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 land of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn, and grow in community with all of you. And today, I'm thinking about an intangible thing. I'm thinking about the idea of belongingness. I'll explain why in a second. Well, let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

As I've talked about on the show before, I'm working on a podcast. Well, I'm working on a lot of podcasts including this one, but I'm working on a peer reviewed podcast project at the moment, and I'm in a bit of a crunch time deadline wise. So I've been really immersed in the interviews that I did for that podcast project as I edit audio seemingly every waking moment of my day. And I'm really thinking about an interview I did with a woman named Andratesha Fritzgerald. Andratesha wrote a book that really opened my eyes to a different kind of application of Universal Design for Learning or UDL.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So the book is called Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success. And in it, Fritzgerald explores how to use Universal Design for Learning, which you're probably really familiar with as an accessibility tool, right? A way of thinking about designing our courses for maximum access for students with disabilities or different kinds of learning challenges, but Fritzgerald explicitly frames UDL as a tool in the antiracist pedagogy tool belt. And it's really a fascinating way of sort of expanding or opening out the purpose of Universal Design for Learning. You know, it's not uncommon to hear critiques of accessibility in higher ed as being particularly targeted towards well, white learners, frankly. This book really opened my eyes to thinking about UDL, I guess, more expansively.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, I've been editing this audio and there's this concept that Andratesha comes back to again and again in our chat, which is this idea of belongingness, the role of belongingness in learning and how it is that we welcome a student into our course, what messages do we send to a student before they've even joined us in the classroom that might signal whether they belong there or not? And I think that this is a powerful thing to think about in June, because many of us are trying to get the last prep done before we put everything away for a month or two. And I wonder if this is a moment to really look at the way we present ourselves on the page, in the syllabus, or in any other materials that we distribute to students, but particularly things that they might see before the course begins. Your Moodle shell maybe, if you open that up before the course begins, for example, what do we signal to students in those spaces?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

In the interview I'm editing, Fritzgerald gives this example of the textbook. Do you just have the textbook or do you have the textbook and you also provide links to how to get it as an ebook or an audio book, and do you talk to students about how to use a screen reader so the book can be read to them? So that any barriers that they have, or even just anxieties or just straight up exhaustion around reading long passages of text, Fritzgerald suggests that there's a way to break that down. There's a way to start the course by saying, "Yes, this is the textbook, but here are some other ways to access it that might be more appropriate to how you prefer to learn."

**Brenna Clarke Gray:**

I think there's lots of ways we can do that. We signal belongingness too by normalizing supports. So if your course is writing intensive, either inviting the writing centre in or encouraging students to go to the writing centre and making that an encouragement that goes to everyone. Not treating it as a remedial offering or remedial service, but making clear that writing support benefits everybody. These are ways that we can signal to an incoming student that this is going to be a space of welcome and a space of support, and that those supports and the idea that we all learn a little bit differently, the idea that we all have different kinds of preferences, that's going to be normalized. That's going to be just a part of how we express learning in this class.

**Brenna Clarke Gray:**

One of the things I really like about this book, Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning, is that it's really cognizant of power dynamics in the classroom and how they function. And in our conversation, Andretesha draws this line between power and honour. So as the teacher in the classroom, we have a certain amount of power instilled in us by the structure. But what we can choose to do with that power is we can choose to consciously honour what our students come into our classroom with. The stories that they bring with them, the experiences that they bring with them, the preferences that they bring with them. We can decide to honour those things in the way we design our classrooms.

**Brenna Clarke Gray:**

I'll include a link to the book in the show notes because I really think it's worth reading, worth checking out. And hopefully soon, I will have this podcast out in the world and you can listen to the full interview with Andratesha because it's fantastic. But I thought I'd put a bug in your ear about it now because thinking about what we signal to students before they enter our classroom is something that was pretty new to me. It's not something I thought of by default in my early days as an instructor. And I think it's something that we can all probably work on. Well, I mean, probably the structure of the institution that can work on. I mean, that boiler plate syllabus, like is there anything less welcoming?

**Brenna Clarke Gray:**

Anyway, speaking of welcoming, I'm really excited because the newest member of our team, Brad Forsyth is here for a chat today. He's our new learning technologist. We have sadly said goodbye to Amanda Smith, who you met on a previous episode and we welcomed Brad. I thought you might want to meet the man behind the Moodle tickets.

**Brenna Clarke Gray:**

As promised, I am here today with learning technologist, Brad. Brad, would you introduce yourself to the community and maybe say where folks might have seen you on campus before, where you lurk now, any of that kind of stuff?

**Brad Forsyth:**

Sure. Yeah. I'm Brad Forsyth. I'm our newish learning technologist, joined the team at the beginning of April. I've been around TRU for quite a while in different aspects. I've been working here for about seven and a half years. I can go through my history if you like, but I started right after doing my undergrad here as well. So I've been at TRU in some capacity since graduating high school, which is weird to think about. Not really sure how I feel about that. But yeah, I guess the best way to explain my current role is I'm kind of our frontline support when faculty or students contact us with Moodle questions or other learning

technology related questions. So if anybody contacts us, that's probably going to be me that responds these days, whether you like it or not, but hopefully -- I try really hard to be helpful.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's combination of your wild efficiency at answering tickets and the lower ticket volume over summer. But yeah, I think you're answering like 100% of the tickets these days or pretty close.

Brad Forsyth:

I kind of have to just to keep busy. I've joined at what seems like it's a bit of a lull and I don't want to give you a nervous tick when I say that because I know how crazy it's been the last couple years for the team, but I think that's partly obviously because it's summer downtime, but I think it's also a testament to all the work that this team did over the last two years, as well as all the work that faculty have done in improving their Moodle proficiency over the last couple of years. So it's been a pretty easy transition so far.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. It's something that Brian and I were talking about last week is just the baseline competency level of the community is up. And the individual tickets, there's definitely less of them. But I think most of them are of a more complicated caliber than we used to get, you know?

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Back at the beginning, it was like, nothing's working and you'd write back and you'd be like, "Is editing turned on?" And we'd be like, "Oh yeah, oops." We don't get any of those kind of tickets anymore.

Brad Forsyth:

No, I get very rarely those types of really basic questions. People are doing more creative and relatively complex stuff within Moodle, and a lot of the questions are, you know, "I've been using this for the last couple of semesters and it's just not working quite the way I wanted to, or I brought it forward from my previous course and you know, something seems to have broken." So we work through that together, but definitely it's a lot more relatively complex questions that tend to come in. When I first see them, my instant response a lot of the time is, "I don't know and have to do some investigation." But yeah, there's not a lot of those really basic questions these days.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I used to tell Jamie that the main part of my job is Googling. Googling and reading the Moodle documentation to figure out what people are struggling with because there's a huge... Well, everybody listening to this knows there's a huge number of things that can happen in Moodle and a huge number of settings, and I don't think anybody keeps it all in their head.

Brad Forsyth:

No, and there's a lot of different pathways-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Maybe Jamie.

Brad Forsyth:

Jamie does, for sure. But the rest of us mere mortals, yeah, we have to test things and Google things.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's true. I've got a question for you being that you were a student at TRU some time ago now. I'm guessing you can notice a significant uptick in the uptake of technology in the classroom from when you were a student here, do you think?

Brad Forsyth:

I think so, yeah. It's hard to get a temperature check in this role, just because again, it's been pretty quiet. And prior to this, I was working on the Open Learning side, but when I was a student and I was a history student, so I was the opposite of tech savvy, Moodle was primarily just used to dumping ground for PowerPoint slides and that sort of thing. At least in my experience, we didn't utilize discussion forums or Moodle quizzes or anything like that. So definitely it does seem to be more of an active space for students rather than just a resource centre, I suppose.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I get that sentiment too. I think that you could easily do an arts degree here previously and maybe never even really log into Moodle. Moodle was there if you missed a class maybe, or it was where the syllabus was posted, but that's certainly not the case now. And I think the expectations of students have really shifted too. They anticipate that, that space is going to be used for something and it's forced faculty to really up their game, which as we've talked about, they really have, which has been kind of a rewarding part of this whole chaotic period.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think the learning management system historically, I mean the word "management" is in the name. So I mean, it's evolved over time to have those additional activities and that sort of thing. As the learning management system grows, I think faculty and student expectations of how to use it have grown as well, and I think the pandemic just amplified that by forcing everybody to use it more.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I've always preferred the term they use in the UK. They call it the virtual learning environment over there.

Brad Forsyth:

That does sound a lot nicer, yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Doesn't it?

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It sounds a lot less like a repository and a lot more like a classroom, you know?

Brad Forsyth:

Exactly, yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So Brad, you came through the MET program at UBC, right?

Brad Forsyth:

Yes, yeah. So I graduated last year. It's the Master of Educational Technology program through UBC. It's a fully online program. At that time, when I went into it, I was working as part of the registrar's office. I was in my second role at TRU as part of our transfer credit team. So assessing students transcripts and that sort of thing, and kind of halfway through my role. At that time, I'd been in that role for about a year and a half. I started to ask myself, "Well, what do I want to be when I grow up?" And that's always something you should be asking yourself in your late 20s. So I started to-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm still wondering.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah, me too. So I started to brainstorm grad school options. Kind of all different sorts of subject areas, museum studies. I had been accepted to go to archeology about a couple years before that and decided not to, so my life could be very different right now, but eventually settled on the UBC MET program. And it was really a pragmatic choice. I saw that if I'm going to stick at TRU to you, what field is probably going to grow over the years? And obviously, I didn't see the pandemic coming right around the corner, which has caused it to grow even more. But yeah, I got into that program. Again, I went into it without a teaching background, without a technology background, and I found most of the students were either educators, K to 12 teachers, or a lot of university instructors as well, or they were instructional designers, or they were even already ed tech specialists that just wanted more of that theoretical foundation.

Brad Forsyth:

So I dealt with feelings of imposter syndrome for quite a while in the program, probably about halfway through. Three quarters of the way through, that started to wear off. Still feel it a little bit, but then while I was in the program, I was able to switch over to our Open Learning production team and they do all of the setup and maintenance of our Open Learning courses. So that was a little bit more in line with what I was learning. And yeah, it was a great program. I don't think I'd be in a role like this without it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's so interesting, education programs in general, they tend to catch lots of different people, you know?

Brad Forsyth:

Yes.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And I definitely deal with those feelings of imposter syndrome all the time, because... Well, I've talked about this with Brian lots, but I don't have any kind of education degree background.

Brad Forsyth:

Right.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Previously, a lot of folks who have been in this role have had educational doctorates or masters of education, and I have none of those things. But what I like about that, other than the fact that I'm employed, which is great, but is the sort of, I don't know, I think that coming to these roles with a range of experiences is really valuable because if everybody just came through like a bachelor of education and then a master's of education and then an education doctorate, that would really limit the scope because the community we serve comes from all different perspectives, very few of which are either technology or even education. They may be educators, but they don't necessarily have that training and background either, right?

Brad Forsyth:

For sure, yeah. I think I'm one of the rare people, and maybe this is becoming more common, that specifically planned to get into this field as an outsider. I think a lot of people like yourself, and I hope I don't mischaracterize this, are tech savvy educators that eventually just transition into this field. So yeah, that was, I think with this program, and there's not a lot of programs like it, I think it is becoming more common that people specifically get into this field though.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, and this is question for you, because you said you chose it pragmatically and good job because you did it at just the right time. But I mean, you don't finish a graduate program purely on the basis of pragmatism. I'm wondering what it is about educational technology that grabs you or that makes you want to understand it on a deeper level.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah. I mean, I don't want to make it sound like it was only for finding a TRU continuing. My first role here was in enrollment services and at the time we only dealt with Open Learning students. So that was my first taste, I guess, in working with Online Learning, even though I was just servicing students, but that's when I started to value it and value our open principles that we have here. So I got into learning technology specifically just because I, myself, and I love to learn new things. I'm constantly trying to learn all sorts of things.

Brad Forsyth:

So I kind of like being in this sort of environment. Really I just wanted something that would challenge me creatively as well. I mean, there's a lot of different ways that we can approach this, not just from a tech's point of view, but from a teaching and learning point of view as well. So when I got into the

program, again, I dealt with those feelings of imposter syndrome for a while, but then really started to appreciate what I was learning, who I was learning with and from, and got to do a lot of really cool electives that just hooked me and yeah, stuck with it until I finished it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Did you have any favourites in the electives you took?

Brad Forsyth:

Yes. In my last semester, I took a course on creating digital educational games. So we just created a video game as our final project throughout the whole semester. That was really cool. And then probably, besides that, I would say I took a really cool elective on how to implement, I guess, climate and energy literacy into your educational practice. And it was not from a science perspective, it was actually from a humanities perspective. So how to incorporate energy literacy into the humanities through storytelling and stuff like that. So very different perspective and obviously something that's very critical right now.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's cool. That sounds like a lot of fun.

Brad Forsyth:

It was a lot of fun.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that you picked up the thread of the creativity of this role, because I think from outside, people might think that educational technology doesn't intersect with creativity very much. Well, Brian sometimes jokes, there's this perception of us as like button pushers, like it's our job to make the Moodles go. But the role itself is, it's super creative on a baseline level, just because, as Jamie will point out, within Moodle or WordPress, there's 400 ways to do any individual task. So finding your own route through is inherently creative. But also working with educational technologies, I think it opens up a lot of different assessment practices, which you would've experienced in the MET program that are creative, that are going beyond the multiple choice exam and the five-paragraph essay to really think about what's the best way to demonstrate learning. And that, of course, is inherently creative.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And I think this goes back to what you and Brian talked about in your episode last week, I guess it was, about just what a learning technologist is. And again, it's not just tech support, although that is part of what we do. But I think my biggest takeaway from the MET program was, we really placed teaching and learning at the centre of it and the technology was almost secondary.

Brad Forsyth:

So you're thinking about things like how to apply design thinking into technology-supported learning environments, how to think critically about your learning technologies, which ones you're selecting and how it can not only enhance what you're currently doing in your teaching practice, but also transform it too. So like what you said, what sort of new opportunities are there to facilitate new types of interaction or authentic assessments and really just rethink what the role of the teacher is, as well as what the student is. And then we looked at other things, like, I know you're big on ethical and privacy concerns,

but then stuff like, are there politics embedded in the technology that you're using? How do students create their identity online? How do they navigate online communities? All those sorts of things that you don't really tend to think of, or at least I didn't. I know you probably think of these things, but as a wider community, we don't really tend to think of those things.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, I think we're not encouraged too, that's for sure. It's something I've been thinking a lot about is this idea of procurement. Like, how the tools even get to us in the first place, whose voice is included in that conversation? And there's all these signals that we are sent, if we think of ourselves as learners, by the learning management system about whether or not we belong here, right?

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Like when you log into Moodle, does it give you the sense that you are welcome here, that there's a place for you, or does it not? Does it consciously not? And I think that too often, we just get asked to just use the tools and not think about those pieces. When you said about putting teaching and learning at the centre, it's one of the things that I'm really proud of our whole unit is that I think the question we always ask first, it might be a simple question that comes into Moodle support, but the question that we always have to think through is like, well, what are you trying to accomplish? What is the goal here? Because that impacts tool, choice, use everything else.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Too often faculty are handed this really limited set of tools and it's like, "Well, go teach with these." you don't have any real training in teaching and you don't have any real training in technology, but like, "Go, see ya, do this." Instead of really thinking about how like, yeah, that virtual learning environment, whatever it is, it's circumscribing what you can do and it's making choices on your behalf. You got to make sure your politics align with what those choices are, and I'm guessing often they don't.

Brad Forsyth:

Exactly. No, I mean, there is lots of activities and stuff that you can facilitate within Moodle, but I know... You know, my experience doing the MET program completely online, it's really just up to how the course is designed. It's kind of how much you put into it and there are those ways to open it up. Of course, if you want to use like a WordPress site, or a lot of the times we use things like Mattermost or Slack or something like that to just improve communication rather than discussion forums or static things like those. So there is things out there, but then of course you have to consider, especially over the last couple of years, if everybody's using a different platform, then how confusing is that for students when they have to log to eight different things in the semester. So it's kind of a balancing act, I guess.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It was by far the strangest experience of the pandemic, I think for Jamie and Brian and me, because we had spent so long trying to convince the community to try out a new tool, go play in WordPress, check out this Mattermost thing. How about a podcast? And then the pandemic hit. And we were like, "Everybody, get your butts into Moodle." Like everything has to be relatively uniform. Students are overwhelmed, platform fatigue is real, cognitive load is an issue. Like, go put your stuff in Moodle and

we'll help you. Which isn't to say there wasn't experiment in play because there was, but I think in the context of where everyone's head was at learning in the pandemic, it was like, maybe this isn't the moment for a lot of play. Maybe right now we focus on just getting the job done.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah, exactly. That was my worry, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, because this was going to sour people from continuing to try new things. And I remember again at the beginning, talking to a couple students and they're saying things like, "Oh, I hate online learning. I can't sit in a Zoom lecture for three hours." And I'm just trying to explain to them, this isn't online learning. This is what I call emergency remote teaching because we had a weekend to prepare for this stuff. So I hope it didn't sour people to doing more blended or flipped approaches or fully online or whatever modality you want to look at, because they are two very different things. You have to design them purposely for that, at least at the beginning, we just didn't have the time.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I mean, the intentional design piece was really missing. It was like, just upload everything and hope for the best. I think that we definitely saw like, I don't know, an exodus back to the classroom. I had more than one person say to me, "Well, thankfully, I don't ever have to think about this stuff again." And I was like, "Oh, cool. Well, my life is a lie.".

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But what I'm noticing now as I start to talk to folks about their plans for the fall is they are starting to imagine how to fold those tools that they learn back in. And I think that the end result, I suspect, whether the institution structurally wants to talk about it yet or not, I think the end result is going to be more flipped, blended, more hybrid, more sort of use of asynchronous learning activities. I think that's coming because students are starting to really expect to have some engagement and to have less classroom time. But as everything with a university, the structures are going to take some time to catch up to what is actually happening on the ground, which is why our jobs are weird because we kind of have to straddle this line between what the official discourse of the institution is around things like hybridity and supporting faculty who are doing it anyway.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I hope faculty can take some positives out of this and I mean, continue. The biggest thing is just to provide students greater choice in how they're attending because I mean, I don't want to jinx it in terms of saying another pandemic is coming, but I mean, look at all of our fires that we've been having or floods or, you know. If you do offer these more flexible approaches rather than saying you have to be in class this time, every three days a week, or whatever it is, then I mean, we can start drawing in those students who maybe aren't comfortable fully online learning, but they want some classroom time, but they have kids or they live slightly out of town and don't want to come in three days a week. So it really just provides students more choice. And it can be more work upfront for faculty, I appreciate that, but once you're prepared then I think it becomes easier for everybody.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I agree. I think we need to start thinking about this in terms of resilient pedagogy. Like what teaching and learning choices can we make and can we prepare for so that if you wake up and the air is unreadable, you can send a quick message to your students to say, "Hey, don't worry about trying to

commute in today on account of the air doesn't work. So let's just meet online." And unfortunately, like you were talking about, folding in energy awareness and climate justice. This is the reality of both the moment we live in, but particularly the geography we are in. So yeah, I think resilience and flexibility will continue to be the name of the game. And that's going to take some time for most institutions to adjust to because that's hard for big, hulking entities to wrap their heads around, I think.

Brad Forsyth:

Yeah. And I mean, there's so many organizational issues that have to be taken into consideration too. And I think we were both at ETUG last week and it was pretty exciting to see how many institutions are formally adopting things like high flex and hybrid learning, or whatever terminology they want to use at their institutions. I was surprised at how quickly they've done that not just even at a departmental level, but at an institutional level because it does take time. So yeah, it'll be interesting to see if we start to look at those things campus wide or if it's just going to continue to be individual innovative faculty that take that on themselves.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I wonder if we're going to see a push from the province in one direction or the other, because it's not like a province isn't aware of floods and the fires and the smoke and all the different things that "disrupt" learning.

Brad Forsyth:

Well, yeah, if we're going to be on fire every summer, let's let students stay home.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Brad, I really just wanted to have this opportunity to introduce you to the community a little bit further, a little bit more rounded than you get to be on the Moodle support tickets. So thank you so much for taking the time to chat. I'm going to let you get back to the Moodle support tickets now.

Brad Forsyth:

Thanks very much for having me. Appreciate it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Thanks. Take care.

Brad Forsyth:

Great. You too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode 28 of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter, @brennacgray. And in both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. 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, which is grab that syllabus, grab that Moodle shell you're working on, and just consciously add one or two things that address this idea of belongingness. How do you let your students know that this discipline is in fact for them. Take a look at the textbook that you use, what are the pictures like? If you've got a bunch of students studying together, do they look like the diversity of your students? Could you change that by the kinds of images you include in your Moodle shell, for example? How do you signal to students that this is a place for them?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

My challenge to you is to find one or two ways to do that somewhere in your course materials before you close up the books for the summer. And those of you teaching this summer who are like, "Thanks, Brenna." I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but save this lesson, come back to it. I think it has a lot of value. That's it for me. Take care of yourselves and each other and I'll be back soon. Buh-bye. (singing)