

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 unceded, traditional lands of Secwepemcu'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. Today I am back with a regular episode and I'm going to cut the episode a bit short today because I sound like this. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I got a head cold. I keep doing the rapid tests, they still say negative, but I'm keeping myself to myself. My kiddo went back to school for two days last week, and now we all have a head cold, which is just about the summary of my experience of daycare and having a five year old. Do they just lick everything?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, so I sound like this and my energy level is a little low, but that's actually okay because I have a lengthy episode today. I brought the boss on, Brian Lamb is here, and we're talking a little bit about, what is learning technology even? But I don't think it's too inside baseball. We talk a lot about the community here and the kinds of services we try to provide and why. Yeah, I think it's a worthwhile talk for everyone, not just learning technologists. Although if you are a learning technologist, there will be some inside jokes. I'll let Brian take it from here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I am here today with Brian Lamb, for a slightly, oh, I don't know if it's going to be chaotic or if the audio is just going to be unlistenable Brian, but between this head cold that I have contracted, and the fact that The Groot is home with a head cold and running around like a crazy person, the audio will be interesting. The editing experience will be interesting, but hi.

Brian Lamb:

Hey.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I invited you here. I'm skipping the introduction, because you've been on the show like 47 times.

Brian Lamb:

Okay.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I wanted to invite you on to maybe just give you a chance to reflect a little bit on this very tumultuous year we've been through and talk about some changes or some sort of process work in the works. Good, that was a sentence. Yeah, and then just maybe have a chat about this job we do, which is kind of strange and kind of great. But do you want to start by telling me how you feel about this past year?

Brian Lamb:

Yeah. Thank for the invitation to do it. First of all, it's cool that I actually feel like maybe only for the last few weeks that I'm in a space to begin reflection, and I think maybe that space existed earlier in the year, but I couldn't trust myself to allow it, if that makes sense.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Totally.

Brian Lamb:

I was still in hypervigilant mode.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

And I think even though there may have been a bit of breathing space, I couldn't allow myself to trust that and to lean into it. I think it's really only been since the semester ended and our staffing is somewhat stabilizing in the immediate group, which has been helpful. I do just begin to feel like I'm beginning to start to be able to look back and think about it now. Yeah. We went into the year with all sorts of misgivings and fears and some of them played out.

Brian Lamb:

I actually have to give props to our faculty. I think they were more resilient than I thought they might be. I was amazed at how many times when, for example, people were struggling with classroom technology that they didn't immediately call us screaming, that they really tried to make things work, and then the conversations that we had were quite useful. It was a weird year. I felt like there was this kind of pull of anxiety. There was a sense of trying to be ready for a bunch of scenarios that may or may not play out. It was definitely a hard year emotionally. I felt like I was very much in the tunnel of something of what I guess was burnout.

Brian Lamb:

I found myself using the metaphor in another chat. I feel like a really old pickup truck that was left out in the barn for 10 years, and now it's like [car noises], and it's just starting to turn over and start firing, but it's belching oil and it's not going to be an easy ride. I don't know, that's where I feel like I'm at. How are you feeling? Does that resonate at all with you? Or how has it felt in your role?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh yeah, totally. That sense of not trusting the downtime has been really acute, I think. I was saying to Jamie, that there was an 18 month stretch where downtime really just meant we didn't know what horror was awaiting us. We didn't know what wasn't working or we didn't know what people didn't know. Whereas now I think downtime means people have stepped away from their computers for a few minutes and everything is probably fine, but coming to trust that is difficult.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think too, campus relies on our team in a way that has created some really wonderful relationships, but it also does make it hard to disengage or to detach in any way because we are used to being relied upon, but folks are back face-to-face. I think a lot of the solutions that people have come up with for dealing with high rates of absences and their own need to be able to work from home on occasion, they seem to be working within the parameters of their own comfort zone, which is great, and I'm really impressed with our community.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You know I hate the word resilience, but I'm really impressed with the way our community has really absorbed the lessons of the last two years. There's like this pop culture desire to put the pandemic moment in a box and seal it and never look at it again, but we've talked before about how much learning has happened, not just for our students, but for everyone, and seeing that actually come to fruition in the classroom has actually been really rewarding when I give myself time to notice it.

Brian Lamb:

It's very understandable why, it's been a tough couple years, I think for everybody, I don't know who it's been easy for. It's natural to treat it like spring after a crappy winter and to get outside and just move on. It's not that I want to wallow in bad vibes. Oh, maybe I do. I do say in other instances at times. I find it problematic to the idea of just wanting to put that experience in a box.

Brian Lamb:

First of all, because I'm not at all convinced that we're not going to be called upon to do something similar again, that some other disruption won't come along and I would like us to reflect and think, what did we do right? What would we have done differently? And we did learn a lot and we did grow a lot, and our community grew a lot and it was not a fun process, but I think a lot of people at this university have reasons to feel proud of what they did.

Brian Lamb:

Certainly, when I look at the landscape of our university and when we think about the kind of things we want to do and the kind of people we're going to be working for, it's different, people have grown. The basic baseline literacy, we can assume among their faculty, for example, it's night and day.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It really is, it genuinely is. You said, we may need to do this kind of thing again. I think it's something people don't want to think about. You and I were just in a session this morning. Well, you were on the panel, I was just in the audience, but there was the sense of like, "We're never doing that again." But I also think back to last summer and the wildfires and having conversations with people who were like, "I'm really grateful I didn't have to commute by bike to campus today because I would not be able to breathe."

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We're living through a moment where change and tumult is kind of the watch word, and I think we owe it to our students to retain this capacity for responsiveness to the situation. To me, that's the one major, I don't know, professional development win that came out of the pandemic is academics in general are

not always really good at looking at the world around and being like, "Oh, that might be impacting my students' lives." But the pandemic really forced that on people, and we saw this huge proliferation of conversations about care, which I was so grateful to see.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I don't think you put that awareness away. I don't think that that stops being relevant. We had the highway closures in November that stranded students in Vancouver, and we've had so many moments totally apart and aside from the pandemic to remind us that for education to fit this moment, it's got to be fairly nimble, and it can't be exclusively reliant on a sage on the stage kind of model, because sometimes the sage is stuck on a highway that has collapsed. What do you do then?

Brian Lamb:

Personally, if I had gone through the kind of stuff I've gone through the last two years, and if I'm putting myself in the place of the students and the faculty, I don't want to put that in a box, and think of it positively, I'd like to see my growth to continue. I'd like to build on it. Why lose these new skills we've learned?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, absolutely. Recognition for those skills is something that I think we need to think about institutionally, structurally, personally, coming up with the narrative for what this two years has been within the arc of a career or for a student within the arc of a degree program, I think it's really important to be able to articulate learning how to do basic audio editing because I release my lectures on podcast now or that kind of thing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think if people actually sit down and reflect on the skills acquisition, the changes to their professional practice, the changes in their outlook, it's pretty major, and I think it deserves a space in how we articulate the work that we do. I think it's important.

Brian Lamb:

Especially if we really do value this idea of lifelong learning.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

I hope to see analysis of that or theorizing or however it gets conceptualized that begins to kind of make sense of that piece of it, because I think it's immense.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I just realized I was going to segue into a conversation about learning technology, which I still want to do, but I also did want to give you a space to talk to the community. We didn't get to have an ACTAC meeting this spring, and that's often a space where you get to tell people like what's happening on a systems level, so I thought you might want to take five minutes here to do that. Then I want to talk about changes to learning technology as a discipline.

Brian Lamb:

Okay. I'll try to give it a just very quick capsule. When you sometimes hear the discourse like, "Okay, summer we're all off." That's never the case for learning technologists. It changes. The pace usually lightens a bit. We usually have a bit more of a same day-to-day vibe, but the workload doesn't diminish at all, because this is typically the time we put things in place.

Brian Lamb:

One of the things we're doing is I think we're going to be... well, because our current version of Moodle 3.11 isn't set to be supported for security updates much longer, we made the decision that unless something goes horribly wrong, we're going to try to upgrade to Moodle 4.0 over the summer, and that's going to be a bit of a tight turnaround because it's not mind blowingly different, but it's different enough that we're going to definitely need to revamp some of our training materials, and there will be a learning curve for our users or at least just relearning some habits and things like that, at the very least.

Brian Lamb:

I wouldn't call it an utter transformation in the model or anything like that, but workflows will be different. I think the big criticism that people have with Moodle, it's got a bit of a busy interface, and I think that has been to an extent addressed in the new version. The downside of that is, when you have a cluttered interface, that means there are links, and usually people use links, some of them at least. I think there are going to be people whose usual pathways and navigation habits will be disrupted. I'll say I'm concerned how that will impact people. I think we'll roll with it, but it's going to be an adjustment.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

That one is fairly big. In terms of actual work, it may not impact quite as many people, but we were just rolling out the culture of video platform when the pandemic hit and we were planning this slow launch and it ended up being a really integral piece of our infrastructure really quickly. Last I checked, we were around 45,000 videos created by the TRU community. It's probably about half the daily volume as it was when the campus was fully virtual, but it's clearly a big part of what our community uses. It's a must have piece of technology now.

Brian Lamb:

The BCNet shared service that provides it is no longer going to be hosted in British Columbia at the UBC campus. It's going to be hosted on a Kaltura managed cloud service on an Amazon Web Services framework. We'll leave aside the really big picture implications of that for the moment if you'd like. You're welcome to bring them back up.

Brian Lamb:

We do hope actually that should actually result in some improved performance and potentially a couple additional features that couldn't be supported with the on-premises version. But it does mean moving all the videos from the old installation to the new one, moving over all the user accounts, hopefully connecting all the pieces correctly, then testing all that out. Then one thing we know is going to break is

that if you have, for example, embedded or linked to videos in Moodle, those links aren't going to work anymore, because the URLs are going to be different.

Brian Lamb:

There is a vendor service and I rummaged through the couch cushions and managed to find a little money to bring in a third-party service that claims to run scripts and processes that will fix a number of those links. I don't think it's a 100% thing. We're a bit fortunate where we are on the migration curve. There's three or four institutions that were in line ahead of us, so hopefully we'll benefit from some of the pain they're currently going through.

Brian Lamb:

I also have to note, it does look like they're going through some pain. Yeah, I know, your noises express my outlook I'm afraid. I don't think this is going to be fun. I don't think it's going to be disastrous, but it's going to be a slogging maintenance job. Hopefully, we'll get to a place, a better place by fall semester. I am grateful that it looks like we're going to be able to get to it in June, which will hopefully give us a little time for people to identify things and fix it up. Yeah, that's going to be big.

Brian Lamb:

I'm doing a lot of personal growth in this process in terms of, I'm doing some things with the vendors and taking on some roles to help our friends in IT out a little bit, that I wouldn't normally be doing, which has been interesting actually, but it is extra work and there's a lot of times where I find myself doing things that seem pretty important that I don't quite know how to do.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I'm glad it's you.

Brian Lamb:

Like contracts and stuff like that. Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I think it's going to be, for us a slightly tumultuous summer with resolving those two pretty major changes. Yeah, my hope is that summer faculty will feel it a little bit with the videos probably, but by fall we have things in place so at least we can orient people to the new Moodle interface and videos will be behaving properly. That's my hope anyway. My hope is that it's all resolved by September.

Brian Lamb:

Yeah. That's my hope as well. Well, I really don't know. It is a bit of a plunge at the very least. Once we get through this, I think some of the ongoing issues people had reported to us with Kaltura, at least some of those should be resolved in the new environment, which we hope will be helpful.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This is actually a useful segue into the conversation about what a learning technologist does, because I'm looking ahead to the Kaltura migration and realizing that for some days what Jamie and I primarily are going to be doing is fixing links places, and going in and doing that kind of like just straight up cut

and paste work to make links work properly, and that's often a big part of the day, is just resolving fairly minor, but significant to the end user problems.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Then there's also this other component of the work of learning technology that I think has become really quite urgent now, which is ed tech companies are largely not out for the best interests of students and faculty, they're trading in data and to be good at this job, I think you have to have a pretty rounded awareness of what that might look like and how to help people to make better decisions and guide them, and so I think there's this dichotomy between maybe what the learning technologist's job is on paper or how the job is perceived by faculty, who may only ever interact with us through support tickets, and what the job is in its entirety, in its philosophical space. I know you've been thinking about that a lot these days. I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about that sort of split role maybe.

Brian Lamb:

Yeah. I'll try to start off and then I really hope you'll jump in, because I do enjoy having this conversation with you always, but maybe I'll just note too, as we record this, this week, two epic pieces of journalism appeared in the so-called mainstream media, The Globe and Mail piece about the effects of a lot of the technologies that were adopted during the pandemic and their effects on children. Also in the Washington Post with the more of an American lens, and it appears that the US Federal Trade Commission is taking an interest on the abuse of... well, frankly, the abuse of kids and their privacy, and some pretty shocking revelations about where this stuff goes. It really brings home that idea that to just passively ride the waves of what vendors give us and listen to the sales pitch and adopt the tool and move along and assume goodwill is really a bad idea and can really harm people.

Brian Lamb:

I think that those harms, I don't think we've really processed them yet. I don't think they've worked their way through. I don't think all the effects have been felt yet. But yeah, I've been thinking more about this question. It's something I'm always thinking about, but it was triggered by someone on Twitter, I believe it was Jonathan Rees, who's a historian, but he's someone who's always had a strong indie ed tech kind of orientation. He just tweeted that the experience where at his college, he had asked for a WordPress install and that they essentially laughed him out of the room. I guess, it caught me in a weird moment, and I actually was just trying to be... and reflecting on my own journey here. When I came to TRU from UBC, I had built my career on open platforms on weblogs and Wikis, and we'd done a lot of work at UBC and I'd worked with so many good people there. If I start naming people, it'd be the rest of your podcast. I guess, Novak Rogic, who's still doing that stuff there, and Scott McMillan, but there's so many people that made that work happen.

Brian Lamb:

Then I came here and there was a WordPress install, but it was clear that, "Here's your template, here's your login." And the idea of being this space for iteration and experimentation and really pushing what the platform can do, wasn't really in scope. Well, I think I did. I think I alienated some people in IT, by just even asking some questions about what was going to be possible. I realized and I think we've done a lot of work to improve that relationship with IT. As it stands here, I have nothing but good things to say about our IT people, they really are doing amazing work under really challenging circumstances, and I really try my best to make their life less hard.

Brian Lamb:

That all said, if you just look at how a typical IT unit is mandated, resourced, and then the things that will get them into trouble, they really value things like stability, security. The way they tend to organize projects, they have closing dates. They like to be able to say, "Okay, this is done now." Whereas I guess, my vision of how a WordPress platform works say, it's never done and it's never as good as you want it to be. To me, it's so powerful that when someone comes to us with an idea and says, "Hey, I have this piece of research and is there any way I could represent this information in this way?"

Brian Lamb:

We do have the capacity here. Although, obviously, time and workload, mental energy become our issues, but we do actually have the ability to listen to that problem, go out, see what's been done elsewhere, contact other people that do really cutting edge development work in the platform, try out an experimental plugin. If it looks promising to incorporate it and build upon it, and then maybe build upon that capacity in the future.

Brian Lamb:

The metaphor I always come back to, it's a lot like a garden. You plant your garden, weeds pop up, and it's not a tidy garden, it's a garden where things feed off of each other and pollination is happening and there are cycles, and sometimes plants die and it's almost like a living organism, the platform. And it requires a certain kind of attention that I don't think IT units are typically staffed and supported to provide. Some places do. I think a lot of IT units, they say, "Okay, I gave you your WordPress platform. And now you're asking for that? You keep asking for new things." Now we're getting into your question was like, "What is a learning technologist?"

Brian Lamb:

I'm increasingly coming to think that other than learning technologists, nobody likes us really. They might appreciate it when we help them, but I think first of all, most faculty think we're it. I'm sure you get this too. I get emails blaming me for email--

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, 100%.

Brian Lamb:

... And things like that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

And just assume that we're part of IT, and not coming at this from a teaching and learning perspective. Of course, most learning technologists, most of us have taught before or at least I think we think of ourselves as educators primarily.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yes.



Brian Lamb:

At least in my vision of it. The IT people think of us as these never satisfied flaky weirdos. We have a good relationship with our IT people, but it's kind of a running joke that they roll their eyes at us. Thankfully they seem to do it affectionately now.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. That's true. It does sometimes feel like we're the dirty hippies in the room when we're raising particular issues.

Brian Lamb:

I think that to me is the core issue, and I think maybe we can tease that out. I don't know, does that formulation make sense to you or is there a better way to look at it?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I think part of the issue that we're getting at here is that the work can be largely invisible, and I think IT folks experience this too. When everything is working, you don't send an email to IT being like, "Hey, got all my emails today. You guys are doing a great job." We only reach out when these services break because they are so much a part of the infrastructure of the university, and yet they're not really treated that way.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's as important that we have a functional learning management system and a functional WordPress installation for the way our faculty teach their classes that is equally as important as the maintenance of the buildings, but it's not treated that way by anybody outside of really our office and the folks in IT who understand us.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think there's a certain amount of just sort of a lack of visibility and an assumption that the service is there, and I think a lack of understanding of how many teaching and learning decisions are ultimately shaped by the platforms we have access to. I was acutely aware of that as an instructor in my previous life, I was always aware that I was butting up against the limits of the learning management system or my desire to have courses existing in the open meant I had to do it all by myself because I wasn't going to get any support from the institution to do that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that if you're just using the tools the way they've been designed to be used, then it's maybe not quite so obvious that it shapes the choices that we make in the classroom, and so I always think, I think you're right that nobody likes us, but I think in many ways we're like the last line of defense often. We're the people who are hopefully present to raise questions, to challenge some of the assumptions around purchasing or to push back against the functionality of a tool on behalf of faculty and students, but I'm not sure that we always communicate that role effectively. I'm not even sure how you communicate that role really, if that makes sense.

Brian Lamb:

Yeah. It's a hard role for people from the outside to understand. That gets me wondering too about what I suspect a lot of people on campus might say similar things, a lot of the people you've interviewed, what people think that role is and then how those people themselves conceptualize what they do and what they bring to it and the kind of thinking they bring into it. I think a lot of it is under the surface. I'm probably guilty of doing this to other people that I work with in other areas of the university.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You know what? That really came clear to me. Brian and I, are both serving on the integrated strategic planning committee, and sometimes when we have those conversations and when we talk to people in other areas, it's really clear how much we all don't know what each other do and how much we are... my perspective on what the university needs is circumscribed by my space within the university, and I don't butt up against, let's say the research office very often. I may not be aware of integral work that they do that just doesn't intersect with my work, and so I don't know about it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's a question I keep coming back to is, how do you facilitate a better understanding of how all of the work works together? Because it obviously does. On some level we're a big organism, the pieces must be co-functioning. And yet I think we really don't know. We really don't know what we don't know about the functioning of the university and other units.

Brian Lamb:

If it's okay, I might throw a bit of a curve ball in here and just--

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

... Go back about five minutes and then step back a bit. When I had that exchange with Professor Reese, about the role of the learning technologist, I got this mini wave of direct messages from people at other institutions going, "Oh, I can't talk about this." Then kind of their own sense of being isolated within the institution or how requests that they felt they needed to make to be able to do their jobs effectively just couldn't get prioritized and just couldn't get traction and support. They wouldn't be given the tool set to do what they could do, but then they also get that lovely thing where somebody later on will, "Well, what is it you do that's so innovative anyway?"

Brian Lamb:

They do exist. There are people who work in LMS support and like the platforms they work in, I do meet those people occasionally, but most technologists I talk to, I think most of us tend to just view it as this... we might grudgingly recognize the utility of it, and actually, I used to say really vitriolic things about the learning management system, but I refer people now to it all the time. If I talk to a faculty member and what they want to do is manage administrative tasks in the classroom. I was like, "Well, what you want is a learning management system actually." I get excited when they ask for things that the LMS can't do, and if they're open minded to stepping outside of it.

Brian Lamb:

This is where I got reflective, and I'm going to move into old man ed tech mode. I started at a very weird place. I started at an experimental university called Tech BC more than 20 years ago. Our learning technology department was actually... because it was this new, mostly virtual. It was blended really, university in British Columbia that was meant to serve the high tech sector. And learning technology, which was still in its infancy was really nowhere near advance as it is now.

Brian Lamb:

Learning management existed, but like Web CT back then, which later got incorporated into Blackboard was like a passion project of a UBC professor, and he used to run the Web CT server out of his office, the machine was literally under his desk that kept the learning management systems for a number of universities. I remember going to a talk by that professor where he announced that they were going to have to start charging money for this, and he had to apologize for it. The culture was just so different.

Brian Lamb:

Now Blackboard was a thing, but it was a tiny company back then. Anyway, the university I was at, we built our own learning management system. We actually called it the CMS, for course management system. It was like this really quite impressive creaking boat, but it was actually built to meet the needs of our group. My point is, our group, we had coders, we had sysadmins. We had database administrators as part of our learning technology team. Actually, back then, that wasn't so unusual. We did it to a scale, other places didn't, but most learning technology teams back then had someone who could actually run the servers and who actually could install the applications or even build an application.

Brian Lamb:

Back then, if you went to the equivalent of what is now ETUG, people would be sharing the custom built app that their team had built to solve some boutique problem they had at their university, and it might be a really specific teaching and learning need and they'd share it. The thing that would always happen, and open source was just starting to be a thing. People would share this cool piece of work they did, and then you'd put up your hand and go, "Wow! Is this shareable?" And they're like, "Well, we haven't gotten to that part yet. We haven't really packaged it up."

Brian Lamb:

This was actually built by a CompSci student as a project and they've graduated. Honestly, I think some of the degradation of the capacity of learning technology units was a bit self-inflicted from that era. I think there were a lot of orphan projects and a lot of development funds. We didn't work well with each other. We didn't build on shared platforms very often. We didn't use a common language to share our stuff, and we didn't put the needs of say, open source development which would allow us to share code up front. In fairness, we didn't have things like GitHub back then.

Brian Lamb:

I don't know, when I look back on it, I just think though about what a typical learning technology unit looked like then, and then what learning technologists do now. Weirdly enough though, the other thing that's changed is the professionalization of it. You're a rare person to enter the field recently that didn't have to study in a formal program.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I know. Everybody has got an EdD and I'm just like, "Hi, I like books." It is weird. I'm sort of reflecting on this change because the other thing that has happened is that so many of the tools have become obviously centralized and more uniform, and there's a level at which that gives a more consistent learning experience to faculty and students, that don't have to master a different set of tools for every course. I do think that in the pandemic we saw the cost of the cognitive load that comes from multiple platforms and having to balance that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But it also means that I think at so many institutions, if you can't do it with the tools that have been selected and streamlined, then you can't do it. It is one of the great joys of working at TRU and working on this team is that we really... I don't know if people feel this way when they interact with us, because we are circumscribed by our own limitations, but we really try hard to say yes to whatever folks bring to us.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I find that really exciting, because I definitely worked at a place where the default answer was no previously. What I learned from that experience is people will just do it anyway. They just won't do it with appropriate guidance and the right tools, and they won't do it necessarily securely or safely, which I think is part of your general ethos of not being the tech police, is it's better to figure out what people are trying to accomplish and see if we can do it together.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that about what we do, and I think one of the nice things about this moment is that we're maybe finding our way back to that because at the height of the pandemic pivot, we definitely didn't have the resources to help people take on the big projects that they wanted to do for the most part.

Brian Lamb:

Well, yeah, like our team meeting this week and I actually had to do private check-ins with a few of you, because I was like, "I think I'm going to start asking more of you now." I was excited about it, but I was like... because yeah, I've been trying to protect you too, the last few years, so I have said no a lot more than I want to. I'm hoping we can get to a place where we're never going to be able to just be an undisciplined group that says yes to everything, because then we'll get nothing done.

Brian Lamb:

But at the same time, yeah, I'm excited. I hope this isn't one of those famous last words podcast. Some of those ones we've done early on in your series. I've occasionally gone back and listened and I'm like, "Oh, boy, it's almost painful to listen to." There's one we listened just before fall 2020, where we thought--

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's my favourite one. Yeah.

Brian Lamb:

... We thought we had it under control. We're not under control, but I think we felt as ready as we could be. We were quite chipper and upbeat. Then I know things are going to come along, that's one of the things, but I got to say too, you said this earlier. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but I'm really pleased our group, and I'm not just talking about our campus support team, but our general immediate milieu is as willing to entertain new challenges as they are.

Brian Lamb:

I sometimes talk to peers at other institutions who want to do more and want to be more adventurous. Frankly, for whatever reason, the people they work with aren't ready to come along with them on that. They're not prepared to put themselves out or take the risk or take on the extra work. I can't get inside those people's heads, I don't know enough, but I feel really, really lucky to have colleagues that, as you said, that aren't no people, that we're ready to at least talk about the possibility and try to find a way to get to somewhere in a way we can accomplish it. I feel so lucky to work with people like that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You know what conversation I have all the time that cracks me up every single time? I will get DMs from other learning technologists and they will say things like... and actually I'll out Jason, he asked me this on his first day at TRU, "How did you get permission to make the podcast?" It makes me laugh because it literally never occurred to me to ask. I think that ethos of the team of like, "I believe in this thing and I see it's utility." I think I did talk to you about it a little bit before, but the beauty of TRUBox as a space is that it doesn't have to go through a series of permissions to access server space. You just sign up and you have your space.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that I've had folks from elsewhere say, "Well, do your marketing communications people sign off on your episodes? Who does it go through?" And it's wild to me because I don't always recognize how lucky I am to have landed in a place that is super supportive of experimentation and play. That is true to a lead greater or lesser extent of the world around us, but for our team in particular, go and try it is always the ethos.

Brian Lamb:

Yeah. No, and I'm glad you mentioned a couple other units because it does rely on the goodwill of a lot of people. It's not just something we can decide on our own. That's why relationships are important. That's one thing. I don't know if you get a little meta on your podcast. One of the things I love about your podcast, to me it's such a great showcase of how many different angles go into a culture that supports iteration, creativity, whatever you want to call it. It's way more about culture than any tool set.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think that's really clear. Anybody who has access to WordPress can make a podcast. It's just that, do you feel like it's possible within the confines of where you work? Do you feel like it would be supported? I think that that's a much tougher question and I often think that the sort of... the term people use is chilling. I think it's really easy to get into a situation where a culture is chilled to doing anything new or creative or interesting.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

As frustrated as I sometimes get around here, I certainly never have to deal with that issue, and that's a big deal when we're thinking about the capacity of learning technologists, what the role can be, how we can grow within a role like this. I think that that capacity for play and experimentation, that's really central.

Brian Lamb:

Is there any place you would like the role to go that involves anything that we haven't been talking about? You know what I mean? Are there gaps that you wish we could... that's a big question to toss at you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The thing that we always will run up against is capacity. I think that capacity is always going to circumscribe what we're able to accomplish, and that sucks because it's such a concrete and specific thing as money. I think ultimately what I would like to see for the role of learning technologists in more places is a greater integration between procurement and learning technology. What tools are we buying? Why have we done the ethical legwork on it? That to me is a role for a learning technologist, and so often is not part of the larger conversation.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I also think that we're in this moment where learning technologists need to be involved in policy making both within the institution and at larger structures, whether that's provincial or federal, I think a lot of decisions and choices get made. A lot of money gets spent without a really clear understanding of the implications of it. I think learning technologists, particularly ones on our team where we have such a strong teaching and learning focus, I think we are really well positioned to help to do that work.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The reason I started off with capacity is because, as I talked about in the digital detox this year, this is all governance stuff and governance comes under attack when we are working through austerity times. Nobody has the time or the capacity to do that work fully. It's hard work to read through documentation and assert a need for changes and make those changes and support that with research and facts. That's all really hard work, so I would like to see the role of the learning technologist more respected structurally within the institution as people who can give advice on policy.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think in general, universities, not ours exclusively, all universities generally do a bad job of recognizing the expertise within their ranks. Talk to anybody who teaches in an organizational behavior unit, they would really like to be consulted more at whatever institution they're at.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think in particular, we've got a group of people in these roles, in staff and admin and faculty roles across the country who have something to say about the kinds of tools we choose and to leave that expertise on the table. To me, especially in this moment when everything is changing so fast and the people making the decisions, I would hope should, could acknowledge that they don't have the expertise. That's to me, where the role of learning technologists should be headed in this moment.

Brian Lamb:

Well, as usual you say it better than I can.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That Globe and Mail article and I'll link to it in the show notes, it's a fantastic piece of journalism, but it's also... I found it really frustrating to read just like I found it really frustrating to read last week that the president of CAUT, the Canadian Association of University Teachers said, "Well, nobody knew that these big tech companies would have implications for academic freedom." It's like, are you kidding me? Your own members were screaming about this.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm glad to see us all coming around on deciding that this conversation is worth having. I wish more of these conversations had been happening at the procurement moment. I don't know how easy it will be to backtrack from a lot of the choices that have been made, and you know that's my usual doom and gloom position. It's good that the conversations are happening now, but this expertise didn't emerge, folks had this expertise rolling into this crisis. I hope that if we've learned anything it's that safeguards around data and privacy and security, that needs to be number one, that needs to be in place. You know what I think about the hand waving away of FIPA at the moment we most needed it?

Brian Lamb:

It was interesting. We were talking a little bit about how it's great to not feel like no people, but isn't it weird that when we assert ethical questions or even just self-preservation questions, "Hey, by the way this tool you want to use is going to outsource you." That's when we are made to feel like no people, when we're actually trying to do the right thing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, and it's more than feeling like no people in those conversations, almost any learning technologist you talk to has a story of a time when they've been made to feel like the Luddite in the room because they have raised objections. It's like, you can say a lot about me, but the idea that I'm anti-technology is unpersuasive at best.

Brian Lamb:

Oh, I get that all the time. I'm so tired of that. "Oh, I thought you were the director of innovation." Which is fair. I probably should get it removed from my title. It would be fine.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But it's not innovation for innovation's sake. I think that this is something that learning technologists and faculty developers could probably spend more time aligning our messaging on. There are already good practices in the classroom to be retained, and we can think about how those are best translated to a digital space without necessarily having to erase them. Yeah, nothing chaps me more than when people are like, "Oh, all you guys ever do is say no." It's like, "No, all I ever do is try to get you to follow the law. Sorry. I don't like being a cop either, but here we are." All right. I think that's good. Plus I have to edit this. Do you have anything else you want to share?

Brian Lamb:

There were a couple of silences towards the end where I was like, "Boy, we've been talking for a bit." Before I start another thing, it's like, "Maybe she wants to wrap."

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Is there anything else you want to share with the community before I let you go today?

Brian Lamb:

Well, I just want to say, actually believe it or not. Some of the things we talked about, notwithstanding. I said this to you offline, I don't know if there's some lingering health issue I don't know about, and that I'm having some weird side effect, but I'm actually feeling oddly hopeful again, it's kind of nice to start to look forward to things and have options. Our team talked about having a gathering to do big picture planning and, oh, that's just all immensely exciting. I hope that there's a little bit of that happening to people where they are finding this in their earbuds.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I hope so too. I still laugh every time. That's exactly how you phrased it. I don't know if I'm dying, but I feel weirdly hopeful, which paints the picture of 2022, I think in some detail. But yes, I think we can leave folks on an optimistic note that, yeah, we hope you're finding hope where you are, because if we can find it in learning technology in 2022, I think it's possible anywhere.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is it for season two, episode 27 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. In both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at, yougotthis.truebox.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 this one is brought to me, you, by my attendance at ETUG today. By the time you hear this, ETUG will be over, but it's the educational technologies users group, and it's lots of folks, learning technologists for sure, but also just lots of faculty who enjoy using technology. I certainly joined ETUG long before I was in this role.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, at ETUG I got a little tip that I'm going to pass on to folks, because I know that often when we're in situations where we're doing things at a distance, which we don't necessarily have to do day-to-day anymore, but we certainly end up in that experience on occasion. Someone in the chat today suggested that something they like to do is they let the participants or the students know that it helps them if a few people turn their cameras on, and so they ask, particularly in a recurring class if folks could sort it out themselves to make sure there are a handful of cameras on for each session.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I kind of like this. I've been big on cameras off for the whole pandemic for all kinds of reasons, we're in each other's home spaces and I think we need to respect boundaries around that. Also, bandwidth is an issue, but I do know that there are folks who prefer to turn cameras on and maybe sometimes don't feel



invited into doing that. This feels like a nice compromise to me, and it also gives students some agency around sharing the load of that sort of attentive participation.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I often think of the labour involved in attentive participation. When I think back to a submarine technical tour my husband dragged me on in Portland once, it took forever, it was three hours long and it just kept going. I was the only person who was performing the active listening. As a result, the nice submarine captain, captain I don't know, gave the whole talk directly to me. It's a lot of work listening attentively, so thinking about how we can fulfill our needs of having someone on the receiving end of our comments and also sharing the labour of attentive listening, I think it's great.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's it for me folks. I'm hoping that next week when I record, I will sound slightly more human, a little bit less like a cartoon jazz singer, which is how I feel right now. Take care of yourselves and each other, and we'll talk really soon. Bye-bye.