

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and 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. This week, I'm thinking a lot about putting projects to bed in a good way. Not in quite so much of the overwhelm that I talked about last week. Let's get into it.

I've had reason this week to spend time thinking about perception, about how sometimes when an experience ends badly, it colors everything that we thought about it in the lead up. It's hard to look back on, I don't know, say you have a bad experience at a conference and maybe the rest of the conference was great, but your paper wasn't well received. It's hard to feel good about all the good stuff at the conference when you're carrying around this baggage about how your own paper was received.

I think, perceptually we have a hard time teasing apart the good and the bad until we have a fair amount of distance. There's a bunch of reasons why I've been thinking about that today. Not all of which I'm going to get into, but I am thinking about perception in relation to that feeling of putting projects to bed as I finally near the end of the beginning of my shirk podcasting process.

By the time you hear this, all of my episodes, all 14 episodes of my podcast community of practice will be going through a peer review process, will be in the hands of the project team. I hope. Maybe by the time you hear this, it will be almost in the hands of the project team, but I'm so close that I can't help but spend a little bit of time ruminating. This project has genuinely been really hard for me. I've loved all the component parts of it, but putting it together and getting it across the finish line, that's been hard. Regular listeners to the show will know that I've had a time.

I've had personal illness, family illnesses, a whole bunch of circumstances that seem to have conspired over the last little while to make everything feel impossible. And I'm thinking about perception because I'm thinking about the ways in which I'm coming to the close of the first stage of this project. Of course, peer review is going to be a whole other stage. Stay tuned for those rantings later. But I'm feeling so good about the end result that it's starting to shift my perceptions of the work on the project as a whole. Because for a long time, my inability to achieve deadlines and the fact that things were taking me so long was really coloring my appreciation of the work itself.

Right now, I feel really good about it. Six months ago, I really didn't. It's something that I try to keep in mind with academic work all the time because it's so easy to wrap my identity up in the projects that I'm working on when my feelings about them are really so transient, I guess. And maybe that's something we should be talking to students about too, not seeing their whole identity wrapped up in a numerical grade, like frigging easier said than done.

Two people who know a lot about how students experience learning are my pals, Marie and Stephen, two of the instructional designers here in Open Learning. I wanted them to come in and just talk to me about the process of creating courses as a way of thinking about how we can do that work better, all of us, whatever kind of course we work on. I'm going to let Marie and Stephen take it from here.

So I am here today with two of Open Learning's instructional designers, Marie Bartlett and Stephen Doubt. Marie and Stephen, can you guys introduce yourselves? Maybe I'll start with you, Marie.

Marie Bartlett:

Hello, everybody. My name is Marie Bartlett and I am an instructional designer in Open Learning. I have been working in distance education and online environments for about 16 years. And I also really enjoy visual arts. So as well as instructional design, I do incorporate visuality and multimedia into my work as much as possible.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Cool. Thank you, Marie. Stephen?

Stephen Doubt:

Hi, I'm Stephen Doubt. I'm also an instructional designer and actually my office is two doors down from Marie's here in the Open Learning building. My background, I was a long time high school teacher, specifically high school English in many different places in Canada and sort of around the world. And I think almost I consider myself, and we talk about terminology sometimes, as learning designer in terms of we're thinking more about the learner than the instructor sometimes when we're designing courses. And I think that's something that defines what we try and do in Open Learning.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. So I really like that. And it also segues very nicely into where I want to start the conversation today. So sometimes I feel like the way the coordinators of educational technologies sort of interface with campus, sometimes I feel like we're kind of instructional designers like.

We're doing an awful lot of advising on course design within the Moodle space, but that's not really our expertise or where we kind of come to the technology from. So I've thought about sitting down with you guys and talking a little bit about what it is instructional designers do, and then thinking about how we can apply some of your knowledge to more of what happens on campus with courses.

So I'm going to start in this open-ended way and invite you both to speak to this idea that Stephen's just opened up, which is learning design or instructional design. What is it?

Stephen Doubt:

I mean, what you speak of is during the first year of the pandemic, we worked a little bit more as a team with the learning design group. And I think both Marie and I had the opportunity to work with people on faculty who are having to pivot their face to face courses to online and helping support that kind of Moodle design. I think that was very helpful and those conversations were wonderful, and I think that there is lots of opportunity for that. In terms of what it is, I feel like this is something I always struggle with. People not in education like my friends ask what my job is and I'll start to describe it and then someone who's an engineer will say, "Yeah, you make websites. | Yeah, kind of design websites. That's exactly what I do. I don't know. Marie, what do you think about that?"

Marie Bartlett:

That is super funny. It is very difficult to describe to people what we do. It's funny because websites do come up and/or graphic design for me anyway, because it's a designing kind of. And I think that design is actually the key word there because a lot of what we do, or at least in my practice, we plan. So we plan for the student experience, for the learning experience. And you mentioned the pandemic. It's really important to recognize that a fully online course, synchronous or asynchronous is different than using learning spaces, online spaces to support face-to-face instruction.

So I think that the first steps that we engage in with the subject matter experts that are facilitating or teaching the course is about what it's going to look like. Is it an experience that's fully online? Is it an experience that's on campus and online? And as Stephen mentioned before, the plan is to really have the student in mind. I always kind of think if I was a student and this was the course that I was taking, what would it feel like? How is it organized? What are my movements throughout that space and time?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that. I come to this conversation with my own background, which was I spent nine years as a classroom teacher in post-secondary, and we don't know anything often when we come to that space. We're subject matter experts and then we get put into a classroom and we get put into a classroom where there is an obsessive focus on content and coverage.

That's what you learn when you first get a university class. It's like, here's what needs to be covered. And very little conversation about here's what the learner experience should be. Maybe now in this moment you get a gesture towards course objectives. I certainly didn't when I first started teaching. So I think oftentimes design from a face-to-face in class experience starts at content. How am I going to get all this content into these 12 weeks or these 13 weeks?

Marie Bartlett:

Yeah. That was one of the things that I wanted to mention when I was thinking about what to speak about today is content. Because that's the first thing, as you said, that everybody thinks of. And there's so much of it and it's so overwhelming. I think that the fire hose of information and content that we do have available now everywhere is burning everybody out. You can think about it as lecture, but that is a little bit more personalized in the classroom space.

So the teacher puts in jokes. They explain the content in different ways and ways that it's a relatable kind of content or the information is relatable to the learner. In an online space, if you only focus on content, it's so overwhelming. So I often think about designing courses and the student experience as having different colored Lego blocks and making sure that the content is relevant and simple.

That is the information that if somebody wants to dig deeper, they can go to the library. Depending on what the activities are structured as they can pursue further. So you have this one colored Lego brick that's the content, but another Lego brick is activity. So what is the student actually doing?

So the content is the student getting the information, whether it's in verbal form, in a lecture, video or readings. Activity kind of Lego block is what really is interesting to us as instructional designers. I think that knowing Steve would agree, and that's where we really get excited.

Stephen Doubt:

I feel like, Marie, I wish that you'd shared this Lego metaphor with me earlier. I see myself bringing pieces of Lego onto my desk and I can visually build courses. It's brilliant. I do want to back up just a little bit though, Brenna, because I know what you're saying and that yes, people sometimes come out of a PhD into the classroom or earlier and they're kind of dropped off the deep end. But I hear a lot about the lack of training for profs globally. And I will say that it doesn't necessarily reflect the experience of the people that I work with.

I'm actually often astounded at the level of understanding and experience that some of the people I work with do have in terms of designing assessments and chunking up the information. And that maybe partly through the piece of training maybe through scholarship of teaching and learning participation,

maybe through the CELT office here, maybe through different PD opportunities and just through experience of teaching people are incredible that I design courses with.

It's a real balancing act in terms of how much support people need and how much you need to just get out of the way and how much people need specifically designed template or not, or need to have conversations every two weeks or not because the breadth of knowledge and understanding about the education and pedagogy component of what they're doing in the classroom, what they're bringing to, in this case, a distance learning course is incredible.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I don't know if you guys have read Cate Denial's Pedagogy of Kindness essay. One of the things that she talks about it, I think I've brought it up on this showing 900 times, so bear with me listeners, but one of the things she talks of it in that essay is being asked to justify her pedagogy for the first time. So for the first time in her career, somebody asks her, "Why do you do what you do in the classroom?" And she's sort of at first baffled by the question and it leads her on this journey that takes her to theorizing out of a pedagogy of kindness.

But it gets at some of what you're describing, Stephen, which is there are resources that you can go and look to for learning design support. And there's also a lot that you learn honestly by failing in the classroom or by not seeing students succeed and adapting, and trying to figure out what will work for a certain student population.

I think when I first started teaching, I was an excellent lecturer because I was a drama kid and I really liked attention. So it was a good fit for me, but I'm not sure I became a good teacher until I started to figure out the design piece.

So that takes me to the question of when you guys approach a course, I don't actually... Despite having worked alongside y'all for three plus years now, I don't actually know how the process of course design works, but does it start from content? This is what we have to cover. Does it start from here are the learning objectives? Where do you guys start When you have to build a course?

Stephen Doubt:

It starts from, yes, course description and learning outcomes. And really I generally ask the question, "Okay, what do students need? What is the important information in this course that students need to know at the end or skill, or what do they need to be able to do when they've done this? And then working backwards, how are you going to know? How are you going to assess that skill or knowledge or understanding?"

Then, "Okay, what about next, next, next?" And then mapping it to the outcomes. Then the first thing is quite a long process of putting together a very detailed blueprint. I think one of the differences between designing these distance learning courses and putting together an outline for your classroom is it has to be much more detailed because it is much more permanent and you don't have the liberty of during the class providing secondary supports or making changes or changing on the fly.

And that's one of the things that course writers or developers struggle with a little bit is that permanence. And that is a very different experience than being in the classroom and going in with a loose plan.

Marie Bartlett:

You also don't have the liberty to see the immediate feedback from the students. So teaching in class, like Stephen said, you can change, you can adjust, you can feel if something is not working because you

can see it. With course design, we don't often find out if something is not working until after the fact. So after enough people take the course and they fill out our questionnaire, we find out that maybe something is not quite as it could have been better, and we learn from that.

We do have extensive feedback on course design that we collect in online courses. So we have that if something doesn't work really badly, we find out straight away and we fix it. But then there could be parts that just don't work. So students go through it and then we don't find out until after. As Stephen said with online spaces, it has to be perfect because there isn't that immediate feedback.

It is a solitary experience for the student. And if tasks are not well described, if the course is not organized and students get lost or disoriented in it, it's not a good experience for them. So the thought that goes into the blueprinting planning process, I spent probably such a big time planning, such a huge amount of time planning and then looking at the first unit.

And after that I step away and let the creative process happen with subject matter expert writing. But the planning part is huge and then looking at the first unit and getting all the feedback from all the different people is really key, the first stepping back.

Stephen Doubt:

It's true. I mean, students need to know within a course where everything is, how can they find out where the assessments are, how do they locate the resources, how do they know what they have to read or watch or listen to? So that consistency through the course is very important and the clarity of the way that it's laid out and presented. And I think that's a lot where we come in.

So, Marie, it's funny you mentioned that because I feel like that's a conversation every time is okay. We're going to take a long time getting the first week or the first unit being. We're going to do a lot of back and forth on this until we have a template that we can use moving forward that works for the type of course that this is. And that's often a time consuming process and a lot of back and forth.

And then as Marie said once people get it, they can go. But I will say, Brenna, you mentioned at the beginning of your post-secondary teaching career, walking not knowing. In a lot of ways I think people really appreciate even having someone to work with. It's very collaborative and I think people really enjoy that, I hope.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm imagining that that is true. And also that subject matter experts who get to go through the process of doing a development of a course like this learn a lot about assessment design, that they're bringing their own experience, but they're also learning about how the modality shifts. And I think in a lot of ways folks who had that experience found the experience of the pivot a lot less stressful because they at least had some understanding of what it meant for a student to have to move through course material with less guidance without somebody at the front of the room the whole time.

Stephen Doubt:

Now, certainly I'm finding more and more I will work with subject matter experts who did their PhD online or they have some experience as a distance learning student and that experience is huge in terms of informing the way that they want to design courses because they have that experience. And that's something I think that's changing.

I know it's very different being a student than an instructor. The things that you don't see as a student, I think most people who teach or design or write can relate to, but it does make a big difference because

they have a better understanding of the online space and what that experience is like whereas people who come into it and don't have a lot of experience with online learning generally, it's a bit different.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Marie, I want to ask you a bit about the visual aspect of course design because I know how much work you do in the visual design and the field of making information comprehensible through art is something that you do. I will say that in my experience as a classroom teacher, that was certainly not something that I had extensive experience in that I always wanted to do one of those cool syllabus, infographics that you see on... You see them on Twitter at the beginning of September and you're like, "Well, that's really cool, but mine is already at the printer and also I'm tired."

But I'm thinking about the ways in which the visual experience of learning can be attended to. And I'm wondering if you want to say anything about how you guide students through material from a visual perspective.

Marie Bartlett:

Oh, thank you, Brenna. Yes, that is definitely a topic I'm super interested in. When I work with subject matter experts, and as Stephen mentioned when we are looking at what the students really need to know, what skills they should really have, those big questions, big focus areas that there are for the course, I often encourage subject matter experts to express those really important points in more than one way.

We are very textual in academia. The different disciplines have more visual elements. The sciences are actually wonderful for visuality. It's good to have a good explanation of a really important focus point in a course and if possible to offer other ways to relay that information or practice that skill so that we reach as many learners as possible.

We do as humans, enjoy visual expression. Visual information is everywhere online. So if there is a concept that can be also explained by a diagram or an infographic or a process video, H5P element, something that would be more than text, not that there's anything wrong with narrative, it's just as an addition to it.

So that concept is really examined from multiple perspectives and it gives it a different dimension. When there is a visual element, we tend to remember it as well. It stands out especially after we go through a lot of text. So that's what I talk to subject matter experts about. We are very fortunate here in Open Learning. We have very talented artists at work on our course curriculum that is in video, that is in graphic, that it's in multimedia interactive elements that are custom programmed by one of our colleagues as well.

So it can be as simple as a timeline that is more than bullet points. We can interact with it. It can be a very complicated graph of a molecule for example, or kind of a more complicated ecosystem in which different things are interacting with each other and just putting it out as a picture can be very powerful.

Stephen Doubt:

Yeah, Marie, I'm glad you mentioned it. I think it's really important that... I mean, we're very fortunate here that we work with a number of wonderful teams. We have a media team that includes John, who does a lot of video work for us and Stephanie and Nicole who do all kinds of either graphic design or they help out building H5P components or using articulate to build out the visuals like Marie said. It talked about the permanence earlier and we have a wonderful editing team that goes over everything at the end for us.

We have a copyright group that helps answer questions so we can't like, "Can we use this?" And they say, "No." But then they so often provide alternative links or alternative resources for those that I'm so impressed all the time at their ability to dig things up that I don't know.

Marie Bartlett:

We have amazing colleagues. We are very fortunate. And that is to recognize that our colleagues on campus don't have that especially during the pivot.

Stephen Doubt:

They could have used a copyright team.

Marie Bartlett:

Oh my gosh. My heart was breaking because we know how much work that goes into each of our courses. They're professionally produced courses and asking faculty members to do this within a couple of weeks, it's different. So then you have a different type of course than you would when a course goes through our process with our professional teams that support the initiative.

Also as we were talking, I was thinking about templates. So in instructional or learning design, there is a predictable kind of process that we like to do. We have a course guide. We have all the learning outcomes. We align everything through the different content blocks and activity blocks and assessment blocks.

We make sure that everything is connected and it works well. We always check that students are understanding, especially in online environments. It's important that we do that intentionally because we don't have the immediate feedback that is in the face-to-face environment.

So there is some beauty and templates that when the pandemic happened, we shared because it's the fastest way to provide some resource that would be immediately useful and you could use. But we do work with every subject matter expert on a unique structure.

Every subject, every course is different. It can have 13 units or modules. It can have three. It can all work. It just needs to be organized in a way that the student can move through confidently and without getting disoriented. So I think when we think about teaching, whether it is on campus or online, it's thinking about structure but not necessarily a rigid one.

Oh, it's also very interesting lately we have been talking about, because we do have a very linear approach to learning design and I'm curious about non-linear different approaches. It's something that always piques my curiosity and then we try different things. We always try do different things as well. Wouldn't you say, Steve?

Stephen Doubt:

Yeah, I think mean that's one of the natures of working with, I just mentioned all the different groups and so we often talk about having a more freeing way of working in courses and sometimes if it's just one or two people, it's easier to do than when it's dealing with the timelines of a lot of busy people, so it does lean towards a more linear design process than sometimes appropriate or we would like.

Marie Bartlett:

Yeah, because face-to-face teaching... I have been a teacher for a long time as well and sometimes I feel sad that we can't really... It's not the same. The two modalities are not the same.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, that's a really good point and I'm glad you guys brought up all the amazing folks we can draw on within Open Learning because that is a big difference between approaching a course on your own, sometimes for the first time, trying to figure out how to cover a whole bunch of content and having a sort of team and a process already in place.

We're pretty much at the end of the time that I asked you to devote to this today and I'm grateful for it. I wondered as a closing thought, we might think about difference in the process and the approach and maybe share some things that you think are or would be beneficial to face-to-face instructors when they approach course design? Maybe things that you would impart given the opportunity.

Marie Bartlett:

I always ask my subject matter experts, once the student finishes the course and a year later, what would you like them to remember? So after they finish the course, what do you think is really going to impact their life? What is going to stick with them? And then that's kind of the focus point of the course. I make sure that it echoes through the space. It's not lost.

Sometimes we have so much information in those courses that you don't want a gem like that to be cluttered by other things. So amongst all the learning outcomes, all of the content that you have to cover, take a few minutes and think about what we would like students remembering a year from the time that they finish your course.

Stephen Doubt:

One of the big things, particularly now, I mean not just now but the last 15 years that people teaching face to face have started to incorporate more online tools and whether that's for use in the classroom space or at home or within some kind of blended model to think about the visual design of the online content and to really consider the user experience and how they're going to interact with that because I feel so often that that is something that is missed, that here's the content, here is how you access the readings from online or home or here's additional video work or here are whatever it may be.

But so often it becomes a jumble of resources rather than a real design experience. I think that's so important and I think that's something that people can take away from that sort of instructional design way of looking at courses.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that because I often think-

Stephen Doubt:

Oh, you probably see that all the time, Brenna. I didn't even think of that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. Well, the analogy I often give to faculty when we're working through something together is like... So on the first day of class, you don't want to just open the door and throw your stand of handouts at the students and then leave, which is often what week one of a Moodle shell looks like, right? Because it's just like, "Here's nine PDFs." So yeah, I think that's a really good point that... And it comes back to that idea of the visual aspect of learning that Marie was getting at and the need to organize. And that's not just on an individual activity level that's like making sure that there's a coherence to the appearance of the course. I think that's a lesson a lot of people learn in the pivot because their Moodle shells went



from being a repository space where just if you miss class, go get the handouts there, which has very different design requirements than actually having to navigate the space on your own.

Stephen Doubt:

I mean, to be fair, from an LMS perspective, I mean, we have a much more flexible Moodle design than campus instructors have access to.

Marie Bartlett:

Language helps too though. So when you organize things, it's like a well organized storage area. And going back to the Lego blocks. So even introducing the learners to the fact that there're going to be some content blocks where they're going to learn and some of them are, let's say optional and some of them are more important. And then the activities. And even organizing the space that way will make it more comprehensive to the learner.

I think easier for the faculty member too to determine whether the student experience is well balanced. It's not too heavy on the passive, and it has some active elements in it where the student has the opportunity to actively practice what they're learning so that when they're assessed, they had every opportunity to learn about the topic, had an opportunity to practice it without the stress of being assessed and well prepared for the assessment with everything being well aligned.

So even if you think about the blocks, the organizing of the learning experience in those ways, it's going to make it easier for the student and less like a repository, like a story area where there's a whole bunch of files and things that are difficult to make sense for the students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This was great both of you. Thank you so much. I sent Marie and Stephen a very come on the podcast kind of email without a lot of context. I think we had a really great conversation out of it and I'm grateful for your time today. Thank you both.

Marie Bartlett:

Thank you, Brenna. It's always a pleasure.

Stephen Doubt:

Always a pleasure Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season three, episode six 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 and it's really more of a tiny self-reflexive tip. I know, I know, I know. But I want you to think about how perception might shape your experiences in the classroom. I remember I used to finish a really difficult day of teaching and my sense of myself would be absolutely at tatters.

But finish a great day of teaching and I would feel great. I'm not sure it's healthy for our personal identities to be so transient and so shaped by experience. This is a place I actually found that keeping a journal of my teaching was really helpful because it gave me a space to write about the bad stuff, but

also to remember the good stuff and to hopefully give myself at the end of the term a more tempered vision of who I am in the classroom.

I don't know if that will work for you, but maybe think about how perception might be shaping how you're feeling about the classroom in this difficult midterm period. Hang on to that. Maybe it's useful and I'll look forward to seeing you next time. Take care of yourselves and each other, and we will talk very soon. Bye-bye.