

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 Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And today, like most days, I guess, I'm thinking about all things open. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I was on a podcast this morning -- I know literally today I have recorded four different podcasts. And only two of them are my own to edit, so that is a joy. But I was on a podcast this morning and I was talking about open education. And the host asked me very thoughtfully to try to tease apart the difference between open education philosophy and open education practices. I think he was trying to get away from just sort of an operationalized definition of open. Like here are a bunch of open educational resources and here are a bunch of open assignments, to really get at the heart of what we are doing when we say we are doing open education.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It was a good question. And it got me really thinking, I think of open as an ethos. This is something that I've talked about elsewhere, a kind of desire to be more ... to be totally cheesy, open hearted in our teaching and learning practice. To be able to bring our whole selves into our teaching and learning experience. And to be able to access and ask for a certain level of transparency in the experience of learning. When I think about being open as an educator, I think about talking to my students a lot about the why of what I'm doing. Explaining my course policies, explaining my assignments, helping students to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing is as much about my open practice, as any individual assignment where I have them go off and make websites or Wikipedia pages, or what have you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

For me, that open heartedness is really central to why I choose open. I think that when it's working well, open should be more accessible to more learners more often. I think that open should help us to understand our own learning journey. I think that open should invite reflection and engagement. And I think that open should be about the co-creation of knowledge. Students and faculty and the room itself, AKA the internet, working together to create knowledge. And to do so in a way that's meaningful, that other people can access and make sense of. And that has some larger tangible benefit. It's that ability to see, not just that you've achieved a good grade on an assignment. But that you've learned something and explained it to someone else and done something with that material. I think that is a really powerful aspect of what open is.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Being open isn't easy. This ties into something I think about a lot about the act of classroom teaching. Whether you're teaching in person or online, whether you're teaching in a class or in a volunteer capacity. The act of teaching is simultaneously, obviously very public, right? You're literally standing in front of people and performing your understanding of a topic or a concept. It's very, very public. But it's also intensely personal. The choices that we make in the classroom, they're deeply inextricably and

profoundly tied to our values. And who we believe ourselves to be as people. That can be really scary to open up for critique.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

There's also the fact that I think a lot of us have a lot of insecurity around our teaching. I do and did, and do. I've said this before in lots of context, but as post-secondary instructors, many of us have no formal training in education. We know our subject matter well, and I think we feel like we know what works for our learners. But when you don't have the grounding in teaching and learning, that's when imposter syndrome takes off. And I speak from personal experience here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I think about that a lot, too. I think about how openness is ultimately an act that is really vulnerable. And if you don't have trust or faith or confidence in your community, whatever that is. Your department, your faculty, your university, whatever, to support you, then that can make being open really, really difficult. I spent a lot of my career being open in secret. I was enacting open pedagogies and I was working really hard at openness and transparency with my students. But I think only about four or five of my colleagues knew that was what I was up to in my classroom. I otherwise gave off the sense of being very conservative in my approach. And it was because I didn't feel confident in my choices. But more than that, I didn't feel supported by the department that I was in.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

All this to say that openness has like a lot of layers. And when we start to tease apart openness is educational philosophy, there's still more layers there. Ultimately, what I know is that open education, both as a philosophy and as a practice is closest to an authentic representation of myself. And I've always found that teaching comes a lot easier when I'm connecting to something that feels authentic to me. My first example of this was when I was a peer facilitator. My supervisor used to laugh because I had this technique for getting students to talk. When you're a peer facilitator, you don't answer questions, you redirect them. And so I used to redirect questions and then I would work my way through the silence that followed with awkward dancing. That was my technique. I will dance awkwardly at you until you answer my questions.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And I remember my mentor in that role saying to me, "It's really good that you feel comfortable to do that. And it comes across as authentically you. But like I can't do that. I can't dance awkwardly at students because that is not authentically me." I'm not actually sure, in retrospect, whether it was the dancing or the awkwardness that was authentically me, I suspect the latter. We've all had those experiences though, right? Where the person who is facilitating our learning experience doesn't seem to be behaving authentically for themselves. And that can often feel really patronizing, for whatever reason. I don't think anybody ever felt patronized when I danced at them, because I was very into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, all this to say, I think that finding the approach to education that matches you philosophically is super important. To that end, I'm actually really excited to tell you that today I'm joined by our e-learning facilitator here in Open Learning, that's Melissa Schuurman. Melissa has just finished her Master's of Education and M.Ed. actually focuses on open. So we'll get into a few of these things in our conversation. I'm just excited for you to learn more about Melissa and the work she does and the

program she just finished. Especially if a Master's in Education is something that's in the back of your mind. This sounds like a really good program. I'll let her take it from you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I am here today with Melissa Schuurman. Melissa, would you introduce yourself and your role here TRU. Maybe tell people what you do and where they can find you, if they're looking.

Melissa Schuurman:

I am Melissa and I work with our program delivery team in Open Learning as the e-learning facilitator. Really what I do is similar to kind of what you do, Brenna, is I help our Open Learning faculty members rather than the campus faculty. But I do basically just the technical support with them and then their initial training when they get hired. And then anything that has to do with online teaching and learning, they actually have a senior OFM that does that work with them.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You also have the responsibility of the big OLFM conference every year, right?

Melissa Schuurman:

So I organize that, that happens annually. We finally were able to do it again in person this year, which I forgot how crazy it gets. But it was a lot of fun and it was nice to see them all in person. Because it's really the one time of the year that they get to come to Kamloops and see everybody. So it was a nice little reunion this year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, it must be a really important piece of just keeping the OLFM sort of group connected to each other, right?

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah, it is. For sure.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So the main reason I wanted you to pop on the show today is ... well to congratulate you, you've just completed ... well this week, I guess, you're convocating from your M.Ed. program, right?

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah. This Friday.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So exciting. I was hoping you would tell me a little bit about your M.Ed. program, what you focused on. If you could just kind of, I don't know, fill us in on what that Master of Education was like.

Melissa Schuurman:

The program itself has evolved. It used to be a Master of Distance Education. Now it's a Master of Education and Open Digital and Distance Education. But when I first started it, I knew I wanted to do a

master's, that's always been one of my life goals. I just didn't know what I was going to do a master's in. Because my education background is actually in business, I have a business degree in economics and then a post back to diploma in HR. So really nothing to do with education at all. But I know I didn't want to do an MBA because I'm not an MBA person, was never really a fit for me.

Melissa Schuurman:

So when I was looking at programs, it was actually Irwin DeVries, who used to work here in Open Learning, approached me about doing the Athabasca M.Ed. And then, I looked through it and I liked the fact that it was all online, it was as affordable as a master's can be. But it also allowed me to do ... they had two different routes that you can take. You can take a thesis route or you can do a capstone project, which is course based. So I actually chose to do the course based route and then did my focus ... there's a few different focus areas. I did my focus area in educational leadership. So yeah, so I did just courses. And at the end, I created an online portfolio. Which was probably my favourite part of the whole program, just because it kind of concluded everything nicely.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. It must be a really good opportunity to sort of reflect on the learning you've done. So often when you take a bunch of courses, like they're all individually interesting, but you never get that opportunity to see how it all clicks together. And I'm assuming the e-portfolio kind of has that piece to it.

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah. Because it has you basically go through all of your work through your entire program, which I was probably writing four or five papers per course. So if you think about 12 or 13 courses, I'm like, that's a lot of writing. But really what they wanted you to focus on, what were pivotal moments of learning throughout the process? So we had to go through and think of the times, like for me, I thought of the times that I remembered the most about a specific assignment that I did or what was going on and things that popped up right away. And then we had to align them with the program competencies and show how our learning evolved. So yeah, it was really nice doing that reflective piece and it really made me proud at the end. Because it wasn't just getting a piece of paper, I was like, "This is all of my work compiled into one piece." Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that. Because it speaks to so many things that we talk about of ... well, giving students space to reflect, as I already said. But this idea of learning as kind of a journey. And how the pieces fit together, impact how that learning sticks with you and what you're able to do with it after. Could you share any of your reflections? Things that really stuck with you from the program.

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah, a couple of them. We had to do ... so five different artifacts that we reflected on. And a couple of them were ... like there was one I did on an elective course that I knew I wanted to take as soon as I started the program on gender issues and distance education. And it's a tricky course, because it's only offered once a year and you have to have a whole bunch of prereqs to be able to take it. So I thankfully got into it and I had a lot of classmates after they read my reflection that were like, "I wish I'd taken that course. Because I wanted to and I never did."

Melissa Schuurman:

But we had to do a case study on a topic around educational access issues for women. So I chose to look at access to education for indigenous women in Canada. And that was a real eye opener for me. Like I knew that there were issues in rural settings and with indigenous communities getting access. But what a lot of the research showed me was how indigenous women have what they called multiple jeopardy or double jeopardy. Because one, they're women, so they're part of that marginalized group. But then they're also part of the indigenous community, which makes them even more marginalized and makes it even harder for them. So that was really just an eye opening experience.

Melissa Schuurman:

But it also really helped me focus on this is why things like distance and online education are so important. Because they can get to those groups more easily than like a traditional education environment would. And even like my classmates were like, "I didn't even know the term multiple jeopardy until you found it." And it was really hard to find. That's another thing, is there isn't a lot of research into educational access for indigenous women.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Are you finding that the work that you did and these kinds of ... well, especially something like that, that's obviously really stuck with you. Are you finding that it's impacting your work in your role at OL?

Melissa Schuurman:

I don't know about my work in OL, but I think definitely as I'm coming into learning what it means to be an ally to these marginalized groups. Like I just did a human rights course through CUPE a couple weeks ago. And that was really the focus of it, is how do we use our privilege? Because everyone comes with their own privilege, but how do we use that to support these people and these different groups? How do we use that privilege we have to become better allies? So that's something that I'm becoming more aware of. And I'm hoping I can bring it into my work, but I think personally it's just made me a lot more aware of what am I able to do. Because I am a white woman, so I do have that privilege. What can I do to make things better for everybody else?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, it's such an important question and when you tie it into this power and the necessity of distance education. And in trying to reach more communities, it's neat to hear you articulating the importance of that mission in relation to multiple oppressions, which is like what you're describing. Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm sort of fascinated with the Athabasca model of distance ed, in general. And I think it's really neat that you've completed this distance program while supporting people who are supporting learners doing distance education. I wonder if that gave you any resonance with our students experiences while you were in the program.

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah, I think so. I think it probably gave me a bit of an edge compared to everybody else in the program. And I think one of the things I loved about the program is that it wasn't just people working in education

doing it. There were people in like finance backgrounds, a lot of people in healthcare doing it. So, it was a very unique group of people.

Melissa Schuurman:

But yeah, I think I came into it with a very strong understanding of online distance education that everybody else didn't have. So there were things that were quick for me, but then also there were things because I don't have an education background. So when I was learning about instructional design, that was a whole new area that I knew nothing about, but I knew was important for my job to learn more about. So I think I had a bit of an edge coming in.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's interesting. This is something I talked about with Brad Forsyth, when he was on the show a few weeks back. Because he was talking about going into his Master's of Educational Technology program, similarly with no education background himself. And it's something that I've actually really always appreciated about education as like a ... whether it's actual like structured programs or just as a scholarly space. So many people come to it from such varied backgrounds. You've got the people who have like the undergrad degree in education and it's been their focus since the beginning. And then you've got lots of people who are kind of finding their way into being curious about education, I guess. And I always think it makes the conversation richer to have people who are approaching it from all different perspectives, rather than just that like single background perspective.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. So, I'm curious about taking the program through Athabasca and particularly their open mandate. Because obviously you work somewhere with an open mandate, as well, so that wasn't new to you. And it sounds like the degree shifted a bit to sort of have that open education kind of explicitly in the name. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you experienced it in terms of like what open education felt for you like as a student, as someone who has like this day job experience of open. I'm just kind of curious about how those pieces fit together.

Melissa Schuurman:

At the beginning with the admission process, there wasn't a GPA requirement to get into the program. Which, because I chose to do an economics degree for my undergrad, economics was really hard.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to say, I could not have done economics as an undergrad.

Melissa Schuurman:

I was happy when I got C pluses on things. So that was something that I knew was a barrier for me getting into a master's program. And that's another reason why I chose Athabasca is because they didn't have that GPA requirement. They do require that you have a certain, I think it's a B plus GPA to stay in the program.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Like once you start taking courses?

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, got it.

Melissa Schuurman:

Once you start taking the courses. So that was one obstacle that I didn't have to stress about getting into it.

Melissa Schuurman:

And then even like the way that some of the courses were set up. Like I had one course on educational technology, actually, and there was a set ... I think we had about three or four assessments to do. But we had the option of choosing from about 15 different activities. And so that way we could choose how we wanted to learn. And there were no deadlines for any of them, other than you had to have them done by the end of the course. And you didn't have to do them in any set order. So it did give us a lot of freedom to do them ... and also the format, it didn't matter how we did them. So, that was just that one course.

Melissa Schuurman:

But even in other courses, like format wasn't really a requirement for any of our projects. They actually encouraged creativity. So if you didn't just want to write a paper, if you wanted to create a video or create a different type of media presentation, you were welcome to do that. Other than meeting the core competencies, like everything was very flexible. All the instructors were really great and really accessible. I actually had one that did her initial bachelor's degree through Open Learning. So when she found out I worked through Open Learning, she's like Open Learning got me to where I am today. Like if it wasn't for you guys in OL, I wouldn't have a PhD and doing what I love. So it was cool. She kind of pulled it all back in.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that. I was talking to somebody this morning about open education practices and we were talking about access choice and opportunity. And you've sort of just described access choice and opportunity. It's like, your synopsis there, it's perfect.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

But I do have a question for you as a student. Because it sounds like your undergraduate degree was like a fairly traditional economics degree. Like did you feel overwhelmed? Like when you were met with all that choice, for example, in the ed tech course. Did you have like a moment of, "Oh my God, what am I doing?" Or was it all like sort of set up and scaffolded in a way that felt approachable for you?

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah, I say it felt approachable. I think that the way that they designed it is there were so many options. So if all you wanted to do is write papers, you had the option to just write papers. Like you were able to pick what you were comfortable doing for that particular assessment. So I think that helps with like

calming people. I think if they'd had more options than the ones presented, then it probably would've been overwhelming.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's a hard thing to hit. I think instructional faculty sometimes worry like whether or not you're sort of achieving the optimal amount of scaffolding, but giving appropriate choice. Like it can feel really difficult. And especially if you've come through like a really traditional degree program and this is kind of all new to you as the course facilitator too. I think that can feel really like, "Oh my God, what am I doing?" So it's interesting to hear, I always like to hear it from the student's perspective when you're faced with those kinds of opportunities, about whether they feel like opportunities or chores. I think it definitely depends on the learner, for sure.

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah. The ones where I got to choose the way that I wanted to learn, I found the most rewarding. It was the times where like there were a few courses that it was like write a literature review. And it was a period of time where all I was doing was writing literature reviews, which is important at that level.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yes.

Melissa Schuurman:

But you can only do it so many times before you just get disengaged in the learning.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, it's just such a very specific form of writing, too, right? There's only so creative you can ever be with a literature review. I used to describe it when I taught students to do synopsis writing for literature review, it was like, you kind of have two choices, like it's either boring or wrong. Not the most inspiring thing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I wonder if there's anything ... you've already given us one really good example. But I wonder if there's anything else that you learned in your various courses that you were like ... you know sometimes you learn something new and you become kind of evangelical about it. Like you just want everybody to know this important concept or fact or idea. Is there anything that you would want everyone to know that you learned coming out of your M.Ed. program?

Melissa Schuurman:

I think one other thing that I learned that really stood out for me was how important reflection is in learning.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, I love that.

Melissa Schuurman:

And I had a course, it was one of my electives called Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. And I actually thought it was going to be an easy course. But it was very content heavy. And the concepts that we were like ... I had a few classmates that we would be messaging and be like, "Did you understand that article? Because I've read it like 10 times and I don't understand it."

Melissa Schuurman:

But what we had to do throughout the course was each week we had to write a journal entry on what we were learning. I think that was the only way I was actually able to learn the content just because it was so heavy. And even the instructor said that the content was very heavy. But I think that's why they put that reflection piece in. And even at the end, so once we wrote all those entries, we had to go back and summarize them. And it really helped because like halfway through, we had to submit the journals for review. And the instructor really pushed on like ask the why. Like one thing she said was, when they made that comment and you stopped and reflect, ask yourself why you had to stop and reflect. So that really expanded my learning. Just constantly like that critical thinking like constantly-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah.

Melissa Schuurman:

Going back and being like, "Okay, why did I think of it that way?" So that was another really important thing that I think I've never really done in a course or a program before.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

No, I was going to say, that's really excellent modeling of like how to read critically. Because it is a difficult skill and I think that a lot of people ... well, it's hard to do and we don't get a lot of models for it. And I love the idea of like asking yourself why you're reacting the way you are. It's actually-

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Probably just a good life skill, not something I do well enough. But yeah, that's really interesting.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, I'm just really glad to chat with you about this. I think it's excellent news that you've finished your program and that you're bringing all of that grace and talent to OL. And I love the idea of the focus on educational leadership. I wonder if I can ask you a big open ended question to end, which is, we're in a pretty tumultuous moment. Not just at TRU, but everywhere. It seems like there's austerity and big changes to post-secondary in the wake of the pandemic and everything else. And I guess a question to kind of reflect on for me these days is, what does academic leadership mean to you? What does good academic leadership look like? You're the expert now, Melissa, where do we go next?

Melissa Schuurman:

Yeah, in my process, like I think I am at a point where I'm becoming a leader. And because I've done all this learning and other programs and things that I've been part of to learn about leadership, is I believe it has to be very engaging and consultative. And like I think of a term I learned a couple weeks ago, this course I did and called the single story where if you're only looking at a single story or one point of view, you're missing everything else.

Melissa Schuurman:

And I think that's an important concept to think of in leadership is if you're going to have that very narrow focus and that single story, that point of view. One, you're not going to get the buy in from everybody else that you need and you're not going to be able to make the change that you need to make as a leader. I think that's really what I want to see for myself and also in the future of educational leadership is moving beyond that single story. So moving beyond that traditional structure and format of what education is supposed to be. Because we're in a world where one size does not fit all. And I think that educational institutions need to adapt.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is a perfect place to put a pin in it today. I think you're so right. I think as soon as we start assuming that we know what the whole picture is, we've probably missed something pretty significant. And I really hear what you're saying about this need to be adaptable. And I think you're right, that requires us to recognize a whole lot of different stories if we're going to achieve that. So that is a perfect place to end our conversation. Melissa, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Melissa Schuurman:

You're so welcome.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode thirty of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. And I'm also on Twitter, @brennacgray, in both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. And of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. And it's a Tiny Teaching Tip to explore openness a little bit. I'm actually going to link you to a book that really changed and shaped my experiences of open from a philosophical perspective, I guess. It's a book called Open at the Margins. A question that I often have is, what are the reasonable limits of open philosophy? For example, what are the ethics around asking students to work in the open? What choices do we need to help them make? And what knowledge isn't appropriate for open? What areas of experience don't actually have an open license appropriately? What aspects of our experience are not appropriate to open up? Open at the Margins really help me understand how different groups are differently impacted by openness. And the best part is, it's a free read. It's an open access book and you can check it out at the link in the show notes. I'll encourage you to spend a little bit of your PD time this week exploring some of the essays in there. And I'll link to some of my favourites.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

In the meantime, we're getting towards the end of the season. Just one more regular episode after this one and then a minisode. And then, you'll be free of me for a couple of months. I hope rest is on the horizon for you. Take care of yourselves and each other. And we'll connect again really soon. Bye bye.