

TLX Xchange Forum Podcast – Celina Costa

>> Patricia Robinson: Hi, everyone. I'm Patricia Robinson, Faculty Facilitator with the TLX, and I'm hosting a new segment of the XChange Podcast called XChange Forum in which I interview our faculty colleagues from across the college. So today I'm joined by Celina Costa, faculty in the School of ESL in the CPLS Department. Celina, maybe you can introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your work at the college.

>> Celina Costa: Hey, Patricia. Well, thanks for having me on your podcast today. This is very exciting. Well, I've been a professor at the School of ESL since 2004. And the School of ESL, as you know, has a very diverse student body with both domestic and international students from all over the world. The program has nine levels, and each level last eight weeks. So they're really like have semesters. Our students can be placed at any level depending on how they do on their placement tests. Our students have different reasons for why they're studying English in our program, but they all share the goal of wanting to speak English better. Since I started teaching many years ago at the School of ESL, I've had the privilege of teaching most of the nine levels in our program. I also spent a few years as academic coordinator, and I even had the opportunity to teach some communication courses for one year with the School of Hospitality and the School of Social and Community Services. Currently, I am teaching level 300, and that's considered sort of a pre-intermediate level English course.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. So sounds like you've got a wide range of experience and knowledge about your students and the curriculum within the School of ESL. And I actually heard you were involved in a curriculum project last semester. So can you tell us briefly what that was about?

>> Celina Costa: Sure, definitely, I'd love to. So for just a little bit of background, for a few years now the Chair of ESL, Ana-Marija Petrunic had been working on getting approval as well as some funding to undertake a curriculum renewal project that had two purposes. And, by the way, a little aside, our last major curriculum renewal project was all the way in 2006, so we were definitely due for a change. So anyway, back to your question. The first purpose was to align our curriculum with something called the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. And we often refer to this as the CEFR or the CFR. And really all it is is an international standard for describing language ability. And the second aim of this project was to create a blended ESL program that would include both an online and a face-to-face component.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. So the curricular part actually started, again, focusing on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, but also blended and face-to-face learning. But then, as we all know, the pandemic hit, and so I'm curious, what kind of impact did that have on this project?

>> Celina Costa: Yea, it had a fairly substantial impact as you can imagine. Because of the pandemic, under pivot online teaching back in March, the focus of the second aim of the project was altered and instead of creating a blended program, we were instructed to create a fully online program. So as a result, last semester in the fall of 2020, faculty from our lower levels, levels 100 through the 400s, started the project process, and we used the CFR that I

mentioned earlier to help inform our curriculum decisions. The level teams met weekly to discuss everything from new course outcomes to best teaching practices to assessment and everything in between. And as of the session, January to March 2021, the new curriculum is being rolled out as a pilot. What this means is only one section of each level is using the new material. The prime end is to implement the new curriculum across all levels sections in the March-April 2021 session.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. And you said that only section of each of the ESL levels, so from 100 to 400, there'll only be one section that will be involved in the rollout. So can you explain what that means by like the sections?

>> Celina Costa: Sure. So, you know what, I'll explain by giving an example. I teach level 300, but at the same time, there are three other teachers teaching level 300 as well. So that means that there are a total of four sections, or four different classes if you will, of level 300 being offered. So therefore with the pilot, only one class or one section got to implement the new curriculum. So come March when the rollout begins across the entire level, all of the classes or sections will be using the new material. I hope that makes sense.

>> Patricia Robinson: It does make sense. It reminds me of those math questions --

>> Celina Costa: Yes.

>> Patricia Robinson: You know, our grade six math book, so problem solving. So yea, but I do get it. It makes sense now. Can you share with us some of the struggles and highlights that you have experienced while working on this project?

>> Celina Costa: Yea, sure. Okay, well I guess I'll start with the challenges first, and I'll end on a high note with the highlights. So the biggest struggle for our specific team, the level 300, was time. Due to scheduling issues early on in the project process, we found ourselves with less time than some of the other teams. So it was extremely challenging to finish all the materials for the pilot this January, and also stressful. And in fact, we didn't finish, so right now I'm currently still working on some guiding documents, materials, and even some assessments.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. Got it. So there's still some work to be done.

>> Celina Costa: For sure.

>> Patricia Robinson: So you talked about some of the struggles. So can you tell me about a highlight that you've experience in the process. Is there anything specific that you would want to share?

>> Celina Costa: Good question. Yea, well, there's one highlight that pops into my mind, and that was having the opportunity to really think about what students in today's ESL world need and to make curriculum changes to meet those needs. This felt like such a privilege, and as a result, I feel very grateful for the chance to work on the project.

>> Patricia Robinson: And you know, that's really interesting you mentioned earlier that, you know, the curriculum hadn't been updated since 2006. And we know that the world is a very different place in 2021 or 2020 than it was -- another math question -- 14 years ago?

>> Celina Costa: Fourteen, fifteen years ago. Yea. [laughter]

>> Patricia Robinson: And also, you know, you mentioned this about having the time to think. So when we're teaching we often don't have that time to think carefully about our students' needs because, you know, we're always on the go, we're always lesson planning, you know, putting out fires here and there. So in a way, this curriculum project has been such a great opportunity that you do have that time to really consider carefully what your students' needs are.

>> Celina Costa: Yea, that's right. It was amazing. And you know what, as you were speaking, you just reminded me of one more thing. So can I mention just one more highlight?

>> Patricia Robinson: Yea, go for it.

>> Celina Costa: Okay, thanks. So another highlight for me was being able to collaborate with my project colleagues. Too often as instructors, we work in the silos, and we mostly work with those teaching the same courses. So in this project, however, I was able to share my ideas and insights with instructors from the other levels, and we provided each other with really helpful feedback. I can't stress, you know, how beneficial this piece was to me personally. And funny enough as I'm speaking, I just remember one more highlight. This will be the last time. Also, what was really exciting about this project was I got to completely overhaul our level 300 material. So we replaced all of our textbooks with original content. And although this was extremely time-consuming, we were able to create material that integrated its relevance, it's interesting, and it really helps me a course outcomes perfectly.

>> Patricia Robinson: That's really amazing. So, you know, receiving feedback from instructors who teach different levels than you, that's such a great opportunity, and then, you know, creating all original teaching material. So I can imagine that's a lot of work.

>> Celina Costa: Sure.

>> Patricia Robinson: Yea. I would actually like to go back to what you said earlier about collaborating with your colleagues. So I think that that's true that we don't often get that opportunity to work closely with our colleagues especially when we are so busy teaching. So can say more about what you learnt as a result of that collaboration?

>> Celina Costa: Sure. Yea. So, you know, my default mode as a teacher is to want to solve everything myself without asking for help. So the biggest takeaway for me from collaborating with the other teachers on this team was the reminder that we all approach curriculum development differently, which is really refreshing. It left me thinking about, you know, the next time I'm stuck on something or having some kind of problem, I need to seek out a colleague to get their unique perspective on the issue. And it also made me feel like I don't have to have all the answers, you know, and that there isn't a right or wrong answer, but instead there are multiple, often equally valuable, perspectives on a situation or issue.

>> Patricia Robinson: Totally, totally.

>> Celina Costa: And so actually, just to add as an example of the advantage of collaboration, our team was unsure of how to present all of our new material online in an effective manner. And by reaching out to our other colleague, we discovered one class notebook, our level 100 faculty member, Tina [inaudible], had started using it to deal with the same issue, and she had

great success with it. So if we hadn't reached out to the team, we may not have found this particular solution.

>> Patricia Robinson: That's so great. And this one class notebook, it is available as part of our MS365 office suite, isn't it.

>> Celina Costa: Yea, that's right. So any George Brown College staff or student has access to it.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. Great. So, okay, so we've talked about some of the struggles and the highlights including the benefits of collaborating with colleagues. What else would you say that you learnt through engaging in this curriculum project?

>> Celina Costa: Well, this project taught me some new things, but it also reminded me of some old ones. So for me the really new thing was, you know, intentionally working with the principles of Universal Design of Learning. Through a variety of workshops and reading, I was able to familiarize myself with its principles and to incorporate more of them into my teaching context. Interestingly enough, as I read, I realized that I was already applying many of UDL's principles.

>> Patricia Robinson: That's so great. And I like how you said that, you know, the new thing for you is intentionally working with UDL. So I think that's a really important piece of it is the intention. And then you said, so through your own reading and research you were able to identify what you were already doing that was aligned with that UDL framework. And so, I mean, I can imagine that probably boosted your confidence a bit as well.

>> Celina Costa: For sure. Yea.

>> Patricia Robinson: So what were some of those old things that you were reminded of?

>> Celina Costa: Well, although I've already mentioned the value of collaboration, I'm going to go back to it because I'd like to add that during our regular meetings with all the teams involved in the project, we offered and received feedback and, you know, we had some interesting and, at times, heated discussions. But again, you know, getting these different perspectives helped inform the work that I did on the project and it also made me reflect on my own teaching beliefs and practices, and it really challenged me. And it was great to be reminded of the value of collaboration and reflection.

>> Patricia Robinson: That's such a good point. You know, that reminds me of some the research and work that I've done on professional learning communities. And, you know, that importance of having open dialogue and being challenged to see things differently, or to see things in another way. You know, these are the things that help us grow as professionals. So that's really great that you experience that as a result of working on this curriculum project. So I do have another question. So we know everyone went, you know, to fully online teaching last March and it's now almost a year later. So from the beginning of the pandemic to now, what has the transition been like for you in teaching ESL fully online?

>> Celina Costa: Yea, that's amazing that it's almost been a year, but, you know, it was really hard at first. Not only did I have to deal with a change teaching modality, but I also had to somehow help my low-level English learners to figure out the technology needed to learn

online. My poor students, you know, like the rest of us, were trying to cope with the adjustment of living in a pandemic, [inaudible] in a state of lockdown, having children around while also trying to move ahead with learning ESL online. So I cannot stress enough how challenging it was. I feel like I have PTSD from that time. But, you know, my classes that first week ended up being very teacher-centric, which was, you know, so unusual for me. But it felt like that was something I could control at a time when so many other things were out of my control. And last spring, as I mentioned previously, pivoting online within one week was extremely challenging. It wasn't enough time. But it has been, you know, the most incredible form of professional development that I've ever had.

>> Patricia Robinson: I bet, I bet.

>> Celina Costa: Yea, it was, you know, just crazy. So for years, for example, I've been extremely interested in exploring new educational tech tools. And although, you know, I dabbled here and there with a few new things, I never seemed to find the time to really explore the full range of the possibilities. And, you know, then actually implement them into my daily practice because that was another piece. Teaching in person seemed to negate the need for a lot of these digital tools. They just weren't practical. So then suddenly, wham, I find myself teaching online, full-time, and I had to no choice but to create this space to learn about as many tools as possible. And, you know, it was overwhelming at first because there's a plethora of choice out there.

>> Patricia Robinson: For sure. Like there's so much out there to choose from, you know, it's crazy.

>> Celina Costa: It is, and so as the days passed, I started to feel more comfortable, giving up that control, and creating more opportunities for students to participate in meaning and interesting ways.

>> Patricia Robinson: And so, you know, as you became more comfortable and found those opportunities for your students to participate, what does that look like online, and what does that feel like for you now?

>> Celina Costa: Well, fortunately I can say that all these months later, my classes look and feel very different. The pivot online learning has rocketed my teaching into the 21st century in a way I would have never imagined back in March.

>> Patricia Robinson: I love that. It's rocketed you forward.

>> Celina Costa: Oh, my gosh, yea. Like I said, like nothing I would have ever imagined. But, you know, over time, I've been able to get back down to earth and curate some really great online tools that I use. And, you know, it's down to a manageable number and I've had great success with them. And by success really I mean I've been able to use these tools to make my classes more engaging and motivating for my students.

>> Patricia Robinson: So which tools have you found that you would say are most aligned with your teaching pedagogy or, you know, which ones best support the learning of your students?

>> Celina Costa: Yea, so for me it's been a tool called Nearpod. It's been a real game changer for me. It's the one tool that I use constantly in my classes. And students love it because

they're participating all the time as I'm teaching. It's made any presentation component of my class super interactive. And fortunately Nearpod is easy for students to access either on a phone or a computer. And, you know, once you're in it's very straightforward. In addition to Nearpod, I also like Hoots [phonetic] Quizlet, Jeopardy Lab, MSsway [phonetic], and Forms, and you know, because I teach lower level, these are the sorts of tools that lend themselves to my students' proficiency level. I know teachers at higher levels are using slightly different tools. So let me add that I use all the tools that I mentioned both for the synchronous and asynchronous components of my classes.

>> Patricia Robinson: Okay. So that's really interesting. I really like how you talk about focussing on the ones that work for you and your students. And, you know, that's so important that you've been able to narrow down what works without overwhelming your students and yourself. Because, you know, it's so easy to get lost in, you know, what to choose. So there have been lots of changes and lots of learning happening, not only for students, but also for us as faculty. And so I want to ask you Celina, what other realizations do you think you have had or you have been having?

>> Celina Costa: Okay. That's a big question. [laughter] Well, I guess I realize that I need to figure out what kind of teacher I am in this new online learning context. The way I used to teach is not how I can teach now. So clearly I need to develop and grow into a new teaching identity really. But I do feel that I am making progress with every class I teach fortunately. Another realization is that I really miss face-to-face teaching every day despite my growing comfort level with online teaching. You know, I miss making personal connections with students and having those sweet serendipitous moments in class where, you know, someone says something funny or unexpected and everyone laughs. And, you know, even I miss running into former students or running into colleagues in the hallways and having a brief chat.

>> Patricia Robinson: Yea, I know what you mean. I really feel the same way, too. I mean, just missing those personal connections and running into the people in the hallway or having people drop by my office. You know, it's hard, it's hard not seeing people and be able to spend time with people in person. Okay, so Celina, we are just about out of time. But I have one last question for you. What advice would you give to other faculty?

>> Celina Costa: Okay. Wow, time flies when you're having fun. So, okay, advice. I'd say my advice is simple. I suggest really thinking of how to make your classes interactive. Find a few simple approaches at first that work and stick with those. You know, maybe it's using Flipgrid or staying within Blackboard and using the Blackboard collaborate breakout rooms or the white board feature. Then as you comfort level increases, find other ways to engage your students during classes. Teacher centric classes have never been an effective way of teaching and, you know, now more than ever, this is true. We need to remember that just because we've taught something doesn't mean students have actually learnt it. And I guess in other words, you know, it's the how. The how of our teaching is really essential now. Students need interactions to feel invested in the material, you know, to feel motivated to pay attention, and ultimately to be able to learn. So, if I may I'd like to end with a personal example.

>> Patricia Robinson: Go for it.

>> Celina Costa: My son is 15 and he's studying fully online at the moment because of the way there's lockdown restrictions. And every day he tells me how boring his classes are, and when

I asked him, you know, what makes the classes so boring, he answered that all the teachers do is talk, sometimes for 30 minutes, sometimes 45 minutes, sometimes even longer. And he says he can't pay attention that long so he just tunes out. And, you know, hearing that, it's such a shame to hear him saying that. But, although I have a better developed attention span than a teenage boy by a longshot [laughter], I completely understand where he's coming from. Because when I attend workshops for seven hours or even study, I also can't effectively focus for long periods of time if I'm just sitting there listening. But, you know, that all changes if I get to participate in an interactive session, then I find time flies by, I'm focussed, and I leave feeling like I've learnt something, like I've retained something. So I guess to conclude I'd just like to say, you know, not including more interactive opportunities when we teach online, is really doing our students a disservice.

>> Patricia Robinson: Wow. So that's such a great example. You know, you're seeing this happen from the other side, right, from your son's perspective as a student.

>> Celina Costa: That's right.

>> Patricia Robinson: And so, Celina, you know, I think based on what you said here, we should definitely end this podcast so that we actually don't go over 30 minutes.

>> Celina Costa: I know, I guess you're right. There's been no interactive content. Sorry out there.

>> Patricia Robinson: So thanks Celina. I really appreciate you joining me here today, and thanks to those of you who are still listening if there's anyone still there. [laughter] Thank you for hanging on. Thank you so much. Bye.