know, people were scared. You know, but it's great that you can look back on that now and feel positive about some of those things.

MARY SYMONDS: Absolutely, yes. In the beginning I had to kind of figure out my own anxiety about everything that was going on. So, you know, over time I've really learned to manage it, and I -- one thing is I spend so many hours in front of the computer, as all of us are right now in every kind of job, and I've had to learn, and I have learned, to set better boundaries. I was very good at that when I was actually at school in person, but I kind of had to figure it out all over again, and I felt I needed to be there for the students. And they email me, you know, at different times of the day and the night, and that's where the boundaries came in. I'm certainly

not a pushover, and I'm not literally at your beck and call, and some of my colleagues have told me that I needed to be more cynical about things, but that's not who I am. So I have to be there and help them out as best as I can. Trust me, I am cynical about a lot of things in life, but teaching is not one of them.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah, and, you know, you brought up a good point about that. You know, trying to figure things out again, you know, we're, you know, when -- we're kind of in a rhythm when we're teaching in the class and, you know, as you mentioned, you've been at the college for eight years so, you know, you're used to a kind of a rhythm, a pattern, a way of doing things, and then suddenly being online it's a whole new rhythm to kind of get used to, so -- for ourselves as teachers, but also for our students, you know? What does it mean to learn online? What does it mean to teach online? And, you know, what are those kind of new patterns or ways of being that we kind of have to figure out? So, it makes sense.

MARY SYMONDS: Yes.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: And so, I wanted to ask you, so at that time, what were you teaching?

MARY SYMONDS: I was teaching the second and the fourth semester students when all of this happened. And it was funny, I was literally just getting to know the second semester students. I was starting to know their names and their faces and trying to develop a real rapport with them, and that part, I tell you, has been very hard. We didn't get to bond the way we should've been able to, and of course, you know, they didn't really know me either. So now we're getting to know each other as small faces on a computer screen. So it makes me sad. And the fourth semester students, I'd gotten to know them really well, and then literally all of a sudden it was cut short, and we didn't get to say goodbye, and I know that all of the faculty in our program was sad about that. It's such a big deal for us to kind of, you know, wish them the best and send them off into the sunset for their new careers. So that makes me sad.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah, I can imagine that would be so hard and, you know, for the faculty, but especially also for the students. You know, they are -- they've been in this program, like you said, for four semesters, and then suddenly just to kind of have things, you know, wrap up and be gone and you can't really see anyone in person.

MARY SYMONDS: But, you know, overall, it's really important to me that the students know that we're in this together. There's a lot of give and take, and I try to translate all of that, you know, through the online learning in a proper way. It's really hard when you're doing it like this, it is. But I go in there and I teach them, and they have so much to teach me too. We have amazing discussions about all kinds of things, based on the curriculum and also other things too. You know, you never know where the conversation will take you, and they have so much knowledge and things to share, and I just keep that going like I did in the, you know, in-person classes. I have virtual classes every single week to make sure that I'm with them and they know that I'm there for them.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: That's so great. So, you have been able to replicate that sharing, you know, that you used to have in your face-to-face classes in the online environment as well. So that's really great. So, I have another question. Is there anything you've found that you've disliked about teaching online?

MARY SYMONDS: Well, I strongly dislike the sound of my voice on the Blackboard session recordings. I do record all my classes with the students because I feel that's really important for them to have to, you know, to utilize in their studies, but it's not enjoyable knowing my voice is there. So, you know, as long as I can't hear it, it's okay. And, yeah, and I guess the other thing is, is that, you know, I have at times an unreasonable amount of fear and anxiety when it comes to technology. Once I know it, I am thrilled, you know? And I feel like I've always been able to do it. But the process of learning it can be really daunting for me at times. But I had no choice, I had to get over it and I had to do it quickly.

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PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, and, you know, I know that you're definitely not alone in those feelings around, like especially around technology and learning new technology and, you know, figure out how to translate, you know, what we do in our classes into this online environment. So, you know, in the TLX we've definitely heard from many faculty who've been experiencing those similar feelings of anxiety or fear or even frustration with, you know, learning all -- learning Blackboard and learning about the different tools that they can use. But, you know, it is -- it's great to hear that you are having those feelings of accomplishment. Especially, you know, you've learned something new and you're feeling some success around that, so that's great to hear, and I'm guessing it's helping build your confidence as well.

MARY SYMONDS: It is, absolutely, yes. I've learned to work through Blackboard, developing tests and assignments, and it's been fantastic. And I mean, actually, Blackboard itself is just a great tool to use when I'm teaching. I have links that I've set up for the students in each of their courses. They have weekly content folders with all of their curriculum. And it's not like I didn't do this before. I did, but this has really -- being online has forced me to become even more detailed, and when I was creating content for the students to make it easy and accessible for them, and also make it easier for me too.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, right. And, you know, when you say easy, I know that you're not making, you know, the outcomes easier or the assessments easier, but you're making it easier for the students to navigate, right? To access the content.

MARY SYMONDS: Absolutely.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah. So, tell me a bit more about your students, and what are some other ways that you support your learning now that we can't be with them in person?

MARY SYMONDS: Yes, in our program we have a real range of ages. So, we could have students that are fresh out of high school to people that are coming back for second career, and people up into their 60s and beyond. They're from very diverse backgrounds and every group we have that comes through is very unique. We have a high percentage of international students and, you know, they're not even here right now. Again, as I said, we get a mixed bag of individuals, you know, that come into the program. And our program is unique because we quite often could be a jumping-off point for other programs because it's office administration and it's health related. A lot of students will go on to careers in that, and then some will use it to go off and learn health information management or, I don't know, some have even gone on to go take nursing. But I will say though that the students have found that it's hard learning online. Some of them are not very tech-savvy so they have been feeling very overwhelmed by all of

this. I'm really trying to make it as user-friendly as I can for them. I quickly found out that not everyone has proper Wi-Fi connections, right? And there's more students than I realized who don't even have home computers. They're getting all of their schooling using their phones, and that was such a huge reality check for me. I found this way back in March when everything started happening and I knew I had to make things, as I said, accessible. A lot of them, fortunately, have been able to get laptops and the proper equipment from the college or elsewhere to make it easier for them to learn.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, that's really good and such a relief. You know, hopefully students by now all have that kind of equipment because yeah, I can imagine what a struggle it would be with trying to learn, you know, not just one course but, you know, a full-time program just on your phone. So, what are some other ways that you're supporting your students?

MARY SYMONDS: I make a point every class to check in with them. Just, you know, the students as a whole. It's always at the beginning and, you know, sometimes if we have time at the end, I will as well, or I'll stay behind on the Blackboard session to chat with them. And it's not like they're having to share personal things with me, but we always kind of try to share if anything exciting has happened or -- I recall, actually, a student got some new puppies the other week, Chihuahua puppies, so that was -- we all talked about that. And they check in with me too, which is really nice, and it gives a real sense of community. I think we all, not all, but we can forget for sure some people are alone during all this, and their teachers, we might be the only people that they really have much interaction with over the course of a week. So, I think that's something we have to keep in mind.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah, I think, you know, I think that that is so important to keep in mind. You know, everyone is living and learning in such different circumstances so, you know, just definitely keeping in mind that, you know, what our own situation is or what a handful of our students' situations are could be so different from the other people in our class, so -- or even our colleagues.

MARY SYMONDS: Oh, absolutely, for sure. And students, you know, they'll tell me that they're feeling anxious or overwhelmed and I tell them, because it's the truth, I understand. I totally get it. And again, it's not like I do share personal things with them really, but I do let them know that I understand, and having these feelings are absolutely normal. When we were, you know, back at school in person, I had time to talk to students who might need more attention before or after class and I could check up on them more regularly, and this online learning makes it so much harder. We talk by email, or through email, but it can be really impersonal when the student really needs to talk. So sometimes I'll have private BB sessions with them, or Zoom, you know, sometimes that. But I can literally probably have anywhere from two to four a day if I wanted to, but you have to learn how to draw the line at that when we're all still kind of figuring this out. Between all of that and the extra prep time that's going into the online learning, plus the classes, it can be too much. So, this whole online experience, I hope I'm not the only one, is really, really draining at times. Both mentally and physically, I feel sometimes overstimulated. And being at school, I always got really like energized from being there and being around the students and the teachers and, you know, everybody. But being online seems to really zap the energy, and it's a whole different kind of exhaustion.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, yeah it really makes sense. I mean, just, you know, teaching online, meeting with our colleagues online, having departmental meetings online, I mean, all of this involves basically the same activity, right? We're sitting down, or standing, but just staring into a computer screen, which I don't think we're meant to be doing. So yeah, I share your feelings of exhaustion, you know, and I am hearing this from many, many people as well. So, you're not alone. So, what impact has the pandemic had on your program overall?

MARY SYMONDS: Well, you know, everything has continued pretty much as is, but what's really been the big thing in our program is the impact on our fourth semester students, and that they no longer have field placements. So, it, you know, in their fourth semester they go somewhere to a healthcare facility and apply the skills they've learned in the program. And, of course, nothing like that's happening this year. It's really awful, but nothing we can do, and we have to keep everybody safe. So, the students were really upset when, you know, they found this out. They look forward to it so much. It's giving them lots of practical experience before they go out into the world and look for their job. So yeah.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MARY SYMONDS: I think back, our fourth semester students from last year, they didn't have a graduation. I mean, I know they had one, it was a virtual one in October and, you know, we did the best we could, right? With the circumstances. But I just -- I wish we, as a program, I wish we could've done something for them like some kind of a virtual get-together. So that's something that I think would've been a really good thing and actually the right thing to do, so I feel badly about that. But the great thing is, is that we've learned from so many -- sorry, we've heard from so many of them by email letting us know how they've been doing with their job searches, their health, their new jobs, and then of course there's been lots of news about babies. There have been so many babies.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Yeah, and I mean going back to the graduation, you know, it is, it is hard to know what to do in the moment. Like things are changing so quickly and we're getting, you know, new information all the -- you know, when we look back on things, it does make sense that, you know, we can probably find things that we could've done better. But, you know, it's hard to know in the moment, so --

MARY SYMONDS: Yes, yes, it is.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, can you share with us what have been some enjoyable things for you about teaching online?

MARY SYMONDS: Well, I always -- I always have this anyways, but I make sure it happens. Being -- teaching online, you've got to have laughter, you've got to have humour. So, again, checking in with the students, having some light-hearted conversation, having fun while you're learning, it's so important. And sometimes it's in the lesson, you know, and then other times we transition over to the week's lesson after some light chit-chat. And I also have to say that everybody at George Brown has been so supportive during this time. Everyone from my chair, Steve, Karen, his assistant, she has saved my life many a time. A lovely woman by the name of Gladys and so many other people I can't even name who they are have been helpful, and the response time by email has -- or phone, has been super.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, yeah.

MARY SYMONDS: I think a couple of other things that have been, you know, good -- I mean, there's lots of good things, but I've had a chance to expand my knowledge in technology, because I had to, but, you know, it's been good. It's been really good for me in that sense. And then I guess on a lighter note, I love not having to commute to work, that's been great. And having a kitchen and a bathroom that's available to me, and only me, 24/7 has been delightful, so.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Nice! So, you don't have to wait in line for the bathroom.

MARY SYMONDS: No.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: That's great. So yeah, I love not having to commute as well, and I think my only traffic jam is just on the stairs, going up or down the stairs, with just me and one other person, or the dog.

MARY SYMONDS: Exactly.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, what are some tips or advice that you would give to others who are teaching?

MARY SYMONDS: Well, you've got to keep your sense of humour. So important. That and keep water nearby. I swear, with all the talking and everything that you do and the meetings that we're all in, you need to stay replenished constantly with fluids.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MARY SYMONDS: Yeah. You've got to be there virtually for your students too. Seriously, you can't just upload content, I feel, to Blackboard and just leave them on their own. Being online is not an excuse to think that you can lessen your commitment to your students. As well, you also don't want to overload the content online and think that that's going to compensate. I think and believe that you have to be there for them.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yeah, I totally -- I agree. I mean, just, you know, more and more content does not help learning.

MARY SYMONDS: I think too you need to know your boundaries between work and play. And although I'm not saying I'm the, you know, I'm not the poster child for this, I think it's really important that we all have a -- try to develop a sense, a balance for your sanity and your basic well-being overall. And self-care, if it's ever been important, now is the time that it's really important. And --

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm.

MARY SYMONDS: -- I think staying connected to the faculty in your program and beyond, if you can. I will say though, it's been, of course, very difficult because we're not near each other at all. But try not to be strangers to one another if you can.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: So, what other advice and tips would you share?

MARY SYMONDS: I think, just, we've got to remember, you know, we're all dealing with this pandemic, but we're dealing with it in different ways. So be flexible, and if you already are, I think you need to be a little bit more. And again, it's not meaning that you're letting anyone get away with anything or making anything easier for people, you know, tests or assignments, anything like that, you're just giving some space for when a student maybe loses their internet connection, they're unable to complete their test or exam because of it, give them a chance. And, you know, they're, unfortunately, people are getting sick and/or worse, and there are people that have to take care of family members. They might be the only person that's there to take care of them. People have their children now at home. You know, we're all kind of together, locked down in our pods. So, it's a really unique and awful place, and I think it's important that we give a little. And I really do believe that 99% of the time I think it's justified that we, that we have to be a little bit more flexible.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: And you're right, it's important to just, you know, be flexible and be patient, so -- so before we end this podcast, do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share?

MARY SYMONDS: Well, you know, I just miss the personal contact with everybody in the faculty, the admin and support staff, and of course the students. And I just can't even imagine what it's going to be like when we all get back to school and everybody is safe, you know, everybody is vaccinated, you know, we know everything is okay. I have to speak -- this image in my mind, everything's going to just be wild. There's going to be so much conversation and laughing and talking and I'm really, really am looking forward to that. I can hardly wait.

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Mm-hmm, I know, I'm really looking forward to it as well. I'm trying to -- I'm trying not to be pessimistic and not get my hopes up because, you know, who knows when that will happen but, you know, I think it'll definitely be an exciting moment, you know? Thank you so much for joining me today, Mary, and I appreciate your time and sharing your experiences with teaching and learning over these last several months!

MARY SYMONDS: Oh, you're so welcome, Patricia. It was my absolute pleasure. Thank you very much for having me!

PATRICIA ROBINSON: Thank you so much!

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