

# The XCHANGE Podcast Episode 11

## A conversation with Professor Nicki Monahan

### Transcript

Note: This transcript was edited for readability.

[MUSIC]

JASON INNISS: Welcome to The XCHANGE Podcast, where we inspire growth through collaboration. The XCHANGE Podcast is dedicated to fostering a collaborative and inclusive space for educators to engage in transformative conversations, share innovative practices, and promote equity in the field of education.

I am so excited today to interview Mickey Monahan, professor, faculty facilitator of the Teaching and Learning Exchange, coach, faculty developer, curriculum specialist. Nicki was one of the incredible faculty who mentored me when I first started teaching at GBC and attended the new Faculty Academy. Nicki was also one of the creators of the XCHANGE Podcast, which we're currently on. So, this interview is going to be quite bittersweet for me as I get to chat with Nicki knowing that she will be retiring at the end of the 2024 calendar year. Nicki, welcome back to XCHANGE.

NICKI MONAHAN: Thank you so much, Jason. It's such a delight to be here. And I remember fondly when Mike Avis and I decided to do this XCHANGE podcast five years ago, at the beginning of the pandemic when everybody was at home scared, worried. It's really nice to be past that time and to be resurrecting this podcast with you.

JASON: Well, it's great to have you here. And I remember being part of those late evening podcast interviews. That was good times during some tough times, for sure.

NICKI: Was good times during some tough times.

JASON: So, Nicki, we're going to get right into it. You've spent 25 plus years full time at GBC both teaching and working with faculty. What are some of the challenges or changes that you've observed in the teaching and learning landscape, and what have you learned from them?

NICKI: Well, Jason, I have to say, it's hard to believe that it's been 25 years full time and five years part time that I've been in George Brown College. And one of the things that I've learned is that there is always change over those two and a half decades. I've seen the college go through so many changes.

NICKI: And in my work in faculty development, I've tried to shepherd some changes with our faculty. So, I can remember the years when Susan Heximer and I introduced faculty to outcomes-based learning.

And that was a really a shift from the role of teacher as to share content, share knowledge to the role of a faculty member to try and figure out at the end of a course or the end of a program, what kind of skills the students need to be doing what they're going to be doing in their work. So, that was a huge change. And then we really focused on a shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. And all of the changes that came with the pandemic. I remember we used the word pivot probably more often than anybody needed us to when we pivoted to what really wasn't online learning.

Because, of course, our instructional designers have been building robust online learning courses for many years. But we had to pivot to be delivering off campus. And then, of course, the last 18 months or so have been the changes that have been thrust on us because of AI and generative AI tools. So, one of the things I learned after two and a half decades of being in teaching and learning at George Brown College is that changes is inevitable. We need to find a way to manage it, deal with it, embrace it, be adaptable, welcome even the challenges that come.

And I think even some of the biggest challenges that we faced have also created the greatest innovation, as you know. So, I actually think online learning at George Brown College is way more robust because we all had to learn how to do it during the pandemic. So, I guess I would say that was one of the big learnings that, even if you're somebody who doesn't like change, change creates opportunities for growth, for development, for innovation. And, yeah, that serves us well to have that kind of philosophy.

JASON: Yeah. One thing that's constant is change, right?

NICKI: Absolutely.

JASON: So, you've spoken about changes a fair bit. What are some of the changes you've observed with in terms of needs and realities of our learners over the years?

NICKI: Yeah, that's a great question.

JASON: Or has there been a change at all?

NICKI: Well, it's really interesting. I say “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”, the more things change, the more they stay the same. And I can remember back my very first year teaching part time in the Child Youth Care program, being so delighted at the diversity of our student population. I walked into 200 King Street, and it just felt like a place where the student population was alive and vibrant and diverse. And that hasn't changed at all and I love that our

student population is so diverse. But I think one of the things that's changed among faculty members is sort of a greater awareness of what student needs are, maybe because of that diversity we've seen a better and deeper understanding of some of the barriers that our students face.

And I'm thinking about systemic barriers, the systemic barriers of anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia. I was probably the second year that I was a faculty member, that I was part of the first Positive Space campaign to try and create more inclusive spaces for queer students. And I think we made a lot of progress, but now we have more and more students who are identifying as gender queer, gender non-binary. And we need to we need to keep responding to the needs of students.

But it's one of the reasons why I got so excited fairly early on to work in the UDL landscape, Universal Design for Learning, which is a pedagogical framework that begins with how do we start recognizing the accessible barriers to our students, the systemic barriers to our students? And I've seen this huge shift in understanding faculty sometimes say now, oh my gosh, I have more and more students who have accommodations. And I think there's always been a lot of students who've had learning needs that haven't been met. And I think we're getting better at recognizing that there are things that we can do to design our courses to create spaces, face-to-face spaces, online spaces, digital spaces that are much more responsive. So, the diverse needs of the George Brown student population probably haven't changed that much, but our awareness of them.

Now, that being said, I think we also saw some really significant shifts as a result of the pandemic, so students needed to learn how to learn online. And that was a stretch and that was uncomfortable. And I worked with a lot of faculty who said to me, gosh, I think my students are just rolling over in bed and turning their laptops on because I can't get them to turn their cameras on. And that was a challenge to have meaningful, robust student engagement and online learning. And then we saw the shift back to campus. I had faculty say "oh it's been hard to get our students back into classrooms". I think a lot of students got excited to get back into kitchens and labs and dental clinics and simulation clinics.

But to get students back in the classroom was a little bit more challenging. So, we've also seen those needs to sort of reinvest in the soft skills, the interpersonal skills, the teamwork skills, the collaboration skills, the skills that some industries are now calling "power skills". But, the students at George Brown have always been diverse, wonderful, passionate, interesting. And I think we've been learning in the last two and a half decades that I've been working here, we've been learning how to understand their needs a little bit better, how to address some of those systemic barriers, how to design learning better. And we got a long way to go around issues of accessibility, diversity, etc. Yeah, yeah.

JASON: And just riffing on what you said about a Universal Design for Learning. I remember years ago, you are saying learning often happens at the edge of our comfort zone. And I refer back to that so often when we're having difficult conversations with people or having conversations that involve racism or disability justice and trying to sort of, welcome people into spaces rather than calling them out. And it's such a powerful quote that you shared, and I wonder is it your quote or did you get it somewhere else?

NICKI: No, but I'm not quite sure and I can remember somebody just sort of showing me that diagonal line back in the 90s, we talked a lot about safe spaces. We talked about this Positive Space campaign and as we started to get more nuanced about that, people were having these conversations about how you create safe spaces for learning. And really, there is no such thing as a safe space. So how do we create safer spaces? I've done a lot of work in supporting faculty to understand how to create welcoming spaces and inclusive spaces and spaces that where students feel like their lived experiences are seen and valued and recognized.

But if we're too comfortable, and this is true for us as faculty too, if we're too comfortable, then we probably don't learn. So there has to be that edge where we stretch and where we see things in new ways, and we develop new perspectives. And so we want to find that balance between warm, welcoming, engaging spaces that recognize our learner and learner diversity. And how do we go about learning? We got to think about things in a different way. We've got to be open to new perspectives. So yeah, it's a delicate dance in all of our classroom spaces, for sure.

JASON: That is so true. You've talked about change. You talked about the change of our students. But what are some of the realities of teaching and learning at GBC that haven't changed?

NICKI: Jason, one of the things that that I'm really aware of is that I have had in my 25 plus years just this tremendous, incredible privilege to work with literally hundreds of faculty members from the new Faculty Academy to working with contract faculty to being brought in to work with faculty in various areas.

NICKI: And one of the things that hasn't changed is the passion of our faculty. You know, the faculty who teach at George Brown College. You know, it doesn't matter if they're critical care nurses, if they're plumbers, if they're chefs, if they're accountants, if they're digital media specialists, design specialist, they're all passionate about what they do and they're all passionate about wanting to support their students to learn. And so I have had this constant in my career of seeing people come, go, stay, stay a very long time and stay passionate about saying I have something to offer these learners. And I also had the experience of having had a student who was in my classroom the very first year I started, then become a faculty member in

the child youth care program. And she was just as passionate as a student. She was when she became a part time faculty member.

So, I would say that's the constant, the passion, the desire to support student learning that, reality that many of our students really want authentic learning experiences. They want to know "How is this relevant? How will this serve me? How will this help me when I'm working in my chosen field, my chosen industry, my chosen profession?" And that's been an amazing thing. And one of the other things that that I think has been constant has been my desire, whether I'm talking about outcomes-based learning, active learning, experiential learning, authentic assessment, generative AI tools, the relationships between faculty and students still, to me, remain at the core of where real learning happens.

And this September, I had a chance to speak at our TLX Welcome Back Day. And I talked about a relational pedagogy, that our relationship with our students in addition to what we have expertise in and what we know and what we bring from our particular area. But our relationship with our students is so critical. And I would say now more than ever. So I think that's something that really hasn't shifted that much. And I'm glad to see that I had a wonderful conversation with one of our new Faculty Academy members from this past year. And we were talking about something, probably theoretically pedagogical. And he said, can I interrupt for a second? I said, of course. And he talked about a student that he was very concerned about, who had been depressed and who was really struggling. You know, one of the consequences of the pandemic is we have lots of students with social anxiety, lots of students who are struggling in terms of their emotional and mental health. And he asked for some support about how to give some students some support. And I thought, this is the thing that never changes, that our faculty really care deeply about our students. So that's pretty cool to keep seeing that as something consistent.

JASON: It's palpable. And one of the things that that I, that I see and I'm so proud of it, working at George Brown is the people that we work with. Right? There's such incredible people, intelligent, brilliant and caring and passionate. Right? So that's wonderful. Thank you for that. I'd like to take a little, bit of a different tact here and just think about Higher Ed moving forward. What skills do you think faculty need to navigate change as we look to the future a little bit?

NICKI: Well, I mean, I know it sounds like a cliché, and I think at one point during the pandemic, I said if somebody hears me say pivot again tell me just to stop. But really, especially given the last 18 months and the changes we see in technology and generative AI, then I would say the skills that faculty need are skills about adapting to change and the skills about, being able to be a really good learner and the capacity to try new things even if you're not sure how they're going to work and to say... I got to a point in my career in the pandemic where I was being asked to do things where I thought, I have no idea how to do that. I remember an associate dean

reaching out to me and saying “could you help the millwrights learn how to teach online?” And I remember thinking “What's a millwright now?” Big apology to Tom Hunt from the new Faculty Academy.

And one of the things that the pandemic forced me to do was to learn. I had been teaching for, how many years at that time? Probably 20 plus years. So I would say the skills that faculty need as higher education continues to change or the ability to adapt to change, to try new things, to make mistakes, to not pretend to know it all, to take the lead from their students about what their students are telling them about. What's important, what's relevant. Adaptability is absolutely critical. Yeah.

JASON: And I love the point that you make about learning from your students. I remember one of the best pieces of advice that was given to me when I first got hired as a faculty was a family member saying to me never let your students. Never, ever lie to your students. If your students ask you a question and you don't know the answer, say “I don't know”, and then say, “but what I'll do is I'll research and I'll get back to you”.

And then I later learned to say to them, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to go research and get back to you. But I want you to research that as well. And we're going to come back together. I'm going to share with the class next week. And then remember the point of that being like, never lie to your students because you lose all credibility in front of them, right? And they'll actually back to you more just by saying that you can make mistakes and you don't know as well.

NICKI: Yeah, I agree with you on that Jason. And there was a time where we could say we expect our faculty to be experts in our field. And we are. And yet given the information explosion, we cannot expect ourselves to know everything about everything. And so we need to be able to have some humility when we come into learning spaces and not feel like I need to know the answer to every single question. And I can help my learners learn the skills to research, to navigate digital information, to navigate gen AI tools, to navigate what might be based in scientific research.

And we have to do this too, because it's impossible now for us to know everything about everything. And there was a time that teachers were expected to have all of the answers and to know everything. And now I think it's really important for teachers to know how to ask really good questions and not just be focused on the answers.

JASON: Right? Yeah. One of the one of your coaching tips as well to learn how to ask rich, robust questions. Right?

NICKI: That's right. Powerful questions. For sure.

JASON: You know, as I'm sitting here chatting with you, Nicki, I'm enthralled. Right? So you've been teaching here 25, 30 years, 25 is full time. And I'm just wondering, what kind of advice would you give to a faculty member to maintain the same sort of vitality that you have now? What do you draw on?

NICKI: Yeah, it's a great question, Jason, because somebody asked me "are you retiring because you're burnt out? Are you tired? Retiring because you're done? Are you retiring because you're worn out?" And I hope everybody who knows me and has worked with me knows that I have maintained a lot of energy for this work and a lot of passion over two and a half decades.

And so I would sort of have two pieces of advice. One is make sure you know how to find the joy in the work. You know, I have always experienced joy in my work. And when I was with students in the classroom, I felt incredible joy watching them grow and develop and learn. And working with faculty members, I felt incredible joy in the privilege of learning and collaboration. What a gift. I have learned much more, I think, than I have taught. So I would say find out where your joy is. And for some of our faculty that's in research and or the joy is in finding new ways to teach something really simple.

And then the second piece, and I would say this is the piece that really has kept me alive, is continue learning, continue beyond being a learner. I would say that is if all you're doing is teaching, then you've lost the plot. So continue learning. And I've had the privilege, in this very long and rich career, to have had two professional development lives.

In one of them. I went and spent a year and studied at Concordia University, where I got my credentialing for the International Coaching Federation to be a certified coach. And anybody who knows me knows that changed my life. It changed my trajectory. But it was a powerful year of learning. But you don't even need to go on a PD leave to learn.

At one point I was learning Spanish and, because it's good to sit in that learner's chair to figure out. Learning is sometimes hard. I'm good at so many things. And I was terrible as a Spanish student, and I had a girlfriend tell me, yeah, you speak Spanish but with a French accent.

And I said, well, that can't be good. But I keep learning, you know? And right now, I am passionate. I was one of those tennis players who said, oh, real tennis players don't play pickleball. But I've crossed to the dark side and now I'm learning pickleball, and it's kind of easy as a tennis player. And yet there are still new things to learn.

So, I would say my vitality in this long, rich, wonderful, amazing, fulfilling career at George Brown College has been sustained by finding the joy and not forgetting every single day to find the joy. And for me, that's often been in relationships. And then keep learning. Because when you learn, you have way more insight into what our students are experiencing every single day.

JASON: Two important pieces of advice find that joy and never stop learning.

NICKI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JASON: I remember I remember during the pandemic taking a couple of continuing ed classes. Now both of them were in my former field, in culinary, but wow, it was just so incredible. And since then, I've taken on, I'm studying for a Master's program. And just by learning how other people teach, I recognize my own pedagogical approaches and what works and what doesn't work.

So, by taking on those learning opportunities it really helps grow me. So just really great hearing you say that as well, to never stop learning and find that joy. So.

NICKI: Yeah. Absolutely.

JASON: What's, what's your favorite quote, Nicki?

NICKI: Jason I have so many and it's really hard to pick one. Again, over the years, I've supported a lot of students and faculty going into interviews, really important interviews. So, of course, I always say, in the words of the late, great Oscar Wilde: "Be yourself, everybody else's taken."

My dad used to say "don't hide your light under a bushel." He's a very Catholic guy. And so that's one of my favorites. But lately, I love art, I go to the AGO as often as I can. I love when I go to Montreal, I go to the bazaar. And one of my favorite artists is Georgia O'Keeffe. And so I have a fridge magnet on my fridge that says, from Georgia O'Keeffe "To create one's world takes courage", so I'm often reminded, especially during these days and we've been reflecting on world realities and political realities.

It takes a lot of courage, to create the world that you want to live in. But that's something that inspires me to be courageous, to speak your truth, to be fully and authentically who you are. And, in some ways, it's a good motto for me right now because it's taking me some courage to leave.

You know, I'm leaving a place that's been my work home for 25, 30 years. It's a place where I experience a lot of joy and satisfaction and meaning and purpose. It's comfortable. And I'm stepping out of my work environment. But to create one's world takes courage.

JASON: Yeah. That's so incredible, because it wasn't until you said that when I realized how much of a courageous person you are. You never hesitate to give positive feedback. You never hesitate to ask if someone wants to have feedback, you stand up, and you speak your truth so now that you've said that I was like, oh my gosh, , Nicki's probably one of the most courageous people that I know. So that's incredible. Thank you. Thank you for saying that. What are your next steps, Nicki? What's on the horizon for you?



NICKI: Always good things on the horizon, Jason. And when you introduce me as teacher, facilitator, curriculum person, coach, none of that is going to change. I will continue to do all of those things. Of course, I wear my coach hat a lot of the time, and I've had this incredible opportunity. This is my second year teaching at Concordia University in the professional Goal Centric Coaching Program.

And so, I will continue to teach, and that's teaching learners and emerging coaches who will then be having impact. So, I'm going to continue to do that. In the last couple of years, I've had a teeny tiny coaching business on the side, which I intend to grow and build on and that will be a main part of what I do.

And I also still have curriculum design and development as an area that I'm interested in. And so I will be using those skills. So, yeah, this may be a moving away from George Brown College, but I'm not thinking about it as retirement. I'm thinking about it as a transition.

And I'm actually in the middle of a 12-week course on transitions coaching. It's a really powerful course, I'm learning a lot. I'm always learning. And one of the things that I'm reading about is the literature about how often we make changes, it's the nature of change in higher education.

It's the nature of change in the world. And most people every 3 to 5 years go through a relatively big transition and every 18 months some other kind of transition. So I'm working on this coaching framework of transition. So, I am also going to, I have a dear friend who's like a brother to me, I've been playing competitive tennis with for the last 30 years. And he and I decided we're going to become pickleball coaches. So, I will be pickleball coaching. And anybody who knows me well also knows I'm a traveler. I'm a hiker. And I'm always happiest when I'm somewhere where I can put my hiking boots on and go out and see the natural, and beauty.

So I will be continuing to do all of the things that keep me alive and passionate, make me happy. But also help me shine my light in places and support and collaborate. If I had to name with all of those hats, if I had a name, what I do is, I like to think that I work in partnership with people to help them just really shine. And achieve their potential. So, I'll just be doing that in different places than George Brown College.

JASON: I mean, one of your roles is faculty facilitator to really help people shine. So, you've been doing an incredible job with that. And really looking forward to the transitional change part of your life. We've had a lot of change, it has been one of the themes that has sort of like interspersed throughout this conversation. Where can we follow you, Nicki?

NICKI: Well, my coaching business is [www.nickimonahan.com](http://www.nickimonahan.com), or [nickimonahancoaching.com](http://nickimonahancoaching.com). And I will certainly be updating my LinkedIn profile. And before I leave, I'll set an outgoing email with my personal email. So [nickimonahan.com](http://nickimonahan.com) has my personal email. And probably for me the hardest part about leaving this place will be leaving people with whom I've had beautiful,

wonderful collaborations. And so I'm leaving the place. I hope not to leave the people. And I'd be really delighted. At this phase of my transition, I have such deep, deep gratitude for the hundreds of students that I worked with early in my career and the hundreds of faculty that I've worked with and the team that I've worked with in the last five years, especially, and these relationships have been powerful. So, I hope people will find me and I will reach out and stay connected because these connections, they feed me, they nourish me, and they allow me to do the work that I do, including my relationship with you, Jason.

JASON: Well, I know I speak for a number of those hundreds of people who you've made connections with over the years, and you'll always be welcome back. So, we'd love to. I'd love to have you back and hear about how things are going. Nicki, I want to say thanks so much for coming in today and chatting with us and giving you some beautiful insights. And it's absolutely been a pleasure being a colleague of yours for the last 12 years. So, thank you so much.

NICKI: Thank you so much, Jason, and thank you for resurrecting this podcast. And for doing the work that you do and the leadership that you show. And it's such a pleasure to be here with you today.

JASON: All right. That's the EXCHANGE podcast, folks. Have a great day. We'll see you later.

You've been listening to the EXCHANGE podcast. I'm your host, Jason Inniss, and I've been supported by our producer, Gian Michele Pileri. If you'd like to create and record a podcast in the new tech space and Authoring Zone, contact us through [tlx@georgebrown.ca](mailto:tlx@georgebrown.ca).

[MUSIC]