

## XChange FORUM Episode 10

### - A Discussion with Dr. Margrit Talpalaru

#### Transcript

[ Music ]

[Patricia:] Hi, everyone. And welcome to the Xchange Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Patricia Robinson, Faculty Facilitator with the Teaching and Learning Exchange or the TLX. And in today's podcast we are focussing on UDL or Universal Design for Learning, specifically related to student assignments. So, I'm here with Dr. Margrit Talpalaru from the Department of English and Communication, in the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies. So, before we get into our discussion, Margrit, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at the college?

[Margrit:] Thanks Patricia. Hi everyone, I've been with the college since 2015. And I've been teaching in the Department of English and Communications, so courses on communication and leadership and research skills within different programs. So, I've had the opportunity to work with a variety of students, and culinary, and hospitality, and nursing, mechanical engineering, and business.

[Patricia:] Wow, so it really sounds like you've worked with students, again, from a variety of interests and goals in so many different disciplines.

[Margrit:] Absolutely, yeah. And in our department actually we make sure to tailor our courses to the interest of students. Obviously, we have set course learning outcomes, but the vehicle through which we deliver those course learning outcomes is tailored toward the interest, and how they can apply what they learn in these courses into other program courses. So, transfer toward other academic purposes and professional goals is something that we work hard on.

[Patricia:] Okay. And so today for this podcast we're here to talk a little bit about UDL or Universal Design for Learning, and how have you been applying that in the courses that you teach, so we're specifically going to look at assignments. So, can you share with us a little bit about how you've actually integrated UDL into student assignments?

[Margrit:] Oh, for sure. There's so many things to say about assignments in UDL. But I'd like to focus specifically on scaffolding, because we don't have all the time in the world, right? So basically, scaffolding is breaking down a major assignment into its constituent parts, and it sounds kind of contra intuitive, because those parts are showcasing the little skills that are needed for the bigger assignment. But for some reason we've inherited the system where our courses are designed with these big assignments, like here's a 50% exam at the end of the term. And teaching experience and the scholarship of teaching, learning are showing that these aren't the best way of building developing and showcasing skills. So,

scaffolding is going back to what are the skills this course is teaching -- how do they build on one another, and how can we have lower stakes or formative assignments that allow our students to practice these skills without having that huge pressure of 70% assignment. In practice, this means linking them to one another to showcase how they build upon one another. So, a useful strategy to show the students how the skills link, and how to demonstrate the relevance for their other courses, and for their professional careers. They illustrate the process of learning, you're using these skills, you're building upon foundation and so it allows for flexibility as well.

[Patricia:] So, when I'm listening to you, instead of that sort of traditional 50% assignment where it's everything is students are expected to demonstrate that outcome in such a huge percent and there's no opportunity to learn from that assignment, there's no opportunity to build those skills from that assignment. So, you're saying through scaffolding and having smaller stakes assignment that allows them that opportunity to learn from the assignments to develop those skills, see how the assignments build on one another. And then again, you're also because you're teaching a com class, you're also talking about how can they apply the skills that they learn in your class into other courses within their program.

[Margrit:] Exactly yeah. So, from the UDL perspective, recruiting learner's interest by demonstrating the relevance of the assignment both to the course but also to their future needs. It allows the students to sustain the effort. And supports persistence throughout the course and throughout the program. And so learners see how these things are connected rather than segmented into I will use my short term memory now to memorize all these things. And then, hopefully, I'll remember some of them. So scaffolding, this is how scaffolding creates engagement. Because if students understand how these smaller skills built onto one another, they're more likely to buy into the whole process and see its authenticity, which is a big part of UDL. And in this way that the assignments connect to the learning material and transfer to workplace ready skills, you can see a continuum, or you can see basically the cycle of learning because it's not linear. So, in terms of action and expression, it gives both the instructor and the learners the flexibility of not doing the same thing over and over again whether that be quizzes or exams or other things. So rather than doing multiple choice tests over and over, that just check for passive understanding. How can we imagine different types of assessments that bring the different skills that students have built in your course, bring different modes of expressions and [inaudible] maybe.

[Patricia:] And so, from that UDL perspective, again, so we know about UDL the importance of recruiting interests. So, engaging our learners, building in authenticity. And again, this piece about different types of types of assessment, right? So perhaps giving learners choice or again bringing in different modes of expression as you said. So, that's how you're using scaffolding and UDL for your assignments. But can you talk a bit about how that relates to the course learning outcomes, specifically?

[Margrit:] And this is so interesting, because this is exactly how course learning outcomes work, they are made up of objectives. So, when we scaffold, we connect the assessments to the learning material as well as to the objectives. So, the smaller instead of having one big assessment that relates to one big course learning outcome, we can have smaller ones that tackle a couple of objectives, and then they build up to the bigger one. So, to give you an

example from one of the courses that I teach -- one of the CLOs there is to analyse post-secondary sources to distinguish purpose and audience, and articulate the main message in a piece of communication. So, this is all about analysis. Where do we start analysis, because it's such an abstract term even though everybody wants students to have analytical skills. How do you break it down? Where do you start? So, you can ask what is the main idea here? What is the purpose of this piece of communication? So, it provides students with an entry point into analysis, this big, huge skill and process that every single other course will use, and of course their jobs irrespective in which field they are will use as well. So, you can move up from comprehension, from understanding simply an application up to into the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy like analyse, evaluate, and create, and put students together into giving each other feedback on, let's say, an elevator pitch. Here's my main idea. What do you think about it? And they can collaborate and help one another. And all of this is just sort of the strategy, let's say, or to get to the course learning outcome. But the medium, it can be whatever. It can be a written paragraph, or it can be a video, or it can be a podcast like we're doing right now, because the skill is the same. And that's what UDL gets at, is that you are teaching a skill, you're having students practice a skill. But the way that the students express it can be up to their choice. So, when I'm teaching purpose, and on audience, and style, and medium, which are all interconnected, the students can demonstrate the skill in any medium they want. So, that's how it relates to the principle of engagement -- to have a better chance of engaging students when the medium is more familiar with what they experience every day. You know, TikTok, Instagram, these are real things that our students use of their own volition [chuckle] on a daily basis. And it takes a complex set of skills to produce a TikTok video, right, that gets people's attention. And when we demonstrate the connection to students' real life and their interest, they're going to have, multiple means of engagement over there and think about oh, I can translate this in my own representation.

[Patricia:] And, again, just from that example and what you're describing there. So again, for those people who know about Bloom's Taxonomy and analysis as a higher level, but again, you're preparing students for the real world, right, outside of the workplace. So they are learning in your classroom these really important skills that are necessary not only for the course but, again, as you said earlier, for other courses in their program but also in the world of the workplace. So, collaborating with their colleagues, keeping in mind, again, audience, medium, all of these things are really important, and again connecting to the outside world. So, I have another question, Margrit. So, you are teaching communication course and I know that you probably have, your students probably have to write an essay of some type. So, how would you build or scaffold, so, you've talked about this elevator pitch. And so let's say the students, again, you said that they can choose a different media maybe a video or something or TikTok or Instagram. So, from that elevator pitch, using a different medium, how do you build or scaffold this towards writing an essay, for example?

[Margrit:] Yeah, this is a great question. And actually the idea of writing an essay, we're sort of trying to slowly move away from that too, because again we're sort of stripping it down. What is the actual course learning outcome about? If it's about building and creating an argument. Again, higher learning Bloom's taxonomy to create now, if it's about creating an argument, does it have to come in essay format or can it come in other formats. So, this is

where we get back to the UDL and multiple means of action and expression. So, I mentioned the pitch and that is sort of building toward the bigger persuasive text that the students need to do to demonstrate argumentative skills. And we can get there via multiple roots. We can scaffold toward it. And this is how it mirrors a workplace project which increasingly work is project based. It's no longer the same day every day, although email seems to be ubiquitous. Our goals are more project based nowadays. So, why not mirror it in our classes. It's not a one and done. You do get opportunities to present parts of it work in progress, to get feedback from your colleagues. So, this is the value of scaffolding is, you have students present their argument in whatever form you want. And then, you have everybody give feedback to a number of people. So, in my peer workshops, I have them do feedback to three or four people. And it's guided, I give students a template and I tell them yes or no is not acceptable. You have to give people as specific feedback as you can. So that gets them thinking okay, what is the actual thing that has gotten my attention here? And then that piece goes back into translating it for their own purposes. So, then everybody takes the feedback that they get from their peers and from me, from the instructors and rework their initial pitch, their initial argument into the next submission. And yet the process of learning is sort of more authentically displayed this way. And with metacognition, thinking about how am I doing this? This is how my colleague did it. How do I do it? It serves to sort of get, what is the word that I'm looking for, imprinted on their brains, right? And they can use it next time because oh, this is how I did it in that course or this is how I did it in school. I remember, I don't think they'll remember the course exactly. But in college, this is how I did it? And it's so much easier to recollect. It's so much easier to access that skill whether they have to present at work. Whether they have to you put a video up on TikTok, and persuade people to follow them, whatever. It is the skill that we're teaching is the same. And the more we can get students to understand and to get used to the idea of process, the more they'll sort of be able to get the skills, I think. Use them going further.

[Patricia:] Yeah, and again that piece about that feedback and providing guidance for your learners for feedback that's really important too. Because they, again, if work is project based, they're going to be working with their colleagues. So, you're integrating these additional skills in their, which they're going to need in their workplace. And that metacognition as you said is such an important part of learning. So, if students can really clarify, how are they learning? What are the steps that they're doing? And here, a classmate also talked about that. That's another option for them to learn from. Because maybe they're doing something the same way, but if they hear one of their friends, this is how they do it. This is their process for doing it. That opens up for them a new way of learning or trying something different. And so, this piece of ownership about students learning, again, it's really some something that's important. And we really hope that our students can transfer this into the workplace. And so, the way that you're using or the way that you're integrating UDL into your course and scaffolding these assignments, I think, is really helping these learners to become independent and help them take responsibility for their learning, or self-regulation, something we would call self-regulation. So, helping students building their strengths, creating goals, in order to, again, improve better for the next time.

[Margrit:] Absolutely, and it's also about taking risks. It's so much harder to take a risk when you have a 50% assignment. But this, we don't have the opportunity to see work in progress a lot. We don't see drafts. Whenever we see something that circulated, it's already like the finished product. So, what that means for writing, for example, for something that's published, it's not just one person who worked on it, and it's not just one person who did it and that's it. And so, being able to show our students the messiness of the process is invaluable, and it leads to creating this community of learners where we engage with one another, support one another, and have a learning community where we can take risk and we can sort of, again, there's a word for this and I can't find it right now, experiment is the word that I'm looking for. The students get to experiment and bring in hopefully their entire life experiences, their backgrounds, their point of view that we want them to bring to class. So, UDL helps in building, for example, an anti-racist class because it allows us to review our assumptions and, hopefully, challenge them. So, when we do have a huge assessment that we give to our students, our assignment is that they will be able to go through all of these smaller steps to get there. And the reality is that our students come from many backgrounds, from very different educational backgrounds too. And we can see this in our classes. Some systems of education prioritize some forms of learning versus others. Here, we prioritize critical thinking way more than comprehension, and just be able to replicate the textbook. So, breaking stuff down through scaffolding allows for deeper participation, so it allows for authentic diversity. And the reality of our workplaces today is that we have to prepare students for flexibility and resiliency. So this under this means understanding how things develop over time, how circumstances evolve. And all the little things you have to take into consideration in business, and healthcare and working with patients. So, if we are able to actually make our learning community authentically model the real world diversity, it means we honour this, and our students will be able to honour it over time in their careers.

[Patricia:] You're really highlighting that piece about learning as a process, and that learning can be messy. And the importance of making mistake. And if we go back to thinking of how we learn as children, we learn through play, we learn through experimenting, we learn through making all those mistakes. And so, allowing that to happen in your course and supporting it through an intentional way, I think it's really important for the learners to experience that and be aware of that. And I think it also helps build confidence too, because it's through that process of making those mistakes and learning about what your mistakes are, you develop that resiliency and that confidence that okay, it took me three times to do this, but I got it right. So, I can do it, right? And working with learners that are, that are diverse in very different ways, we learn from that as well, right? So, we're modelling the workplace. It is important to learn from different perspectives, and different ways of approaching something. So, I think all of that is such an important thing that you're including in your courses.

[Margrit:] Yeah, and I really want to go back to the idea of support that you mentioned, because this is like authentic support for the students. But when you flip it around, and you think about the amount of time that it takes to develop this authentic assessment that requires scaffolding. We can start a conversation about the institutional support for faculty to be able to develop and sustain this because as we want to model for our students, we

need this model for us too. It takes way less time to come up with some quiz questions, multiple choice quiz questions, and then change them, have a bank of them. And then, they get automatically graded. But the amount of time, and empathy, and support that scaffolding and authentic assessments require from faculty needs to also be recognized and supported institutionally as well. So, I know we've thought a lot of support and creativity from the TLX. Every single time I've had a question about, is it okay to ask students to do either a video or an essay? How do we make it equivalent? I've always found great support in a TLX, but I have to say from my point of view, that takes a lot of time and giving feedback, and every single stage also takes a lot of time. So, understanding supports, and how our students need to be supported sort of indirectly or directly by the college is also a conversation that needs to happen, for sure.

[Patricia:] And what you're saying there too, again, about that process for faculty, again, developing those assignments. So again, we're learning in the process as well. So, you do an assignment with the student, and you find out, okay, these are the things that didn't work, these are the things weren't clear. And so, then you would revise it for the next semester perhaps. So, absolutely, as teachers, we're learning as we're going through this as well. We're not going to just come in there and, okay, I'm applying UDL and I'm scaffolding these assignments and it's going to be perfect. So, there is that, as you said, there's this process for us as well. And I think, again, having some college supports and having peer supports with faculty getting, as you would have, your students give each other feedback on their work. There's so much value in having our colleagues or asking our colleagues for feedback on our own assignments that we've developed, or our rubrics that we've developed. Working together I think is really important part of our job at the college, because I think it enables us to better support our learner.

[Margrit:] Absolutely. Yeah.

[Patricia:] So, what advice would you give to a teacher who's maybe going to try this out for the first time? Let's say maybe they don't teach a com class, but they want to start scaffolding assignments. Do you have any advice that you would give them?

[Margrit:] Oh totally. I would say start from the course learning outcome. Look at the objectives. And build from there rather than trying to assess for the bigger outcome, try to break it down into these small objectives. And start small, start with one assignment. Maybe break it down into two, if you usually have 50% or whatever even smaller, have a pre-assignment that is maybe 10% where students can give you a draft or an outline that you give feedback on. And then, if you can build in that peer workshop, peer feedback amongst the students themselves, it's going to be all the more valuable for them to see to create a community of learners as well. And then go from there, see what works, see what doesn't work, see how much more time you need to put in. Especially because when you break it down and you have to give feedback. And it's always quality of feedback, and it requires your engagement. But what I've heard from students, is that they've come -- and this is like throughout a term from term -- they come into a college English course thinking oh, I'm a terrible writer, oh I can't write, oh my English is awful, oh it's terrible. And they leave understanding the process of putting together not just writing but putting together an argument, because it's broken down into smaller pieces that are easier to tackle. And

then they see models at every stage, and they manage to go through them and to understand how that works.

[Patricia:] Actually, I was I was going to just ask you, if you ask your students for feedback, that was my question. So, I'm glad that you shared that with me, because, again, I think that that's an important piece, that we should remember as faculty that when we are trying something new getting feedback from our learners. So how was this for you? What did you learn from it? What could be improved for next time? Again, because we are here for our learners. So, it's important that we get their insight into their learning process.

[Margrit:] Absolutely. I think that's absolutely key, because I think we can sort of come up with all kinds of ideas that sound really lovely in theory, and then when we apply them, they don't really work. So that's why I --

[Patricia:] Been there [laughing] Right?

[Margrit:] That's why I like to always ask my students at different stages, how is this going for you? What's working? What's not working? And maybe they don't know to tell me exactly what how to change things. But that's up to me, that's my job. What I need to know is, what part of it is working for them? What part of it isn't working? And then I have to deal with the whys and hows, right?

[Patricia:] Yeah exactly. And that flexibility is so important too as instructors. We need to be really flexible. And I think that that's how we grow and develop as instructors is through trying these new things, involving our learners, rather than just kind of, okay, I've done this assignment every semester, I'm going to do it all the same. I feel like there's not as much opportunity for us, teachers, as teacher learners to be growing and developing. And we need to be growing alongside our students. Obviously we're growing in different ways, but our students are such an important piece of how we can grow. So I think taking this as an opportunity for our learners, but also for our own professional growth.

[Margrit:] Absolutely. Our teachers are most important, our students are most important teachers is what I say. Yes. So, maybe I'll say it again after a break because I just loved it. Our students are our most important teachers. So we have to listen to them and make and build opportunities for them to give us feedback. And, hopefully, have the time to ponder that feedback and process it, and become a better at delivering the kind of learning that our students need.

[Patricia:] Yeah. Nice. Thank you, Margrit. It's been such a pleasure to talk to you. I feel like that's a really nice way to end our discussion. [Laughing].

[Margrit:] Thank you so much, Patricia. I was really [inaudible] --

[Patricia:] Thank you.

[Margrit:] -- chat with you about this.

[Patricia:] Thank you for joining me.

[ Music ]