

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 today I'm thinking about my arts education. I know, but let's get into it.

So you'll hear that today my feature interview is with Robin Nichol, who is a professor in the theatre department here and is directing the most recent production. And talking to her for this week's episode really got me thinking about arts education in general, but my arts education in particular, we hear a lot about the assault on arts education, you know, fact that students are pursuing more quote unquote practical degrees. I don't think they actually are any more practical, but you know, there's always temptation. I think, when you're a student. I certainly felt this. To pursue a degree that you could put an ist <laugh> on the end of right. Something that really was strongly legible to family and friends as having a career at the end of it. And I think especially depending on your position and where you're coming from in the world, like that can be really, really important.

Talking to Robin today made me remember my own education in theatre. It's probably not a surprise that I have a background in the performing arts. I went to theatre arts high school, literally based off of the movie Fame. Like someone in education, whether it was a teacher or the board, I'm not really sure of the gist, but they definitely watched the movie Fame and thought like we should do <laugh> that here. And so in the eighties, what had been a technical high school transitioned into an arts magnet school. And you know, I know here in Kamloops we have the School of the Arts, there's something about that kind of an education really centered on expression, emotion engagement, but also like actually a lot of really practical business skills. Like in grade 13, because I'm old and from Ontario and did a grade 13 <laugh>. But in grade 13 I produced a theatre show like I was the producer. I had to master all of the business skills around mounting a production, managing a budget, managing people, right? All, all of the crew were my responsibility.

It's an interesting thing that we tend to think of the arts as being, I don't know, sort of airy fairy and up in the clouds, but I learned so many practical skills as part of pursuing an education in the arts. I definitely thought I was going to be an actor. There was a period in my life where I did a little bit of voice work. Can you tell why do I love podcasting? But what's interesting is that I don't think any single component of my education has had more impact on who I am as a teacher than my training in theatre. Everybody who teaches knows that teaching is a performance, but I'm also talking about the need to be empathetic, my interest in care, engaging emotionally with folks, being willing to be vulnerable.

Those are all things that I learned how to do because I learned how to act. I think that it's easy to lose track of how valuable all of those practical skills are. Now, there's other ways to learn those skills. Of course, there are, what I think I'm ultimately making an argument for is not like everybody should take drama, but that we should think more broadly and openly about the kinds of skills that students require as they move out into the world. And that we don't necessarily have to have like a class in, I don't know, social skills for business to learn social skills for business. Right? You know, here's a good example. I was invited to give a presentation to the ministry this week or to a working group of the ministry of higher ed. And it was about machine learning and artificial intelligence and academic integrity. Things I really, really care about. But I've never presented to a government working group before and I was terrified. But learning how to manage my nerves was something that a theatre education gave me. I didn't have

any opportunity to learn that in most of my other classes, but I certainly learned that every time I needed to get up on the stage.

My path, all the way to educational technologies was like really circuitous: stops in theatre and performance and voice acting. And briefly, I was a political science student and then English and then comic studies. I think that when students are selecting their majors, I don't think they always realize just how circuitous the actual path to their career is going to be. And that the reality is that the jobs they end up doing may not even be jobs that exist at the moment. They pick that major or certainly they may not be jobs they know about. I didn't know that learning technology was a job when I started university. I didn't know it was a job when I finished my PhD. I didn't know it was a job when I went out on the job market the first time. And it's the most fulfilling thing I've done in my career to this point.

So, speaking of circuitous <laugh>, I guess I'm just making an argument for openness and flexibility and for really recognizing that all learning opportunities bring us gifts that we expect in gifts that we don't, and we don't really know where we're going to end up. So you know what? Take the drama class. If it interests you, there's a lot there that you'll carry forward into whatever you do.

Anyway, as promised, my conversation today is with Robin Nichol and it's great. It's going to really make you want to go out and see a play. So I'll let Robin take it from here.

I am here today with Robin Nichol. Robin, would you let us know, you know, where you live on campus, what you do, and then we'll get into talking about well, I'm very excited to talk about the new theatre production today.

Robin Nichol:

Hi, I teach in the theatre program, so we're in Old Main, right beside Starbucks. I've taught here for 18 years.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, fantastic. And this week is the opening of the third production of the season. Right. And it's called Mustard, I believe. Can you tell us a little bit about the play itself?

Robin Nichol:

the play was written by a playwright named Kat Sandler, Canadian playwright. It's about the concept of imaginary friends and it's assuming that they're real and that they, everybody had one, then most people just forgot about them and sometimes they don't go away. That sounds fun. It's, it's very fun. But it's also, it's also has quite a heart to it. It's the family that we're seeing is going through some rough stuff and the daughter's imaginary friend hasn't gone away because the daughter needed him. She's growing up now and she needs to be able to function on her own. And so things are going wrong, men. It's a complicated story, but it's, it has a happy ending and it is a lot of fun.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This is the third play of the season, as I mentioned. I was wondering if you could give me a little bit of an overview of like how the theatre program works for students. What point in their degree do they do a performance like this? Those kinds of details.

Robin Nichol:

We are a BA in theatre as opposed to a BFA, which, I mean, I know that the, the, the significance of that might not be glaringly obvious to you, but a BFA is normally considered to be a professional training

program, whereas we are, we have a more academic degree and our students usually go on into education or graduate school. We have some students who have left us and gone into the profession, but that's not our main goal. So that being said, we're not an exclusive program. We don't have an audition system to get in. Anybody can take first year acting and if they enjoy it, they can carry on. Anyone can audition for shows. We don't even confine it to theatre students. That is the majority of the students who audition anybody can be in a show that they audition for if they get cast.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's cool. So you get kind of, well you said majority theatre students, but I guess there's the opportunity for students to interact with people from across campus then.

Robin Nichol:

Yeah, I've had students in shows who are, I've had a geography student in a show.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And so, so the, the production itself then isn't a part of the degree program, it's then in addition to the degree program, then

Robin Nichol:

Yeah, students can choose to get credit for doing shows if, if they want to, but they don't have to. So it is part of the program in that way. There's, there's no theatre program worth it. Salt that doesn't produce shows. That is the practical example of everything that we're teaching. That's when students get the opportunity to do in real life what we're teaching them sometimes theoretically.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Like I'm guessing stagecraft is a component of the Yeah. Program as well. So does that integrate with the courses or is that also a like student interest kind of from across campus?

Robin Nichol:

Again, both, but it definitely integrates with the courses. students in the theatre production courses have to do practicum hours, so they do them on shows mostly.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

One thing that I noticed when I first moved to Kamloops, you know, it being a smaller center, is just how integrated the theatre program at TRU is with sort of theatre in the city as a whole. My, my kiddo loves the children's theatre in the park, for example. And I noticed there's often instructors from TRU who are directing those shows and things. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about like, sort of where you see these productions and this community as kind of fitting into the larger community of Kamloops.

Robin Nichol:

I agree. When I moved to Kamloops, I was surprised at how kind of strong and healthy its cultural community was for a place of this size. Colonna can't maintain a professional theatre company, plus a symphony Kamloops is way ahead in that regard, I feel from many places of the same size. The fact that we as a, you know, smallish university smallish program in a smallish university have a connection with a professional theatre company just down the street is great. I mean, currently I think we have 10 alumni

who work there, which is amazing. And, and we share resources with them. They borrow stuff from us, we borrow stuff from them. students go down and do crew calls with them. We've had, we have a great, great relationship. Project X, the, the theatre in the park. That company was originally started, I have no idea how many years ago, 25 maybe. by two alumni from our program. Our, our students are regularly hired there as actors and as backstage and stage management and all the other things. So it is a great resource for us. I guess I could say that because it gives our students more opportunities and it's a great addition to the cultural world of camels.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I've sort of struck in your introduction, you know, that distinction between the BA and the BFA and the kinds of things that our students go onto. I'm curious, you can take this question in whatever direction you want, but I'm really curious, you know, cuz we've been hearing all the time about like, you know, the assaults on arts degrees or the lack of interest from students or sort of a cultural movement away from the arts. But it strikes me a theatre background <laugh>, depending on what you go into, could be like a really useful and versatile background. And I say this a little bit, I went to a performing arts high school, so I have a little bit of sort of a sense of what that gave me in terms of, you know, framing the work that I do now. I wonder if you might say a little more about the range of things that the students from the theatre program here go on to do and, and maybe the versatility of that background for them.

Robin Nichol:

Yes, you're preaching to the choir because of, of course I believe that a theatre education, everybody should have a theatre education. It's just chock full of life skills. Take courses in theatre, then you get better at public speaking and teamwork and creative problem solving and you know, emotional expression and empathy and just all sorts of great things. As I say, some of them go into the professional theatre either in administrative or technical capacities. We have had a couple of students who have gone on to become professional actors. I would say. all but maybe one high school drama teacher in this town came out of our program. We also have a lot of students who are doing a minor. We had a tourism major theatre minor. We had a couple of students who, who did business majors. Actually. We've had a couple who did business double majors, business major and theatre major together. But I've also had business major theatre minors. And then we just, within the faculty of arts, we have a guy who has been with us for a while. He's doing the Slow Root, but <laugh>. But he is, he's an amazing sound designer and composer. And he's, he's got professional work while still in school for the last few years as well as doing a lot of sound work for us in our shows. But he's a philosophy major, theatre minor. It's the theatre can, can with anything. It's like a fine wine.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I want to have a conversation with the students who are business major theatre minors or double majors because I really, that's, that makes so much sense to me just in terms of the, the performative nature of business, the

Robin Nichol:

Performative nature of business, and the fact that theatre is also a business

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And arts administration. I mean, that, that's the kind of career that really would put the two of those things together quite naturally, I guess.

Robin Nichol:

Yeah, I mean Dušan Magdolen, who runs the Kamloops Film Society and the Paramount downtown, he was one of our graduates. He was the double major.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Totally changing gears now, but I'm really, really curious about the process of selecting the plays for the season. How, how do you guys go about that? Does there a sort of, what's the process look like for that?

Robin Nichol:

It's, it's complicated. I mean, theatre faculty are in the happy position that we get to choose the shows we want to direct, which is not necessarily the case in, in a larger program. Every year we have a season of three shows. We normally also have at the end of the year, something called the Director's Festival, which is the senior directing students presenting work. We don't have that this year because COVID kicked our ass and we lost, we lost a cohort. So, but they'll come back. It'll be fine. Anyway, so the three main stage shows that we do with the three faculty members, we need to create a season that, you know, we, that isn't all the same. That is kind of gives, gives the students a variety of opportunities. in terms of style and genre of play, we personally, when I'm looking for script, on the one hand I have a kind of running list of things I'd like to do one day.

I also read a lot of plays. I also occasionally go through the websites of other theatre programs, what they're doing because when you're doing shows with students, ideally you don't want a huge range of ages in the characters. It becomes a little ridiculous when you're asking a 21 year old to be 89. And we need to be able to cast it. So we need to know that we have, you know, enough students and people who can handle it. You know, if there's, if there's particularly demanding parts, there's no point in doing King Lear if you don't have a King Lear.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Do you have to pay attention to things? I guess I was going thinking like class composition and like really basic things like how many men and women you have enrolled in the program in a in a given period. Do those things play a role?

Robin Nichol:

Absolutely. And that, that seems to weirdly kind of come in waves where it's, it's pretty common across the world that theatre programs have twice as many women as men in them. But I look, looking back over the years, I would say that we have gone through times where we've had a lot of men and then times where we have had hardly any. So yeah, I certainly have to pick your shows with those things in mind though, in this brave new world, we're, you know, things are moving closer and closer to the kind of non-gendered, non-binary character. So therefore the opportunities become greater, which I think is great. You know, I mean it's, it's infuriating the number of great plays that don't have decent women's parts in them.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Love the idea of sort of the, the fact that you guys managed to put on three performances a season. I think that's, that seems like a lot for the size of our university and the size of a program. Do, do you find we have a fairly supportive community when it comes to, you know, getting out and seeing the plays and, and being present and, and being part of that, the sort of the vibe of having a live here on campus?

Robin Nichol:

I would say, I mean, we have a pretty loyal following in terms of our audience. I would say that less than half of them are coming from campus. We have a visibility problem, that's for sure. The number of times over the years that I've, I've heard students or faculty say, oh, I didn't know we had a theatre program. Yeah. So we, we, we have good support. We certainly would like it to be better, especially on campus. It's tricky to get the word to into the right ears.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think the campus in general has a communication problem, you know, take that how you will. But even just a practical, I mean there's like, there's on a philosophical level, but I think even on a practical level, like I, we find it's, it's really hit and miss whether our programming finds audience and I think in general. So I, I, I empathize with that from a different perspective, but it's definitely something that we struggle with in our office too,

Robin Nichol:

In that regard. I have to say thank God for social media. Before that, the, the only way to, to get the word out was to, you know, email press releases and put up posters. We weren't reaching anybody. I mean, we, we have, we've never not had an audience, but I think social media is a nice free way to actually get a lot of exposure.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You, you said earlier about the directing students that you lost a cohort to COVID. Can you talk a little bit more about the impact of COVID on the program?

Robin Nichol:

We never stopped teaching face-to-face. That was an interesting year. 20, 20, 21, you know, it was a ghost town on campus and we were rattling around in Old Main. There was nobody else there. I became best friends with Security Guard for sure, but our classes were relatively small. We normally take in 75 students into first year. That goes down as, as we go up in years for sure. But that's normally our opening cohort. And that year we had 17. Oh wow. That, that cohort is now in third year. I mean, we have one student in third year acting, so I mean, we've just combined that with another course so that he can get through and finish his degree. But we've had to do some, let's do some creative things. Yeah, I mean, at the same time we had through those, those first two years of COVID, we had a pretty strong upper division cohort.

We had, you know, lots of students in third and fourth year who were, or second to third and then third and fourth who, who were keen to carry on. And we did a full seat. We never stopped producing shows. And in that first year, I did the first show in the fall in 2020, we just hit a window where we were allowed to have an audience. I, I don't know if you can throw your mind back to those dark days, but whether public spaces were open or closed kind of changed regularly. They were open in the fall. I mean, that was when you had to, you know, keep a, keep a, an empty seat in between every group and you had to have little stickers on the floor to keep people separated and had to check -- Oh no, it was later than we had to start checking vaccine passports. But yeah, it was, it was very complicated. But yeah, we had an audience for a show in the fall of 2020 and then the, the last two shows that year plus the director's festival were all open learning. Those guys were great. They shot the shows for us. They, we put them up on Vimeo, so we sold virtual viewings. And theatre never looks that great on screen because it's not, it's not lit for it. The sound isn't as good. It was the best we could do.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's actually kind of incredible <laugh> to hear about. I mean, the fact that you guys kept the lights on is amazing. Yeah.

Robin Nichol:

Oh, for sure. For sure. And as I say, we, well, no, I shouldn't say it was only us because visual art was in as well. Not all of their courses were face-to-face, but some of them were.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I don't think I set foot on campus during that whole first semester. So it must, well, I maybe came to pick up some monitors, but that was about it. So it must have been a really, like a real ghost town experience.

Robin Nichol:

Yeah, yeah, it was great. Parking was great.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to say there were no lineups at Starbucks, but I'm guessing there was just no Starbucks.

Robin Nichol:

There's no Starbucks. No.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This show has a small but dedicated listenership, primarily faculty and staff. And so I often like to ask folks at the end of an interview if there's anything that they would like to be able to communicate to faculty and staff about the work they do or the program they're in. So I just, I wonder is there anything that you'd particularly like the TRU community to know about the theatre program or the performances or the work that you do.

Robin Nichol:

To the faculty, especially the faculty of Arts come out and support. They're your students too, come out and support them.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

How do folks get tickets? What's the easiest way?

Robin Nichol:

We go through a ticketing an online ticketing company. So if you go to our page in, on the TRU website, under the theatre program, there's a, a, a page that's called Current Season. Under this show, there'll be a buy tickets link. And there you, there you have it. We also have an actual live box office with an actual human in it. The weeks that the show is running there, they'll, there's someone in the box office Monday or Thursday, 11:30 to 2:30 I think. So you can actually walk up and hand over cash and everything. <laugh>.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, I'll make sure I include a link to the virtual ticketing option in the show notes today. and yeah, so mustard does open on March 23rd. That's this Thursday and it runs for two weekends, I believe.

Robin Nichol:

Thursday, Friday, Saturday for two weeks.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Perfect. Well hopefully we'll see a good turnout for it. And Robin, thanks so much for your time today.

Robin Nichol:

Thank you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for Season 3, Episode 15 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 and mastodon.social @brennacgray. And in both cases that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. Of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there.

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. Well, the first thing I'm going to do is say that you should get tickets to Mustard. It sounds great. I'm going to go, so that's your first piece of homework. Go do that <laugh>. Also, I really encourage you to spend a minute thinking about what kinds of skills you use every day that you didn't learn in the discipline that you now work in. Does that make sense? Like what kinds of skills came to you from that more circuitous path? And is there an opening for you to talk to your students about that, about what that looks like and about why they might want to, on occasion when it's possible, take the road less traveled, or at least the one that's maybe not mapped out for them. To find something a little bit different that interests them, that might actually make all the difference in the career they're aiming for. You do that. I'm going to go see a play and we'll talk to each other next week. Take care of yourselves and each other. Bye-bye.