

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching, learning, community, conversation, and your digital life made 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 community is exactly what I'm thinking about today. I'm thinking about how our communities enable us to engage in critique and I'm thinking about what it means to speak up and to speak out. Let's get into it.

So I spent a chunk of time this morning listening to Gettin' Air with Terry Greene. Terry is senior eLearning designer at Trent University in Ontario, and he hosts this podcast about education. I highly recommend it. Today's episode was an interview with Ian Linkletter. I've talked about Ian before on the show. I consider him a friend even though we don't, I think, actually ever met in person, possibly a very close internet pal.

Anyway, you'll remember that a couple of years ago, Ian was sued by Proctorio. Proctorio is one of those surveillance exam companies that became so incredibly wealthy during the pandemic. Ian had posted critiques of their software and how it functions on Twitter when he was at the time an educational technologist at UBC. And yeah, Proctorio didn't like that so much and they filed suit against him. That lawsuit is still ongoing. It has so far been more than two years of Ian's life and it will likely go on quite a bit longer.

The interview is wonderful because it's been a long time that Ian's not been able to speak his piece. And so for that reason, it's just really great to hear him articulate the cost of his activism. Ian believes very strongly, and I think that he is correct, that tools like Proctorio are bad for education and they are harmful to students, that subjecting students to that kind of surveillance is ultimately unproductive and that the end result is not worth whatever gains we make in so-called academic integrity.

None of that is surprising for you to hear from me. You've heard those perspectives on this show before, but I was really struck listening to Ian talk about the role of community and support, and how lonely the work that he does, has been, can be, is. Early in the lawsuit, I wrote a letter of support publicly to defend Ian and I was really struck. We had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people offer themselves signatories to the letter.

Supporting Ian in that way was easy. Honestly, I believe very strongly in the work that Ian does, and I believe that educational technologists need to have the freedom to critique the tools that we support. Otherwise, I don't think there's much point in us existing. You might as well have corporate tech support if you're not going to allow technologists working in universities to critique these tools.

But I recognize that not everyone feels that they have the capacity to speak in support even when they do agree with a critic. There is a lot of incentive to stay quiet in these kinds of scenarios. Whether one is anxious about a lawsuit coming against themselves or whether one works at an institution that will not be supportive of their activism, and different levels of privilege always make different levels of critique more or less safe.

I won't say possible. I know lots of folks in precarious positions who put a lot on the line to speak about the ethical concerns they have with the kinds of technologies we impose on students. But I definitely think it's safer and to make those critiques from say, permanent faculty position particularly, oh, I don't know, a tenured position, like fingers crossed and stuff.

Anyway, I'm going to link to the episode because I think it's worth your time to listen to. The cost of critique is not insignificant and you can really understand that when you hear Ian speak. Ian is now

emerging technology and open education librarian at BCIT, and I think that's ultimately an excellent fit for him and his skillset and his capacity. But the kind of freedom that those of us in faculty roles have is really critical to extend to folks who are not faculty within the university because I think that if you have expertise in an area, the university should support your right to speak on your area of expertise, whether you're in a staff or a faculty position, and we should support students to do the same. Having a community of educational technologists stand up and support Ian through this wild ordeal has been important. Institutional support is material, and that's important too.

Speaking of the institution, I have a new member of the team to introduce to you today. I'm really excited to share this interview with Melanie Latham. Melanie joined the team just this summer and it's been a heck of an onboarding. I have been absent for most of it, so it was really nice to sit down and get to know her a little better and I think you'll appreciate that too. I'll let Melanie take it from here.

So I am here today with Melanie Latham who is the newest coordinator of educational technologies on the team here at LT&I. Melanie, would you introduce yourself? I usually ask people to share where folks might find them on campus or kind of what they're doing in the role. So however you'd like to, please feel free to introduce yourself.

Melanie Latham:

Thank you, Brenna. Yeah, my name is Melanie Latham, and like you mentioned, I am a coordinator of educational technologies. Where you can find me on campus is in the OL building on the third floor. You'll see I have an office there and always welcome to ... The door is always open.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I always tell people that you can find me there or more likely at Reservoir where the coffee's better, but I don't actually know if they've opened yet for the fall semester.

Melanie Latham:

I know I've been keeping an eye on that. I'm curious too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, it's definitely the best coffee adjacent to campus, but their pandemic hours have been understandably a little bit different, anyway.

So Melanie, I brought you on the show because I always make all the new team members do an episode. So welcome. But also, I'd love to talk a little bit about your background before you came into this role and then we might transition to how it's been so far. Coming on board during the summer in a pandemic is like you barely get to see humans. So I'm curious about how that process has gone. But yeah, let's start with your background and what brought you to educational technology in the first place.

Melanie Latham:

I guess my background, I'll start with kind of my credentials here. I've got a Bachelor of Education degree and a Bachelor of Arts degree. So I was destined for kind of a K to 12 environment, but as opportunity kind of presented itself, I was in Red Deer at the time, and a role called the Educational Multimedia Specialist came about through Red Deer College and really intrigued me.

So I was successful in that, and I started that and I just fell in love. I think it was just a new direction that was so interesting and fascinating and just a different side of education that I really didn't know existed.

So really found my passion, really found my groove there and worked in that role for a number of years both in person and remotely.

And then over time, just kind of through talking to colleagues and my bosses at the time, they encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree. So I ended up doing my master's of education degree and instructional design. And I was in the learning designer role for about a year there until I accepted this position. So a little bit all over the place, but all related to ed tech and just kind of found my passion, found my calling.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, I love this, I love this. I think ed tech is a field that everybody has kind of a fairly circuitous path to. Even folks who do a graduate degree in educational technology, they often start somewhere very different. So I think it's one of the things that makes the field really rich and interesting.

You said you fell in love with it. I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about why you think you fell in love with it.

Melanie Latham:

I think it was just the environment, being in a post-secondary world and just the potential and the opportunity that that presented and just different ways of working. And I think a little bit more maybe flexibility and creativity and use of ed tech maybe. I don't want to say K12 doesn't have that. Maybe just in my experience of K to 12, it was pretty set and rigid to some degree, I guess. Or you just maybe don't have the capacity to explore other tools because you're focused on delivering the curriculum in the best way.

So yeah, so I think it's just the differences of tools and then you've got your adult learners too in a different audience, which I think opens kind of a multitude of opportunity as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I do love working with adult learners. The freedom and scope you get, as you know from our team chat, my kiddo just started kindergarten and we've been getting all these great updates from his teacher and it's awesome. And also, I do not have that kind of stamina or capacity. I know the sheer logistics involved in just keeping the wheels on the car when you're working in a lot of K to 12 environments, I think, yeah, it can make it difficult to explore and be creative.

And also just the reality of moving from a heavy teaching load to getting to be in faculty support and the amount of space that we get for play compared to even in a post-secondary context when you're not carrying that teaching load. I think that makes a big difference too.

Melanie Latham:

Yeah, I think you summed it up perfectly. That makes, yeah, exactly.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We just got an update while we've been talking. My phone binged and it was an image from the teacher and it's like, "Here they are cutting." And the next one is like, "Here they are gluing." And I'm like, that's amazing. And also you have the patience of Job.

Melanie Latham:

Well, that's exactly it. I remember being in a grade one classroom and that's exactly your focus is safety, making sure people are on task and it's less about the ed tech exploration at that point. It's just kind of getting through the day successfully, making sure everyone's successful. So I think, yeah, it's just a different change of pace, that's for sure.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, and it's something we find in this role too. Obviously, not getting people's shoes on part, but often, faculty are so busy and what they want is for us to give them solutions. Here are some strategies that are going to work. And play comes kind of after that often. They need the sort tried and true way into a tool and then they'll start to explore with it later.

But I remember that from having a 4-4 teaching load, it's like, "Oh yeah, no, I don't have time to breathe. If you want me to try a new tool, you got to show me that it's worth my time and that it works and then I'll invest interest in playing with it later."

Melanie Latham:

Absolutely. And I think that's part of where my passion lies too. It's like, let me do that kind of background work and exploration so then you can focus on your priorities and then I can help you support you with that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So you started, this is going to show how foggy my whole summer has been, but I feel like you started in July, is that right? Did you start ... Oh, well. Okay, yay. I was totally here. I wonder if you might, we talk a lot on this show about the effective reality of working in the university. I don't shy away from big feelings, I just wonder what the experience was like of starting a new role in a pandemic with most of us still working remotely in our team anyway. This summer, most of us were remote. I wonder what that was like.

Melanie Latham:

I guess I have a bit of an unusual background in that sense where I had actually been working remotely for about six years prior to this. So then when I began remotely, to me that was a very familiar environment and I'm used to working kind of on my own day to day anyways. So I feel like it was a smooth transition in that sense. And honestly, this dynamic of coming back to the office is a change of pace for me. And it's getting used to that structure routine and just environment as well.

So it's actually been a bit backwards in that sense, just kind of getting used to that office life again. But I think it presents a lot of neat opportunities that I really look forward to this year. I mean the future is always undecided here. We'll see how this pandemic continues, but it's nice to have the option to be remote, to be on campus and just to, I guess choose the modality that suits the task at hand.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. And I think in that respect, our team is not far off from a lot of the teaching faculty we're supporting. I find in office hours anyway, when people are on their teaching days, they're on campus. But if they're on a non-teaching day, they're very often not. And maintaining some remote offerings I think has been really helpful for getting to connect with folks who might be choosing campus one day, not campus the next. And as you say, what's best suited for the task at hand?

Does it make sense to go all the way to campus and pay for parking to sit in your office and do 10 Zoom calls in a row and then go home? Probably not, right? Also, I'm not sure if the campus internet is up to 10 Zoom calls in a row a lot of days.

Melanie Latham:

Yeah, that's a good point too. That's part of it. But it's just nice to have that opportunity to exactly support faculty virtually, but then also to be available in person as needed because I had actually also seen kind of that dynamic too that some faculty are happy with the digital method. It's convenient for them. They don't have to trek across campus where I think some faculty too are like, "I learn better in person, is it possible to set something up?"

So yeah, I'm kind of just flexible and will be able to be accommodating, which is really nice.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I agree. I think it's nice to meet people where they are and also where they're most comfortable. And I think one of the good things about our team having sort of a range of preferences even within the team itself is that the semester is, things are going to change over the course of the semester. If we learned anything from last year, it's like what you feel comfortable with today versus what you feel comfortable tomorrow, no guarantee that's the same thing, right?

And so I think we're able to be responsive to that. But I wonder, have you found things on campus you really like yet, or are you mostly just like OL building, home?

Melanie Latham:

Good question. You know what? I've tried to force myself to just explore the campus as much as I can while I'm here, just kind of cruise around like I went to the back to school barbecue, which was really neat. It was just cool to be a part of that energy because I hadn't been a part of that in, oh gosh, a number of years, kind of an on campus event. So that was really exciting and just kind of getting my bearings straight, understanding where buildings are and what's around there. And I checked out the Common Grounds cafe and that was lovely.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh yeah, that's the best on-campus coffee.

Melanie Latham:

Totally. Totally. Yeah, I was going to say I was really pleased. So it's those little kind of gems and just getting my bearings straight.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, so I love Common Grounds. It's also a great place to just sit and hang out and oftentimes, well back in the on-campus days, we used to make a lot of use of TRUSU's rooms over there because they will let us book them and they're really nice, sort of open spaces, and they have close proximity to the good coffee.

And I have to put a plug in for you. You won't have been able to try it yet but the Scratch Café opens again this week and the Scratch Café is the culinary arts café, and it's awesome. They have three or four specials every day so you can go and get lunch. It's really reasonably priced. The culinary arts students run the kitchen and yeah, they open again tomorrow, I feel like.

Melanie Latham:

Okay. Yes, I have heard of that one and that is something that has definitely been on my to-explore list, so I appreciate that. Absolutely, I will definitely check that out.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, it's a good one. The French fries in particular, that's my advice. That's my workplace advice.

Melanie Latham:

Noted. Got it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Always get the fries. So one of the opportunities of having all the new team members come on the show at some point is to just introduce you to the community. I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about what you want to do in the role or what you hope to do in the role or what you see your strengths as, or what the community can expect from having you as one of our coordinators.

Melanie Latham:

Absolutely. So far I think where I feel I am finding a groove a bit is supporting on the help desk, so answering tickets through the Moodle support and learning tech emails as well as participating in office hours. And I think that's just a bit of a learning curve in terms of just learning the Moodle system. I come from the Blackboard learning management system where, so just trying to get my kind of understanding of Moodle up to speed here.

But I think it's coming along well and I think the faculty helped with that when they bring their questions and concerns. So hopefully some patience is there too, just as I learn this and kind of become familiar with the systems, but always happy to help in those office hours.

So that, and I think just projects, I'm really excited to dive into some just other, I guess, aspects. I am curious to see as they come up just like our digital literacies project, kind of thinking about that and even workshopping as well. I'm excited just to think about how to best put together something for the TRU community.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, so I also came from a Blackboard background and one of the things I found about Moodle is a day just comes at a certain point and your brain just thinks Moodle now instead of thinking Blackboard. For me, it was really great because I find Moodle a more ... I mean I'm never going to be the person who cheerleads the learning management system, but I do find Moodle ultimately easier to work with than I found Blackboard.

But yeah, the learning curve is no joke because for a long time it's just the buttons are all in the wrong place and people are asking you questions and you're like, "I know how to solve this but I don't know where the button is."

Melanie Latham:

Exactly. Yes, that's exactly it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, totally. It's like I know exactly what the problem is, but I don't know how to find the right spot to fix it. And then the other thing about workshops and what's going to work best for the community, I think that's one of the great things about having you here as just a new perspective on that because it's something we've been talking a lot about.

I'm saying that to the listeners because we've been talking a lot about it because I've been talking about it with you. But it feels like a cliché to say that the pandemic changed everything, but the pandemic really has changed everything in terms of like we're still trying to feel out where people's focus is right now and what their primary interests are. And all of that is sort of in progress and in process.

So it's really useful I think for the team to have someone new with a fresh perspective who's not sort of set in a particular way of doing things to say like, "Hey, if this isn't working, how about X, Y, and Z?" And it's our job to listen. I'm not sure I'm always great at that part, but it's really good to have you with a fresh perspective to try to help. Because I think learning how to serve the community and being super flexible about what the community needs is both the joy of this work and also the hardest part.

Melanie Latham:

Absolutely. Just kind of figuring that out, and I think it's trying to identify to the needs that I'm just not familiar with or past history of just how things have progressed, how the pandemic was experienced here. So it's just those kind of things and start to identify the gaps where I can step in hopefully and help fill some of those gaps.

So I'm always open to suggestions and just to hear areas that you can see a need for some development work and everything as well as exactly bringing in perspectives that hopefully can kind of bring some new insight, because I always value that. I totally get what you mean when someone new comes to the table. It's just a new perspective is always helpful.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Is there anything that you are dying to do? A workshop that you used to do that you loved or maybe a perspective on something or a technology you'd love to bring in? Is there something that you're sort of chomping at the bit for right now?

Melanie Latham:

Honestly, I'm just amazed and I loved here the used technology, the open source platforms that we have here that I've just been excited just to play around and wrap my head around how these can be used in the classroom. In terms of, I guess, things that I'm excited and passionate about is I really admire instructional design and learning design and how that correlates with educational technologies.

So even something like if you're putting together a PowerPoint presentation for one of your classes, well, are you considering which graphics are going in there? How they're laid out, how you're storytelling, you're organizing your slides. I think a lot of considerations, even developing those kind of instructional materials and resources, there's a lot of considerations to factor in that maybe sometimes go unlooked. Because again, the focus is typically on the content, making sure you are getting together what you want to deliver to students. And I think I have that lens and passion to help bring a new element into the picture to consider in that sense.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm looking forward to that because I think as a sector, we have this weird, I don't know, learning design and instructional design for most campus faculty. And I say this wearing my previous hat as a full-time

faculty member, it's like the last thing on your mind because you have coverage, and you have content, and you have policy, and those are the things that you have to do. And no one, no one, no one in the whole institution is talking to you about design or about your instructional plan or any of that kind of stuff.

And especially because the vast majority of us come to post-secondary teaching without a Bachelor of Education, without any kind of training in the field, it's sort of wild to me. Because now that I'm in this role and we work so closely with the instructional designers and we work so closely with CELT, I get it. I get how important all these pieces are. But I remember also the frenetic piece of being full-time faculty member with no educational training and just not even being aware of those things.

And the obsession with content and coverage, especially I taught in the community college system and it was all about alignment for transfer, not alignment for learning objectives or alignment for a particular outcome, but alignment for transfer. That was all that mattered.

And I love that in this role, we can I think sometimes make instructional design and learning design concepts very accessible to faculty. And also I think we're a good conduit to the instructional designers when that support is needed. And it's just a whole world that I knew nothing about, honestly, nothing before I came to this role.

Melanie Latham:

Absolutely. And that's exactly my experience too, is working with faculty members with exactly like you said, not necessarily an education background. So my challenge and passion has always been, well, how can I put together resources, workshops or anything that can have a big impact with low, I guess effort in that sense. What small changes can be made that will make a huge impact on the student experience but don't require a ton of work, understanding and respecting that exactly?

That's not the priority when you've got that content you're thinking about and how you want to put together your lessons. So I think that's kind of an exciting part of this role where it'll be, yeah, how can I best support faculty with that kind of instructional design lens when using kind of educational technologies, just trying to create the best student experience? That's the end goal is just how can we create the best experience for students with hopefully just in really streamlined easy ways?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, that's exactly it. And I think it's making it bite-size and accessible. But it's also so many of us crave a better understanding of why we do lots of things. And I think we often don't even realize that that is missing from our world until it's provided to us. And that's one thing I really noticed when our attendance kicked up huge in the pandemic. There was suddenly this space to have those conversations about why we make the choices we make in the classroom.

And there's this famous article, Pedagogy of Kindness, by Cate Denial. And in it, she talks about how she had never in her life been asked to justify why she makes the choices she makes in the classroom. And at one point, that was the most natural thing in the world to her, if you just do what you do because it's the way you were taught and that's what we do. But how utterly strange she feels it is now that she does think about the why of her classroom all the time, that no one ever had that conversation with her earlier in her career.

And I kind of see us as in a place to do that.

Melanie Latham:



Absolutely. It's kind of intertwining that, why you're doing something with how to actually achieve it and make it happen. So I think, yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because I am all about the why and having practical applicability. You need to be ... It's not just to do things to make things look fun or flashier, it's engaging. There's a reason behind it like a pedagogical purpose.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, that's just critical. It changes everything about your practice once you have a way into those conversations. And I like to think that's one of the things we give to campus in addition to answering Moodle support questions, which I think is our primary gift to campus.

Melanie Latham:

Absolutely.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

... making Moodle run. Well Melanie, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. I really appreciate it. And I'm also just genuinely so happy you're here. We haven't had a chance to chat very much because you arrived and then I was on a family leave and then back, and then the chaos of the beginning of term and then I disappeared to do my tenure promotion portfolio. So we haven't really had a chance to connect.

But I'm really glad you're here and I think you're going to bring in energy and a real design sense that will benefit the whole team. So, thanks for taking the time today and also thanks for taking the job here. It's going to make us all better.

Melanie Latham:

Awesome. Well thank you so much for having me and I look forward to this year. I'm super excited to see what comes of it and I'm just super happy to be a part of this team.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care, Melanie.

Melanie Latham:

Thank you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season three, episode two 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. And in both cases, that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts or 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 and it's going to circle back to that reference I made to Cate Denial's essay, Pedagogy of Kindness. I think it's a really good moment in September, before September passes us completely by, to take a second and reflect on our why. There are a lot of reasons to reflect on why we do what we do in the classroom. It's good practice, obviously, big fan of reflective practice over here.

But I also think that reflecting on why you're choosing to do things the way you do them in the classroom makes you a more confident educator. And it also makes it a lot easier to explain to students why you're doing what you're doing. And it has long been my experience that when we really want buy-in from students, what we need to do is explain to them why we do what we do.

Our learners have spent their entire academic careers, most of them probably just doing things because someone said so. They're adults, and sharing with them why we make the pedagogical choices we make gives them a lot more agency, allows them to prioritize more effectively. And it also lets them look under the hood of their own education, which it's not something to be sneezed at.

So take some time this week, reflect on why you do what you do, and think about sharing that with your students. I have always found that the time spent doing that is paid back to me in great dividends with buy-in on what I want to accomplish.

Until next time, I hope you're well. I hope the new term is treating you well and I hope you're treating each other well. Take care of yourself and I'll be back next week. Bye-bye.