

TLX Xchange Forum – Episode 1

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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 I've been away from the college on a PD leave and now that I'm back, I have a ton of questions that I want to ask faculty but I'll just try to limit it to a few. And I know that there have been a lot of changes to teaching and learning that I've missed out on and I want to learn more about the experiences that my peers have been having. So I've decided to invite different faculty to join me and today I'm joined by Alison Ross, a faculty member in the Centre for Health Sciences. So, Alison, thanks for joining me and maybe you can tell us a bit about your role at the college.

[Alison Ross:] Sure. Hi, Patricia. Thank you so much for having me. So I have taught in the Centre for Health Sciences for a little bit over 10 years and currently, I'm predominantly teaching in the practical nursing program. I've also taught in the personal support worker pathway to practical nursing and interprofessional complex and long-term care programs. And I'm currently coordinating the interprofessional complex and long-term care program. So that's a brand new program. It just launched in September. And so although I'm with the school of nursing I'm not actually a nurse. I'm a social scientist of health and medicine. My PhD is in health studies so I predominantly teach the social science courses that complement and support the core nursing curriculum. Although every once in a while I do find myself in a math or biology or anatomy classroom.

[Patricia Robinson:] Oh my God, like that's so interesting. So you're really teaching a large variety of different courses and then you're also a program coordinator for a brand new program.

[Alison Ross:] That's right.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah, and so that actually makes me wonder, because you have those responsibilities, I'm curious about your transition to teaching fully online since the pandemic. Did you experience any challenges with making that transition?

[Alison Ross:] Oh yeah, for sure. The biggest challenge I faced I think was just trying to find ways to build those relationships with students that would, you know, even compare to the really strong relationships I've had with students in the past. You know, building that trust and rapport in the classroom it's like the greatest challenge but also, you know, the greatest responsibility and joy of teaching so you know teaching online –

[Patricia Robinson:] Mm-hmm, for sure.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, teaching online can be really just so isolating and so I can only imagine that learning online is equally, if not more, isolating for the students. So finding just creative ways to pull the students in and get them excited and motivated and curious. It's been challenging but it's really important because, you know, at the end of each course I

just want the students to feel that they know me and that I know them. There's a relationship there and that they've learnt something valuable that they can take forward into their healthcare practice. And so that's just a more challenging goal to achieve when we're teaching online.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah, I can imagine how challenging that would be. I mean, for me as a teacher too, I find that my relationships with students are super important. And so you've mentioned finding creative ways to pull students in and get them excited and motivated and curious about what they're learning. So maybe you can share with us some strategies that you've been using and how it's going for you.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, for sure. I've actually surprisingly found that using social media has worked really, really well to help the students and I just feel more connected to each other. So what I've done is I've created a private Instagram account for each course that I teach and then the students can request to follow along. And I mean these accounts are linked to GBC email address so they're professional. They're not personal accounts. And then I invite students to follow along and then I do promise them that I will not follow them back so they don't have their, you know, their teacher following along with their personal lives.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah. They would probably be creeped out about that.

[Alison Ross:] Exactly, exactly. I don't want to be that teacher.

[Patricia Robinson:] Exactly. So what kind of Instagram posts do you actually make?

[Alison Ross:] I post a lot of different types of content, like they're simple things like reminders for upcoming due dates. I do one-minute videos of me just, you know, summarizing that week's lesson. I will share news stories that are related to what we've been learning about in the course. This semester, I started to try to integrate some memes into the accounts and then I also have to admit that I post a lot of pictures and videos of my pets, my cat and my dog.

[Patricia Robinson:] Oh my God, that's so amazing. I feel like -- so I have a dog too and I would totally be posting photos of my dog in my class.

[Alison Ross:] Oh, yeah. Yeah, the students seem to really enjoy, well some of the students seem to enjoy it at least.

[Patricia Robinson:] And so yes, you said some of the students do enjoy that about the dog. How else do you know that your students are engaging with the Instagram?

[Alison Ross:] Yeah. Well, so they like and they comment on posts and I actually do get a lot of DMs or direct messages from students. And so sometimes these messages I get, they're just private responses to a post, if they didn't want to comment publicly. Sometimes they'll just ask questions related to the course material if they want me to, you know, clarify a concept or something like that. And sometimes, you know, they just start reaching out in the DMs for just some more general support. I think I will actually say that maybe about 50% of my student communication is through GBC email and then the other 50% is actually through the Instagram DMs.

[Patricia Robinson:] That is pretty interesting. So do you check your Instagram every day?

[Alison Ross:] Oh yeah, constantly throughout the day just to make sure I don't miss anything.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah, that's pretty cool. So in terms of those private responses from your students, what might be an example of a message you would get?

[Alison Ross:] I get a lot of messages about the dog and students will actually like send me a picture of their dog so it seems to be something we're bonding over. But I get a lot of questions that are just asking for clarification sometimes with assignment details. So for example, if a student, for whatever reason, is not able to find the instructions for an assignment or the rubric on Blackboard, I will discuss it privately with them on Instagram. Sometimes students share, you know, that they're really loving a course or sometimes they tell me they're feeling super overwhelmed. And so it's also worked out as a really great place to just gather feedback and then use that feedback to make some positive change in the courses.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's a really smart idea.

[Alison Ross:] Thank you.

[Patricia Robinson:] So you mentioned Blackboard and so you're using Blackboard and then you're also using Instagram. So how do you kind of integrate those two things together?

[Alison Ross:] Yeah. That was something that I put a lot of thought into at the beginning because when I started using the Instagram accounts, I really wanted to make sure that students who, for whatever reason, aren't comfortable using social media or maybe they're just not interested in social media, I didn't want those students to be left out. So anytime that I post something on Instagram like a reminder of a due date or, you know, sharing a news story, I also make sure to send that out through Blackboard. And then in terms of sharing the videos of myself talking about the course and all that pet-related content, I make sure that I upload a weekly video to Blackboard just so that everyone is feeling included in that social exchange. So I mean it's really just been about diversifying the ways in which we connect with the students. I'm trying to use multiple platforms so that students can choose what works best for them where they're at.

[Patricia Robinson:] I think that's a really thoughtful way to approach how you're designing your classes. And especially now that we're all isolated, making those connections with students can be even more difficult when we can't spend time with them in person.

[Alison Ross:] For sure.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah, it sounds like your strategies are pretty effective.

[Alison Ross:] Thank you.

[Patricia Robinson:] And actually this leads to my next question. So can you share or would you be comfortable sharing what have you been learning about yourself as a teacher?

[Alison Ross:] Oh gosh. I've learnt so much. Most importantly though I realized -- I think I always knew but I really realized how much my relationship with students matters to me. I think that, you know, I've learnt that that energy that we derive from being in a classroom together is so important. And so it's just been hard work trying to find different ways to create that energy and create that connection, not only between me and the students but also amongst the students.

[Patricia Robinson:] So that's pretty amazing. So, you know, you knew that beforehand and now you've realized that it is super important for you and you're trying to find these ways to make those connections, and that you actually are finding ways to recreate this in an online way.

[Alison Ross:] Trying to.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah, I think that's really great and, you know, it's great that you're taking that initiative to try out different things. So I'm going to ask my next question which is what have you learnt about the students?

[Alison Ross:] Well, I think with online learning, we've all been reminded of the diversity of our students. So, you know, in their learning styles, their capacity for change, comfort with technology, but we've also learnt a lot more about the disparities of access to various resources. So, you know, for example, who has access to the necessary equipment to learn online? Who has access to a quiet space or who's caring for children who are also learning online? And then, you know, unique to our nursing program, so many of our students are frontline healthcare workers right now. There's many personal support workers and so they're stretched to their absolute max right now during this pandemic. So I just feel that it's our responsibility as their teachers to be open to learning about their unique circumstances and then working collaboratively with them so that they can reach their goals.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's really amazing. So you're actually teaching some of the students who are working on the frontlines of this pandemic?

[Alison Ross:] Yeah.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's kind of crazy.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, it is.

[Patricia Robinson:] And what has that meant for you as a teacher?

[Alison Ross:] Well, it means that I have to be adaptable. I have to be creative in how I deliver the courses. You know, so for example, I decided to blend synchronous and asynchronous strategy so that the learners can move along on their own time and at their own pace. So to do that, what I do is every Monday I upload the weekly module and that is released at 8:00 am and it has a full audio narration. So basically I record what I would have said if we're all in the classroom together. So that would also include things like discussion questions and questions for reflection that I encourage students to, you know, pause on and consider. And then what I do is I run occasional Blackboard Collaborate

sessions that are optional so that students can still choose to benefit from that real time interaction if that's helpful to them.

[Patricia Robinson:] OK. So right, so your students, a lot of them are working or they've got families or they -- and they've got maybe students who are also learning online and so you're providing them with these options so that they can go through the course at their own pace.

[Alison Ross:] Right, exactly.

[Patricia Robinson:] And then using these Blackboard Collaborate sessions.

[Alison Ross:] Mm-hmm.

[Patricia Robinson:] So what's your attendance like would you say in your Blackboard Collaborate sessions?

[Alison Ross:] So last semester it was pretty good. What I would do for the week that I was offering a Blackboard Collaborate session, I'd offer two different times during that week so that students could attend whichever session fits best with their schedule. And then I would just make sure to record both sessions so that the students, you know, if for whatever reason they didn't attend either, they could still go onto Blackboard and watch the video. And so I think that offering multiple times for students to attend really helped to increase the attendance.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. And so we're just at the beginning of the semester now so is that something you're going to do again this semester?

[Alison Ross:] Yeah. Absolutely, for sure.

[Patricia Robinson:] So it sounds like the way you have your classes set up, you're really supporting an accessible learning environment for your students?

[Alison Ross:] I mean, yeah, that's the hope at least, that's the intention. You know, some students seem to prefer the synchronous learning, others prefer asynchronous learning. So I'm just kind of hoping that by blending the two strategies together, I can address the needs of as many students as possible.

[Patricia Robinson:] Right. So speaking about your students, what is something that has really stood out for you about them since the pandemic began?

[Alison Ross:] Oh well, I've definitely learnt how, I guess, resilient and versatile they are. I can't imagine having, you know, started a new program or being in the midst of a post-secondary program and just, you know, having the rug pulled out from under me, being forced not only to learn the new concepts and theories and skills but also learning how to learn online. I'm so impressed by their ability to adapt and then, you know, really thrive given these challenges.

[Patricia Robinson:] It is pretty amazing.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah.

[Patricia Robinson:] Like you know, when we think about our students and what they're able to do, I don't know that I could do it either.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, it's amazing.

[Patricia Robinson:] Yeah. I mean even related to the students having to learn how to learn online, many of us as teachers have had to learn how to teach online. And so, yeah, and I mean there's a different learning curve for everybody but in that process, I'm sure for everyone, we've all made some mistakes and hopefully we're learning from them as we go along.

[Alison Ross:] Mm-hmm.

[Patricia Robinson:] Alison, would you feel comfortable sharing any mistakes that you've made with us?

[Alison Ross:] Oh, Patricia, I don't make mistakes. No, no.

[Patricia Robinson:] Like me neither.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah. No, I mean there are so many times that I've made mistakes. I'm constantly messing up. One thing that happens a lot when I'm recording the narration for lesson modules is that I mess up or I get tongue tied or I completely forget what I was going to say. And then instead of deleting those moments and rerecording them so that they sound perfect, I often just leave them in there and I kind of laugh about it. And one time that comes to mind when I was doing this, I was sitting near a window in my house recording a lesson when my dad decided to come by my house for an impromptu visit. Now, instead of ringing the doorbell like, you know, a polite normal person might do, he just started yelling through the window. He was like, "Alison! Alison! Allie! Sweetie!"

[Patricia Robinson:] Oh my God.

[Alison Ross:] Honey! Yeah and so obviously that translated onto the recording and instead of stopping the recording I just left it in there and told the students to, you know, hold on, my impatient father has just showed up unannounced. And then, you know, I just laughed at the situation. Tell them a little bit about the pros and cons of living too close to your parents. And then at the end of the day, it only adds an extra 30 seconds or so to a whole module but the students kind of get like a blooper reel, a blooper reel for the lesson. So I think that just makes it more real and true to life in terms of what might actually happen when you're teaching live and face to face. So you know, the recordings, they don't have to be perfect but I do try to keep them authentic and vulnerable.

[Patricia Robinson:] I think that is so hilarious that your dad just came by and was like yelling through the window.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[Patricia Robinson:] So how did he respond when you told him that you were in the middle of recording a lesson?

[Alison Ross:] Oh, he didn't care at all, like at all doesn't care.

[Patricia Robinson:] Oh my God. Does he live pretty close to you?

[Alison Ross:] Well, so it's like a 20-minute walk but it's only about a three-minute drive so it might be a little too close.

[Patricia Robinson:] It's maybe a little too close.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah.

[Patricia Robinson:] How did your students respond when those little bloopers happened?

[Alison Ross:] So every once in a while I'll get an email from students who are, you know, having similar challenges working from home and they'll be like, "Oh my gosh, I just heard your dad, you know. My dad does the same thing or my," -- you know, the spouses working from home at the same time or --

[Patricia Robinson:] Or the pets.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, the pets, the children, so we all kind of, you know, share our frustrations.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's awesome. So what advice would you give to other faculty teaching online based on kind of, based on what you've been learning over the last however many months?

[Alison Ross:] That's a good question. I would say don't be afraid to be vulnerable with students. Admit that you're learning too. Celebrate that we're in this together. Try something new. Let them know that it's new and then just laugh at yourself if it doesn't work.

[Patricia Robinson:] Mm-hmm. And I think that's really important, actually letting them know that it's new so that, you know, you're not going to be perfect. And also it might not be a perfect learning situation for them as well but that, you know, we're going to learn from that mistake and continue on.

[Alison Ross:] Exactly.

[Patricia Robinson:] And it sounds like you're open to trying out new things.

[Alison Ross:] Mm-hmm, always.

[Patricia Robinson:] So can you think of, off the top of your head, something that you would like try out that you haven't yet?

[Alison Ross:] Oh, something I'd like to try out? That's a really good question. So, OK, I have one. With Blackboard Collaborate, I really want to use it to its full functionality. So last semester, it felt just like a little bit of a scramble to get on there and just figure it out and make it work and so I was really --

[Patricia Robinson:] [Inaudible]

[Alison Ross:] Yeah. So I was really using it really at its basic level and so I'm looking forward to using this semester to get a bit more creative with it and, you know, try out some of the other features, like I really want to get better at using the polling questions more effectively. That's one of my goals.

[Patricia Robinson:] That's a good goal. I think that's a good plan to try out those things, try new things.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah.

[Patricia Robinson:] And so, you know what that means is that you're going to have to meet with me again and let me know how it goes.

[Alison Ross:] OK, absolutely. I would love that.

[Patricia Robinson:] OK, perfect. So I just want to thank you, Alison, for sharing with us what you've been doing and learning and I really look forward to chatting with you again.

[Alison Ross:] Yeah, thanks so much for having me, Patricia. This was fun.

[Patricia Robinson:] It was fun so until next time.

[Alison Ross:] OK. Talk to you soon.

[Patricia Robinson:] OK. Talk to you soon.

[Alison Ross:] Bye.

[Patricia Robinson:] Bye.