

Xchange Podcast – Episode 3 Transcript

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MIKE AVIS: Hello, faculty and welcome to Xchange, the TLX podcast for faculty by faculty. I'm Mike Avis and I'm a faculty facilitator with the TLX and I'm here, as usual, with Nicki Monahan, faculty facilitator and coach, coming to you from our own houses. How's it going, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: It's going all right Mike.

MIKE AVIS: So I'm, I'm here in my basement, as usual. I finally put the kids to bed and this seems to be the time that I can work. So it's nice, it's quiet and this is not a very common occurrence these days in my home.

NICKI MONAHAN: (laughing) I'm glad those kids finally went to bed. And I am also in my home office which, to be honest, sometimes is my living room couch. And my dog Morley is sleeping right now and I hope he stays that way through our, our entire exchange.

MIKE AVIS: So, I'm just doing the week check-in, Nicki. How are-- how are things going?

NICKI MONAHAN: Things are going pretty good, Mike. It's been, always, a busy week but things are moving forward and I'm really excited for us to have another conversation to share with our faculty.

MIKE AVIS: So we decided to call this podcast 'teaching in a time of uncertainty' but I also like to call it, 'the adrenaline has worn off, now what?'

NICKI MONAHAN: (laughing)

MIKE AVIS: So how would you describe what's going on in the college and with faculty right now?

NICKI MONAHAN: Well, it's a bit of a different time now because our immediate crisis is over. The crisis that I think of when we had one week to help faculty get up and running to moving to remote learning. And people have been doing that and it may have been a bit of a scramble but by now, faculty have some kind of plan for getting through this term and many have told us that they're really enjoying their new ways of engaging with learners remotely. At the same time, I call this teaching in a time of uncertainty because I think some new anxieties are arising. Maybe people are asking themselves well, how long will this last? I know my dog keeps looking at me and saying, 'aren't you

going to work yet?' I mean, too much of a good thing maybe. But people are asking those questions, 'so what's going to happen with the summer term?'; and 'how are my students managing?'; and 'what about my international students, the ones who stayed here and, and the ones who went home? How are they faring?' So there are a lot of questions that are popping up in people's minds these days.

MIKE AVIS: Yeah and it certainly doesn't help-- or just the uncertainty of everything that what we're getting from the city what we're getting from the news media, you know, that, that notifications we're getting from, from, from the college as well, it's really hard to figure out where we stand. And I know that, you know, right now the push has been let's just survive the end of this term but the next term is around the corner and I think a lot of people are thinking, okay, so there's-- it's one thing to survive teaching online for two weeks but what if it's another two or three months and I have to do my whole course online? I think that is certainly, you know, can cause some anxiety.

NICKI MONAHAN: For sure. And, and you're right it's a time of change and the change seems a bit unpredictable and when things are unpredictable that, that raises questions for people.

MIKE AVIS: So is there anything you've noticed particularly or specifically in the last week with your conversations with faculty?

NICKI MONAHAN: Well, Mike, I'm developing this very non-scientific theory. I'm calling it my theory of ten. And, and one of the things I've noticed in quite a number of exchanges in conversations with faculty is that, you know, in times of uncertainty, people are who they are kind of exponentially or times ten so. If you struggle with anxiety like a lot of our students do, your anxiety may be way ramped up right now. And maybe this plays itself out in your work with your colleagues or with whoever's at home. Or if you're the kind of person who sometimes procrastinates or feels distracted, has a hard time focusing and being attentive, then maybe getting down to work when you're on your own at home may be that much harder. Maybe you're lucky that you're able to just focus on the work right in front of you and you move forward step by step and if that's the kind of person you are, then that's probably how you're coping right now. And what I've really noticed and been so delighted to see is that if your tendency is to reach out and support and care for yourself and your colleagues well, you know, Mike, we-- we've seen so many of our faculty doing that really in spades.

MIKE AVIS: Yeah, no, it's been a-- it's been an amazing thing to see. It makes me-- thinking about your theory of ten-- your non-scientific theory, it made me think, well, I wonder which one of those I am. (laughing) Where I sit in-- I wonder how you identify which one of-- how, how-- what, what part of you is amped up times ten. I wonder what that is. Certainly I've noticed---

NICKI MONAHAN: Like, my ex--- my experience of you is that, that you're somebody who's passionate about your work and passionate about helping other people do their work. And, and I've seen that times ten with you---

MIKE AVIS: Yeah, I'm not sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: Over this last week or so---

MIKE AVIS: I'm not sure that's a great thing ramp-- ramping up my passion times ten. I'm not sure if that's great maybe. (laughing) But one thing I've noticed certainly about that is how it manifests with working with colleagues and students.

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MIKE AVIS: A lot of the work that we're doing now is coordinating, you know, programs; coordinating lesson planning; coordinating all these things with other faculty members. And certainly part of that challenge is not just how am I gonna connect with my students but how am I gonna work in a team with other faculty members remotely with all of this other thing-- all these other things kind of circulating around? And I think that is a real challenge in itself.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. And, and they're definitely complex layers of these new working realities and, and I think it's, it's important for us to recognize what these new realities are. I had one faculty member who was just delighted 'cause she had finished her first Collaborate Ultra session and she said, 'Gheez, there were more students with me remotely than there were in my last face-to-face class'. And she was really excited about that but there are also some extra strains maybe for some of us working remotely. So again, there's, there's all kinds of proficiency among our faculty members in using technology but, you know, if you were someone who had a learning curve, maybe you're feeling a little bit less confident or---

MIKE AVIS: Yes.

NICKI MONAHAN: Maybe you're making some, some mistakes or-- and not being sure if the technology is going to work 100 percent of the time, can make us feel really vulnerable.

MIKE AVIS: And also having to rely on technology to solve your technology is just another added piece to that-- to that strain of working remotely, right? So if you're used to going into a place and talking to a-- talking to someone, sitting next to them, now you have to rely on technology to do that. So that, that certainly can add a strain. What else is there?

NICKI MONAHAN: Well-- and I'm also thinking about, you know, even what people's working conditions are like at home. And, and, you know, we, we have-- when we go into our spaces in the college, some predictability. Maybe your office isn't always quiet or maybe you don't have the classroom-- you know, the ideal classroom you would have chosen but working conditions at home are really variable. I'm thinking about people like yourself who now have kids at home and maybe you're trying to work and home school or maybe you're used to seeing your partner at the end of the day and now they're there 24/7 and, and that might be a good thing or that might be wearing. Or, you know, maybe you live alone and now you're working alone and the college has been a place where you've gone for social contact that's actually face-to-face and not virtual.

MIKE AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: So, these are new working realities and, and this is a period of adjustment to those working realities.

MIKE AVIS: Plus there's, there's also the, the aspect of just physically and mentally taking care of yourself, you know? Especially with the physical isolation that we are practicing, all of us I hope.

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MIKE AVIS: There's a lot of time where you're, as you said, either crammed in a house with a bunch of people, which is my case. Or maybe you're-- maybe you're just-- you don't have that, that social conduct that you'd like. So, the, the, the reality is right now mental health and physical health are really important and taking care of that's also really important.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. And you know, while we are really depending on this technology, there's a way in which working remotely can, you know, lead us down the path of working all the time, you know? Maybe there's a tendency for the work day to become the whole day or the whole night, you know? I'm aware we're doing this at 9:30 at night while your kids are in bed and that's when it's quiet. And so, you know, establishing some, some boundaries for work and really taking care of our physical and mental health is, is really important. So establishing some, you know, routines for the workday or some structures or finding ways to take breaks from work is really important.

MIKE AVIS: Okay. So that, that leads us to the, I think, the real reason for this podcast is---

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MIKE AVIS: Yes, all these realities are here. Yes, we're coping with a lot of them or maybe not coping as well as we could.

NICKI MONAHAN: M'hmm.

MIKE AVIS: How do we manage it all? What do we do? How do we work through this challenging time right now?

NICKI MONAHAN: Well, given that I knew we were gonna have this conversation tonight, Mike, I reached out and had a conversation this afternoon with one of my favourite mental health experts, Ann Bernardo, one of our college's counsellors. And she had some really good, simple suggestions to, to share with our, our faculty listening audience. And the first one is really try not to catastrophize. If, if we spend a lot of time on the news-- and I know I'm a bit of a news junkie but I'm trying to, you know, not be immersed all the time. But it's easy to think about worst case scenarios and, and, and that can really affect our, our bodies and, and ramp up our stress. So, you know, one of Ann's pieces of advice was really trying-- try not to catastrophize. This is also really a time to, to be kind to ourselves and, and gentle with ourselves. And one of the practices that, that I've engaged in for some time given my background in positive psychology is, is really a practice of monitoring my own self-talk, especially negative talk and---

MIKE AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: When I-- when my own anxiety ramps up, I notice I'm saying, 'Oh, what is this?' Or, 'What is that?' Or, 'I should do this'. And, and, you know, and we really have to turn the volume down on our, our negative self-talk.

MIKE AVIS: Yeah, for sure. I mean, you can get carried away with the-- I like the idea that the, the first one you brought up about catastrophizing is, you know, you get that news cycle running. You're working in your home office or wherever you're working at the kitchen table and you've got that news running, you know, the whole time that you're working. And that certainly can affect, you know, your anxiety levels; it can affect how you-- how you relate to other people, your colleagues. So certainly, that's a-- that's a really good thing to keep an eye on. So, what else is there that we can do?

NICKI MONAHAN: Well, one of the things that you know a lot about is, there's a different experience when you're working from home when you have small children around. And I know there's been lots of discussion on the news about should, should parents be home schooling at this time? And, you know, how do you do a full time job and, and take on the job of being your child's teacher as well? So---

MIKE AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: You know, the advice that I got from Anne really was to again, not expect per--- perfection of yourself as a-- as a teacher to your kids, you know? Even, even one hour a day of school work is, is more than enough but there are lots of ways

for kids to learn when they're at home. They learn through play. You know, if you bake together, you can learn math and reading. If you spend time playing board games, all of those things are ways to, to keep your kids engaged without having to, you know, drill down on a-- on a really formal curriculum so.

MIKE AVIS: In a lot of the conversations-- just going with that and a lot of conversations I've had with faculty in the last week or two is conferencing and talking like we are right now on Teams and everyone else-- a lot of other people are using different apps and Facebook and sorry, Face Time and Zoom and all those, is I've seen so many little heads pop up, you know, from behind-- behind people trying to get their parent's attention. So, yeah. Paying attention to, you know, not only yourself but your kids and your family while you're trying to work is also really important. So one of the things I've done-- I've started to do is just do that. Just walk away from the computer. Close it.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yup.

MIKE AVIS: Get up.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yup.

MIKE AVIS: Go outside. I've got a small little backyard but it's big enough to do-- you know, to have some fun and walk outside, spend some time, an hour with the kids and then back down to my basement bunker. But there are a couple of things I want to just add to that list. I know Jessica Patterson from Academic Excellence, she's got a Team on mindfulness and well-being, a group on Teams and they meet on Mondays and Fridays. And that's been-- I know a lot of people have been enjoying that. So mindfulness and just meditation and just thinking and relaxing and thinking about as you said, your 'what ifs' and your negative self-talk. That's a really good way to, to start to deal with that. There's also---

NICKI MONAHAN: Jess has really built a lovely community. She showed some tremendous leadership in helping people find different forms of practice that, that can keep us really present-focused and centered and, you know, and she offers those sessions on Mondays and Fridays now. And, and it's in the middle of the day so I use it as a way to take a break from my morning work and my afternoon work and, and just take a pause.

MIKE AVIS: And we will-- we'll post that link at the bottom of this podcast whether it's on YouTube or SoundCloud. And so you can link into her on Teams.

NICKI MONAHAN: Great.

MIKE AVIS: There's also an app called Calm that-- that's really good that you can use to give yourself a 15 minute break and just sort of centre yourself. But one of the things

that I-- one of my favourite solutions is talking to-- talking to colleagues and to talking to you, Nicki.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely.

MIKE AVIS: This morning I have-- I was having a moment of 'I'm ready to jump off a cliff' and 10 minutes of conversation with you was more than enough to get me centered, to make me think about, you know, do things that you're good at; do things that are important; don't get stuck in everything else. So really just talking to colleagues and one thing I wanted to mention about that is Microsoft Teams seems to be a place where that's now happening. If you're not on the Team site, we have seen a massive spike in the use of Teams. So maybe about three weeks ago before this all started to happen, we had maybe on the TLX Team site, maybe 100 active users on a good day it'd be 100. The last three or four days, we've had 700 active users. So a lot of people have signed up. A lot of people are using Teams to talk to each other to, to compare ideas, to encourage each other, to share-- to share success stories and challenges so. That team is--

NICKI MONAHAN: It's a-- it's a great resource, Mike, and it really is a place where we are building community and every single day I see faculty reaching out to share ideas, support one another, troubleshoot, problem-solve, etcetera. So while we can't be physically close, we certainly have lots of ways to just stay connected with our colleagues.

MIKE AVIS: Right. So we'll post that link as well to the TLX team on-- TLX group on Teams so you can-- if you don't have that connection, that's a really good place to start just talking to colleagues about some of the challenges that we've discussed.

NICKI MONAHAN: Great.

MIKE AVIS: So I guess, you know, we've put in some time. I think-- hopefully everyone's asleep. It's time for me to go and take my, my time away from technology.

NICKI MONAHAN: And time for me to take my dog out for his final go of the night so.

MIKE AVIS: All right. So, Nicki, it's as always, it's been great to chat with you.

NICKI MONAHAN: Always great to chat with you, Mike and, you know, our final message for today for this podcast, 'teaching in times of uncertainty', stay connected with one another, stay healthy, take care of yourself, take care of each other, take care of your families and keep teaching and keep learning. And stay tuned for our next episode of Xchange.

MIKE AVIS: Have a good night.

NICKI MONAHAN: You too, Mike.

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