

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast of 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 unceded, traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And today I'm thinking about grading and grades. And how sometimes they seem to really get in the way of learning. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I have to admit that one of the great joys of the job I have now is that I don't have to grade anything. I love working with students in particular, whether it's on a website or a podcast project, or just consulting with them about something they're trying to accomplish. That's really rewarding work. And I get to see their learning in real time, but I don't have to mark it. And it really does change my relationship with disseminating content I guess. I can be slow and leisurely. I don't need to worry about the sort of finite constraints of the term, and I can give feedback without it being attached to a number. There's really interesting research that shows that written feedback when delivered with a numerical score, the written feedback rarely gets read or processed. The focus becomes on the numerical score. And yet our whole institution is designed around that numerical score. And I don't just mean our institution, obviously. I mean the institution in the broader aspect.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I guess the reason I'm thinking about this so much is because I am actually marking, grading things right now. Jamie and I, as we talked about the other week, we're co-facilitating the PIDP course in learning technology this semester. And to a large extent, we've been able to ungrade it. So for the most part, participants are either working on competency based portfolios, where they just have to complete a number of tasks to a set point value. And they're in charge of deciding how those points are mapped, or they're self-evaluating. They have one assignment that we are evaluating and I'm working on that right now. And it's really interesting to look at the difference in how I feel about the feedback I'm giving. To a certain extent the feedback becomes less about feedback and more about justifying the score on the page. And I guess because I've been away from evaluating for so long, I haven't really had to think about that. I haven't really had to process what that difference does to how I communicate with a participant or a student.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Of course, ungrading is all the rage right now. There's lots of resources. And I'll link you to a few in the show notes for today. Not everyone is in a position to be able to fully strip grades away from our classes. And maybe you're listening to me and you're like, that is not my experience of grades, Brenna, and I don't want to do it. And that's fine. I think we all have different relationships to the evaluative structure. But I do think thinking about how things like competency based grading or self-evaluation and reflection, thinking about those as opportunities to change your relationship to evaluation can be really powerful. I'll tell you from looking at our participant self evaluations, people are rough on themselves and they're honest. And in fairness, that's not just because it's a professional development activity. I've seen that too in classes when I've used self-evaluation. I'll link in the show notes to some research about how self-evaluations do typically tend to line up with instructors' perspectives or perceptions. All of this

to say, if grading is working for you, fab. If it's not, there are other choices out there that might change your effective relationship to evaluating your course content. And it's November, this is a time of year when everybody's thinking about grades because they're overtaking our lives. And so thinking about how taking some of that pressure off yourself by contemplating a different kind of structure might be particularly valued.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. I have the pleasure of a conversation with Cheryl Gladu today, the Researcher-in-Residence here at TRU. And talk about someone who can infuse hope back into my perspective on how we do things around here. It was a real joy, and I think you're going to enjoy it too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I'm here on the show today with Cheryl Gladu. Cheryl, could you introduce yourself to the audience? Maybe let them know where you can be found around TRU.

Cheryl Gladu:

Okay. Yeah, my official title, I'm a post-doctoral fellow and the project is called a Researcher-in-Residence. So I'm a Researcher-in-Residence, and I'm not really on campus. I'm-- half the week I'm found at city hall. And then the other half of the week I'm found at the Xchange Lab on Tranquille. So I'm embedded in the community and I come on campus when there's a requirement for a live meeting or something like that, which is rare these days. But yeah, I don't actually have an office on campus currently.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So this is a pilot program, right? You're the first Researcher-in-Residence at TRU?

Cheryl Gladu:

That's, right. Yeah. At the city of Kamloops. Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. So it's a position between, my understanding is like-- the city of Kamloops and it's housed at TRU, but you're in, as you said, embedded in the community. Can you tell us a little bit about a day in the life for Researcher-in-Residence? What kind of stuff do you get up to as you move between these spaces?

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. Mainly a lot of phone calls right now, but yeah. Yeah. So I'm a post-doctoral fellow. So my primary objective is research, it seems. But a lot of what I do is matchmaking between the city and faculty and students on campus. So the idea of the Researcher-in-Residence program is to form a permanent connection between the two institutions and this way, bringing some of the resources found at the university into the city by way of research projects, and student projects, and that sort of thing. And so I'm officially located in the office of Research and Graduate Studies. And so that's my faculty, if that makes any sense. And I work through them to identify faculty to work on projects that have been identified by city directors and managers. And try to make between faculty, students, and city staff.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. For the most part, I've been doing it in that direction. So I come to the meetings and I'm like, oh, there's this interesting questions come up. Can you refer me to someone? And they'll give me ideas. But we're starting to go the other way around now is to shop around problem areas that the city would like help with. And trying to identify eager students and faculty who are maybe not on our radar or not on my radar because I'm relatively new here, who are interested in a particular area. So for example, the climate change action plan at the city is a big, big, is a series of options that the city has to consider before they lay out policy around climate change, adaptation and mitigation. And they could use a lot of help in terms of background research, comparative studies, that sort of thing. And it's also an area of great interest for a lot of faculty and students. So trying to map that interest into the city so that the city can leverage the resources that an institution like TRU has access to, additional grant funds for research and that sort of thing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, this is really cool. You can see all the possibilities. I was reading some of the press releases from the city and from the university about this. And there's this real sense of a desire for more informed decision making at the city and more embedding in community and engagement with the city as a structure at the university. Which it seems it should have always been there, but it's not always been there. Right? This is a fairly brand new program that they're piloting.

Cheryl Gladu:

This is, I would call it more of an evolution of the program that has been at TRU. So TRU has been, I would say, fairly actively engaged in community engaged research with various community partners, whether it's interior health or a variety of factors like the United Way, but this is just formalizes it and places a person permanently in the city. So I'm spending, it's a three year program. And so I have three years to test out the impact of that kind of embeddedness. And one of the things that I'm trying to do is to move research in the community from projects. So one project, three month review, or a six month thesis towards more programmatic approach to research with our community partners.

Cheryl Gladu:

So a lot of the themes that are emerging, both at the city, but also in the community more widely are quite complex. They're not going to be solved with a lit review or they're not going to be... They're going to continue to be questions that emerge with each project that we do. And so in whatever way we can look for opportunities to seed a more programmatic approach to those questions. So maybe we start with a lit review that a student does to help city staff ground some of the decisions they have to make. But then the next step might be to do some surveying in the community and some interviews in the community, or what we're trying to do is to embed cultural mapping into a practice of engagement in the city. And so continuously building on the work that we do.

Cheryl Gladu:

So to rather than do project by project as grants might allow is to have a programmatic approach to themes of issues in the city. So whether it be a climate action or whether it be housing, which is an issue that I'm working on now, whether it's cultural strategic planning, instead of it being these kind of one offs, which are great and helpful, to have a more long-term lens. One of the things that I'm noticing in working with the city is that due to politics and pressure, the lens of the city is very present and near future focused. And there's very legitimate reasons for that. What a faculty and students can provide is a

bit of a more long-term lens if their research is built that way. So they can take a look back, see what's happened in the past, think about that and bring it into the present. And help the folks who need to make decisions today and tomorrow to have those decisions be informed by past practices, either here or in other cities.

Cheryl Gladu:

And I think that's the potential power of this kind of program is to fix this other lens or have this group of people who have this other lens at the municipal level. And it's just to help facilitate the work that city staff are doing. They work really hard and it's very public work often. In whatever way we can help ground the work that they're doing with this longer term lens, I think it'd be very helpful.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, it's interesting the way you're describing it. You called it a programmatic approach as opposed to project by project and the kind of lens of the scholar with the space and hopefully the space to take that backwards view. But I'm also hearing you talk a lot about student involvement, which is really cool. It sounds like there's also an aspect here of mentoring a generation of young scholars into this community engaged research view of how they might apply their skills at the university.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. 100%. Yeah. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to work with a number of students on these projects. And my experience thus far is that students are really excited about a very applied work and the opportunity to work with people who are interested in this or working in this area day in, day out. And they have particular insight that are hard to pull out of an academic paper. They have particular concerns that maybe they don't feel as viscerally from reading a book. Having the chance to have these long conversations with folks who are struggling around making decisions to help people or to deal with just day to day challenges that exist in any city is really motivating for a lot of students.

Cheryl Gladu:

So with the Researcher-in-Residence initiative, there's five student researchers who are embedded in the project as well. We have two graduate researchers, and three undergraduate researchers over the three year period. And they come in in a layered fashion. Right now we have three students working on very different projects from one another. And then we also have the opportunity to work with students in other ways. So right now I'm working with a number of students who are doing a practicum with us and these students in the social work school. And they're helping me on a whole bunch of projects, which is really helpful. And they're talking directly with service providers to check some of the information we have. And possibly to run some cultural mapping soon as well, around the issue of housing in the city of Kamloops and what it's like to go through the housing continuum in the city. And so it's really applied work.

Cheryl Gladu:

So even students who maybe they're not necessarily interested in a long-term academic career, but they're interested in grounding their careers in this kind of thoughtful evidence-based lens, it's a really good opportunity for them to get involved. And for me as somebody coming up through the schooling as a first gen academic, this applied aspect is super motivating for me. And I think it's perhaps long overdue. I think there is definitely something of a crisis of relevance in some areas of academia and engaged research in this way can help to address that. It certainly feels like it can. And certainly a

program like the one here at TRU is remarkably bold and brave. On the part of the folks who put it together, both the people at the city and the people at TRU who assembled this project, it's a really bold move. And say in many ways, unprecedented for a city like this to have a researcher embedded in the day to day life of the city and what can come of that.

Cheryl Gladu:

And there's some other examples in Canada that are similar, but not precisely the same. And there is some hope that through the, because we receive some funding from Mitacs to do this, and there's some hope that we might be able to replicate this model in other cities. And I think after doing this for about a year, I think that it's very, very interesting work for the right scholar.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that is really exciting. All of it sounds really exciting. And we spend a lot of time in this office talking to folks about authentic assessment and giving students opportunities to really apply their skills in ways that are meaningful to them. And this is just such a macro view of that principle to let students really get involved in the city and the life of the city and make a difference, make a really tangible difference. I, just thinking back to myself as an undergraduate and how appealing that would've have been to me. How meaningful that work must be for them.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm in the same boat. When I heard about this project, I was like, are you kidding me? What good fortune just happening during a global crisis. And this just shows up in my inbox. I'm like, are you kidding me? This project is perfect. It's so unusual. And here it is in Kamloops, which is where I was hoping to stay. So very interesting and lucky in a lot of ways. I feel really lucky.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's very cool. And you mentioned COVID, you mentioned this crisis that we're in the middle of. And this program is really established in that period which it's been a time of stasis for so many area on campus, so many areas of the sector of the world. It's been hard to think boldly amidst all the unpredictability. So it's all the more remarkable that this is happening right now in this moment where between climate change and health policy, I'm sure the city is super grateful to have these voices as part of the conversation.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. I've had such nice engagement with the city staff. I'm meeting with folks regularly around issues that they've been tasked with. And it's really nice, especially when, for example, we have a student presenting her findings at the end of the month. And everybody is really excited and supportive of this young person coming in and sharing her research. And there's a real appetite for this kind of positive news, because the work that we're working on, there's not just COVID, there's the opioid or the drug poisoning epidemic, there is the housing crisis. There's the environmental devastation of climate change. There's layers and layers of despair. And we are bringing in these young people who have a lot of energy and interest and passion to feel like they're contributing in some ways to address these issues in whatever way they can as young people just starting out on their careers. So I think there's an appetite in the city for good news. And I think in a lot of ways, the outcomes of this project can be a lot of good news, even though we're all dealing with really, really challenging problems and questions.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well it's remarkably hopeful program because it implies, it's very existence suggests that there are ways through. And that working together we can find them. It's heartening in this particular moment that we're in.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. And I do think that this hopefully, this kind of very collaborative, so deeply collaborative and cooperative sensibility, that nature of the project, I hope it in some ways informs the work that we're doing as we emerge more into community and interact with people more directly. That some of that goodwill and the curiosity that the young people have, I hope it can leave a mark in the city in a positive way. One of the things about working on a university campus is this youthful enthusiasm that's contagious. It's one of the reasons that I love teaching is that I get a shot in the arm of this enthusiasm and hope, even in moments of quite, I know a lot of students are struggling. I know a lot of people are struggling right now, but there's a kind of optimism in planning for the future.

Cheryl Gladu:

And that's what students do by signing up for courses and trying to aspire for a certificate or a degree is that they're planning for the future. So they are assuming there's a future to plan for. And so they come with this energy and enthusiasm that's infectious. And I hope that that energy and enthusiasm can be brought into the city through programs of research and engaged scholarship in a way that can leave a positive mark. Not just on my own energy, but on the energy of the people that we interact within community services, the city and neighbourhoods and as we move forward on our projects.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's so fantastic. I'm smiling. I just have this big, stupid smile on my face because it's just so nice to think about the ways in which the structure of the university can be leveraged for good and leveraged to benefit beyond the hill we sit on. I just think it's so exciting to think about. Cheryl, you're a post-doctoral fellow at the university. How does this work fit into your own research and your background?

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. So I have an interdisciplinary degree, so that I think is I'm in management and in design, is the field that I was in. And in particular, I studied community led development and a whole variety of questions I had around how people design and develop their own neighbourhoods and manage them and work together collaboratively. So in that way, there's a lot of overlap in my interests around the city and how it works. And a lot of the questions that we're asking at the city and in the city are complex questions that are well served by designerly thinking, problem solving with lens towards unconventional approaches or unconventional solutions.

Cheryl Gladu:

So I think this is helpful for me in working with students and also working with faculty around the framing of possible questions. So I have a lot of conversations with city staff and they'll talk very generally about what they're working on and things that they find interesting. And sometimes it'll feel tangential. So they'll say, talk about problem A, but in problem A there's questions, Y, X and Z, that are interesting to me. And that reframing of the question, I think opens up the door for more research if we're able to match those onto faculty who are also interested in those kind of parallel questions that are yet still applied and functionally interesting to the city staff. Because at the end of the day, with

community engaged research, there's a tendency but not an exclusive orientation from the researcher has a question and they find, identify a city person or person in community who has data let's say. And they use that data to answer their questions.

Cheryl Gladu:

But we're flipping it upside down as we're asking the city staff, "Hey, do you have questions or do you have areas that could be supported by a student or faculty researcher?" And then we bring that up to the faculty like, how does this match on to your interests and how can we co-create questions that benefit both you as an academic with your interest and the city staff with their very applied need for this information. And so the questions are different than they start out. And when I think of the best versions of designerly thinking, you don't end up with the same question you started with. It gets reframed, the problem gets reframed. Even before the city folks are oriented on a solution, they have to develop a policy. But the framing of the initial question is super important at getting to policy that serves the greatest good.

Cheryl Gladu:

And so from a very applied place as a researcher interested in designerly thinking and that sort of thing, I'm getting to see how people craft or reframe questions in an interesting way. I think once I've done the project, three years out, I'm going to have a better understanding as to what's actually happening there. But I think there's some real interesting reflections that can happen at the end of this project. And also just to stress that the idea is that it's going to continue on in one form or another. So the three year pilot project is funded, we're funded for three years and with these five student researchers. But the idea is that if there's some value to it, that it'll continue on here. So the idea isn't that we, it was a nice experiment. We'll go back to sitting on the hill and not transferring resources like people and faculty.

Cheryl Gladu:

The idea is that there's this very deep desire, both at the city right now and at the university to create a solid fixed link so that when people, say, new researchers or new students come on, they know they can go somewhere and get access to folks at the city who are doing interesting things and have interesting questions. And folks within the city, the community, the wider community as well and that we can map students on. And that we have, at the end of the day, maybe some programs to train students up to being able to do community engaged research because it's an emergent area. People have been doing this for quite some time, but it's not always the same skill set that you might have in a common methodology class.

Cheryl Gladu:

So we're working right now at training up students in cultural mapping because that's a methodology that we use. We're thinking about some other skills that we can be building so that students feel better equipped for doing this kind of research because it's just different. It's more co-creative so there's a much more collaborative cooperative approach that is maybe not obvious from the outside that you can help students develop the skills of listening, taking a step back from time to time and just observing what's going around and that sort of thing. So we're hoping to train skills and have basically a group of students who can be deployed in a meaningful manner to address problems as they emerge.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

My next question was going to be where do you see the program expanding to, but you've kind of answered that. This idea of preparing students and programming around this kind of work, because I could see it being, particularly for the undergraduate student researcher, a little bit of intimidating. It's so different than what most students are trained to do day to day in the classroom around research. So the idea of preparing them and they become almost like a cohort, they're like a little group who could rely on each other as well. It's such a unique program. I don't know. My questions keep faltering because I'm just so delighted by the very structure of what you're describing, I think.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. And it's really emergent as well. I have to just hedge it a bit in that there's a lot of stuff that we're developing, we're going to test them and not all prototypes work. So we'll know more at the end of the program, what was successful and what was maybe overdoing it or we'll see. But I don't see us at the end of the day, just even one year in going, oh, well, can we engage research steps, a fad. I see this as a very, very important pivot for academics. Not every academic has to be engaged with the community, but more of us do so that we have a better understanding of what's going on in our cities. We're reliant on the city for so many things. We should be in lockstep with one another.

Cheryl Gladu:

So we're also two big institutions that have comparable challenges. Comparable challenges that's literally a comparative study, there's work that can be done where we learn from one another more proactively rather than just in hindsight. Maybe some clever master's student was like, "Oh, hey, there's these two programs that ran at the same time. I wonder what the outcomes, how they're different." It's like we could map that into what we're doing. For example, the work that's being done by another post-doctoral fellow at TRU around EDI just aligns really nicely with some EDI work that's being done at the city. How just having conversation between these two groups of people over time, what can we learn from that? And then how can we map students into that process so they learn while it's happening. And they see the projects unfolding in all their glory and messiness. Those are opportunities that we wouldn't have if we weren't constantly looking for them. And that's what this embeddedness can allow is sort of like a constant scanning for these kinds of opportunities.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We're getting to the end of our time. And I guess what I want to give you some space for here is the listenership of the podcast is mostly faculty and staff here at TRU, sort of half and half here and away. But definitely primarily teaching faculty. What would you want folks who aren't familiar with this program to know about it? Whether it's as they interact with students or as they interact with the community. What do folks need to know about the Researcher-in-Residence program? And how they should or could engage with it potentially?

Cheryl Gladu:

Well, it's kind of an open door. So that's one thing. It's I want to be as open and accessible as possible. We are looking for eager students who are interested in doing applied work. So as an instructor, if you identify a student who's super keen and very oriented towards making a difference in their community, these students would be really, really well suited for the work that we're doing in community. So we are looking for better processes for identifying students who are well suited for community engaged research. And providing them the skills to make them feel comfortable doing that. So, and also there's



the opportunity to do coursework that's oriented towards a service to the community. So it could be bringing and having students do coursework around a particular challenge. We have one faculty who's running a series of studies related to municipal parks. And this information will be shared with the city in a way that might help them around decision making or grounding some of the work they do in evidence the value of those parks.

Cheryl Gladu:

And so there's ways of embedding these questions into coursework. And I'd be welcome, I really welcome having those conversations with faculty in terms of if there's something we can do broaden our reach or to, not that research is always like a paper as an outcome. It could be that we have a series of conversations in class. We're also thinking about doing some work through the Xchange Lab, like community conversations around research and that sort of thing. So there might be opportunities for people with particular expertise to share their expertise. And we can facilitate discussions so that it's not just an academic giving a lecture, but rather interacting with community around good conversations and making the university feel more open to the wider community. That's one of the things I'm hoping to come out of the Xchange Lab as well.

Cheryl Gladu:

And the Xchange Lab, which is a really neat space that we share with the United Way, is a space that is available for people to use for research and for collaboration in the community. So we have space there. So if you're ever looking to bring your students on a walk of the north shore, for example, you might, how's it at the Xchange Lab. We're really open to talk about how to use that space. We're in that process of planning its emergence from COVID. So there's opportunities there. So there's space, there's connections, there's, and just a willingness to talk and to think through possible opportunities for student learning. Because at the end of the day, I think the whole thing that really this is provides a door way for students to come in and experience Kamloops in a way that might feel close to them. But maybe isn't really close to them. It's just maybe having a friendly person at the beginning saying, "Hey, here's three people you should talk to for your research paper." And I can try to help where I can on those types of projects.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's fantastic. This whole conversation has been surprisingly energizing for me today so thank you. I knew I would learn a lot. But I didn't realize it would just revive my faith in the institution as a structure and it genuinely has. It's so cool to hear what's happening and how brave a program like this is because it really is. You were describing like we're prototyping things and not all prototypes work. And just I've been in universities for a long time. The idea of starting a project that might not work is like that alone is brave and bold and exciting to hear. And so I just, I don't know. It's really, thank you for your time today. I've really enjoyed this conversation.

Cheryl Gladu:

Yeah. Thanks for asking for me to come in and just to stress that there's so many people involved in this project, both at the city and at the university. And while I end up, we say in a couple of our promotional things, while there is a Researcher-in-Residence, it's an initiative that involves a lot of people and it really is a team effort. And I don't think things like this happen without a lot of team effort. And TRU has a really solid group of very, very engaged people doing really excellent research. And I think this is the, I

would say the natural outcome of that, but maybe it's the supernatural outcome of that. There's just some great folks trying some good work. And I think it's really neat that it's happening here in Kamloops.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, I do too. Thanks so much, Cheryl.

Cheryl Gladu:

Well, thank you for asking all so many nice questions and it was nice talking to you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode 11 of You Got This. As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm [bgray@tru.ca](mailto:bgray@tru.ca). And I'm also on Twitter [@brennacgray](https://twitter.com/brennacgray). And in both cases, that's Gray with an a. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at [yougotthis.trubox.ca](http://yougotthis.trubox.ca). And 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. You are in probably the throes of midterm marking hell right now, maybe, depending on how your course is structured. Or you're looking towards an end of term that's going to have a huge evaluative component. I wonder if now is the moment, while you're at most overwhelmed, to think about where you could take something off your plate. Ungrading might be a portion of that. Is there something in your course that could be better evaluated by letting students reflect on their own experiences or with contract grading or some other strategy? Again, I'll link to some resources in the show notes. But maybe it's just that there's one assignment too many, one quiz too many, one assessment too many. And you don't think it's as valuable now as you did when you were setting expectations back in the summer. This is a good moment to think about that. So often the really hopeful enthusiastic person who sets up the assignments and the tired instructor who has to mark them in November, technically it's the same person but it doesn't feel like it. Go ahead and give yourself permission to think through what's working and what's not working right now while you're at your busiest. I promise that if you make a plan to make some changes now, the version of you who exists in March will be super grateful. That's it for me. I'm also doing some reflective practice about how I need to reframe my own working schedule for winter. I'm definitely overtaxed right now and I'm ready to imagine something otherwise. So I hope you can take some time to imagine something otherwise too. And in the meantime, take care of yourself and each other. And we'll chat again next week. Bye bye.