

Work Shift Podcast Transcript

Episode 11

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Hello, Ray. How are you?

RAY HARRIPAUL: I'm good, Shawne. Are you well?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: I'm good, yeah. Thank you. And we want to let listeners know that Ray and I are chatting through the video conferencing app Teams right now and we're recording ourselves that way so we are practicing physical distancing.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Yeah, it's a bit weird not being in our regular studio set up but this is what we need to do, right? It's critical for all of us to practice physical distancing to stop the spread of the Corona virus. It's also important for all of us to stay connected, whether online or over the phone, to the people we care about.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: So it's been a crazy few weeks. The world is in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing and remote working have become the norm across Canada and that includes us here at George Brown College. To team GBC had one week to figure out how to ensure students could successfully complete their winter term. One week to adapt to this massive work shift. Crazy. But it wasn't only the academic side that had to be figured out. Team GBC also had to find a way to ensure student supports were in place; a tall task when you can't meet in person. And these services become even more important when feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are heightened.

RAY HARRIPAUL: So how did we do it? We know there are awesome stories from across the college of support staff going that extra mile and showing off their problem solving skills; managers keeping their teams motivated and making sure they had access to the right tools; and faculty innovating on the fly.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And students who've proven they can adapt, learn and continue to thrive amid this unprecedented situation.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Today we're bringing you two examples of Team GBC members who rose to the challenge.

[music]

SHAWNE McKEOWN: So we'll just start off with some introductions. If you could tell me-- give me your name and what you do at the college and how long you've been at the college? We'll start with you, Marlene.

MARLENE SLOPACK: I'm Marlene Slopach and I teach in Architectural Technology. Specifically I've been teaching semesters five and six with third year graduating class. And I've been at the college about 13 years, something like that.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Cool. And Pearl?

PEARL RAJU: Hi. My name is Pearl Raju. I'm the manager of Library Services. I've been here at George Brown for six years and I manage Library Services together with two other managers.

RAY HARRIPAUL: So Marlene, if you could open with this. How did you make the pivot to incorporate working remotely, physical distancing and providing online services to students?

MARLENE SLOPACK: I guess I embraced Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. I did have a lot of information on Blackboard in the last two years so it wasn't that difficult to add this extra kind of lives-- talking together with students. On the other hand, it was really challenging even for myself to get the mic working, the camera working and the students also did have their individual issues. Some of them weren't able to get their mics working, speakers working, etcetera. But since I do meet with them at least the same group twice a week, we managed to get through the glitches.

RAY HARRIPAUL: That's great. And Pearl, what about you?

PEARL RAJU: The library is in a good position to work online because we've actually made a transition to incorporate digital resources, you know, services some 10 years now already. And we've embedded some of our services in Blackboard so we have already set up a lot of services online for students and, you know, we've been supporting that over the years. So in this period, it was just a matter of emphasizing our online provisions versus the physical provisions we have in the library itself.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Can you tell us some of the main challenges you faced during this quick turnaround and how you overcame these problems? I will start with you, Marlene, if you can kind of go through what some of the main challenges you faced were?

MARLENE SLOPACK: Yeah. I guess the main challenge for me was actually just learning that new software and making sure I had the equipment that was actually going to work. The main issue in fact with my students, they also were missing hardware and software. That was the toughest challenge. The program that I teach our students produce construction drawings. They do it through specific software and it takes a very robust computer to support this software and about 30 percent of our students, they might have had an old computer or a weak computer and didn't know what to do. So we had been trying to get some function computers for them but at this point even now there are some that just don't have the correct software, hardware so I had to re-evaluate my program to see what do we really need from our students to produce. we're used to seeing them as computer drawings but there's no reason-- I'm not teaching a computer course. I'm teaching them software; I'm teaching them what is

appropriate, what we need to include in a set of construction drawings. So as long as they can produce drawings or the information, that's what's important. We modified the product such that they could even do manual drawing and give us information even sometimes in essay format on Ontario Building Code requirements, sustainable design requirements that didn't actually require drawings. The focus really on what they can produce to mark that rather than what we know they cannot produce.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: When the closure and then the remote alternate-- alternative delivery of classes was announced, that probably caused some anxiety in your students, seeing as they're so reliant-- their program so far had been so reliant on the software and on this technology. So how did you handle that as well? I guess, how did you help manage their anxieties around that as well?

MARLENE SLOPACK: Yeah. I think that's in fact the hardest part. You know, we know we'll always find some solutions that the student doesn't necessarily know that. I think it was really important for me to reply to students immediately even if I didn't know exactly what we were gonna do about it just to know they're not alone there; that we will find a solution and, you know, slowly as we figured out what would work best for each situation 'cause we had a number of different situations with different students' capabilities with what they are left with between hardware and software. I modified the program that would suit them and gave them in writing what I would require from them. And you know, we have this rapport back and forth. Not only did we email each other but I always asked them if they wanted to chat they could send me their phone number 'cause some students are just more comfortable like that. But I think the key was to really reply very quickly and produce some kind of encouraging response that they are able to complete the course by some way and you know, this is the format. And then if they say well, they don't know how to do that or if another problem came up, to quickly figure out something else that would work.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And how about with other, you know, face-to-face interactions that you require in a normal school or a normal learning environment? Say, lectures? How did that change and what challenges did that bring up?

MARLENE SLOPACK: Well, you know, actually in a way the challenge with lecture was more a challenge for myself than for the students because I didn't-- even though I did have PowerPoint and my lecture time where I would speak through the PowerPoint, etcetera, I didn't realize how much I needed the visual contact with the students and judging their reactions from their faces. We have-- even though I might pause my lecture online to say, 'are there any questions?' and questions would come up. When I have a face-to-face lecture, I look at their faces and I guess I'll see whether they're understanding, whether they're bored, whether anyone's asleep. You know, when they need a break to change things up. I'm not sure I have a resolution to that yet but actually something did happen the last lecture that I did. I was going through really something kind of complicated. I was explaining to them how to calculate footings to hold up their buildings and I has these diagrams that I was going through 'cause you're able to share your documents and your windows and all that stuff. Things were going I thought quite well

and then somehow about 20 minutes later, I get this email saying, you know, 'you've been off line for the last 15 minutes'.

(laughing)

MARLENE SLOPACK: The first time-- my first lecture and my first week at studio classes, I never once got disconnected. So I was really so confident this week going into that lecture that I was just kind of-- just like floored when I found out. I was shocked at how well it did go considering we were at such distances and there have been so many impediments and just this fear of the virus and all this are intimidating everyone. I thought things went really well.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: That's great. And Pearl. How is the quick turn-around for you? And I know you manage quite a large team so can you tell us about some of the challenges you faced with, you know, learning very quickly that, you know, all college employees would have to be working remotely and how to get everyone set up at home to deliver student services and to deliver research help and what not to students?

PEARL RAJU: I think, you know, one of the things that motivated and motivates everybody is that we all understand why we have to do this and in needing to keep our distance and so on, that this is essential. So even though, you know, we heard at 5:00 we have to-- we're closing, it was a rush to get the libraries cleared and out of, you know, students that were still around and then think quickly about what would you need to take home? What would you need on your laptops and so on. You know, it was a challenge because at home we have, you know, various types of equipment and so the first few days they did find it a little bit challenging because we were all accessing things differently and so if you had a Teams meeting, there are some people who can only chat on the meetings and some people couldn't get into Teams just then and so on. So it was a little bit disjointed and took us, you know, the first week or so to stabilize all of that. What it also meant is we had to rethink the work that staff would be doing so where as when we are in our physical space, we have a combination of online services as well as critically delivered services and so for those people who offer the physical, in-library services, they then had to be pulled into the online delivery which required some special training but we got through that. We also had-- because we work in a college consortium with other libraries, we did also get help through our colleagues and we were able to learn how others are doing stuff. And so the library community amongst the colleges were really helpful in giving advice and, you know, we were learning things from each other. On the other side of working from home, you also have to get used to sit in your dining room chair for eight hours which isn't so comfortable. And, you know, learning to manage your time and not responding every time you see an email but, you know, have a cut-off point. In the first weeks we were closed, I had about 400 chat conversations with students about, you know, ranging from research to, 'I can't log in' and those kind of questions. So each program we sort of assembled the top resources that will be useful for their program and then we have some video tutorials and then the librarians are usually available-- always available I would say, usually for one to one support. It's just-- I found everybody quite resourceful. You know, as a problem came up, there were always solutions coming up as quickly as the problem came up too. So everybody was helping each

other out. I actually felt quite warmed about that kind of community spirit among our team as well as others in the college.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Now we're into this new way of working and what we'd like to know is how's it going for you and also how are students reacting? Marlene?

MARLENE SLOPACK: I think as Pearl said, it was really true. Like, I think if we had forced students, 'you must take this online course; the in-class course is full', students would have been very unhappy and complaining about everything that went wrong. But as Pearl says, they understand that we're doing this for the safety of everyone and I think because of that they actually appreciate-- I find there's a real appreciation, a lot of 'thank you's' from students that, you know, things are going on as normally as possible. And their attitude I find in general, I think-- I teach over 100 students and I don't think there is one that actually has, you know, a negative attitude. Even though they've had problems, nobody has told me they want to give up. They all seem positive. I've put so much stuff on Blackboard and even though for instance in my lecture this week, the students hung by 15 minutes with a dead computer while I was talking. When I came back after this death by computer, I still had most of the students hanging in there.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Pearl?

PEARL RAJU: Yeah. I'd say I described the first week as trial by fire and then as the second week rolled in, we got more used to things and adjusted-- started adjusting and I have to say, you know, it took the cooperation of everybody and so, you know, I am quite proud of our team of the librarians and the library techs and the user service reps and the managers and technologists. Everybody was just, you know, had this can-do attitude and trying to figure out how to get through. We figured out, you know, quite a few of the hiccups and we're getting to learn what the students-- some of the difficulties and a lot of it was around technology access. And so, you know, in the first week of closing, we did open-- well, the second week we opened for the day and thanks to our user service reps who were brave enough to get back despite all the growing concern that the pandemic-- they came out to do these loans and we loaned out over 300 pieces of equipment to students and we had to be very careful too for the safety of the students and the staff and to do this in a very controlled way. But, you know, we had a lot of feedback from students at the time to, you know, say how appreciative they were that they could get access to this equipment. And in some cases, some of the equipment had the specialized software that students needed. And then the librarians have been working closely with the faculty to get them ready for March 23 to help them get content for the online teaching and get things set up into Blackboard. And, you know, in some cases the library staff had to help beyond what they would normally do in terms of getting technology set up, etcetera. But, you know, it was all part of just helping everybody to get up to speed, get on board and get things going in the interest of getting, you know, some kind of stability.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And is there anything that you've taken from this experience, this whirlwind of the last few weeks that you think you might incorporate into your working life once everything eventually returns to normal? Marlene, can you think of anything?

MARLENE SLOPACK: You know, we were forced to quickly learn all this new software and then sometimes it takes that to get us going and for certain, I really like Zoom and Collaborate Ultra. For sure there are features that will be valuable in the future. And I think also the students, it force them also to learn. I think there's, you know, great satisfaction when you find something really challenging and then you succeed. I think, you know, we've all actually gained a lot through this experience and what's shocking is the enthusiasm of all the teachers to help each other and to not back down from this challenge. I don't know one of the teachers in our teams said, 'No, no, no. I can't do this. I don't want to do this.' Everyone, you know, knew they needed to embrace this and they really did it with a smile on their face. They did not complain at all and I think that was really rewarding that students and teachers, everyone knew they had to do this and they didn't begrudge and they did it with enthusiasm.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: That's great. So seeing everybody rise to the challenge.

MARLENE SLOPACK: That's right.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Yeah. And Pearl, is there anything you've taken from this experience that you can see yourself incorporating into working life once this-- life returns to normal?

PEARL RAJU: Well, I've been hearing a lot of people saying that this is the new normal so. We kind of just kind of settled into it but-- and I also think that, you know, we can no longer talk about the future of work because we're living it as we're working in this kind of environment. But I reflect on it and I think it's opening up new opportunities because, you know, not only in terms of distance learning and those kinds of things but, you know, also to achieve work-life balance. You know, work from home and not just for faculty or so on but even support staff now. It helps us to think of different ways that people can work and the way our work life is organized. And from the academic support that we provide, I think now that some faculty are using the open educational resources, I can see more and more, you know, the value of that bank of titles and so on and to put it out there more and get more people using it, you know? But definitely we also need more data about students and students' access to technology and students' ability to work in an online environment. And, you know, while we teach students study skills and we teach them how to, you know, go about various things to be successful, I think this is one component that we need to add in terms of soft skills and other things that we teach students. Those are the kinds of things that I've been reflecting on as I'm going through this period.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Well, great. Thank you so much Marlene and Pearl. We really appreciate you taking some time out of your afternoon to talk to us.

MARLENE SLOPACK: My pleasure.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Thank you.

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SHAWNE McKEOWN: That's a wrap on this special episode *Work Shift*. What did you think? Email us at workshift@georgebrown.ca. We'd love to hear from you. It's the end of your work shift. Take care, everyone.