

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 where we support the whole university 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 it's Moodle Upgrade Week. Happy Moodle Upgrade Week to all who celebrate. Let's get into it.

Okay, I'm mostly joking, but this is a bit of a PSA at the beginning of today's episode to remind you, if you're listening on Monday, April 24th and you're part of the TRU community, then you can expect some Moodle downtime tomorrow morning, Tuesday, April 25th as we upgrade to Moodle 4.1. It's very exciting times. Listen, we've been prepping for this upgrade for a while, making sure all the support materials are up-to-date and making sure everything's going to work smoothly when we transition on Tuesday. And I think you're going to like Moodle 4.1. It's much slicker, it looks a lot more, I don't know, modern, I guess honestly. It's a cleaner, faster looking experience and a lot of the navigation changes are fantastic. Jamie and Jon have made a great video outlining the changes that you can expect to see. So I'm linking to that in the show notes and I hope you'll go and check it out.

In general, I think what you'll experience when you log into Moodle for the first time after Tuesday is, whoa, this looks super different. Oh, whoa. Everything is basically exactly the same. So there are changes to navigation, things are slicker and there are some bug fixes behind the scenes, but for the most part, once you get in and add an assignment or add a quiz, the functionality within those tools is not any different. It's going to look exactly the same. So once you get in there and actually have to mess around, you should be just fine.

This is a good reminder though, that you're going to lose that little bit of the morning for your grading, so maybe plan for that and don't panic. It's important that we do this now so that as soon as classes are ready to roll on May 1st, we are too and unfortunately grades are due and classes start on the same day. So we didn't have a window in between those two things in order to do the upgrade. This is the next what we call long-term supported version of Moodle. So it's important in terms of security fixes and just keeping up to date with the technology that we make this transition now. So I know you're all very excited to hear about versioning history, et cetera, and you're not at all just caring about whether it's going to work or not. Fingers crossed on that. I'm recording this before the upgrade, so gosh, who knows? But I do think that overall it'll be a better experience for both you and your students once you log into the new Moodle.

Okay, so PSA over, it's not my usual let's have the most possibly controversial conversation on a Monday morning that we can approach to the podcast, but it is important. And for those of you who listen from outside TRU, well, it is a TRU community podcast first and foremost. So sometimes we talk about Moodle upgrades. I don't know what to tell you, it's just part of the deal, but I promise you that our feature length conversation today is something everyone can enjoy. I am joined today by Noah Fischer, who's the Learning Strategist for the School of Nursing, and we're going to have a great conversation about student support and care and what it means to get our students across the finish line when it comes to their coursework. It's a great conversation and I know you're going to enjoy Noah very much. I sure did. So I'm going to let Noah take it from here.

So I am here today with Noah Fischer. Noah, would you introduce yourself to folks? Let them know what you do on campus and where people can find you?

Noah Fischer:

Yes, of course. Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Noah Fischer. My pronouns are he/him, and I am the Learning Strategist on campus for the School of Nursing. And if you're looking for me, you can find me in nursing and population health 342D up on the third floor.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So this is great because I feel like I'm doing a miniseries on Learning Strategists across campus.

Noah Fischer:

Yes.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So we've had lots, we've had the arts Learning Strategist, open learning has a new Learning Strategist role, and then in past times we've had Learning Strategists who are doing work around mental health and suicidal ideation and academic integrity, like the gamut. So I wonder if you might start by giving us a little bottle synopsis of the Learning Strategy role as you understand it in the nursing area.

Noah Fischer:

For sure. Yeah, I mean, this is a new position for nursing. I know that there have been several Learning Strategists pop up all across campus over the last several years, but this is the first time that nursing has had a dedicated Learning Strategist for the faculty. So it's a new position that started back in October, and I have listened to all of the other episodes and I love hearing from all of the other Learning Strategists and Charlene from Arts actually was somebody that I worked fairly closely with, and we kind of had this wonderful opportunity to design these roles as we went and identify needs and gaps in services and then kind of tailor our interventions and approaches to the needs of the students. And in nursing, that has been a lot of one-on-one support, and I've really enjoyed being able to foster a stronger sense of community in nursing by hosting events and starting new initiatives, we've got a new student lounge that was brought to completion, so there's been lots going on over here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, Charlene shared with us an event that you hosted. It was around feeding students, it was sort of like a luncheon. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Noah Fischer:

Totally, yeah. So I mean, I just recently graduated from TRU from the Bachelor of Arts program. I did my major in psychology and I worked at the wellness center, and we worked pretty closely with House Five. And House Five, one of the things that they do every week is they have a soup circle, and sometimes they have different guest speakers come in and they serve soup and bread, and it's kind of just an opportunity for students and staff and faculty to connect, and share, and just make those connections with other people on campus. And so in collaboration with them, we had our own soup event in the nursing building called the Nursing Soup Scoop. And so we did three of those, one each month, one in February and then two in March. And we had some guests at the beginning, and it was just a lovely opportunity for students to meet some of their peers, and we don't always have opportunities to do that and build those deeper connections. So it went really well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's a really nice acknowledgement too, of the importance of meeting basic needs in order to be able to succeed.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. And if you bring free food anywhere, you're always going to get a turnout. So I'm learning quickly on my feet.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Can you tell me a little bit more about some of the gaps that you're identifying or the needs that you're finding as you start to create this role and get a sense of what it is that students are really needing?

Noah Fischer:

Yeah, so I mean this has been super unique for me because as I just mentioned, I don't have a background in nursing, so I did my undergrad in psychology. I'm currently pursuing my master's degree in counseling psychology. So I have taken the approach to this role of really erring on the side of the support and providing resources. I have students come to me for learning support or learning strategies or connecting them with other resources on campus. But I've also really enjoyed the opportunity to connect with students and create a safe space where they feel like they can share, or if something has come up and they need somebody to support them through a decision making process or accessing other resources, it's really been helpful to have somebody that's outside of the power dynamic of you're not being assessed by me. I'm not your professor. I'm not your preceptor for nursing students in particular. So it's been really valuable to be able to be that person in the school of nursing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. Those third spaces are so important to students that somebody who can navigate the physical buildings knows where resources are and they're located. But yeah, it doesn't have that ... Even the best instructor student relationship is still one with a pretty dramatic power dynamic. So I could see how roles like Learning Strategists are really important to students to help have someone who can just navigate those uncertainties with them.

Noah Fischer:

At the beginning of my position here, I was really preoccupied with making sure everybody has to leave with something, everybody needs to leave with resources and access to other resources on campus and all this information. And I've learned as I've gone over the last several months that really it's more about being person-centered about, it's about okay, I'm going to meet with a student. I really just want to make space for them to share, I really want to make space to hear what they're going through and how the role that I occupy can be flexed to help them and support them, I guess.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, this is really interesting to me because there's been this movement since the pandemic, it seems like, to really recognize the important value of care in seeing students succeed through their programs. And it sounds like you take a really care centered approach to the work that you do.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. Yeah. And I think it's had a huge impact on students and faculty and staff alike. I mean, I was still doing my undergrad when we went online and having that constant back and forth between, we're at home now and then we're at home for a year, and then we're at home for a year and a half, and now we're back on campus. And it feels like in a lot of ways, the world has carried on, but there's still lasting impacts from what we all went through that need to be addressed.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I was actually going to ask you about that because I was reading last night on, I guess it was in the Vancouver Sun, they're doing a series of articles that they call the Kids Are Not All Right about return to campus and return to the classroom. And it was in the context of a discussion with public health about the importance of these returns, but also the difficulties that some students are having in returning or for some students for the first time being on campus, depending on what their trajectory was through the campus closure period in particular. I wonder if you've noticed anything about the student compliment now and the kinds of issues that they're having that maybe is different or maybe more acute or maybe we're just more aware of than we might have been pre-pandemic?

Noah Fischer:

I think that what I've noticed above all else, and even through my own experience as a student, is that people's capacities have, I don't even want to use the word decreased, but I think that maybe people are more in touch with their capacities, and what they do and don't feel comfortable taking on, and how much they feel like they can successfully manage. And I think that in a lot of ways that's super positive because we want people to feel at ease and we want people to feel like they're taking on a reasonable amount so that they can still be successful and still get through this program or whatever else they might want to do. But I think it's having those conversations and getting to a place where we can work that into our approach and how we can accommodate people and make them feel comfortable and safe and yeah, competent.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This is so interesting to me because I am really interested in student care and student success and how we achieve that within the confines of particularly a nursing program, where there are very clear learning outcomes that students can't leave without achieving. And I know that nursing students often feel just a tremendous amount of academic stress and desire to achieve. They're in a very high pressure, high demand program. I wonder if particularly you've come from your background as an art student, do you notice a particular strain on the students that you're serving or do you have particular strategies for addressing that with your students?

Noah Fischer:

Yeah, no, and you make a great point. I think that that's one thing coming into this role that was really important that I learned quickly is that nursing students, they're on a very rigorous schedule and everything is very prescriptive. As we're saying, there's specific skills that need to be learned and practice placements and clinical, and it's all very laid out. So I think in some ways it's good because everybody knows what to expect and there's very little room for deviation in terms of what you're going to be doing from semester to semester.

But I think that it's a lot to manage and I think that it can be very overwhelming for students, especially as we were talking about students who maybe are coming to university after having been online for the

last year or two of high school or something. And this is a new experience and it feels very heavy and intense and scary. And so a lot of the work that I do with students can even be stress management skills or connecting them with other resources on campus like counseling services or the wellness center or a lot of work with time management. So there's a lot of breadth for sure. But I am noticing that I enjoy paying special attention to the schedules and the routines of nursing students that need to be addressed to make sure that they're getting the support that they need.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I guess it's no good to them if they can't make it to your soup event because they're in class or something.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. Yes. And that's another thing. I mean, I'm doing everything in my power to make sure that as many people can attend as possible, but just knowing how divided the cohorts are between different clinical days and different instructional days, that's also been a struggle is making stuff available for everyone and wanting everyone to feel included. But if you missed it so far, it's coming back around. So be patient with me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that. I love the idea of recognizing what's limited, like time, ability to achieve getting everybody in one pace is probably really difficult. I wonder, we talk a lot at the faculty support level, we talk a lot about working with faculty to manage student workload and to try to help them achieve a healthy balance, but it can be really difficult. I think often from the faculty perspective, it's difficult because you're one of five courses that a student is taking, you don't know what else is going on in their lives. I wonder, you have your background in the wellness center as well so you're probably really well versed in student life balance and how that's being achieved. What kinds of supports are in place do you find for students and are they accessing those supports?

Noah Fischer:

I think that for sure, it depends on the student and what they feel comfortable doing. I think at TRU we have access to a lot of great resources and supports. As I mentioned, the wellness center and counseling services, and recently TRU purchased a license for virtual and phone counseling to bridge the gap between the capacity of the center on campus here and students need to access those services immediately. So I think that we are doing a good job. I think that there are things available for people to access, but I think TRU is also growing at a very fast pace.

And now we're in a place where maybe these mental health difficulties were always present, but we are moving towards a place where we're more comfortable having conversations about them and bringing them to light as we should be because these are important dimensions of people's identities and lives. And this isn't something we can just put on the back burner and forget about because we're going to school. So I think that there is work to be done and this being a new role, I'm hoping that over the course of the next year, I'm going to be able to shape it into something that might be able to help bridge that gap, especially while we catch up to the growth that we're experiencing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, that bridges really nicely into my next question for you, which is you're in this great opportunity to shape a role to decide what it's going to be focused on and what the central concerns are going to be. I

wonder if you might say a little bit about your plans for the next year and where you hope to see this role go?

Noah Fischer:

I've really enjoyed the opportunity to be able to shape the role. I mean with my background in counseling, I really felt like this was an appropriate role for me when I started, but now having been in it for a few months, I can see that there is the need for any person in this role to be able to support students. So I think coming back in September, some of my goals would be to definitely host more workshops because I think everybody coming in fresh in September is going to be a lot more willing to participate and hopefully we can continue to build that sense of community.

This past year I offered mental health first aid. Like I said, we did the Soup Scoop. So I'm definitely hoping to bring those back and kind of establish a sense of consistency in the nursing department. And just continuing to reach out to students and really adapt my approach to what they need. I really am passionate about consulting with them instead of developing stuff first and testing it and then having it and all work. I would rather just have those important conversations and identify the needs beforehand.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That makes a lot of sense and it sounds very, very student driven and very flexible so that you can respond to needs.

Noah Fischer:

And I think having had my own student experience so recently, I feel very comfortable in that space of being able to, yes, now I'm an employee and I have a different perspective and a different angle, but I recently just had that experience myself. Not necessarily in nursing, but I mean many of the struggles are obviously similar and consistent across different faculties. So yeah, I'm hoping to bring that to the position as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I think that's so important. I say this as somebody who I started teaching in my, well I guess my mid 20s. It's amazing how quickly you lose that perspective on what's ... Because the student population changes. I like to think of myself as extremely hip and with it, but I was not a student during COVID, and I don't have that experience in the way that I would have if I was closer to it. So I totally take what you're saying is that it's like a peer plus kind of relationship.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. And I think even with students coming to see me having that, I'm going to use the word energy because that to me is what it is. Having that energy and that environment set up where people feel comfortable and feel like they can relate to you really helps that process of even encouraging them to open up and share and help you identify how you can help them, if that makes sense.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Totally makes sense. I'm going to get you to think on the macro level a little bit here with my next question. The listenership for this show is primarily faculty and staff, and I wonder if there's something you want the community to know about the Learning Strategist role more generally? I find this is a new role in a lot of places. I think people were really used to Learning Strategists who lived in the faculty of

student development, but these Learning Strategists kind of proliferating across campus is really new. So yeah, if you could speak to the community about maybe about the value of the Learning Strategist role as a whole, is there something you'd want to share with the community about that?

Noah Fischer:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think above all else, what I would want everybody to know is this is such a beautifully collaborative role and if you are fortunate to have a Learning Strategist in your faculty or your department, I would encourage you to reach out to them. I, from the beginning have been going across campus and going to different departments and meeting new people and making connections and hosting events with people. But I'm here to help and support students and answer questions. And even if faculty want to reach out and talk about the role and how it can benefit them and how they can use it to support their students, I think I really just want there to be an open channel of communication. So often today there's this perspective that I'm in my role and you're in your role and we both have our sets of responsibilities and that is true, but I would also just encourage people to reach out and let's work on something together. Or if you have an idea about something that might really be helpful to benefit your students and support them, then reach out and get that conversation going and let's make something.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Is there any kind of misunderstanding about your role that you bump into or any kind of clarification you'd want to offer about what Learning Strategists do or do you feel like we're starting to get good traction on what it is Learning Strategists do and are for?

Noah Fischer:

What I have noticed is that because the roles are so new that across different faculties how each person that occupies those roles, how they interpret it is different. So I think that Charlene and I spoke quite a bit and we understood the role in similar ways, but there are other Learning Strategists that are in specific departments, and so their roles are more particular to those departments, which is totally understandable and valid. So I think the misconception that I would probably address is this is a jack of all trades role and for me that is what I love about it because it has me doing different stuff every day, supporting different students, and just kind of adapting my approach to meet the needs of what's coming into my office. But as we figure that out, I think that the core of each of these roles across campus is going to be student support. So if there's any ever misunderstanding about that, our priority is always going to be taking care of the students and making sure that they're comfortable and good and supported.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

If we maybe stick on the student support angle, is there something you think we are missing at TRU or is in development? Is there a gap that you've identified since entering this role? Or I guess even mean you can reflect on your time as a student too. I think that on balance, this is a university that cares very much about its students, but no institution is perfect and there's always gaps. I wonder if there's something that you've identified as sort of the next thing that you think we need to be prioritizing in terms of student support?

Noah Fischer:

For sure. Well, I mean even if I'm speaking to specifically the nursing department, I think that a lot of students that come to me specifically for course content based support, that's less so in my wheelhouse as I'm sure it is for most Learning Strategists because you're not always going to have the same qualifications as the faculty or the department that you're working in. Much like me, I do not have a degree in nursing. So I think that making those opportunities available for further academic based support is a gap that I've noticed that I'm actively working on bridging. For example, one of the most challenging courses in nursing is anatomy and physiology, and that's a really difficult course that a lot of students struggle with, and a lot of happened over COVID with making resources available. But in the fall we're going to be bringing back supplemental learning sessions for that course. So that that's kind of been my focus now, especially with when I can't be the person to provide that support, identifying what steps we can take to make it available regardless. So for sure that that's been a priority.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, I love that in particular because it really echoes what you were saying previously about the peer or peer plus or that sort of energy of people who are in the trenches or recently there. I mean, that's what supplemental learning really offers for a lot of students is just someone who kind of gets it.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. And that cannot be understated. The value of being able to connect with a person, especially when you're vulnerable and need support and knowing that they get it, I think that that makes a huge difference for students, whether it be academic support or personal support or anything of the like.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to chat today. And yeah, I'm looking forward to continuing to talk to Learning Strategists because you're right. When you say it's different across campus, it really is. It's kind of like this catchall term for specific student support needs being targeted across campus and it's just been so fascinating to talk to all of you about the variety of your roles.

Noah Fischer:

Totally. And yeah, hopefully as time goes on, we'll continue to all do events and continue to make opportunities to collaborate and work together and it will be great.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Awesome. Thanks so much for your time today, Noah.

Noah Fischer:

Thank you for having me. Have a good one.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season 3, episode 19 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, gosh, for the time being, but this whole thing with the CBC getting like labeled and stuff, I don't know if I'm on there for a long. But anyway, I'm on Twitter at Brenna C Gray, and in both cases that's Gray with an A. By the way, I also have that same handle on mastodon.social, and I'm sort of parked on it on both Post and Spoutible, but I don't really like either of

those. 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. As you finalize your grades and start to put this semester in the rear view, I know what you're thinking. You're going to be like, Brenna, are you going to tell studio reflective practice again? No, although you should. This is a good time for reflective practice, but I tell you that a lot, so I'm going to not tell you about it again. And then you're probably like, oh, Brenna's just going to tell us to rest, and I'm not, although it is important and you should. So yes, do your reflective practice and do your rest, but the thing I really want to talk to you about this week is to take some time to plan your next few months.

Now, for some of you who are teaching through the summer, you're like, yeah, Brenna, I'm going to be in the classroom. Thank you. And many of you who are working normal hours through the summer, you're like, yeah, I need to be at my desk. Thanks, Brenna. But for those who have a bit of flexibility coming up in the next few months, I want to put in a plug for block time planning, especially if you have a lot of writing to do or a lot of major projects on the horizon. I really struggle with finding the time in and amongst all the meetings that happen at this time of year to get the big stuff done. I'm a big fan of using my calendar to block out specific time to focus on writing or project work.

This takes on different forms for different people, and I'm not going to try to tell you that I know what works best for you. I'm not even sure I know what works best for me, but I am going to say that the end of April is often a really good time to look ahead to the next four months regardless of what your day-to-day is for those four months, and start to think about where your project time is going to come and actually put it in your calendar and tell people you can't take meetings then. And trust me, I know exactly how hard that is. I fail at it on almost a weekly basis. But this is a good time to re-up that energy.

It's also a good time, I know I said I wasn't going to tell you to rest, and I'm not going to tell you to rest, although you should rest, but I am going to tell you to plan for rest. Even if you're teaching this summer, even if you're still working your full-time job this summer, really, really think about planning where the rest is going to come because you know I'm right. September's going to hit you like a freight train and you want to be ready for it. And ready for it does mean prep, but ready for it also means taking on all those other things like writing and project work and rest that you need to make sure you have a successful September. I know it should be illegal to talk about September in April. I do understand that. But that's what I'm leaving you with today. So you think about that. I will go and revise my own block time schedule and I'll see you next time. Until then, take care of yourselves and each other and we'll talk real soon. Bye-bye.