

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 unceded, traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And reading week is done, my friends, which means we are on the backslide to spring. And I'm going to try to channel some of that energy and talk a little bit about renewal. Let's get into it.

Renewal takes on a particular form. Over here where I work, there's been a bit of a campus reorg; reporting structures are changing. And I don't fully understand all of it, hence today's guest. Paul Martin is here to talk a little bit about what the reorganization of some components of Open Learning, including my team means for larger structures on campus. But it's also got me thinking about the work I do and where it lives.

My team is now reporting up through the AVP Academic, which is a pretty big change. We've always been housed within Open Learning; I say it at the beginning of every podcast. And I think I still live in Open Learning; I'm not 100% sure, actually, on paper what it looks like, but the reporting structure has shifted.

And it's been an interesting conversation because we've been talking a lot about the fact that there's going to be greater integration between campus and Open Learning. That's a mandate of the new provost. And it's an interesting piece because I've always felt a bridge between the world of open learning and campus. I do all my work... Well, 95% of my work with campus faculty. But obviously my job lives in Open Learning, and I lean heavily on the expertise of my colleagues on the media team here in Open Learning to make things happen. Without Nicole and Stephanie and John, who make our websites and videos turn into things that people might want to look at, the work of this team would be greatly diminished. Those connections within Open Learning have always been really, really important.

And also, I've never felt particularly divorced from campus because I see you campus faculty folks every single week in office hours or in workshops or in sessions, or we exchange emails. And so, I don't know, it's interesting. I don't know what any of this will mean for the way we do our work. I think we do a pretty great job with the resources that we have, and so I hope things will continue on a pace.

But this is a time of year when we start to think about spring, hopefully soon, change, renewal, so it's interesting to be in this moment of maybe rethinking the structure of how things happen around here at the same time. As I say, for the most part, I don't see it changing the day-to-day of my work and what I do. My hope is that it brings us even closer to the kinds of projects that we want to do.

On this topic of renewal and rebirth and energizing, my colleague, Marie Bartlett, and I at the TPC, we wanted to talk about this new idea we have for the TRU Open Press and the idea of bringing in-house in one place all the resources that we have to offer folks who want to do open projects, whether that is an open knowledge mobilization plan for your research or an open textbook or anything in between. And we have so much expertise here at TRU, both in terms of people who have done these projects successfully and can share their wisdom and experience to the range of platforms that we can offer to the technical expertise to actually get it done. It's amazing when you actually take a look at what we can do around here. And I think that's important to remember too.

It hasn't really impacted us where we've lived in our ability to make connections either within the teams at Open Learning or across campus or both. Often, almost always both to actually get the work done.

And thinking about what that might look like in the future is really exciting, finding a way to really celebrate all of that work, which is what the TRU Open Press is all about. I'll put a link to some of the information about that in the show notes. It's not real yet. It doesn't exist. It is a funding application, really, more than it is anything, and a dream; a funding application and a dream, like so many things I get up to around here.

All right, well, while I'm on the topic of reorgs, reinventions, and things that are new, it would probably help to just let my friend and colleague, Paul Martin, explain it in a way that comes from someone who knows. Because one thing I really do recognize through this process is I am not one who knows, so I defer to people with greater structural and institutional expertise than me, and today, that's Paul. I'm going to let Paul take it from here. I am here today with Paul Martin. Paul, would you say a little bit about what you do on campus, maybe where folks can find you when they're looking for you?

Paul Martin:

It feels like people are always looking for me, and I'm doing my best to hide. Yeah. Hi, I'm Paul, and I'm the Director of Curriculum Development and Delivery for Open Learning at TRU. And right now I'm splitting my time between my office on the fourth floor of the Open Learning building and also the clock tower where I'm working part of the week out of the office of the Associate Vice President Academic.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay, so this is really why I've invited you to the show this week. There's been a bit of a reorg over here, and I only understand a very small part of it. And last week, I was having coffee with someone, and they were like, "I heard there's a reorg at Open Learning. What's that about?" And I was like, "I don't think I can explain it, but I know someone who can." And then, Paul, you got roped into coming on the show to explain the reorg. I wondered if you could give a little short synopsis of what the reorganization is and maybe why we're trying this, and maybe then we'll go from there.

Paul Martin:

Yeah, sure. Thanks, Brenna. That's a great question, and I think it's one that we've been getting a lot for sure. I think one of the first places to start is that Open Learning is a massive operation. And I think it's very easy to say, "Oh, this is just the fourth floor of the Open Learning building. And they do some online courses and things."

But Open Learning as a whole encompasses not only the development and the delivery of all the courses that are offered to TRU students through Open Learning, but also all of the Open Learning faculty members who work remotely. We've had closing it on 300 Open Learning faculty members. Open Learning serves 15,000 students. Only 2,000 of those are dual enrollment students who would be students who take courses on campus and through Open Learning. That's 13,000 students spread really throughout British Columbia, across Canada and around the world.

Our offices serve all of those students. We have a Student Engagement and Experience team as well. But also run through Open Learning are, for example, the Copyright Office for all of campus. We have team of editors, we have all of the production staff that goes into building the Open Learning courses. And then also, of course, the team that you're part of, the Learning Technology team, the instructional designers who are TRUFA faculty along with you and your colleagues in Learning Technology and Innovation who are faculty. But then also, we have a Partnerships team and the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition team as well, the PLAR team that serves, well, hundreds of students a year. And it's again, offering more flexibility for learners and assessment of prior learning. That's a brief overview of the large team.

And really, we've all been working together, but working also in very different sort of areas. And my areas, which encompass... It's shrunk a little bit as of February 1st. The Student Engagement and Experience team, which reported to me before, is now staying and reporting to Don Poirier. And Don oversaw all of this operation before. But as of February 1st, we're adding Shannon Wagner, who's the Associate Vice President of Academic. To her, we'll be reporting all of the curriculum development staff, the course delivery teams, and also the learning technology teams as well.

That addition of Shannon, I guess that bifurcation of the Open Learning unit means that we will have a stronger focus in this area on the course development side of things, on the course delivery side of things. And really, through the ABPA, I think help in working with schools and faculties to try to streamline some of our processes to try to really reinforce that a TRU student is a TRU student, TRU course is a TRU course. And I think it's been very easy sometimes in the past for schools and faculties, for faculty who are working on campus and certainly for administration and also even the service areas, Student Services, things like that, to say, "Oh, well, Open Learning is something different. They're over there, they do their thing, we only serve campus." This is an attempt to really try to bring those things together that have always been together, but not necessarily perceived as being together, if that makes sense.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, it does. And I think that a big place where there is misunderstanding, and I say this because I work in the Open Learning division and I don't think I understand this, is the ownership of courses and how those courses get developed. Because you just said, "We're trying to remind folks that a TRU course is a TRU course is a TRU course." Can you give a little, I don't know, an elevator pitch, a little synopsis of how course development actually works on the Open Learning side?

Paul Martin:

Oh yeah, I would love to. And not only do we have 15,000 students taking courses through Open Learning, we're trying to actually really move away from language, let's say an Open Learning course or an Open Learning student, to just reinforce that it's a TRU student taking a course through Open Learning. And then we have courses that are delivered through Open Learning; and there are about 450 of those, which is a huge portfolio of courses. There are degrees, certificates, diplomas that are offered through Open Learning that are also offered through campus. And then there are degrees and programs that are offered through Open Learning that aren't offered on campus. For instance, we have a veterinary technology program; that there's a campus offering, and then there's an offering at a distance through Open Learning. There's an MBA that's offered on campus and an MBA that's offered through Open Learning. Both of those programs are quite aligned.

But then we also have, for example, a Bachelor of General Studies that doesn't exist on campus that students can take through Open Learning. And students on campus who want to have a more maybe self-directed type of degree and program of study, they can actually take the... And we find that a lot of the students who are taking the BA General Studies, the Bachelor of General Studies, are students who take 100% of their courses on campus, but they get their degree-

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, really?

Paul Martin:

... pulled together absolutely through Open Learning. I saw a degree Bachelor General Studies the other day because I approve the graduation audits on those courses, of a student who just pulled together just the coolest assortment of courses. They took everything that they could do in terms of trades and architecture and engineering or those kinds of things, and then also took courses in... I can't remember, one of the humanities or something, and just assembled this really interesting degree for themselves. But there's no way to do that on campus, but a Bachelor of General studies allow students to do that. We also have a Bachelor of Health sciences that's offered through Open Learning. And that doesn't exist on campus as well. But that's the biggest degree that we have that's run through Open Learning.

Courses for those programs and for the programs that are more aligned with what we would see on campus, all courses are really under the oversight of the schools and faculties. Open Learning doesn't have any autonomy to say, "You know what? We really need a course in, I don't know, quantum mechanics or something," and just create that on our own. Really, the course proposals, or proposals to revise courses have to come through the schools and faculties. And they put those through all the regular course proposal processes we have on campus; they go through all the various committees.

Once that's all approved, the execution of that course development happens through Open Learning. Schools and faculties have input into and they sit on the hiring committees for the people who develop those courses, they set the qualifications for the Open Learning faculty members who will deliver those courses. And there are a good number of our Open Learning faculty members who are also faculty members on campus. They're two different unions; TRUFA, which is on campus, and TRUOLFA, the TRU Open Learning Faculty Association. You can be members of both of those unions and teach in both of those areas.

Once that proposal comes to us, we hire a course developer. A subject matter expert is another way of phrasing that. And they work together with the instructional designer to really develop and design that course. And the instructional designer is there really to help the SME in terms of pedagogy, in terms of what works for this modality that might work differently from what would happen on campus. Because the thing is with many of our courses in Open Learning are continuous enrollment, which means that a student can start a course at any time, and they have up to 30 weeks to finish. They could finish in five, they could finish in 30. As an OLFM, you might have a hundred students taking a course at a time, but every single student is probably in a different place than the others, so that influences, really, a lot of the pedagogy and thinking about instructor presence in the course.

And even as an instructor, you can't pop in like we would do if we were teaching a live synchronous course online to say, "Hey, everybody, we're onto unit two this week. Here are the things to watch out for." Students are in a different place over time so you really have to build that course in a very intentional way that takes advantage of the affordances of that self-paced modality. You have to be really mindful about those things. There's things that just don't work that might seem that they would make sense, like let's get students into groups, right?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Right.

Paul Martin:

And have a group discussion on a discussion board. Or even just discussion board postings, you might say, "Okay, put up a post and wait for someone else to respond, and then respond to their initial response to your post." Doesn't really work when every student is in a different place. And yet that flexibility that those kinds of courses offer is really one of the things that sets the courses we offer through Open Learning apart, because that flexibility is something that students are really craving. And

you'll see a lot of students commenting about how, wow, they were taking courses at a particular university, they discovered Open Learning, and now they can take courses at their own pace. And for students who are self-motivated, it really is a huge plus for them.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to ask, when you're writing a course in a face-to-face setting, you imagine a student. Now, we spend a lot of time unpacking that imagination because sometimes we imagine the student really wrong, or just as a reflection of ourselves. But I guess who is the imagined Open Learning student when developers are designing that course and thinking through who that learner is? What does that look like on the Open Learning side?

Paul Martin:

Oh, yeah, that's such a great question, Brenna, and it's a really interesting one. Typically, I think if we look back at the history of Open Learning... And remember, this started as the Open Learning Agency 40 plus years ago. TRU has been doing this... Well, what eventually became TRU and through Open Learning has been doing this since 1979. And one of the mandates of TRU and the TRU Act that created the institution, which brought together the University College of the Cariboo with BC Open University was that it's there to serve... One of the mandates says to be a regional university but also to serve the open and distance learning needs of the province.

This is one of the things I always say. I go and speak at new staff orientation all the time, and I say, "You might think of TRU as being the footprint that we see, the number of students we see walking through the door on campus, but imagine it being twice as big and serving people everywhere." There is a TRU student in every corner of the country. You could probably walk into a Tim Horton's in Halifax or Yellowknife and find a student doing their homework for a TRU course.

Historically, we would see those students as being older, often employed full-time trying to get ahead, single parents, people who are trying to move forward in their careers and doing things in their spare time, or being able to devote times where you couldn't actually come to a face-to-face campus. If your only time to take your courses is between 8:00 PM and after the kids go to bed and 11:00, you're not going to find a course on campus that would allow you to do that. But Open Learning give those flexible learning opportunities for students. Historically, the average student for us tended to be older, be in a remote area and be someone who is working part-time or full-time or being a caregiver for someone. We see lots of students too who are caregivers for elderly parents and things like that as well.

But I think one of the fascinating things is that over the last number of years, the average age for Open Learning students is really almost the same as the average age for the students on campus at TRU. That average age has been trending downward. And instead of having students who are... Because the other type of demographic, I guess we serve would be students at other institutions who, "Wow, I failed biology this year. I have to pick it up in order for me to move forward in my degree next year. I need to do it over the summer or find a way to get it done really quickly. And I'll look to Open Learning, but I'm a student at another institution."

The biggest growth area for us right now is in students doing their entire degrees through Open Learning and their entire program. That's actually the majority of our students now. And the age is trending significantly downward. We're looking at, really, almost the same demographic. It's a broader demographic, but really concentrated still in, I would say, students in their 20s. I think that shift has been fascinating. Like you say, it's easy to imagine who the students are and why that might be. Those still could be students who are working full-time and who can't do things elsewhere. Or I think we're

seeing a rise in students who are taking a full course load doing their programs online because they've discovered that that's actually a valiant approach that really works well for them.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Do you think that that change has accelerated after so many universities experience a campus closure? For so many students, they maybe got a taste of learning online that they hadn't had access to before, or the mandates in high schools. Do you think there's just more awareness of that as a learning modality?

Paul Martin:

I do, absolutely. No. We saw a significant jump, I guess. Enrollment in courses offered through Open Learning has grown year over year over year at TRU for the last decade. We saw a little bit of a drop post-pandemic. But really, when you look at the enrollment over the last two years and you see 2020, '21 as a bit of a blip, we're still on that path, I think, of growth.

But one of the things that we have heard for sure from students is, "Wow, you know what? This really worked well for me, and I don't really want to go back." Or we have students saying, "You know what I'd really like to do? I'd really like to take a couple of courses on campus through the year and take the rest of my courses online just to have that flexibility." And I think that really connects a little bit to one of the, I guess, strategic directions that's being set with this change in reporting structure as well. How does TRU become more responsive to the needs and the interests of all TRU students? It's going to be interesting to see where that goes. I think it's a little early to tell. I think there was certainly the novelty of coming back to campus for sure, for students. But I hear from students all the time that, "You know what? That's been great, but I really do miss actually being able to do at least some of my courses online, because maybe I don't want to come to campus every day." And campus is great, but they're realizing that, actually, all that time that they didn't have to spend on the bus or waiting between classes looking for a place to study on campus, things like that they didn't experience while they were learning remotely, that there was some advantages to that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, you've segued into my next question by reflecting on the strategic priorities. I'm wondering what you see as the opportunities or the benefits of this reorganization. I guess uncharacteristic for this show, Paul, I'm asking you to be hopeful as you look towards this new era for Open Learning and the structure that we fall under within TRU.

Paul Martin:

I am always someone who tends to be on the hopeful, even when I'm on the day-to-day basis might be encountering things that cause me to throw up my hands and go, "What's going on?" Because if you imagine, I oversee the work, really, of... I've got wonderful associate directors who work with me, wonderful teams, but the things that filter up to me are the things that people go, "Okay, well, I can't solve that; we'll send that to Paul." I get the really situations that you just go, "I don't know if there's an answer for that one."

Somehow, in the midst of all of that, I do find cause for optimism. And I think this is one of the things that drew me to Open Learning in the first place. I've got a long history and work with OERs and open access and open pedagogy especially in my own career as a teacher and as an educational developer after that. Just look at that; 15,000 students cross Canada who might not have access to post-secondary, really, in a good way, and we're helping them achieve their educational goals. And so it's very easy to

look at things that don't work or things that could be better or things that have gone off the rails, but I just circle back to that every day, the students that we serve.

And I think one of the goals behind this reorg is to really find ways to be more responsive. And we have challenges where schools and faculties are really tapped out. If you think about TRU in some ways as an institution where the departments, the schools and faculties are built for a university of half its size once you factor in Open Learning. When we come to people and say, "Well, we're a gap in the curriculum. Our students really need this course," it's very easy to say, "Well, we've got all this other stuff going on campus, so I'm sorry that that's going on, but we really don't have time to help you to work on that." Or if there are student challenges, "Well, those are Open Learning students, they aren't our students," things like that.

This is really, I think, a move by the provost and the AVP-A to really help us to enlist the support of departments and schools and faculties to say that, no, a TRU student is a TRU student, and a TRU course is a TRU course. And we need to make sure that we are able to keep those courses current to make sure that we have all of the curricular offerings that we need for students to be able to complete key degrees, such as the BA in Psych or the Bachelor of Competing Science, which is a huge program for us.

I think everybody's intentions are in the right place. From three and a half years in this role, I can say that there's a lot of things that you can't really understand the full scope or the complexity of the problems until you've been really face-to-face with them for a while. I think there are things that other people involved who are getting closer to Open Learning right now, it seems really clear, and then you actually look at it more closely and their eyes get big and start to go, "Oh, we do that?" Or, "Oh, we have to figure that out?" I think people are really trying hard, and I've got nothing but respect for that.

And I think we're working on really addressing some of the key challenges. I think if you look back at the history of when TRU was created, I think there was this goal for the Open Learning side of it to be much more integrated. And we need the space for all of our teams and things like that, but when you're up on the fourth floor of building on the outer rim of campus there, it's very easy for people to say, "Oh, well, that's an Open Learning thing, or, "Oh, well, yeah, go talk to Open Learning because we don't understand." I think this is good. It's certainly not easy, and there's lots of challenges, but like I said, I think people's intentions are in the right place.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that's a good and hopeful place to leave it, Paul. Thanks so much for your time today and for explaining this, I don't know, this new structure and how it's going to work. It was actually helpful for me too. Thank you for your time today. I really appreciate it.

Paul Martin:

Oh, my pleasure, Brenna. Thanks for having me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is it for season three, episode 12 of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter for as long as that exists @brennacgray. And 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. With reading week behind us, this is the perfect time for a check-in with your students. Oftentimes, I think we approach reading week with this sense that we are going to get so much done. I speak for students, faculty, and staff alike. "It's finally going to

be quiet for a week, and I'm going to get all this stuff done." And so sometimes the return to class after that can... Well, I don't know, sometimes we get confronted by all we didn't do, all we thought we'd do. But it's also we're getting towards... I guess we're midpoint in the semester. This is when things get hard. Major projects, big essays, exams; these things are often heavily weighted to the after reading week periods, so it's a good time just to check in and make sure everything is ticking along for your students.

And you know what? It's a good time to check in on yourself too. Don't beat yourself up too much about what didn't get done over reading week. I say this as someone whose to-do list did not get to-done. And instead, let's just try to keep our wheels on the road together. Check in with your students, check in with each other, and I'll keep thinking about you. Until next time. We'll talk soon. Bye-bye.