

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and learning and sustaining community for everyone in Thompson Rivers University. I'm your host, Brenna Clarke Gray, coordinator of educational technologies. 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'emlúps te Secwépemc within the unceded traditional lands of Secwepemcúlecw where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. Today, I'm thinking about the line between optimism and hope. Is there one? Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay, so as I mentioned last week I'm in hopefully the homestretch with this peer review podcast project I'm working on. I spent all day yesterday editing the audio of an interview I did with Naomi Hodgson. Naomi Hodgson is an educational philosopher at Liverpool University in the UK. She wrote this book that really resonated with me when I first read it. It's called A Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy and the idea is critical pedagogy, the brilliant Paulo Freire and the idea of education as emancipation and liberation, that has been the dominant mode, I think, of most of the way most theorists think about education for a while. It's at least been sort of at the cutting edge of certain progressive education thinking. Naomi Hodgson and her colleagues in Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy, they ask the question, "What comes next?" One of the sort of central foci of this manifesto is that if critical pedagogy is about breaking up the systems of oppression, how do we figure out what to build up after?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

One of the chapters has this central tenet of the movement from cruel optimism to hope in the present. You may or may not be familiar with the notion of cruel optimism. It's Lauren Berlant's theory. I'll put some links in the show notes, but it's this idea that the way we conceive of some of our grand narratives can be optimistic yes, but there's a cruelty inherent in it. The sort of classic example that I always think of, probably because it was the first one I was ever taught, is the idea of the American Dream and how folks often end up voting for a tax policy that doesn't really benefit them in the present because they want to protect the sanctity of the millionaire class because that's where they're headed because that's the American Dream, yeah? The cruelty of that optimism, the cruelty inherent in that dream that statistically very few people actually achieve. Willy Loman said the same thing in the '50s in Death of a Salesman.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, in Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy, Hodgson and her colleagues try to tease apart the idea of optimism and hope. This is something that has had my brain in absolute circles, which is to say optimism may well be foolish and we look around at the impacts of climate change, pandemics plural, economic crisis. It's hard often to feel optimistic about the future, but Hodgson argues that we have an obligation as educators to maintain a sense of hope in the present which is to say hope doesn't have to be optimistic. Hope can be about serving a purpose, recognizing that change is coming but we have no control over the valence of the change, but maintaining hope in our purpose and hope in the work that we do is what gets us up in the morning. Gosh, I hope I'm explaining that right. I've only listened to the audio of this interview four times and read the book three times, but you know.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'll link to it in the show notes. It is genuinely a really good and mind-expanding read, complicated though and theoretically dense, I think. Anyway, I've been thinking a lot about this because optimism is in short supply for me because I read the news. In the last few weeks, things like the school shootings in Texas, watching floodwaters rise at the same time as we're seeing record breaking heat in the Middle East and parts of Europe. I struggle to feel like tomorrow is going to be better than today, which I think ultimately is what optimism is, and yet I still think the work I do is really important. I still think on the ground ethical approaches to educational technologies moves the needle in very real ways for the experiences of our students. I think that all of you who are classroom teachers, all of you who are working with students hands on, whatever your role is in the institution I feel a lot of hope in the concept of education. I feel a lot of hope in our purpose, that we are preparing learners for something that matters.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

How do you hold on to that? How do you believe all of that without necessarily being able to convince yourself that what we are releasing our learners into is a better world? It's Convocation this week while I'm recording this and I think that's part of why this is weighing on my mind so heavily. We tend to think of Convocation as this exciting time, this moment, this next step into the great beyond and we give lots and lots of speeches about how you can change the world and everything you're going to do is great and everything will be better because you're in it. What if it's not? Would education still matter if we couldn't guarantee a better future? It's kind of a downer conversation, and I don't really mean it to be. I've been struggling with whether or not I can maintain a sense of hope and a commitment to my practice and a belief in my purpose if I have to let go of optimism, which some days I'm pretty sure I have to do. Other days I can find it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think it might depend heavily on caffeine some days, whether or not there are fresh flowers in my house and whether the sun is shining. Those definitely play a big role in whether or not I feel optimistic. I guess what I'm saying is the notion of optimism is increasingly transient for me, whether or not I can access it, but what Naomi Hodgson convinced me of in this interview is that I do always need to be able to access hope in the present even when I can't access optimism for the future, even when I worry that maintaining this optimistic stance, this future focus that education is all based in, even if I worry that that is increasingly a cruel optimism that can't be fulfilled. It's about maintaining a critical stance about the future but sustaining hope in the present. That was pretty think-y. I don't know how you operationalize that in the classroom. That is my next step. Part of this podcast project is taking these big ideas and thinking through how to operationalize them in the classroom, and I don't know the answer to that one yet. I'm working on it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I've always approached teaching from this sense of optimism, sending folks out in the world to create a better one. Really baseline level, that's what critical thinking skills are about and that's the centerpiece of an English literature education so for me that's always been central. Take away that optimism piece and then what? I'm working on it, I promise. I'll let you know if I come to any conclusions. I'd love to hear your thoughts, for sure. The one thing I think that always sustains my hope in the present is working with students and helping to serve them to achieve their goals because whatever I think about the future, they are here with a goal that probably has some future in mind.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Over in OL, we're really rethinking student service for the Open Learning side and what it's going to look like to serve our current student population better, and into the future what that student population is going to look like. To that end, we have a new hire in Open Learning. For the first time ever, we've added a learning strategist to the Open Learning team and she's here today. I'm really excited for you to meet Rachel Cantin. She's got a great background in different aspects of student services and student life, and more importantly she's ready to listen to students and figure out how to serve them in the best way possible. If that isn't the very definition of hope in the present, I don't know what is. I'm going to let Rachel take it from here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I am here today with Rachel Cantin. Rachel, could you introduce yourself to our listeners, let them know what your role is and maybe a little bit of your history here at TRU?

Rachel Cantin:

Thanks, Brenna. Yeah. My name is Rachel. I am the learning strategist for Open Learning. This is a brand new position that's never been offered before on the Open Learning side. I'm part of the student engagement delivery support team under Matt, and really what I'm going to be looking at is in a broad sense academic retention and success on the Open Learning side for our students, just increasing Open Learning engagement and experience for students and looking at what kind of programming, resources and support that Open Learning students need and what we can do to fill in the gaps because I feel like there's been very much status quo for Open Learning. We've kind of kept things very much the same so I think it's about time that we look at ways we can really engage students and build more of a sense of community for students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm super fascinated by the learning strategist role at TRU, and listeners to the show will know we've had Stephanie Tate on and Pamela Fry when they were in learning strategist roles. I'll link to those in the show notes. I'm really excited... First of all, just excited that you're here because I think a learning strategist for Open Learning is just hugely good news for our students. Can you tell me a little bit about how you came to this role, what you did sort of prior to coming into the learning strategist position?

Rachel Cantin:

Yeah. Going back, so I was actually a TRU student. I am a TRU alumni, I did a Bachelor of Arts, a major in psychology, and really starting out I realized about third year that I'm like, "Oh gosh. The status quo is not good, just taking courses was not good." I felt kind of lost, and that's when I got recommended to join the Wellness Centre and I became a student wellness ambassador. I loved it. Loved it, loved it, loved it. Just the community at TRU, engaging with students that were outside of my program was so much fun and engaging with the staff. I loved it and that's really what pushed me to continue after graduation to be a part of the TRU community and work at TRU. I was lucky enough to land a temporary contract in the Student Life office. I was the learning strategist there for orientation and transitions for a long period of time with Julie Taylor, who is wonderful, and that's where I met Stephanie Tate and all these wonderful people that I know you've talked to on your podcast that everyone loves talking about because they are such wonderful individuals.

Rachel Cantin:

Then from there I was able to get a temporary contract in Student Affairs office so I did about a month in Early Alert covering for Pamela, and then had about two months off in the winter to then be able to come back into Student Affairs again as an assistant. Just those brief stints and I just... It's really amazing how TRU... How much they support the community and they want you to stay and grow and learn. Just all those connections that I made really helped me to land my most recent previous role as an enrolment services officer, and that was my first ongoing full-time contract. I think looking back on all that experience, it's really set me up really well for this most current role just because I've had learning strategist experience in the past, but also in a virtual context because when I started in orientation and transitions it was about three weeks for COVID hit...

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, nice. Yeah.

Rachel Cantin:

... and before we went home. So as much as I was dealing with more the campus side of things and campus students, we had to change everything to a virtual context and meeting with students through virtual avenues. That's what Open Learning... That's what students have to do and that's the flexibility, accessibility of Open Learning is it's online. Having that experience even though it wasn't a campus based avenue, to be able to then know kind of what that looks like and how can we plan things and make programming that's engaging students but in that online virtual context.

Rachel Cantin:

Then with my most recent role, enrolment services officers, we deal with both campus and Open Learning students and answer general inquiries, help students with registration and I've heard a lot on the Open Learning side, a lot of learning just with how Open Learning works but also just hearing what students go through and where they need support and everything. I feel like I'm coming with a decent amount of knowledge in the position, but at the same time just really ready to listen and learn and figure out, "What do our OL students need?" I think it's great to be able to come into this with a bit of experience but at the same time just that openness like, "Do we really know our Open Learning students?" I'm here to figure that out and see what they need.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I think it's good to have someone who has a wealth of experience across different aspects of student life and student affairs to come in and listen to our students. Those of us who've been in OL for a little while... I finally count myself among them, I only got here in 2019, but I think you can develop a specific perception of our students and what they need. I think fresh eyes are really good for that. I'm also really struck listening to you talk about your trajectory here at TRU. You're not the first guest on the show to make me really aware of how important good, engaging community focused student jobs are in helping people find their career paths and what interests them. I had a really similar experience. My first sort of role, that actually weirdly feels a lot like what I do now, was in peer support for student learning when I was a student at Carleton. I'm just really aware of what a good investment those kinds of jobs are not just in terms of helping students make a living, which is really important, but in terms of connecting students to community and then helping them trace a career path, understand what is possible and what is out there. We've had a lot of folks in really interesting roles across campus who started in those kinds of student assistant positions.

Rachel Cantin:

Yeah, for sure. I think especially because I felt so different than other students at the time, and I'm sure that I wasn't, I'm sure there was other students who were feeling the same things that I was when I was at TRU just in the sense of just I didn't know what I was going in for. I started... I was just interested in psychology so I was like, "Well, I might as well go to school." Because I just didn't know what I was going to do if I didn't go to school. I did study abroad, so that was the thing. I stayed at TRU because I'm like, "They have a good study abroad program. I'll do it, we'll see how it goes. Maybe I'll transfer to a different institution or go into a different program once I've figured it out."

Rachel Cantin:

Then I came back from that and still had no clue, and it wasn't really until I was taking five courses, a full course load which I didn't typically do, that I was like, "Oh, I'm feeling really burned out. I can't just keep going with this." It was a supplemental learning leader, actually, who connected me to the Wellness Centre who said, "Hey, this is really great. You'll get some experience." I think it can really be said that those extra pieces, getting involved and having those engagement pieces can really help students to not feel lost and just provide that experience to those soft skills, I think, that you don't really get just through taking courses and going to lectures.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We'll talk more about your actual role in a second, but where did you go for study abroad? I'm just curious.

Rachel Cantin:

I went to Sydney, Australia.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, cool.

Rachel Cantin:

It was wonderful, such a great experience. If there's students listening, highly recommend any sort of study abroad. It is amazing. I don't even have the words. It was a wonderful opportunity for sure.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, it's fantastic. That makes me think I should have someone on from the study abroad program some time. Okay, so I do really want to talk about the learning strategist role in OL, recognizing that you literally just started. Listeners know we have a team chat and someone posted on the team chat... I think it was either Paul or Matt posted on the team chat like, "Oh, Rachel's arrived. She's the new learning strategist." And I sent her an email immediately. I was like, "Oh do you want to come on the podcast?"

Rachel Cantin:

Yeah. The very first day.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Rachel is super new to the role, and you've told us a little bit about what the role sort of intends to approach. I wonder if you have a sense of maybe what you're listening for or what concerns you're thinking about ways to approach as you settle in in these very early days to this new position?

Rachel Cantin:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think a lot of it is going to come in time, though, because it is very brand new. I feel like there's going to be a lot of figuring it out and trial and error and seeing what works and doesn't work, but really right now what I've been doing is just chatting with everyone in Open Learning and our team, so going to the advisors and going to delivery support and all those pieces of Open Learning that make up Open Learning and learning as well as listening to what they hear from students. I'm really just at that point just collecting a lot of information and a lot of knowledge so then I can then make a plan of what this is going to look like a little bit more, and then what kind of programming we can offer students. I think I'll definitely be more centered on programming and resources that I can bring in for students, so things like what kind of webinars we can offer virtually for students.

Rachel Cantin:

I know one of the biggest things I hear from advising is test anxiety and bringing in those alternate ways to... Because that's the thing, I think students are tired of just reading the website and just tired of emailing, and what can I engage them in a way where they're learning things to get them set up, especially for, say, new Open Learning students when they don't really know where to go, who to reach out to and what to do exactly. So what resources can I bring that are maybe a little bit easier, not so word heavy, maybe some videos, things like that? I have lots of ideas, but at this point it's really just collecting information and then going from there and figuring out kind of how this is going to look, how are we going to approach it.

Rachel Cantin:

I think that's very much in the early stages, but I think the biggest thing that I can really keep reminding myself and that Matt has really advocated and said this is what he wants us to focus on is meeting students where they're at, so not just keeping that status quo and what are students used to? I'm bringing back more of the social media on the Open Learning side and making those communication pieces easier because I think that's the biggest thing that I've heard, too, right now, is that communication for students, whether it be with their faculty member, whether it be getting ahold of someone when they just have general questions. I think students are really feeling like that communication is lacking so how do we communicate in different avenues than just email and phones?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. See, this is a good point. Listeners who are on the campus side of TRU might not realize that Open Learning students don't have access to all the same services that campus students do. They have access to some of those tools but not all of them, and the sort of rich student life experience that on campus students have, for the most part Open Learning students are mostly not accessing those services. Is that a fair thing to say?

Rachel Cantin:

No, that is totally fair and I've definitely seen that. I think that's one of the other pieces of what my job is going to be, is trying to find ways where we can make services more accessible for Open Learning

because they are still TRU students and they still have the need for those services. I think as much as COVID-19, we see it as this very negative time and it's, I think, pushed some of those services to find alternate avenues for students with virtual video conference calls, virtual counselling services and being flexible with timing and so on. I think my job is really going to be to pull the information of what students are needing and to be able to communicate that to other services and see how we can work together to support Open Learning students a little bit better.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I loved what you said about meeting the students where they're at. Jesse Stommel wrote an essay a few years back now, or maybe was a keynote, but the title of it was Teaching the Students We Have, Not the Students We Wish We Had. It was from a teaching perspective of you can't just imagine that every student is you, or you can't just teach to the handful of super high-achieving students who are going to pursue grad school. You actually do have to teach everybody in the room. I think the same is true for student services, but from an OL perspective almost turn it on its head a little bit. I think that we have maybe assumed that Open Learning students didn't want access to all of those services because the typical Open Learning student probably has a job, probably has family responsibilities and they have a very full plate, but I'm not sure that's still the case.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Not that that student doesn't still have a full plate, but that that student doesn't have the same expectation of service level that a campus student has. I think that has shifted. When you said meeting the students where they're at, I think maybe a lot of us have a wee bit of an outdated notion of where OL students are at and, as you say, the pandemic has shifted things. People maybe have a familiarity with taking online courses that they didn't have before and maybe that means that the OL student base shifts a little bit. There's probably a lot of work to do just in that first piece you were talking a bit about figuring out who are students are.

Rachel Cantin:

Yeah. No, for sure. I think that'll definitely be my focus for now, to take a look at that and get some student feedback because I think it's very much just... It's not that the students don't want the support, I think it's... Because I feel like in an ideal world most students would want to come and engage on campus and have all the time to be here, to interact with people for the most part. Obviously not everyone is like that, some people like the more hands off. I think it's more just OL is what they need because they have that working lifestyle or kids or so whatever it may be. I think yeah, definitely we need to shift our gear and what we look at.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. It's been really nice just in the time I've been at OL to really see that student focus change and shift a little bit. I know Matt has done a lot of work to pull together a strong team of people who are interested in engaging students and figuring out how to do that better, and I think it's only good news. I think any time we're engaging students, it's really good and I think... Well, we know that students are more likely to succeed if they feel connected to the institution like that. That data's pretty solid. Off the top, you were saying that the learning strategist role is about student success and student retention and that's something that everyone in OL really has eyes on right now like, "How do we make sure students move through the courses more successfully or how do we make sure students achieve what it is they want to achieve when they sign up for an OL course?" I'm wondering how you see this new position of a

learning strategist as fitting in with that goal that we're all working towards of retaining our students and helping them succeed.

Rachel Cantin:

I think the main part is that I feel like everyone in OL wants to see students succeed and are working towards that. I think it's just because their role doesn't focus on that, they have other aspects that they need to focus on and I feel like I know Matt's been trying to do work here and there, but I think having a person that's sole focus is on it will really help, and have someone like myself to be able to come in and think creatively and look at those problems and, "Okay. How have we been doing it? Then what avenues can we do to maybe solve it differently?" I think because it's very interesting, it'll definitely be a challenge because Open Learning is structured so different. We don't have that typical student lifecycle because students can come in at any time, it's continuous, so it's going to be really interesting to figure out how do we maintain kind of that openness and accessibility and flexibility of OL because that's so important while still supporting what students need.

Rachel Cantin:

I think really approaching it with a sense of being open and I think trying and taking risks... I think my role will definitely be a lot more of the... Right now the knowledge and researching and maybe bringing a plan for some programming, but then I think there will be some side of it that is still talking to students and supporting them and referring them to the other services on campus. I think there'll still be a small piece of that, although my role won't be focused on that. I think in any sense being available for the students because that piece of community and belonging has to do with actually feeling heard and feeling seen in a sense, even if it's through virtual. Yeah. I don't know exactly what that'll look like right now, but I definitely have some loose ideas and I'm excited to do some more brainstorming, but really take some time to just listen and learn from our students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I love this and I really can't wait to find out what you find out in those conversations because, as I say, I think there's a pretty fixed sense of what students are when they choose OL courses. I actually don't just mean that in OL, I think TRU as a whole has a very sort of fixed notion of what Open Learning is and who it serves. I suspect that as you start to actually have conversations with students, that's going to get more nuanced and complex and so I'm thrilled that this work is being done. Something that I always say about institutions is you know what an institution values by where it puts its resources, and so the fact that your position has been created and that you're here, I think it's really good news for Open Learning students that there is this focused role because you're totally when you say everyone in OL wants students to succeed. You're totally right.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Then when you say, "But..." That but is totally right too. There's not been sort of these positions focused on serving students specifically. Everybody has student success off the side of another really important job, whether it's course production or faculty support on the OL side. Those roles are also all about making sure students succeed, but there's something really visible about having a learning strategist in OL who is having those conversations with students so I'm really thrilled that you've joined us and I think it's, as I say, only good news for our students.



Rachel Cantin:

Yeah. Thanks, Brenna. I definitely agree. It'll be really neat to connect to see what all the work everyone else is doing at Open Learning, too, because I think that'll play such an important role, too, to understanding how Open Learning works as a whole so then when I jump into the student side of it I really have a deeper understanding of Open Learning and how we can serve our students and support our students better.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I think your perspective and voice once you've sort of collected all that data is going to be huge in moving us forward in what we want to achieve. I'm really grateful for your time today. It was sort of unfair to do this to you your first week, but I was just so eager to really spotlight this work and, well, just to meet you. This is the only way I meet people, is inviting them on my podcast.

Rachel Cantin:

Thanks, Brenna. It's honestly been such a pleasure, and with new beginnings, right? Jumping into all those new experiences. It's been really neat to be on this podcast so I appreciate you having me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, fantastic. Thanks so much for your time today.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is it for season two, episode 29 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. I'm going to leave you today with a tiny teaching tip. It's not that tiny, actually, because I want you to help me wrestle with this idea of optimism versus hope. Can you tease them apart? Do you see how they're separate? I guess what I'm going to ask you to do this week is think about to what extent your approach to teaching in your discipline relies on an optimistic view of the future. Is your discipline future focused or is it easy for you to think exclusively in the present and about helping students to achieve what they need to achieve in this moment?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that's a tricky thing. One of the things that Naomi Hodgson points out in this interview is the whole structure of education is future focused. We're trying to create better global citizens, we're trying to create good employees, we're trying to create innovators and leaders, but all of that is for tomorrow. Very rarely in education do we stop and think about what we are doing for students today, how the work that they're doing right now is changing their lives in the present, offering them purpose and focus. Hodgson argues that that's the only thing we can focus on because we don't know what's coming in the future, and I'm increasingly trying, as I said, to apply that to my own practice. I'm curious what that little thought experiment of the distinction between optimism and hope would mean for your classroom.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

If you've joined me on this thought experiment, would you share? Would you get in touch with me? I'd really love to hear it. If you're not joining me on this thought experiment because it's hopefully a gorgeous June day when you're hearing this and you are doing anything but turning your brain into

knots about the difference between optimism and hope, you know what? I salute you. That's a better teaching tip. Let's have our tiny teaching tip be everybody ignore Brenna's machinations. I like it better. Until next time, I'm thinking about you and I hope you're looking after yourself and each other. We'll talk soon. Bye-bye.