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 & 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, things, they are changing. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

To mask or not to mask. That is the question. We are mask-friendly. I don't know what any of that means, except that mask mandates are dropped this week on campus. It's an interesting next step, I suppose, in our ever-present quest towards normal. It worries me, though. It worries me on a personal level. My kiddo isn't yet eligible for his second shot and I still feel like we are pretty vulnerable as a family. It worries me for folks in the larger community, immunocompromised people, my dad is one, and really anybody who has a risk factor. I've got high blood pressure like any good academic. So I've been a risk category on my own. I understand the desire to feel like we are experiencing normality. Again, I really do. I mean, I'm not enjoying this anymore than anyone else. I think like many introverts, I might be coping slightly better, but I'm not enjoying myself. To me though, the rush-back to a maskless classroom seems to somehow speak to the rush-back to "normal." By that, I mean, we seem so quick to exchange everything we've learned. All these hard one lessons of the last two years, we seem so quick to toss them aside. We're chasing after a reality that doesn't exist anymore.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I guess I don't understand why living with COVID doesn't mean taking all the best precautions we have to keep the people around us safe. We're mask-friendly, which I guess means nobody can punch you square in the jaw for choosing to wear a mask, I guess. But masking has never been about the individual choice. And I think about the collective responsibility of our classroom communities when it's signaled to us that what matters most is the individual choice. I just got to believe that's not the right way to approach things. Anyway, nobody asked me. So I hope that you are in a position to keep yourself as safe as possible, and I hope that you are checking in with your students and colleagues and trying to come up with communal ways forward, because if somebody in the room has COVID, it's not an individual choice anymore. Don't know if it gets much more collective than that. I think we have to keep having the conversation. We have to not be afraid of it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And I also think we have to stand up for what we think is right. And I still think that acting cautiously and protecting the people around us is what's right. You don't have to agree, of course. And I think that's the messaging that we're certainly getting from campus, is that everybody has to plot their own way forward, but I hope we can try to find ways to do that in community. And if the institution doesn't want to have a community conversation, then maybe that's something that we need to do ourselves. So as I say, I hope you're checking in with students and colleagues and just seeing where everybody is at. Maybe you're all more on the same page than you think.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm excited to share with you my talk today with Robbi Davey because, well, it taps into this idea of checking in and reaching out and building community, but I'm going to let her explain how.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. I am here today with Robbi Davey. Robbi, would you introduce yourself to folks and let them know what you do on campus, where they might find you?

Robbi Davey:

Sure. I work as the Indigenous experiential learning coordinator, and that's in Career and Experiential Learning, a department in Faculty of Student Development. We're basically in career support and then also the co-op arm as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And I definitely want to talk to you about your role and what you do in that capacity, but the real thing that inspired me to invite you on the show is that I found out about your master's thesis via Tony Bates' blog. Things are circular because your master's was done here at TRU. And the title of that project was "'It will never be my first choice to do an online course': Examining Experiences of Indigenous Learners Online in Canadian Post-Secondary Educational Institutions." And I think this is a fascinating piece of research. It's a gap in the online learning research community. We don't talk a lot about indigenization of online learning or at least not enough. And so I'm hoping that you would start by maybe just introducing the project to us and letting us know what it was generally about. And then I'm hoping we can dig into some of the recommendations that come out of your research, if you don't mind.

Robbi Davey:

The project stemmed from when I worked in Open Learning myself and noticed there is an interest in indigenizing, for lack of a better term, and thinking about Indigenous learners in general, but there, you're right. There hadn't been a study necessarily. There's been studies of cohorts and how they have students that are part of the same community and partnerships with different institutions that have rolled out a program, which I thought was very different than, generally, a student alone online. And so what I had heard, so I had been doing a master's at TRU in education because of my background and I had been interested in the online component. There was a few Indigenous students in my student cohort or whatever, that I just noticed a lot of people didn't like taking online courses or they felt alone, they're not enough community. So there was an anecdotal set of comments that inspired me to think about that as a potential. And then when I saw that there wasn't a great deal of information, I thought it was a good opportunity to provide some information.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We already know that Indigenous learners are largely underserved in universities when it comes to accessing resources and feeling like they are in community with the institution. And then you add in the asynchronous, self-paced component, which requires a learner to be extremely self-motivated and in many ways, really rewards an existing positive educational relationship. You've got to want to be doing it and there's not a lot of coaxing or pushing long, and you don't have other people necessarily, or you're not connected to other people necessarily to help with that. So it seems to me like those are two problems that end up compounded. Is that what you found when you were looking at it?

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. I noticed that there's a big concept in looking at any Indigenous aspect of education in terms of not viewing it from a deficit point of view. So the other piece was in thinking through what could we be doing better even in an asynchronous course to support learners who need more community, and in terms of them or us as students taking courses on our own and putting the onus on the student to develop those skills? Because that is an angle you can take, like, okay, well, so for us to take asynchronous courses, we need to have great time management and like exactly what you said, there's a little piece of that in my thesis. But in terms of looking at... So getting away from that angle and looking at what we can do pedagogically, or how we can structure courses, or whether it's content or perspectives, a piece of it is making sure there's inclusive content, examples, and perspectives, but a part of it that I noticed was just an absence of community online. That's difficult in any asynchronous course as well. So trying to get away from looking at the students as... Just looking at the other side of it, what could we do better to support learners who are taking asynchronous courses?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

When I look at the kinds of things that students identified as problems, or things that made them feel alienated or disconnected, or why they didn't find online to be preferable, as with most approaches to equity and education, we may be targeting a particular population when we ask these questions. But the things that you found, they're not only true of Indigenous learners. When students say that they don't have a relationship to students and instructors, when they feel like there's a disconnect between what's happening in their lives and the course content, when they feel a sense of separateness or they're not integrated into campus, I mean, I'm a middle-class white lady. I also don't like those experiences and it just struck me when I was reading that so much of the way we tend to think about education is so steeped in this deficit model that you mentioned, but also just this idea that, I don't know, you just have to get through it the way it's designed because it's always been designed that way.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It really struck me in reading your work that there are reasons to pursue this, just because the educational outcomes would be better for many, many learners. And I was just really struck by that. I mean, I definitely don't want to take away from the important work and the way you talk about connecting with the recommendations of the TRC and the importance in contextualizing, especially some of the really difficult content in courses around the history of residential schooling and framing those things appropriately. I definitely don't want to erase that, but I was just really struck by... We should be doing this. We should be building this community so that all learners can succeed more effectively.

Robbi Davey:

Right. Yeah. Yeah, a lot of creative things such as right as I started the project, this job description started floating from UBC about an Indigenous mentor to be online at different times and it was a part-time position geared towards maybe a graduate student. Different ideas, like having... I remember presenting on the topic early as I was preparing to do the data collection at an Indigenous graduate student conference. And so most of the students would've been Indigenous and just throwing it out there, is this a good topic to do? Partly what you said, a lot of this can affect any student, especially remote students who are on their own, that community is important, but also that if you were online, you wouldn't have at your fingertips, the same types of supports that Indigenous students enjoy on campus that have been developing over the last five to 10 years. So like a gathering place of a

community to belong to and to be in person. So often there's computer banks that draw students in, and the printer, and food, and elders, and learning strategists.

Robbi Davey:

So that all exists there, but could there be a digital community? And a lot of this has to do with funding and institutional pressures. My perspective is the digital community isn't ever going to replace the in-person one, but it could maybe bridge some of these things. One of the interesting findings was that some students got together on their own, so they were creating that anyway. If they were doing different courses, they would often get together with a group of them that were also going to school. So maybe not taking the same topic, but they were just getting together. So that's an indication to me that there was a need for a community and they just did it themselves. They just got together at someone's house. They had study times or study groups to keep each other accountable or at least set the time apart from their lives, and then the camaraderie of just working together. So I noticed that happened. I didn't get into too much detail about how that affected their learning, but they did definitely enjoy that and made them feel less alone in their studies.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, and I really appreciated actually the focus that you put on satisfaction on feeling connected on the effective experience of learning, because that's really important and I think often overlooked. It's interesting that you're raising this. We've just been going through this integrated strategic planning process. And on the open learning side, one of the things that we've been really trying to underscore in our submission to the ISP process is that we need to achieve much more equity for online students and campus students when it comes to the services that they have access to, tutoring resources and wellness resources and all those kinds of things. And one of the opportunities that has been presented to us by the circumstances in which we find ourselves is that we know that a lot of services can be extended into virtual space, right?

Robbi Davey:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brenna Clarke Gray:

A lot of things that were previously only ever offered face to face. And it's my hope that that becomes an opportunity for all open learning students, but I'm particularly obviously interested in the focus here on Indigenous learners and seeing Indigenous students succeed. I'm wondering what would be your recommendations, whether you want to talk on a structural level for open learning courses in general, or if you are thinking of what individual instructors can do to help students who are feeling disconnected and displaced to feel more connected to the learning environment.

Robbi Davey:

Okay. So I can tell you, one thing that comes to mind, and I don't want to be overly critical of asynchronous instructors, but a number of students actually indicated... So this wasn't just Open Learning students. It was pretty broadly circulated. The biggest things that stick out in my mind are that a number of them really felt, and this may come from a place of a lack of belonging, potentially, or that not being built because they're remote or away from campus, that they wish that they had an earlier connection with an instructor, and that that connection be initiated by the instructor and not themselves.

Robbi Davey:

And I wasn't interviewing and giving advice, but if I was to give advice to students when I do talk to students... I'm teaching the career management class and any other guest lectures I've done, I do always talk about that, that it is important to make those connections as well. But in terms of the instructor and the power relationship that exists, it may not always be maybe as obvious to the instructor. But the Indigenous students I spoke to, a few of them at least indicated that they would love to have had earlier connections. That was one of the questions in the survey. Not a survey. Sorry. It was just an interview guide, but I asked near the end or during... Unless they came up with it on their own because these were very conversational.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Robbi Davey:

It wasn't a survey, it was a conversation. So I let it meander however. So some people did offer that they wish they had connection earlier and that they had a community in terms of discussion. So I think outreach from the instructor, which maybe those instructors are not used to that potentially because they are asynchronous. So there isn't necessarily that structure of we meet every week and here's my office hours. I'm not sure exactly how they operate. A couple of positive things came out of this too in that some of the students who felt they had a really great experience had cohorts that gathered at the beginning of a different model, still asynchronous, but it was definitely early gathering.

Robbi Davey:

So they got together, like a residential opportunity like a weekend or something like that. So they felt those were really good ways to connect early and engage and maybe create some excitement or motivation or set expectations. A second piece of this that I've noticed, working on the last year, in terms of support, I'm wondering if there is a way that we could support students who don't have those dialectical skills that are potentially required for discussion spaces. And-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was just thinking that because that ties into your first point about that residential experience, because it's also an opportunity to gauge expectations amongst a cohort, which I think can be really scary, especially if it's your first or you've had a gap in your studies and you're coming back to it, or if it's your first course and especially if it's your first online course. It's like, what even is the expectation? What's the level of discourse? If I use the wrong "your," are people going to think I'm not able to do this course material? That kind of stuff and I can see how having seen people in real life and connected with them could help with that a lot.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. I think that's a really good point. That didn't come up in anybody's comments, but the little bit of research I've done recently... So I'm engaged in an ed tech PhD program. So I'm working on little bit deeper dive into discourse and how culture and gender impacts discourse online. Something that I just observed through the conversations that I had, they've resonated with me more as I've done some more reading and delved into this topic, is that I believe there is a reticence weighed into the discussion, potentially, and then that relates to belonging and sense of belonging being built and trust. So a residence or a residential component would help that as well, but also outreach from the instructor. I

think you've touched on this too in different workshops that I've been with you, is that you've mentioned being more didactic about expectations and ensuring the equity is there.

Robbi Davey:

Because if you just roll out expectations and talk about, "This is how we're going to constructively build knowledge over here," that may not be something that especially first and second year students would know about, unless they've had that experience in high school. Definitely, there's a disconnect between what I think some students are expecting at university and cultural expectations of the instructor versus the student. And then the way online courses, from my perspective, I don't know, maybe you can weigh in on this too, but the way that those are constructed, it almost feels like you need a little bit more advanced dialectical skills to take advantage of the discussion.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's that old UDL concept of offering multiple means of expression and often, that gets really flattened when everything is happening textually. You have to succeed in this space. And I've noticed that even when we did the pivot online, many campus instructors rolled out discussion forms and then we're immediately drowning in discussion form content because students were writing way more than was expected. And that also is an expectation-setting issue. And also, we make a lot of assumptions about what information students glean from the syllabus, how they read it. I think instructors think, "Well, all the discussion forms are worth 5%. Students know they don't need to write very much. It's 5% for the whole term." If you are not super experienced in reading a syllabus, or you're like me and you have very little spatial sense and what 5% is is just not super meaningful, understanding that you don't need to write an essay every week.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I mean, I remember writing response papers myself as a student and realizing midway through the semester that I was writing a formal essay every week, and other people in the class were just scribbling out notes on their readings. And that was all that was expected, but I never recognized that. Never realized that. So I think just talking to students about what they need to do and I think in particular, if you intend something to be, for example, an informal space for students to share ideas, then can they post an audio clip? Can they post a video clip? Can they do something that might break down some of those assumptions about what formal writing is or what they have to be able to do in order to succeed in that space? I just think there's so many layers and when the whole class is communicating and connecting via text, that's a lot for some students who maybe have really negative experience associated with having professors read their writing. There's a lot of baggage there for many of us.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. That's true. So this didn't show up in my thesis, but as a student, when you said your own student experience, I worry about that stuff too. I've taken a lot of courses, so we're talking different experiences in undergrad. I probably would've had the same anxieties, but basically, I had a student colleague in a class and I recognized that she seemed to be unwilling or... I can't actually speak to her thought process, but she put in a doc into the discussion space. I don't know what that says, but it says something and my assessment of that was maybe potentially, was she afraid for other people to read her writing? Did she feel that it was more formal than it was? Was she uncomfortable with the software? She must not have been because she was able to attach a doc. But I thought it was very difficult to have a conversation with that because it's an extra step to download the doc and then I did

do that. I read her output and then put in a conversation thread and there was no response, but then that was something else that came up.

Robbi Davey:

I was talking to actually my PhD supervisor about this yesterday and what came up was, you're exactly right, that if there isn't explicit instructions or expectations of what the discussion space is, and for the class, maybe even like you've mentioned, co-creating the rules for it, that perhaps coming up with a sense or at least a felt sense of a co-creation of the rules and regulations for discussion space, then people are not as uncomfortable maybe challenging an idea because that's what the discussion space is ideally for, is one student says, "Oh, well, this is what I got out of the readings and this is what it means to me," or, "I connected it with this. It's reflective." Then another student I noticed, even in my PhD classes, there's a lot of concern and worry about the grading. And so removing the grading piece can sometimes be helpful and just marking it as, "Yes, you participated," or not five or zero. But over the course of the semester, because then you get away from people who are just summarizing to show that they've... That's more like the essay writing rather than connecting it.

Robbi Davey:

And then that's how you build some interesting conversations. But if people are afraid of offending somebody that they don't know well, or offending anybody even if they do know well, or just... So you get these... I think we were talking about it and it came up in a reading that I was just looking at for another lit review on culture and online discussion spaces, is that there's a lot of cheerleading posts. I don't know. Great thought. And then I thought that too and da, da, da, da. Yeah. So there's not a lot of extra knowledge being, or not a lot of interests in conversations. So that's where the threads just die and you've done your requisite to two-person response and your own post. But if you layer that in and say, "Yeah, what I'd like this space to be is for us to explore," then at least that's a little bit more information to alleviate that anxiety about marking.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

There was an absolutely legendary Twitter thread around the beginning of the pivot, online, where somebody was like, "I really need my instructors to stop assigning me a 250-word discussion post plus two responses." And then somebody responded and they were like, "Great point. I really liked when you said that you wanted to not have to write a 250-word discussion post with two responses. Thumbs up." And then the person replied to that and they were like, "I'm also responding to this post. Great work." And I was just, like dying. That is what it feels like. So active.

Robbi Davey:
Exactly. Exactly.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And we often set it up pedagogically to be exactly that. It's like if you assign someone to write a 250-word response, they're going to think it through. They're going to have something of a concrete argument, but they're likely also going to be feeling finished, like, "That's my 250 words. I'm done." Whereas if you let people post a question or a provocation, if you let them just speak instead of having to write, if you give them these other ways in, you maybe will allow for more actual, organic discussion, but I know it's hard. It's a hard thing. There's no doubt about it. When it works well, it's beautiful.

Robbi Davey:

It is. You're right. You're right. And I think it would be interesting to do a study on that to see how it evolves over the semester, because I can see even in the class I'm teaching, which I'm sure other more seasoned teachers have seen this or instructors, is that the class is starting to come alive now. But at the beginning, it was difficult to get us all chatting and being comfortable. I can feel an ease in the class a little bit more than I did.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh yeah.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. So I'm sure that happens online as well and sometimes it only takes one provocative person that can break the ice as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that is true and it's always... Yeah, it's so hard to balance in a fully online asynchronous discussion between the student who gets the conversation going and then ends up like a bulldozer figure. And it's a much more complex and nuanced task than we treat it like. The discussion board is often the centerpiece of the asynchronous class in terms of any kind of connection between students and with the instructor. I think we pretend like it's easier than it is. And I think a lot of campus faculty became aware of that through the experience of the pivot. I think they realized, "Oh, it's actually maybe more complicated to run a good discussion online than we may have thought."

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And so I think work like what you did in your master's work and also what it sounds like you're working towards in your doctoral work is really important to think about how discourse actually functions, and how to achieve good discussion, and how to structure this kind of pedagogical experience that does allow and account for cultural difference and expectations, and also just experience. The third time you approach an online discussion form is really different than the first time, but I don't think that most of our course design is built to acknowledge that.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah, that's a good point. That brings up an interesting way of marking too that I'm sure other people have thought through. If someone has to do 10 reflections online, let's say, maybe that's too much, and they are marked on it, then maybe they can pick the last five or the best five or something like that. Or some kind of way for a student to have a say and start to learn how to have a more equal say in the learning process.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, and also if we want people to improve their skills, then we should reward them when their skills improve, right?

Robbi Davey:

Right. Right.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And so-

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. That's a really good point.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

... giving them the chance to do that. And also, it's good reflective practice for a student at the end of term to go back through and say, "I think these were my five best contributions to the class discussion." That's super powerful. They've had to actually think through what worked and what didn't and there's learning in that. Especially if you asked them to submit a portfolio style with a little reflective piece, like, "These are the five I'm submitting and here's why." I think that there can be quite a lot of radical and interesting work happening on these very state and static-looking discussion forms, but it just does have to be intentionally done. There's no doubt about that.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. And you're reminding me of something that is interesting too that came up that students often mentioned in this study that they would've... Or one student who did really well. She said she had attributed her skills to... And we go back to the onus being on the student to have all these self-regulatory characteristics and have developed. They said that some success courses were very helpful, but there's an issue with that that could be alleviated by sometimes the instructors taking on that role in every course. But it takes a little more vigilance in feeling out the students. So say you have... I don't know exactly how these asynchronous go, but say there's 20 students and only when you hand in an assignment do you get connection or feedback.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Robbi Davey:

If you want to use that asynchronous discussion space and everyone starts at different times, that's difficult. So is there a role for the instructor to play in that discussion space or... That has to again be discussed with the students like, "You're going to be in a class with maybe two people at the same time," or, "It would be helpful for you to look at the artifacts of the discussion here," stuff like that. Just explaining, but potentially even taking some of the items that would show up in a success course and supporting students with those, even though that's not your content area, if that makes sense. Providing some scaffolding there. I mean, I know that's part and parcel of instructor work, but I think that wasn't necessarily happening in these students' courses that they talked about.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

From what you've written, it wasn't legible to them. If that work was happening, it wasn't happening in a way that was legible to them and that's a disconnect too. And my background is in teaching writing and my constant frustration is I'd be at some faculty meeting or some event and they'd have somebody from the Anthropology Department come up and say, "Students really can't write." I'd be like, "Well, I'm doing my best in the one semester that I have them for. What are you doing to teach writing in your course?" There's a great article that refers to some of this as the "housework of the university" and

these do tend to be women-dominated subject areas. Communications, English, student success, these courses that are designed to be one-and-done. You'll go take your writing class over there, you'll go take your student success course over there, and I will be here teaching the "real material."

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And it's nuts. I mean, the idea that you would learn such a complicated skill, whether it's the skill of how to be a student or the skill of how to write in a single semester. Cuckoo bananas. But the other thing is that it's making a lot of assumptions, a lot of assumptions that I don't think are supported by the research about skills transfer. If I teach you how to write a five-page research paper in an academic writing course, that's a lot to ask you to then never take another bit of writing instruction, and then you're expected to produce some honours writing piece at the fourth year level. And where's the bridge? I think that student success is very similar in that the institution, and I don't mean TRU, I mean the institutional structure, treats it as a thing that happens over there, whereas students are best served surely by having that course, but also by integrating those skills throughout their experience as learners.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. So you're right. And I think that brings up another piece when you're thinking about writing and yeah, you're exactly right. You can learn a lot in one class, but I think unless you practice something... But I think there's a lot to be said for those, like the Writing Center and different places like that. And, I mean, some students, if they're taking part in the university experience and using those services, like even the career services, if you feel that you belong or you have a sense of belonging at your institution, you may be more apt to use those services. But I think continually using those services and improving and not expecting to have perfected it or have that anxiety of performance right away.

Robbi Davey:

So I think I've often suggested continually using those services to students, but also the fact that they may not always be as available, or I think a couple of the participants just mentioned that, "Oh, I wasn't aware of these services until you talked about them." So I know that the Writing Center was around the time that I started the project. They were then offering online, but that was a complaint and then there was a scheduling issue. How we do our work, sometimes it's like you need it right now. You can't schedule your help. So that goes back to this role of maybe that digital mentor that floats around online, or the digital elder, or something like that. But, you mean, that's not a panacea, but it can be helpful to just know that you can get support and that it's a normal part of the process.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Totally. And it comes back to that idea of the services may be there, but if they're not legible to the students you're trying to target, then they're not there. In academic integrity circles, we talk about the fact that there may be an insulating effect against academic integrity by having some of these services more available at times when students actually want and need them. So it's like if it's 2:00 AM, it's really hard to get legitimate help at 2:00 AM, which there are all kinds of structural reasons why that would be hard to organize. But maybe we could start to think in the direction of, even if it's an asynchronous help service right away where you can reach out at the moment you need it, because the people who are there at 2:00 AM are the essay mills. They will absolutely take your call at 2:00 in the morning and produce what you need or what you think you need. And I think that increasingly, students work at any moment of the day and the least reputable folks are also working at every moment of the day. We need

to think about ways we can counter that so that when students go looking for support, there's a legitimate option there.

Robbi Davey:

Oh, well, that's a really good point. Actually, there was a comment. So when you said that about academic integrity, it led me to think about one thing that came up in terms of... And I know that since I've done this project, there's been a pandemic and potentially, I thought that maybe there was an improvement in remote delivery. Maybe not always. We can't generalize, but so many people had to pivot online. It's just become a bigger conversation. So I was hoping that that would improve, but potentially not. And I guess it depends on the instructor, but I was thinking about scheduling exams.

Robbi Davey:

And, I mean, I can't really speak to that as much as before because as a grad student, I wasn't doing exams, thankfully, but the proctoring software and the setting exam times and just dealing, like when you said structural issues, it seemed like that was a difficulty and connecting with setting exams, getting accessibility, and even knowing that there was accessibility options. So just the hoops to jump through and I feel like people... There were a couple participants at least that said they had to pay again, or didn't match up with their schedule, or didn't... And I don't know if open learning uses proctoring software.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

They do. Yeah. We have a contract with ProctorU for open learning courses that require a final exam now. Yeah. Yeah. So they booked a room or they did the testing centres previously and the testing centres are starting to reopen again. The testing centres were closed for a long time due to COVID. And as those are starting to open up again, students have, I think, more options, but, I mean, it's no secret that I'm super uncomfortable with surveillance software generally. Well, I don't love assessments that require it in the first place. But I think that what you're describing with the hoops that students have to go through, I think it's really unreasonable, for example, that accessibility is entirely the responsibility of a student to arrange and organize. That there's no structural support within the institution if the student isn't driving that bus themselves. And there's a big argument. Obviously, the traditional argument is the one about personal responsibility. But the flip side of that is if you don't even know that a service is available, you can't actually be responsible for it. And there's a lot of that. There're a lot of students who find out really late in the game academically that they have need for or that those supports exist. And then we require extremely expensive documentation from students. It's a lot of hoops, a lot of hoops.

Robbi Davey:

And they may not have a doctor. Yeah. There's all kinds of things that didn't come up necessarily in my thesis. The issue of scheduling exams and organizing... There was a couple of participants, I believe, that had managed to work through that and others who became aware of it later, because a lot of people are not even aware that they may have something they are challenged with that could be alleviated with some accessibility sports. So just a lack of awareness of, say, I have ADHD or anxiety. Those are things that I could get support for if I could get through the hoops. Yeah. So in terms of those things and I believe there was some rigidity around... So if it's open learning in general, not just open learning at TRU, but just if it is supposed to be this flexible, you can work it into your life, then the exam should be the same. But I felt that they were saying that that was not the case and it seemed incongruent.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The reviews from students with the option of the online proctoring have often been very positive and I think it's been for that reason. There are more times when they can write and those times are more in keeping with a student who is, say, working during the day, for example, or a caregiver. And so I grudgingly have to acknowledge that, which I don't like. But I think the ability to actually schedule the exam when students want it has improved. But the question is, is there a way to improve that without putting students through a surveillance proctoring tool? That's the question that I would like to answer.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. I haven't delved into that. I know it's a thing and I know that you were a champion of that and that's been an issue, but I just don't see how anybody wins from that situation. It does put a lot of anxiety and stress on students that can be a challenge to show your knowledge if you're anxious. Because I know myself. I had to take a teaching test, I remember, and I was so anxious about it. That was a long time ago and I was moving to the US, so I took this standardized test. I remember I did excellent in the math. For some reason, I'm a math person. So I zipped through the math, like 96%, and the short answer and essay part, it wasn't even that hard, but I was so struggling, speaking of writing. I barely got through that and it was like a blank in my brain and then just the ticking of the clock and you're in this room. So my point is, I'm not a proponent of exams. I mean, I think you can get the knowledge from an open book exam, especially if it's remote and if the student is potentially not... I mean, if there's no cheating there. If you're able to look stuff up because in work, you're looking things up. You're not-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh my God.

Robbi Davey:

... expected to just know things.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

90% of my day is Googling, honestly.

Robbi Davey:

Exactly. Okay. So I have an exam coming up and I'm sure you did this. You had your comps exam. And I'm so anxious about it, but I'm going to be doing it for three weeks, three questions. So I just need to be organized and know where all my material is, but I won't be asked to sit in a room and write it for a day. So I don't know. I just think the days of those things are... So back to Indigenous students and I just think that they're [exams are] an extra challenge that potentially could be alleviated, but that's just my suggestion.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

No, I think you're right. And I am really struck by how often when I read research that is looking at improving situations for equity-seeking groups in our universities, how often those solutions are actually just good practice. And the gap between the way we talk about teaching and what actually happens in our classrooms is still pretty striking. And so I was really fascinated by your work, Robbi, and I can't wait to see what comes out of your PhD because I think this is really fascinating. And also I'm really glad I'm

not writing comps. So good luck with your comps coming up. Thank you so much for your time today, Robbi. I really appreciate it.

Robbi Davey:

Yeah. I really appreciate you taking an interest. This is exciting to revisit it. So-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care.

Robbi Davey:

Thank you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode 21. 21? Seriously? Episode 21 of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca, and I'm also on Twitter, @brennacgray. In both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at 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, and it echoes what Robbi was talking about, but also I think the beginning of the show and that is this is a big change for everyone on campus, whether it's a change you were really looking forward to or a change that you're dreading. I hope you'll check in with your students about how they're feeling about mask mandates and maybe that's another thing that you can negotiate as a class, just like other classroom ground rules. However you decide to navigate this moment, I wish you calm and I wish you grace. And I hope that you are looking after yourself in whatever capacity that takes. We'll talk soon. Take care of yourselves and each other and especially each other. We're all we've got. Bye-bye.