

Xchange Podcast Episode 12

MICHAEL AVIS: Hi there, and welcome to XChange, the TLX podcast for faculty by faculty. I'm Michael Avis, faculty facilitator and professor, and I'm joined here as usual by Nicki Monahan, faculty coach with the TLX. How's it going, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: It's going great, Mike. I had a really low-key, restful holiday break, and I'm really excited to be back in the winter academic semester 2021.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: How are you doing?

MICHAEL AVIS: I'm -- I am, too. I feel I needed the two weeks. I feel rejuvenated. But the power has just gone out in my house and in my neighbourhood. So if this isn't indicative of 2020 and 2021, I don't know what is. So we're recording this on my cell phone using data, and we've got other people using Teams. So when the power comes back on, you might hear some beeps and bops and the furnace might start up. So there's probably going to be some noise, but that's how we do things at XChange. But --

NICKI MONAHAN: That is, Mike, and that's so 2020. Maybe not 2021. If something can go wrong, it will. But one of the things I love about working with you, Mike, is you'll always figure out how to make it work and troubleshoot a solution, so.

MICHAEL AVIS: I really hope it is not 2021. I hope 2021 goes a lot smoother than this.

NICKI MONAHAN: Me as well. But it is a new semester, and we have some exciting news to share. I'm delighted that today we have joining us a member of the TLX team who's been away on professional development leave completing her EDD. So we'll be right back with Dr. Patty Robinson.

[music]

NICKI MONAHAN: And Patty, welcome back to the TLX. How's it going?

MICHAEL AVIS: Welcome back, Patty!

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: Thank you, Nicki and Mike. It's so good to be back. I really missed everyone, and I'm really looking forward to reconnecting with all the GBC folks.

NICKI MONAHAN: We missed you too, Patty. And like most of us, you're probably really happy to kick 2020 to the curb and say hello to 2021. And you know many of us use new year's as an opportunity to create new year's resolutions. But anybody who's been in a gym in the fourth week of January knows that even the best of intentions don't always pan out. So we like to call this episode of XChange "Turning Intentions Into Actions: Making Your New Year's Resolutions Work for You and for Your Students." So Patty, you picked an interesting year to be away from the college --

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: [Laughing] Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- to say the least. And now that you're back, I'm wondering, how have you prepared to start the new academic semester?

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: Well, good question. So what I've been doing during this January down week is actually practice my pre-pandemic going-to-work routine. So I was on PD leave when the first lockdown happened in March. And because I was just at home writing my thesis, not much had changed for me. Like I was already wearing sweat pants every day and had my wet hair in a bun.

MICHAEL AVIS: Sounds nice.

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: But now that I'm back at work, I've needed to make a distinction between working from home as a student to working from home in my job. So I've been practising my old work routine pre-pandemic, which is getting up early, hopping in the shower, doing my hair, putting in my contact lenses, finding an outfit to wear. So this really seems like a lot, and I'm really out of practice, and it just takes forever to get ready now. So I'm hoping by the end of this week, I will feel a bit more in professional work mode than when I was on my PD leave. So that's number one, is making a change to my routine. And number two is about being present. So again, on my PD leave, I just needed to show up for myself. But now that I'm back at work, I need to show up for my colleagues. So again, going back to my pre-pandemic, pre-PD-leave routine, I used to get up super early, make my breakfast, listen to the radio, play with the dog, look at Instagram or whatever. I just needed some time to do my own thing before getting back into my work headspace for the day. So I've been practising the same thing this week, but when my work day starts, I'm all ready to be present.

NICKI MONAHAN: Patty, I really love those two things that you focussed on in terms of getting ready to be professional again and come back to work. And the first, being present with colleagues, which is so important when we're not physically present with one another. And the second one, having good work routines that help us distinguish between work time and the rest of our lives, which can be a lot harder when we're working from home. And I'm thinking those are great suggestions for our students as well. Some of our counselling faculty have told us that students have been struggling even to maintain basic sleep/wake routines. They're logging on to classes literally before they even get out of bed and being present in class maybe only in the most basic way. That is, you know, logged on, but not really there. In December, I read a piece from my favourite teaching and learning newsletter, The Teaching Professor newsletter, from a professor who wrote a letter to his students for the start of the new semester with some practical suggestions. And they included things like get out of bed before you go to class, even if class just means turning on your laptop, or put on a different shirt when you're studying than when you're lounging around playing video games. And if it's possible, he said -- and we know that's not all always possible for all of our learners -- but try and create a different physical space where you do your schoolwork than where you scroll Instagram or play Minecraft. And finally, he said, you know, when it's possible, turn your cameras on in synchronous sessions. And maybe that's only possible in very small classes. And in our context, there might be reasons for privacy or safety that it's not possible. But if it is, when our students are speaking and they turn on their camera, it's a way to be much more present, and we're way less likely to

multitask or be distracted. So those were some suggestions that he had for students starting the new academic semester. But Patty, given that you were a student this past year, what are some of the important things that you learnt that our faculty might pass on to their students as we start winter 2021?

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: Oh, yeah, that's a great question, Nicki. So yeah. Actually, just transitioning from work to being a student was pretty difficult at first because it's a whole new routine again. But what I did, what helped me, was I just kept a little book where I wrote everything down. Like this is what I need to get done for this week, and this is what I need to get done today. And then at the end of the day, I would cross off what I had accomplished and I would circle what I still needed to do. And then I'd start a new page for the next day and list out again what do I need to get done this week and what do I need to get done by end of day tomorrow. So after about a week or two of doing that and then looking back through the pages of my book, I could see the tasks that I wasn't getting done - - all the ones that were circled -- and the tasks that I had completed -- the ones that were crossed out. And it became really clear to me that I was getting done all the easy things, like send an email to so-and-so, find this article online. And the ones that I wasn't getting done were the tasks which needed my focussed attention with no interruptions. So that meant I needed to block off chunks of time when I knew I wouldn't be interrupted, so making sure someone else in the house could take the dog for a walk or make dinner or making sure that I had pre-planned or pre-prepared all those things. I also tried to make it clear that like don't interrupt me today in time. Just pretend I'm not even here. So over a week or two of trying that, I was able to identify when I was most productive or which chunks of time that worked best for me and others in the house so that they could pretend that I wasn't here. And then that way, I was actually able to complete the more cognitively challenging work that I had to do.

NICKI MONAHAN: Patty, it sounds like you really did a good job on, you know, task management and also time management and also negotiating workspace with someone else. And they're really great suggestions that we could pass on to our students. We do know that our students are often sharing laptops with other members of their family, so maybe they need to schedule when they have access to a device, or students have work schedules, but maybe they need to plan their study or assignment time in a more focussed way, especially for activities that require uninterrupted attention or, as you described, more cognitively challenging. And while these suggestions might be valuable for our faculty to pass on to our students, I'm thinking it might really be useful for us as well. Over the last semester, Mike and I talked to a lot of faculty members. And one of the things that we heard over and over again -- it was kind of a refrain -- was it's all work all of the time. And we know that teaching's a demanding job, but it's not meant to be 24/7. So one of the promises I made to myself at the beginning of this semester was to be more efficient with my time. I clearly prioritized what my biggest work projects are for this semester, and I've already blocked off time in my calendar to do them first. I also realized way back in March that sitting at a computer for eight hours a day is terrible for my physical health. And I've been lucky enough to have my dog, Morley, to remind me to get up and move, but I haven't been as good at scheduling regular lunch breaks. So this semester, that's something I'm going to add to my daily calendar. I've also started using my phone alarm to remind me to stretch,

even if it's just for 90 seconds at a time. And I learnt a great technique from our wonderful colleague, Chef Jason Inniss, who shared with me the 20-20 rule. And if you don't know it, he said every 20 minutes, avert your eyes from the computer screen. Look at something different far away for 20 seconds. So those are some of the techniques and strategies that I really built into my new plan for the new academic semester. And Mike, what about you? Any intentions for the new year? One that's your -- you know, not a new year's resolution, but one that you're actually turning into action plans?

MICHAEL AVIS: Well, as always, the road is paved with good intentions. First, shout-out to Chef Jason Inniss.

NICKI MONAHAN: You betcha.

MICHAEL AVIS: Pleasure to work with that gentlemen. All this sort of what you guys were talking about makes me think about how many times I was sitting at my computer thinking, "Oh, have I been outside today yet? [Laughing] Wow. You know, have I opened the door and gone out?" You, Patty, we just -- did you ever have that experience when you were working with your PhD, that you just felt like you were in your house all the time?

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: Oh, for sure, especially in the summer, when I really had my head down and was writing. In the summer and fall, like, you know, somebody would text me, "It's so nice out. We went out for a walk," and I'm like "What? What time is it?"

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: "Like is it sunny out?"

MICHAEL AVIS: I feel like in the last -- and I know Nicki and I have talked about this, and probably the same for you Nick. I feel like in the last, you know, months sometimes I just -- I think, "Wow, I haven't been outside in 10 hours. You know, it's -- oh, it's almost dark out." [Laughing] So I think maybe a new year's intention is to make sure, like Jason Inniss' advice, the 20-20 rule, maybe do a, you know, 60-20 rule. After 60, minutes get up and walk outside for 20 minutes or do something like that.

NICKI MONAHAN: That's a great idea, you know, and sometimes --

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- we take these strategies and make them make them our own. So Jason Inniss has got his 20-20. You've got your 60-20.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: I like that, and --

MICHAEL AVIS: Maybe that's the -- maybe that's a new resolution I just created right now on this podcast. Who knows.

NICKI MONAHAN: For sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: So just thinking about my new year's, I happen to have this great coach. And her name is Nicki Monahan, and she helps me work through all my inefficiencies, which are legion. There's lots of inefficiencies, and Nicki helps me sort of identify them. So I plan to prioritize things. One of the things that I'm really bad at is I like to strategize and innovate and think about new things, but then I sort of throw them out in the wind and sometimes don't work on them. So I like to do that, but I'm not as dedicated as I should be, and I'm not as organized as you two fine people are. I know that if I did a daily list, I probably would never follow it. So one of the things that I'm going to do is make sure that I pick something that's really important and that I know I'm going to succeed with. So I know if I said that I was going to do a daily ledger and circle the things that I didn't do and underline the things that I did, I'd have a lot of circles, and I'd probably leave to failure, and I don't want to do that. So I want to pick some things that I know that I can succeed with.

NICKI MONAHAN: Good plan, Mike. Good plan. Build for success.

MICHAEL AVIS: Build for success. And for me, these are smaller things. And just knowing that I can achieve a few small things, it makes me feel good. So one of the things that -- one of the challenges I always had when I was teaching in com was the rubrics. And the rubrics were the bane of my existence because I would mark, you know, 120 essays, and I would think to myself, "This rubric has got a few problems. It doesn't work." And then I would say, "Okay. As soon as I'm done marking, I'm going to change these rubrics," and I never did. So these rubrics always came back every term to haunt me. So one of the things that I would do is make one small change. Go into one rubric. Change some wording or do something small that you know you can achieve. And then when you come back to them again in the next term, you can say, "Oh, thank goodness I changed all that up." So for me, the new year means small changes, things that I can do, things that will make me feel good and just go from there.

NICKI MONAHAN: I love that, Mike, because you focussed on not creating resolutions that you know are bound to fail and focussing on things that you know that will build success.

MICHAEL AVIS: I've been that guy. I've been that guy in the gym on -- four weeks into January, so I know what that feels like.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. I think we've all been there.

MICHAEL AVIS: Hey, for sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: So this is a -- this is a new semester, and it's a great time for all So this is a new semester, and it's a great time for all of us to establish new, healthy routines. We can all take a few minutes to think about the end of the last semester. What worked for you? What didn't work? What changes or tweaks can you make to help you feel more energized in your work? And the first week of class is a great time to have this conversation with your students, too. Maybe if you have a synchronous class, that would be a good opening topic. Check in with your students. Find out what went well for them last semester and what they might think about doing differently. Or it could be a great discussion board topic. How about giving your students some time to reflect on last semester and put their own plans into actions, you know?

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, that's really nice, because you could -- you know, you could say, "Let's work on that," because we talk about soft skills, too, right. Let's work on one thing we're going to change, and then that check-in could be part of your -- part of your teaching, right. Check in with them. That's great.

NICKI MONAHAN: Exactly. And our students may have had struggles that we're not aware of, and maybe sharing them with their fellow students can help them brainstorm some good strategies, so asking my colleague Patty, you know, "What do you do?" I never thought about that, circling and underlining, but that's something I might add into my little daily check-in with myself. Patty also suggested, you know, our faculty could use a brainstorming app like Padlet to allow students to share ideas, talk about their progress and success or even about the obstacles, because if we're not putting our intentions into actions, we need to figure out what's going in the way. And as always, when we make plans, we need to revisit them every week and follow up. So, you know, today's podcast has really been about starting the new semester off well, taking our intentions and putting them into action, and supporting one another. And in this time of online learning, we can all support one another to adapt and to adopt healthy ways of working and learning together. Patty, we're so thrilled to have you back with us.

MICHAEL AVIS: We are.

NICKI MONAHAN: And I know you're going to bring great ideas to the table, too.

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: I'm so happy to be back. It's so good to be back.

MICHAEL AVIS: And I was going to say that this new term is going to bring a new voice to the XChange podcast which we are thrilled to have. It's nice to have a doctor in the midst, right, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: Exactly. Doctor [inaudible].

MICHAEL AVIS: Are we allowed to call you Dr. Patty, or is that how --

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: I'm -- yeah, just Patty's fine. Just Patty.

MICHAEL AVIS: Okay. I might just --

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: I might do it like my grandmother. When I'm annoyed with you, I'll say, "Now, Dr. Patty."

DR. PATTY ROBINSON: That's right. When you're mad at me, you can use -- then use it then.

MICHAEL AVIS: Which won't happen very often. So thanks, everybody, for listening. We hope that you have a great start to the semester. We hope that you're able to, you know, create some small resolutions that work for you and that work for your students and that we can help support our students do that as well. So thanks for listening to XChange, the TLX podcast for faculty by faculty, and we'll see you again next time.

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