

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 unseated traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And today I'm thinking a lot about joy and pleasure and how finding joy can be hard work. Let's get into it.

So dedicated listeners to the show will know that my kiddo has started kindergarten. Such an exciting moment. It's actually been a really difficult transition, which I confess I was not anticipating. My kiddo takes after me in that he is probably on what I lovingly call the pleasure to have in class to anxiety disorder pipeline, kid mostly. But he's always enjoyed daycare, he's always enjoyed classes, he's always enjoyed connecting with older teachers in particular, he's an only child. So I don't know, I kind of thought all this would be fine. Plus he's been in full day daycare this whole time, so the long days are nothing new. But there's a difference between the structure such as it is of a play-based daycare where kiddos can decide what they want to do all day long and the structure of school, even in kindergarten where tasks are mandated even the fun ones. And also that loss of quiet time in the afternoon. Whew! Are we ever all feeling that as a family?

I was reading about this idea of restraint release when kids are new to school, they kind of they're on guard all day long. And so then they come home and they unleash hell of the people who love the most. Yeah, that's where we are. It's a very gentle kind of hell, but we're on kind of an emotional knife's edge all the time around here. It's got me thinking about joy and pleasure and how joy and pleasure can sometimes be hard work. My kiddo actually loves going to school. He really looks forward to going to class in the morning. It's not difficult to get him up and out the door and ready for school. But by the end of the day there's often tears at school, missing his family, wanting to come home early, those kinds of things. And yet the next morning, up and at them, ready to go, wants to give it his all.

He's meeting friends and finding companionship, but he's also struggling with this moment of transition. It's hard for him to have this pleasurable experience. He has to work at it. I'm finding that a fascinating concept to wrap my head around. I sort of figured after the first day of tears that the next morning would be hard, that he wouldn't want to go back and try again. But that was not the case at all. He was eager to go back and try again. And then he still cried that afternoon and wanted to come home early. Even when there is a lot of pleasure and play, there can be hard work attached to that. I'm actually really inspired by watching this little five year old human I live with decide every day that the pleasures of learning and the experience of school is worth the difficult emotions that come later on. I hope he always feels that way.

I think often for many of us, we have experiences in education where that stops being the case, right? Where the joy stops outweighing the struggle. And I'm thinking a lot about where that line comes and how we go about avoiding crossing it too early in the process and walking away from all that potential pleasure and joy, not for the first time. My son is teaching me a lot about just how to be a human in the world.

Speaking about being a human in the world, it's hard right now. And so I was really eager to talk to Wilson Bell today about the new master's degree here at TRU in human rights and social justice. What a great idea. What a thing the world needs more of. I'm going to let Wilson take it from here.

I am here today with Wilson Bell. Wilson, would you introduce yourself? So I usually ask people to let the audience know kind of who they are, what they do at TRU, sometimes where they might find you if they wanted to.

Wilson Bell:

Great. Yeah, Thanks for having me here. My name's Wilson Bell. I'm an associate professor of history and politics here at Thompson Rivers University. You can find me in my office in the Arts and Education Building on the third floor, A323, or by email, wbell@tru.ca. My specialization is Russian and Soviet history, particularly looking at a region of Western Siberia during the Stalin era. So I focus a lot on Stalinist repression or human rights abuses and so on during the Soviet period. I've published on various aspects of the forced labor camps in the Soviet Union known as the Gulag.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, wow. I mean, that's fascinating work. I would imagine that working on that period of time as we're seeing emergent fascist movements across the west, that must feel uncomfortably relevant at times.

Wilson Bell:

Yeah. Well, in thinking about contemporary Russia right now and Russia's invasion of Ukraine and you have a real crackdown within Russia itself on freedom of expression, they've banned certain social media platforms for example, a lot of independent media outlets have been shut down, either forced to shut down or done so "voluntarily" because they don't feel like they can operate under current conditions. So there's a real crackdown on dissent within Russia. Laws passed about criticizing what Russia calls it special military operation as sort of euphemism for the war. So in some sense, the research on the historical aspects of the Soviet penal system is relevant today too as that system is expanding right now in Russia itself. And you see some of the same issues of overcrowding and abuses and so on.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I was going to ask you what it was in your scholarly background that made you want to pursue creating this master's program at TRU, which is what I've invited you here to talk about today. For folks who aren't aware, we have a brand spanking new Master of Arts in Human Rights and Social Justice. I think, is this the first semester that we have students in place, Wilson?

Wilson Bell:

Yeah, we're very excited to welcome our first semester. They're just getting settled in. They've had some classes now and an orientation. It's really exciting to welcome them here to TRU, our first cohort. And yes, you're right. My research on the gulag is what led me to be interested in this program. I should say I was part of the development team for MA in Human Rights and Social Justice from the beginning. But when we started developing it, we were still trying to think of what would make a good interdisciplinary master program for TRU given the strengths of our faculty in the faculty of arts overall.

So it was a ground up process. We had a sort of coordinating committee that I was on, but then we also had asked essentially the entire faculty to work on developing the curriculum. We had teams of faculty members, not only from arts actually, some from law, social work, nursing, tourism even, helped develop some of the courses. So it was really a collaborative effort to bring it to this point. I suppose I should have added when you asked me to introduce myself that I am co-coordinating the program along with Dr. Hanlon, Dr. Rob Hanlon, who's in politics.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, fantastic. I was reading through the materials about the MA. I would say I was struck by two components of it that seemed fairly unique in the sort of post secondary landscape. One is the central place of Indigenous ways of knowing in the program and how it's conceived. The other is the real flexibility that students have where they can choose, it looks like anyway, they can choose a course based MA, thesis-based, project-based or creative expression. So I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about the structure of the degree program and maybe those particular aspects, or maybe there's something else that's even more interesting that I'm missing.

Wilson Bell:

Yeah, great question. So it's a 16-month program, continuous. Students are expected to start in September and then finish the following December. They typically would do their courses in the first two semesters, a short practicum in the spring/summer. That also leaves them time to, say work on a thesis if they're doing that option. And then the final semester, if they're doing the course-based program, they're finishing that up. But if they're, say doing the thesis program, then they're working only on their thesis in the final semester.

And you're right to highlight those two issues, the Indigenous ways of knowing course and the sort of flexible pathways to completion as aspects of the program that are perhaps unique, certainly unusual. I would highlight two others. The fact that the program combines human rights and social justice as far as we know, it's the only graduate program in Canada to do so, so that's another issue that makes it very unusual program. And then the other one is the interdisciplinary of the program, and I'll come back to those.

But to talk a little bit about the two you mentioned, so we wanted from the beginning, and this was basically a priority of the planning, from the beginning we wanted to center Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous epistemology, pedagogy and so on as part of the program and as a required part of the program. Not something that was optional. This was something that was picked up upon by people we asked to give us advice on how to create the program, who pointed out that other social justice or human rights programs that they were aware of maybe had some Indigenous studies components to it, but they were always optional rather than wired. So we did work closely with the Office of Indigenous Education on campus as well as Indigenous faculty members on campus. We do not have many Indigenous faculty members in arts. But at the time, there were some in nursing who we worked with. So this was a collaborative effort.

And also one idea that emerged for the course was that it would be taught in a way that Faculty of Arts faculty could coordinate the learning in the course, but that it could make use of land-based pedagogies, it could make use of elders. So in some ways it won't be a course... We're offering it for the first time in the winter semester, but it won't be a course that's just a professor in front of a room. We have funding specifically for that course, for example, for field trips and so on. So it combines some very experiential elements and then also Indigenous voices in the knowledge keepers, elders, and so on in the instruction of the course. So we're very excited about that course and very excited that it's a core course.

And to add to that, Indigenous research practices is something that we are trying as best as we can to integrate throughout the program. So it's not just like you get it in this one course and that's it. So for example, in our Research Methods course, the students are reading not this semester, they are reading the Secwepemc Research Ethics Guide that was produced by Garry Gottfriedson and other members of the Office of Indigenous Education. And that's going to be a key element of that course as well. So where it seems appropriate and applicable, and even in some instances where you might not initially

think it would, we are incorporating a lot of Indigenous learning practices there. So we're excited about that.

In terms of the flexible pathways, it'll be a bit of a challenge, I think, administratively, but we wanted to make it so students had many ways to get through the program in a way that made sense for them. So there is a more traditional thesis option where they don't take very many courses, but they work on producing a fairly large academic style thesis. But you can also get through the program if you want just by taking courses, and that's your work. The Faculty of Arts has quite a few professors who are in visual arts, performing arts, creative writing for example.

So we wanted those professors to be able to share their expertise with our students too. And so that's part of the motivation of the creative option. This gives an opportunity maybe for somebody who does a bachelor of fine arts degree, but is really interested in human rights or social justice issues. They could come into our program with that fine arts training and still remain in the fine arts, but also explore their passion for, say, social justice. So maybe that would mean an art exhibit related to some sort of social justice issue.

So there's that creative option. We also have a project-based option, which is I would say somewhat between the thesis and the course based in terms of your coursework and in terms of the length of the final project. But we thought of it more as a kind of a very applied research. So perhaps specific issue that, say, an organization has in town that they want addressed, somebody could do a research project related to that and try to come up with solutions to that particular issue. So that's how we've envisaged that. Whether it works that way in practice remains to be seen at this point.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's exciting, because I don't know, I think back to the MAs that were available when I was looking for MAs around 2005, and there was like... If you even had the choice between a coursework and a thesis option, that was pretty exciting. So the idea of all these range of options, often when I have folks on to talk about new programs or program development, I ask this question of, "Okay, well, who's your imagined student?" But it sounds like part of what the committee has done here is put together a program where there are a lot of possible imagined students for this program.

Wilson Bell:

Definitely. I think also the interdisciplinary of the program allows for that too. So our courses were developed by teams of faculty members from different disciplines. Each course is being taught by two faculty members from different disciplines. So students are really getting a multi interdisciplinary approach to each of these topics. But I also think that lends itself well to attracting students from a variety of different programs. And you're exactly right that even this first cohort, our program was approved relatively late. We could only start accepting applications in May. But we have a first cohort of 19 students. They are from a huge variety of degree backgrounds. So we have people from commerce degrees, social work degrees, psychology degrees, sociology, international relations, education backgrounds, public policy backgrounds. So a lot of a wide variety of degree backgrounds.

But also a wide variety of life experiences too. We have students who are coming directly out of their undergraduate degree, but also students who are at the midpoint or later in their careers but want to take this program either because they think it will help enhance their career interests or really just because they're passionate about these issues and want to learn more. We have one student who's retired and is taking programs. So it really has connected with a wide variety of people. There are five international students. So yeah, we're really quite pleased with the variety of students that have come into the program. And we expect that to continue.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I guess to the range of options for pathways through the program also allows for quite a range of pathways out of the program. That's not a great way of saying that, but I imagine a student choosing a thesis option might have their eye on a PhD program down the road, whereas a student choosing a project option maybe looking to really leap into work with NGOs or government or something else.

Wilson Bell:

Yes, exactly. And that's our hope, is that the program itself gives students a lot of options, whether it be with NGOs, various levels of government, whether it be pursuing further graduate studies or perhaps other types of graduate programs, law for example. So that sort of thing. It could also be training within one's own job. So maybe teachers, for example, who are interested in teaching around social justice issues, they could use this degree and then go back into their teaching. Or corporations. Even the military I was reading recently are really starting to invest in things like corporate social responsibility, in equity and diversity training, those types of issues. So I think there's also room for our graduates. It might not be the first thing you think of when you think of social justice and human rights, but I think there are room for those graduates in those types of positions as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, a potential to make some real change too in those kind of places.

Wilson Bell:

Right. Right. Exactly.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You've obviously been doing a lot of talking about this program. I wonder if there's something in particular that you would want a prospective student to know that we haven't touched on yet today.

Wilson Bell:

That is a very good question. I think one thing we are able to do here at TRU, and this is something that is in our undergraduate programs as well, many of them, but we're really able to have a personal approach, right? So getting to know the students well, working with them closely on their own goals and pathways, this is something that I'm really committed to as coordinator of the program, but also something that our professors are really able to do. I think often if you're going into a master's program at a really large institution, those institutions are more focused on their PhD programs and students. And so sometimes as a master's student, and I this from doing a master's degree at the University of Toronto, I loved the degree and the program, but the master's degree really didn't get the attention that the PhD students did. But we can really focus a lot of attention on our students here and making sure that they're successful and finding the opportunities that they want and need as individuals.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I know there's really interesting data on stuff like the success of CGS, the Canada Graduate Scholarship applications, based on program size. And there really is a strong correlation between small programs, lots of attention from faculty, and success in those kinds of national competitions.

Wilson Bell:

Yeah, I hope we see that in our program as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So we've got 19 students now. Do you have an imagined cap for how many the program can take per year?

Wilson Bell:

Well, so in all our planning documents that were submitted and approved and so on, we had targeted 15 for our first cohort.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, wow.

Wilson Bell:

And then, by the third year of the program I think was the plan, getting up to a cohort of around 30 students per year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay.

Wilson Bell:

So that's kind of our goal and what we think we can support, is a cohort of around 30 students a year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's fantastic. It sounds like such a great program. Everything I've read about it makes me want to go back and do a different master's degree. It just sounds really interesting, but also urgent. The kinds of questions that students will be exploring for themselves in this program, really they feel immediate right now. And so I can definitely see the appeal for students who are looking around and wanting to pursue graduate education but maybe not wanting to pursue a graduate degree that feels really... I'm using the word academic, but in the pejorative kind of sense, right? Like there's something very immediate, visceral, and real about the kinds of issues they'll be tackling in a course like this.

Wilson Bell:

Yeah, exactly. You can look around and see, almost anything you see in the news has that kind of urgency to it. And so we really want to work with the students to have them have the tools to help solve some of these problems and issues that are facing our world right now.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Thank you so much for your time for coming and chatting about the program with me today. I'm thrilled to bits that it's here on campus. I think it's a great addition to what we do here.

Wilson Bell:

Yeah. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care.

Wilson Bell:

Okay, you too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for Season 3, Episode 3 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](https://twitter.com/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, and a more self-serving one than usual. I'm thinking about this idea of joy as I said off the top and the hard work of play and how we motivate ourselves to continue finding pleasure. I have an idea for you. Starting October 5th, we're bringing back our Let's Play series, which introduces you to some very playful technologies that you can incorporate into your classroom. I really encourage you to check it out.

But even if you don't want to come to my workshop, which, ooh, ouch, but okay, I want to encourage you to spend this week thinking a little bit about what pleasure and play can look like in your discipline. What are some opportunities for joy that you can help students see? Especially because in a few weeks we're going to hit that point in the semester where everything is hard, and reminding ourselves that there is something to be gained through the difficulty can be really helpful. So it might be a good idea to think about that now so you can share it with your students when the time comes. Or come to my workshops. One or the other. No pressure.

Until next time, folks. It's always lovely to talk to you and I hope you're taking care of yourselves and each other. And we will talk very soon.