

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and learning and sustaining community for everyone at Thompson Rivers University. I'm your host, Brenna Clarke Gray, coordinator of educational technologies, and this podcast is a project of your friends over at Learning Technology and Innovation. We're housed within Open Learning, but we support the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc within the unseated traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And this week, I'm thinking about inspiration. I'm thinking about inspiration so much that I'm not going to talk very much this week. I'll tell you about it in a second.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So this week I have the joy of being joined by Mike and Michelle, two students who work with the Peer Academic Coaching program. As you've probably noticed from the tone of these essays over the last few weeks, I've been having a rough time transitioning back to the return to campus. I'm not sure if it's that I'm not always 100% sure of how my role fits within the university in this new moment, or I'm just burnt out like everybody else or what, but I haven't always felt the same kind of verve, enthusiasm that I was able to muster for most of last year. That's why it was so important, I think, that I was sent Mike and Michelle. Elizabeth Templeman recommended them as potential interviewees. And they've just got me thinking about what did joyful thing it is to get to work with students and what a joyful thing it is to serve students. I'm really lucky. I'm going to let them remind us how lucky we all are to be members of this community here at TRU.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Today I am here with Michelle and Mike, who are peer academic coaches here at TRU. We're going to talk a little bit about what that program is and how it supports learners. But first I'll invite them to introduce themselves. Michelle, I think you were going to go first.

Michelle Raglin:

Sure. Thank you. My name is Michelle Raglin. And yes, as you said, I am a peer academic coach. I got into it because I also do supplemental learning leading. That one's a mouthful. And I've been doing that for a couple of years now. And I have been a student here at TRU for... This is my third year. I'm studying philosophy and doing my bachelor of arts. I dabbled with the idea of doing my business degree, but I think I have a lot going on right now, so that might just get put on a back burner and we'll just see what happens. So yeah, that's me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Sounds good. And Mike?

Mike Harrington:

My name is Mike. I'm a peer academic coach with Michelle. I think I'm probably the newest member to all of these teams. So it's all a little fuzzy for me. I've been at TRU for... Physically, I've been at TRU for two months. In spirit, I've been at TRU for a year and two months because I studied online last year, as we all did, because it's... What are we? November 2021. So yeah. So I'm in my second year of law and the whole for year was online. I applied to... I didn't actually apply to be a peer academic coach.

Michelle Raglin:

Me either.

Mike Harrington:

I applied to be an SL leader like Michelle is because SL is so helpful in first year law, particularly doing it online. But I think what happened was when Elizabeth interviewed me and saw that at that time, I was 49 years old and was holding down a job and a family, probably hanging by a thread. But I think because I had had some different experiences in life that I think she saw that I could maybe be a useful peer academic coach for some of the younger students who maybe haven't lived through quite as much. So that's my background.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I like it. Well, this is really good. It gives me a good snapshot of both of you. I wonder if for our listeners who might not be familiar with SL, maybe we could start by you both giving me a sense of what that program is. And then I want to talk about Peer Academic Coaching, because I think that's a newer program here at TRU that that folks really might not know about.

Michelle Raglin:

So I took Philosophy 1110, Critical Thinking, in Fall of 2019, which was my first semester on campus. And I actually did get to do that semester on campus. And I just loved it. I went to every SL session that I could, and it was so helpful to me that when I got the end of semester survey, I said I wanted to be involved in the program. So unfortunately, my first experience with leading SL was online, and it was terrifying. I got to go through the terror all over again this past fall when I got to do my first SL session in person. But yeah, what we do is we practice the things that we go over and that have been gone over in class and get good at it. It's basically just a peer study session, but it has some structure to it. That's I guess the easiest way to describe it.

Mike Harrington:

I've never led a session, but I used to teach at SAIT and I lived a number of lives compared to many of my classmates. So my experience with SL was as a student. Law school is weird, right? It's like fight club. Nobody seems to want to talk about it. And so you go into law and... Actually, funny story. I met an upper year... All the upper years at TRU have been really gracious and helpful. And that's something that TRU is known for in the legal community, just as an aside. I remember on some Zoom webinar, I met an upper year who told me that the first time somebody offered her their condensed annotated notes, their CAN, she actually thought they were offering her a can of soup for lunch.

Mike Harrington:

So this is just how naive and ignorant we all are of law coming in. And then you magnify that. You pour gasoline on it because you're doing it by Zoom. So they had selected two classes, Constitutional Law, which is the boogeyman that everybody's scared of in first year, and another class, which has this year been changed appropriately to a more difficult class. But anyway, so we had two SL classes offered to us and they were just so unbelievably helpful. And I really don't know how I would've gotten through Constitutional Law without them. So yeah, exactly what Michelle said, peer-led practice, hypothetical problems. Because the other thing about law school that's scary is the exams are different. And until you've seen them, you really have no idea what to expect. And then it takes, well, in my experience, some time to get proficient at them. So yeah, that's SL in a really big nutshell, I suppose, but that was my

experience with it. And it meant a lot to me. So I applied to do it. And then Elizabeth diverted me to somewhere where my grey beard would be more applicable.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I will confess to you both that back in the dark ages of 2002, we didn't call it SL at Carleton. We called it PASS, peer assisted study sessions. But I was a PASS leader. So I did this work in my own undergrad. And it's funny because when I arrived at TRU, I met Elizabeth for some other reason, but she knew my mentor at Carleton when I had worked there. They knew each other quite well and had established these programs around the same time. And I remember thinking that supplemental instruction is this family that you enter into and you don't really know all the different ways that it's going to enrich and expand your life. But it does. It seems to over and over again. And I think a lot about how the work I do now, which is faculty support, which is basically just supplemental instruction for professors, really.

Mike Harrington:

Yeah. To that note, I'm also... So once Elizabeth tricked me into Peer Academic Coaching, she then passed me up to Jenna Goddard 00:09:41, who tricked me into working at the writing centre as a writing tutor. And as a quick aside, both of those experiences have been incredibly rewarding for me, and I'm doing much better in my studies and in my writing because of those experiences and because of the training that I was put through to do it. So yes, I completely understand what you're saying. And it seems like somehow, it's going to enrich all of our lives in bizarre ways that we hadn't thought of.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's like a cult, but in a good way.

Michelle Raglin:

Yeah. And I also feel like when you show up at the door for one something, you get voluntold into a bunch of other somethings. And-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This is a good segue maybe for you both to tell me about how supplemental learning segued into Peer Academic Coaching and what that program is. If you've never heard about Peer Academic Coaching, what do you need to know, if you're a student, about the program and why you should check it out?

Michelle Raglin:

I mean, ultimately for me, my experience leading both has been that supplemental learning is group dynamics where Peer Academic Coaching is me and one other person. It's essentially the same thing, except in supplemental learning, we deal directly with the course material, whereas in Peer Academic Coaching, I've tended to focus more on life as the material, if that is a good analogy.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Can you say a little more about that?

Michelle Raglin:

Yeah. The people that I've worked with so far have wanted help with their time management skills. I've really focused on looking at the big picture of their whole entire life and not just their schooling, but

their social life and their online life and their work life and how that all ties together and has an impact on each other because we don't just show up at TRU as just students. We're a bunch of different things, and all of those things have to fit together. And sometimes, that can be difficult to get that puzzle to look the way it's supposed to or the way we want it to. So that's where mainly my appointments have been is in that realm. And maybe Mike can speak to something different about his experience with that.

Mike Harrington:

Yeah, that was well said. So I don't want to try and follow that up. So today at lunch, I was having lunch, and the classmate and friend who was hired to be the SL leader that I applied for, there were three of us sitting there eating lunch, and the third person asked how I got this job, if you will. And I said, "Well, I applied for it, but Brianna won the course award in Constitutional Law. So she kicked me out of the position." So I think Elizabeth threw me a bone. But I think Elizabeth is a bit of a ninja in reading people and understanding their strengths and what they can bring to various programs. And so she told me, "You have a lot on your plate. The Peer Academic Coaching experience for you will be more manageable. It'll be fewer hours." As Michelle pointed out, it's one-on-one coaching.

Mike Harrington:

I mean, you'd have to ask Elizabeth, but I think what happened in hindsight was she had asked me some interview question, and I had said something to the effect of that I saw myself as a player coach in first year law. Not to mean that I'm smarter than my classmates. The player coach on a senior hockey team is slower and scoring fewer goals, but maybe able to handle the pressures of the playoffs better. And that's certainly where I am at this point in life. So experiences I've had with Peer Academic Coaching so far, like Michelle explained, it's very multifaceted and it's very holistic. I believe I'm the first person to be both a writing tutor and a peer academic coach. And the interesting thing about that is more than 50% of my writing tutor appointments, tutoring appointments end up dealing with some form of Peer Academic Coaching.

Mike Harrington:

Because if you think about it, the student comes in oftentimes... And this is interesting. They often come in because they have a major in X, but they've taken an elective in Y. They realize that they're out of their wheelhouse now. Their GPA is hanging on this silly elective that they thought was going to be a walk in the park, which actually Michelle, is generally philosophy. And they have no idea how difficult it is. So they're under a lot of stress. The timeline is looming. All of the stressors in their life are building up and piling up on them, and they're nearing their breaking point. So they book a writing centre appointment thinking that they're going to focus on their writing, but quite often, they can't.

Mike Harrington:

So a long time ago, I was teaching at SAIT and I asked the coordinator if I could implement a new orientation protocol. And I said, "It's going to take time up out of class. But what I'm finding is the students are deer in headlights for the first two weeks. And they're not hearing anything that any professor is saying. So if we can address that, if we can talk about it openly and share our feelings and understand that we're not alone, we're all in this together, we all have imposter syndrome together, then maybe we'll actually make more ground than just ignoring this." And that's what I'm finding with Peer Academic Coaching and writing tutoring is, "I'm from Nigeria. I have never experienced winter. I can't find the food I like. I don't have a winter coat. I don't have any friends here. I don't understand the

education system. I don't know what's expected of me." Those sorts of things are what quite often brings students to us.

Mike Harrington:

I don't want to veer too far off here, but it's like any sort of coaching/counselling where they're ostensibly there for one reason, but really there's a whole bunch of factors that brought them there. And I think just through the limited experience I have so far, being open to that and looking for those signs is really what it's about, and sending them out the door with a little bit more confidence, and feeling a little bit more recharged and ready to take on the next task.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, writing too can be a uniquely vulnerable task compared to maybe studying for a multiple choice exam or whatever, right? You're faced with so many stare at the blank page. There's all the anxiety that's engendered in your sense of self worth around writing. People have a lot of baggage around writing. So I'm not surprised to hear that when they come for support, there's a lot of dealing with all the other stuff before you can even sit down and do the writing. Michelle, do you experience that as a peer coach? Do you find a similar kind of helping with just the larger stressors and anxieties of life in addition to the academic in academic coaching?

Michelle Raglin:

Yeah. I mean, usually people's academics are struggling because of life. People get into university because they are motivated and smart, not because they want to sit at home and play Xbox and watch Netflix.

Mike Harrington:

But we do.

Michelle Raglin:

But we do. Yeah. But that's the problem. So people are struggling because they can't put down the Xbox controller or whatever. And we had to pick things that were our specialties, which Mike mentioned the word or the phrase imposter syndrome. And I went, "Oh boy, what am I special at in academic coaching?" I mean, I feel like I need an academic coach sometimes. Am I allowed to do that? Am I allowed to feel that way? But I picked that I was good at time management. And when I am on top of my time management, it's spectacular. But of course, I have a life too. So sometimes that imposter syndrome creeps up because the things that affect everybody else's life also affect mine. I have a social life and I also have a Netflix subscription. So sometimes, those things become more important than writing my philosophy paper. And then I have 3,000 words due and a cursor blinking menacingly at me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love this because you're both really hitting on the peer part of Peer Academic Coaching, the importance of seeing someone else moving through a program of study or a course, or even just an assignment. It's really power powerful to know that someone else can do it because sometimes it feels like the task must be impossible or that you alone are uniquely challenged, whereas when you get involved in some kind of peer learning, whether it's supplemental learning or Peer Academic Coaching or the writing centre, you come to realize that everybody's problems, while not the same, everybody is

struggling, even often the person who's in the mentor role. Either they've overcome those struggles or they're learning how to overcome those struggles themselves.

Michelle Raglin:

Oh. And that's the best part of why I do this is I hear something coming out of my mouth when I'm in coaching session. And I'm like, "Oh, that's a really good idea. I should do that." Of course, I don't say that out loud. I keep that to myself and I don't post that part on the podcast. I'm just joking. You totally can. But even in supplemental learning, I've gone through critical thinking. I think this is my seventh time through it with all the different profs that I've supported their classes, and I'm still learning new things. We don't become excellent university students just by doing two or three years of university. There's always something more to learn. And I love that about this. That's why I keep doing it.

Mike Harrington:

I think it would be valuable for professors to understand that. I really like when professors throw 5% participation points at a student for making a writing centre appointment because I have not experienced a writing centre tutorial yet where they walk in the door and say, "I'm just here to get my 5%," and have not left saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe I've never been here before. I should have done this a long time ago." It's the same for academic coaching as it is for writing tutoring, where I remind them that Brenna is not the paper you just handed in. It is not your identity. It does not define you. You're going to have good papers. You're going to have bad papers. You're going to have papers that are due three at a time of a one-off. Same thing with Peer Academic Coaching. Same thing with your classes overall. You're on a journey.

Mike Harrington:

And a lot of these students, whether they're first year law students who've got straight A's in undergrad, or whether they're first year undergrads who got high high school marks, they're about to get knocked down a few pegs. They need to understand that university is not just about grades. It's about knowledge acquisition. It's about embracing being a lifelong learner. Absolutely strive and do the best you can, but understand as well that in first year, you're not as well-equipped to write a good paper or to get a good grade as you are in third year or fourth year. And so what I try to remind them of is you're on a trajectory, you're on a journey. And it's baby steps. It's incremental improvement. I think that gives them agency to... I mean, I'll try not to get too flaky here, but gives them agency to give themselves a little bit of slack and a little bit of self-love and a little bit of... I do remind them like, "Congratulations. You made it into university," or, "Congratulations. You made it into law school."

Mike Harrington:

That's a feat. And a lot of these students, they're the first person in their family to go to university, like I was, or they're the first person in their family to go to law school, like I was. Let's sit with that for a second. That's awesome.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that. It's extremely wise. Also, it's advice you never stop needing, to take that moment to celebrate the victory, to take that moment to recognize what has gone into whatever the accomplishment is. But also, that reminder that you're not the last thing you wrote, you're not the last thing that happened at work, you're not your bad day, these are all really important life skills. I mean, as much as you are both peer academic coaches, as Michelle said earlier, you're really helping with all the

life stuff too. And I think that's a real shift in just my career, since the... gosh, I was going to say 20, but getting on for more than that... years that I've been in this world.

Mike Harrington:

Yeah. We don't need to go there.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Let's not do that. That's not fun. But there used to be a real assumption that you checked your personal self at the door, you walked into the university, and you were... My phrase was always, "We're expected to be brains in jars," like that image from Futurama, which is another really old reference. But this idea that your personal life wasn't something that you had any right to consider. And if there's one change that I've seen over the years and programs like this, and the way you're both speaking so eloquently about how you engage with participants in your programs, it's like, that's the change. The change is the more and more I think we get to be whole human beings. And that is a joyful change because I think that's what it takes from more different kinds of people to find space and success at the university.

Mike Harrington:

I agree. That's a huge thing. One of the biggest shocks to me in law school was because of my age, coming in, I fully expected law school to be a... I need to find another word... a jerk factory. Obviously, I had a better word than jerk, but... And what I found was a program really tailored to understanding truth and reconciliation and our indigenous history in Canada and trauma-informed lawyering, that's not a term I ever thought I would hear in law school. And same thing in undergrad. We're valuing lived experiences. We're valuing diversity. And yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. My son in grade four knew more about residential schools in the '60s scoop than I did at 49 years old. So I agree. Academics has changed a lot and it's much more humane and empathetic.

Mike Harrington:

And yeah, I agree, and I think it's wonderful. I'm not exactly sure if this is selfless work or really selfish work. It's the Mother Teresa dilemma. Is mother Theresa selfish or selfless? Because just listening, just helping in whatever way you can, these students, is so rewarding. And somebody told me the other day who studied psychology... Might have been Michelle. I don't know... that your brain does play a trick on yourself. So when you are struggling and you're having a tough time with whatever, and you have the opportunity to help somebody else through a tough time, you are tricked into thinking, "Well, I must be okay because if I wasn't okay, I couldn't help somebody else be okay." So I would recommend that anybody who's got the time and the interest would... they should pursue Peer Academic Coaching.

Michelle Raglin:

I guess I got caught up emotionally in what you were saying about the not being truly altruistic in the reason I do this is because I see people benefiting from it. And I benefit from that. And I love that.

Mike Harrington:

She was nodding as I said that.

Michelle Raglin:

I was, yeah. I do that a lot. I have good nonverbal communication.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's just inspiring, what you're both saying about your roles and what you take from them and your experience of it. And that sense of growth that you're both getting from it is genuinely inspiring. And I think maybe we'll leave the conversation here unless either of you have final thoughts you'd like to share.

Michelle Raglin:

Yeah. To not throw back in the age thing again, but I'm going to do it for both of your benefit because I'm in my 40s as well. I wasn't going to say it, but there it is. And this is not the first university campus I've been to. But it is the first campus I've been on that has so many services to support their students, in my opinion. And maybe university was a long time ago the last time I went, but Thompson Rivers University has some amazing supports for the people who attend here. And it definitely makes being a student a valuable experience for me and makes me want to tell other people to come and be students here and to use the services that are available. Before my first day of classes ever here, I went to the mature student orientation, which I thought in itself, the fact that they even offered that was so cool, and ran into someone that I knew casually as an acquaintance in the community. And she's of my best friends now, and we've taken a class together every semester.

Michelle Raglin:

And one of the things that I kept hearing at orientation was take advantage of the services because they're there for you. And the thing that people said they wish they had learned in first year that they found out as they were graduating was the writing centre, supplemental learning. I don't think Peer Academic Coaching was a thing then. We're a fairly new program. But House Four and the Chaplain C and Leap Program and all of these services, I've missed a ton, I'm sure.

Mike Harrington:

Free counselling.

Michelle Raglin:

Free counselling, the wellness centre. there's so much here. And I'm a third year, and I wish I had accessed these services in my first year.

Mike Harrington:

I do have one closing sentiment. As I understand, this podcast goes to faculty, correct?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. Our primary listenership is faculty and staff. For sure.

Mike Harrington:

Yeah. I would strongly encourage them to encourage their students to take advantage of any or all of those supports that Michelle just rattled off. I think it won't be for everyone. Not everyone will do it. But I think they'll have more engaged, calmer, focused students who will get more out of their classes. The professors put a lot of work into that, and I just think it would be really beneficial. I really value the fact that some professors send their students to the writing centre for 5%. I have not had a writing centre or a Peer Academic Coaching appointment in which the student didn't leave visibly, measurably more

relieved, happier, less stressed, more... just really motivated to go take on the next task. So that's what I would say. I would strongly encourage faculty to keep those supports front of mind for students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Fabulous. That's a fabulous sales pitch and a perfect place to end it. Thank you both so much for your time today. I know how busy you are, both of you, if only because trying to schedule this was kooky. So I know that you both have a lot on your plates and I'm really grateful that you opted to spend some time with me today. Thank you so much.

Michelle Raglin:

Thank you, Brenna.

Mike Harrington:

Yeah. Thank you. And you're welcome.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for Season 2, Episode 10 of You Got This!. As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter @brennacgray. And in both cases, that's gray with an a. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. Of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. And it's not really my Tiny Teaching Tip. It's Mike and Michelle's Tiny Teaching Tip. Talk to your students about the support resources here on campus. Help them make connections. Talk honestly about your own experiences, reaching out and accessing support, or talk about the supports you wish you'd had in your academic career. It sounds trivial, maybe, but I think it makes a huge difference in helping students understand that their need for support makes them totally, totally normal. We're all such fragile human beings. And Mike and Michelle did a really great job of reminding me that working in service of others is a joy and a pleasure, as is connecting students to the kinds of supports they need. So you work on that. I'll work on keeping a hold of this joy I feel after this conversation this week, and we'll talk again next week. Take care of yourselves. Bye-bye.