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. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemcte 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 tool selection. I know that sounds really, really boring. I'm going to try to make it not boring in about five minutes. Let's get into it.

Okay, so I'm thinking about tool selection because I'm thinking a lot about AI. And there's this real appetite desire right now for us to find an AI detector, something that's going to solve our AI problems and it's kind of impossible to do. Independent testing of most AI tools is poor, shows a lot of false positivities. I feel like it's a huge risk issue for universities to jump into bed with these kinds of tools and then use them in academic integrity contexts, for example, when we don't know if the information that they're determining is reliable. And then there's also the idea of you're putting student work through this tool and you don't know where the data goes. None of these things have been through a privacy impact assessment. Tool selection is really hard. It's always been really hard.

In 2020, when I first got here to TRU, I wrote this essay for the digital detox called Questions to Ask Before Giving Up, which by the way, I borrow that from the title of a phenomenal poem about an anti-capitalist notion of self-care, I'll call it. I'll link to it in the show notes. It's a beautiful, beautiful poem. But in that essay for the Digital Detox, I try to narrow down the questions that we can ask to what does this tool improve or enhance? And who is profiting from this tool, and how? But even then, those seem really straightforward questions. And I'll link to that essay as well in the show notes in case you're curious about how I tease those apart. But even that question of, what does this tool improve or enhance? That question is hard to answer because it's often hard to extricate efficiency, finding ways to do our labour more effectively, teasing that apart from the notion of actual improvements to student learning, which are hard to measure in and of themselves, and then this question of who profits from a tool, and how.

Finding out where the money goes with EdTech is really, really hard. It's one of my big suspicions with EdTech, Corporate EdTech as a concept, because particularly in Canada, the money that we're investing in these companies is almost entirely public money. And I don't think we have a good explanation for where that money is going. And that's the kind of thing I find distressing, personally. I've been thinking about all this a lot. And it comes down to when we look at AI and we look at how we select a tool, whether it's the actual AI tool that we're using or a detector or whatever, the truth is that I don't think we have enough information to make a choice. We're getting pushed in to some of these choices because of some other choices we've made. So, my example of that is that we're already in bed with Microsoft. Microsoft deciding to embed ChatGPT and its offerings, that's a choice we didn't get to make. Those are questions we didn't get to ask.

I think that where we do have choice, we need to be willing sometimes to say, "I'm not actually going to select a tool because I don't have enough information." And that's a hard place to be because indecision often feels like, I don't know, some kind of failure. But I think the principled resistance is actually a really important part of engaging with EdTech, ethically. We're going to be doing a bunch of AI sessions coming up and I will link to them in the show notes. But I guess all this is to say, if you're not sure you want to jump in with AI yet, number one, you're not alone. And number two, principal resistance is always an option. I don't know, today felt like a good day to give you permission to opt out. So, that's what I'm doing.

I'm really excited about the conversation today with Twyla Exner and Robin Westland. They've done some phenomenally interesting pedagogical work, connecting with community and giving students authentic learning experiences. I think you're going to really enjoy this interview. So less of me, more of them. I'm going to let Robin and Twyla take it from here. I am here today with Twyla and Robin who are here to talk about a really interesting partnership with the Kamloops Food Policy Council. But before we get into that, I'll ask you each to introduce yourselves. Maybe we'll start with you, Twyla?

Twyla Exner:

Sure. Hi. Yes, my name is Twyla Exner, and I am an assistant teaching professor in the Department of Communication and Visual Arts. I am new to TRU this year, I started in August of 2022. And it's been really exciting to be part of this community and to get to try interesting and innovative projects like the one that Robin and I will share with you today.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Awesome. And Robin?

Robin Westland:

My name is Robin Westland. I'm an assistant teaching professor of department of Geography and Environmental Studies. I am also new to TRU, I joined in July 2022 and my focus is on cultural geographies and feminist geographies. And I'm really passionate about interdisciplinarity, which is why this project also is just a really exciting opportunity.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. I'm going to ask you to give me a synopsis of the work you're doing with the Kamloops Food Policy Council, and then I'm hoping we can rewind a little bit and talk about the genesis of it because you both flew out of the gate after arriving here with this really fantastic and interesting project. But either one of you can maybe start us off describing what it is that you are doing with the Food Policy Council.

Twyla Exner:

Robin and I are working with the Kamloops Food Policy Council with two classes that we are running independently, but that we have collaborated on in order to do interesting projects with the Kamloops Food Policy Council. Each of our classes had a focus, they were very different focuses, but both really interested in engaging with the community in some way. The research office here on campus referred us to the Kamloops Food Policy Council, made the introduction and helped us build that relationship.

And we worked with the Food Policy Council to learn about their kind of goals and objectives, the projects that they do. We met their staff, our class met with staff members of the Kamloops Policy Council. We each kind of learned about our interests and our disciplines and where there were opportunities for crossover and exploration. And then, our students developed independent or group projects in response to the Kamloops Food Policy Council, their policies, their programs, their sort of vision. And those projects developed in consultation with community and kind of manifested in various visual methods, which were then exhibited at the Kamloops Food Policy Council throughout the month of April.

Robin Westland:

Yeah, I think we are really fortunate to connect with the Kamloops Food Policy Council. The team that they have there is full of people or staff that also have either a junkie background and or visual arts background. And they're very passionate about creative means of getting their message across and building community. And when they have their monthly potlucks, they'll often incorporate a creative lens. And so geography, which is very place-based, being able to work with a place-based organization around food policies and changes at the local level and then to incorporate the visual art component.

There was just a lot of resonance with what the Kamloops Food Policy Council was already doing and it became a sort of perfect meeting point for Twyla's and I two courses with lots of overlap in our interest and also the needs of the community partner, which was a very important and interesting opportunity for us all. I think.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love this. I love opportunities for students to get out into the world and see how subject matter interacts with real life and solving actual problems and helping people. I think it's a real strength of TRU. It's a real strength of hopefully small universities generally. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the jumping off point for this project. What led you to seek out a partnership like this? What led you to bring your classes together in this way? There's so much that you're both doing that's really fairly innovative in terms of both the pedagogy and kind of the outreach component. I wonder if you could speak to either or both parts of that.

Robin Westland:

And so, sort of an interesting from a pedagogical perspective and feminist geography, it's all about a process and focusing on process over outcomes. So, the learning that the students in my course, which is called Empowering Geographies, their learning was the process of creation. They didn't have firm guidelines for what they had to produce or what my expectations were. It was about trusting their intuition and trusting the process of engaging with diverse perspectives and the community's needs.

And in a way, the story of how it came together kind of mirrors that going with the flow or following your nose method of learning and engaging with the world. Because Twyla and I met at the new faculty orientation, we were both new to Kamloops and both new to TRU and both of us came from outside of the academic world. We both have had our entire careers up until this point doing community engaged work, working in larger, different styles of institutions. So, we felt residents between the two of us and became friends and each had this interest in cross-disciplinarity and doing interesting engaged projects. So, we just sort of trusted that and let things manifest from that place.

Twyla Exner:

We felt that we both had research interests that were really similar and we were excited to bring those research interests into our courses and to develop this partnership that was built around this idea of community engagement. So similar to Robin, I was given a special topics course for the winter semester. I could choose kind of anything that I wanted to explore through that course. And I developed a course called Making Art with Community. In my previous life, before coming to TRU, I worked as a director of public programs at Two Rivers Gallery, which is a public art gallery located in Prince George, BC. And my job was community engagement, so really welcoming people into the art gallery, making that experience accessible, meaningful, engaged for the public and visitors. And I wanted to bring those experiences that I had into the classroom. So, making art with community focuses on different methods of community engaged art creation.

So, whether that is viewing that engagement as the art itself, meaning that kind of the interactions and the experiences that grow out of the act of making are in fact the art. Or it could be more of a kind of process based approach that results in some sort of product, so that you're inviting others into the art making process in some way or another.

This course focused on really thinking about how to invite community into the creative process, how to make art with community, whether it's process based or product based, how we engage with community, how we make it meaningful for them. So, as opposed to just saying, "Here's a square, please paint it blue." Rather kind of inviting the community into that process and really having a direction over how the art is conceptualized and made. So, students focused on really thinking about those processes and those ideas and how to create meaning through engagement.

It's a really different approach to a lot of art making because a lot of learning in visual art really focuses on the artist as the kind of soul creator. This is not always true, but much of our learning is about developing skills, connecting those skills to ideas in theory, expressing your own vision of the world in art making. And this course really wanted to look at how we welcome others into that process, how we can help them to visualize, express themselves and create as a community as opposed to an individual for a community. You can see how with Robin's explanation of exploring feminist geographies and ways of interacting with community, that there were so many overlaps for us to explore within our two classes.

Robin Westland:

If I may add to that also, we could say it was really interesting with the difference of the backgrounds of our students. My students were probably about 60% of them, 70% of them were from a science based background because geography is this mix of science and sort of humanities or social science, the human geographical piece. And in that world having very sort of structured outcomes or students who want to get a particular grade and they're used to having very clear rubrics or it is very outcome focused. Students do what they need to do and similarly but in a different way with Twyla's students, it's generally very individual. So, removing those structures, particularly engaging with Twyla's class and speaking with Twyla and the sort of comfort with creating and trying things and not everything comes together and being okay with something that... The outcome being different than what you visioned it.

That's something that several Twyla's students to us about as being part of what they as a visual artist. But that's not something that stressed quote, unquote failing or not achieving what you set out to achieve, that has really different repercussion in the science world. So, it was a bit of a hurdle for my students to let go of those generally imposed structures and to just again, trust that process. But the outcomes, once they all gave Ian, they really honored the process of creation and found their own voices empowered by that, allowing themselves to sort of guide their own learning.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm fascinated to hear about the different experiences of the two groups of students because I was thinking as I was prepping for today, I think both geography and visual arts in the university setting perhaps suffer. Perhaps that's too strong word, but they perhaps suffer from the perceptions of everyone else. My knowledge of art is and geography are both what I learned in high school, which is an awful lot of, I colored in some maps for sure, and I definitely learned about rock formations and in art I tried to avoid having to actually hand anything in. Those are my frames of reference. And so, it's interesting to think about these two probably relatively misunderstood fields within the university that are also probably misunderstood to each other in terms of how the students approach the work. So

Robin, that's a really interesting observation about what it means to fail or to not achieve or to have the outcome be different than expected for these two groups of students.

Robin Westland:

This whole experience, the students walked away. Both of our sets of students took such a deeper sort of learning away from these courses that they weren't expecting, but several of them have talked about how they feel more ready for the world outside of academia now, they feel like they can see the applicability of the skills that they learn in our two, as you mentioned, often misunderstood fields. And in geographies, often it's not really quite science, it's not quite social science, it's not quite humanities and people always associate it with maps and geography students can't always see the connections to the world outside. But this experience really let them see the applicability of their interdisciplinary training.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, and in this moment, I'm doing a lot of prep about talking to people about artificial intelligence and assessment and what the changing landscape might look like. And I think we might be in this moment where folks are really grasping the relevance of what we call authentic assessment. And that's really what you guys are describing here. This is an extremely authentic assessment where students are going in and connecting with actual people and talking about real life problems and how they can approach them. I suspect we're going to see an increasing appetite among faculty to start to explore these kinds of projects. I wonder if you might talk to us a little bit about how you connected with the Kamloops Food Policy Council, what that relationship looked like and what it took to get this assignment, this relationship, these classes sort of to prime time? If you will.

Twyla Exner:

Robin and I connected first with the research office here on campus as very kind of green, newly hired professors in our first semester of teaching who knew we were having these special topics courses coming and we knew we wanted to work together. We went to the research office and we're like, "Hey, we've got this crazy idea. What are you thinking? Can you help us find a community partner?" They supported us in doing so, which was really greatly appreciated. A lot of community work. It really relies on building relationships and building trust in advance of undergoing that community work. Since Robin and I are both new to Kamloops, both new to TRU, we didn't have those community connections that we felt we really needed in order to take on this work authentically. And so, the research office was able to connect us with organization that TRU already had a relationship with.

There's a history of research projects with TRU and the Kamloops Food Policy Council. So, really relying on our TRU community for that connection was helpful and important for us. After meeting with the research office, we were introduced to some of the folks at the Kamloops Food Policy Council. We had a few meetings with them, took some time to get to know one another and then sort of started planning what our courses would look like in rather a bit of a panic, trying to prepare a course and prepare an ethics application and do all of the things while also both being new professors.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm interjecting here just because I'm remembering my first year of full-time teaching. I used to go teach all day and then I would come home and I would fall asleep on the couch and at some time around dinnertime, my husband would wake me up and put food in me and roll me into bed because just teaching and just wrapping my head around a new institution and all its parameters and teaching full-

time and what a full-time teaching load feels like in a teaching stream role, my brain was like, "This is what we are capable of." So, I'm just thinking about this task you guys are undertaking. And I'm absolutely blown away.

Robin Westland:

In retrospect, it probably wasn't an ideal decision to do this in our first year. That said, I think that it made our first year really dynamic and sort of set a course, I can't speak for Twyla, but set a course for the importance of doing more of this in classes going forward because the students took so much out it. But absolutely, it took at least three times the amount of work, a million times the emotional labor because walking the students through uncertainty and trying something different, that took a lot of one-on-one meetings and it was a huge task. But I think both Twyla and I agree that it was worth it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm glad you raised that though, both the fact that it was worth it and the fact that there was a huge cost. And I wasn't planning on asking you guys this and you can skip it if you don't want to answer, but I'm thinking now because I work on the faculty support side of the house. And so, I'm listening to this, this is the ideal of what we want faculty to be thinking about when it comes to assessment practice and meets the students and really assessing where the learning is happening and this is all great. Are there supports going through this process that you wish you had? I know you've had the support of the research office and getting things off the ground, but are there places where you found a gap in supports or something that you wished was there that maybe we could work towards?

Twyla Exner:

Robin and I actually have a whole document of recommendations that we've been working on. We have been keeping track of this and we will be providing that information to the research office. And we are also going to be participating in a lunch and learn in the fall. So, if people listen to this and they want to ask us more questions, hopefully they can come and hang out with us then, or just email us because we're both approachable. But one of our big challenges in working together on this is that we couldn't get our classes placed at the same time. So, we wanted to do a collaboration, but our classes weren't at the same time. Now, we recognize that part of that is the last minute kind of nature of what we were trying to achieve and that with a year or two lead in that that might be possible, that we deem as absolutely necessary moving forward.

Another challenge that we had was aligning our class times with times that were good for the Kamloops Food Policy Council. One of the really wonderful things that the Kamloops Food Policy does, and I would encourage everyone who's listening to go out and take part in one of their community potlucks. Everyone is welcome, they have creative activities you can share in food and community, you can discuss issues around food security, food scarcity, and other policies that they're engaged with. And also, just make new friends and be in a really nice space that they occur at The Stir which is located on the North Shore. Our students who were able to attend these potlucks, they got to know the community more than the students who couldn't attend. Of course, we didn't make it mandatory to attend an evening potluck. Sometimes some students have jobs, some students have families schedules that just don't allow for that, but the ones who could go did get more out of those interactions.

And so, being able to align our class time also so that they could match up with the potlucks for example, would be super helpful. Another thing that would be helpful for us in this particular situation would be even to offer our courses onsite at the Kamloops Policy location, so that our students could see the community gardens really be in them, observe the stir makers, like the chefs who use the stir

space and how they interact with it. Really to be better integrated with that community partner. Those things we see as having a lot of potential for transformation of the course content, really kind of hitting deeper for all students as opposed to those who could make it. Of great importance would be the opportunity for us both to be able to teach our courses a second, third, fourth, fifth time. As professors, we all know the first time we teach something, we are still navigating that ourselves.

And for us especially, we were learning to work with each other, we were learning each other's course content, we were learning the unique challenges that each of our classes faced in being asked to do this work. We were learning about our students' reactions to doing this kind of work, which was really outside of their experiences so far in university, we were learning about our community partner. Having the opportunity to teach these again and be assured that we could teach them again would be really helpful in allowing us to deepen those community relationships to extend the impact of the course for our students and to engage in research around what it means to really make and explore and build things together as an academic institution in partnership with a nonprofit community group.

Robin Westland:

I think one of this comes up in, when we talk about community based action research or different community engaged research just in the university context in general, even if you are not working with the classroom and doing community engaged research as a professor, the challenge between the timelines of community and the timelines at the institution is a hurdle no matter what the context of that community engaged research.

So for example, to build a meaningful relationship with a community partner takes time, to navigate the needs of what that community partner, what the needs are for that community partner. And how as academics, if you're doing community based action research and want to support to empower that community partner to build the questions takes time. But when we're talking about doing that kind of work in a classroom setting, you only have three months. And if you want to do actual research with humans contributing quote, unquote data, which is very broad. There's all sorts of different modalities of what data can mean in order to gather data and actually do research, you have to go through the research ethics process. And that's extremely important. It's extremely valuable. It's extremely necessary in order to do research in ethical way and make sure that you're not behaving in any way that might perpetuate harm, particularly if you're working with a marginalized community partner. In this case, we weren't really, which was one of the benefits of the Kamloops Food Policy Council, but we still had to go through that research ethics process.

And in order to do so, we had to design what the students were able to do in a way that actually we wanted to give them as much freedom as possible, but we actually couldn't allow certain things and we couldn't allow our students to engage with children, for example. We couldn't go down an interview format, not cause there's anything necessarily inherently wrong with that, but we just simply didn't have time to work with the community, create research questions, create, let's say interview questions, then submit research ethics to do that with the students in the timelines of the ethics process is just not feasible.

So then, if we're going to do this again, we've got a research assistant this summer working with us to sort of streamline how we can have a bit more structure next time around, largely in order to get the research ethics in ahead of time, which will make it easier to do community-based research, but it limits the creativity of the students and means that there's already a bit of a set research agenda going in, which is very different from the very exploratory experience that our students just had. It's a bit of you gain something and you lose something.

And I think that that's not something that TRU has, I can't say this for sure, but the experience is the community engaged research at the undergraduate level and the research ethics process are not speaking together well yet, which limits the potential for some of this sort of undergraduates embedded in community and research, which is what TRU wants [inaudible 00:27:57], the processes don't support it adequately yet.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This is super interesting and I'm really thinking right now about how the creativity and openness that sounds like the students gain so much out of is in many ways at odd with how institutions handle risk, which is ultimately what an ethics process is at least in part doing. But also things like moving a class out into the community like, what does that look like? We're just about at the end of our time together, even though I am realizing now I could talk to you guys about this all day, but maybe I'll invite you to share any last thoughts, particularly this is teaching a learning podcast, love to bring new ideas to the community that they can then run with. So, I guess maybe what I'm inviting from you is thoughts that you would share with other faculty who might be thinking about taking a more collaborative community approach to the classroom. What thought might you want to leave them with?

Robin Westland:

What we've heard from the research office is that there's a lot of faculty that are interested in doing this type of work, but once you start looking at what it might look like, you realize that one course is the equivalent of three courses with a few amount of time, community meetings, Twyla and I meeting Kamloops Food Policy Council, they're meeting with each other and we had research coaches and those were meetings and the time commitment is so much larger, but the outcomes for students I think are worth it. And the outcomes as far as building a sense of community across university and different disciplines as well as the actual wider Kamloops community, I think is worth it. My advice would be to go for it, but to recognize going in that the time commitment is going to be as much larger as you fear. It'll manifest that way.

Twyla Exner:

Well, since Robin touched on that, I'll go in a different direction. I would say my number one recommendation is just to not have any sort of expectations about what is going to come out of the course. I know we did touch on this a little bit earlier. My experience of this is that we really had to be ready to change directions, to plan, to be flexible with our students, to be flexible with the community partner and to really think about what is a community and what are our resources both on and off campus. For example, I had a number of students who wanted to do projects where the community was involved in the making of them. For example, one group of students built pollinator bee boxes, which will soon, I hope, be installed at Butler Urban Farms. And they wanted to invite the community to assemble and decorate these bee boxes, but coordinating the student's schedules with the schedule of the stir and the Kamloops Food Policy Council's staff time just couldn't seem to make it work.

And so we thought, "Okay, how else can we do this and still involve community?" And so we're like, "Of course, TRU itself is a community as well." And instead the workshop was hosted at the Makerspace and we were able to access TRU students, staff or faculty to come in and create these boxes, which then went over to Butler Urban Farms. So, really kind of thinking about what is maybe the ideal outcome for a project and then having to revise that sometimes up to 10 times really just to kind of access the resources and make sure that the project can be successful in whatever way possible. So, there was a lot of pivoting that happened throughout the course and flexibility both on Robins, myself, part Kamloops

Food Policy Council's part, TRU community part, and for our students who sometimes got really overwhelmed with that process of like, "Okay, that's not going to work, now what?"

Which really is what community work is. It was a very authentic learning experience in that way. But if you have expectations for yourself or if your students have really set expectations, it's really challenging. I said to my class many times, I'm aware that Robin did too. Like, "You are on a journey. We are all on this journey together. We don't know exactly what's going to happen. You're going to have to live with some uncertainty, but it's going to be great." So, that was the most exciting and frightening part of a course like this.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, you make it sound both awesome and somewhat terrifying, but I really appreciate the honesty and also just coming to share this experience because I do think this is a direction that the more assessment should go in. And so, as an institution we need to think through what the supports, including things like time have to look like if we really do value this kind of engaged work. I really appreciate you coming and chatting and being honest, and I hope to attend your lunch and learn in the fall and hear more. Thank you so much for your time today, both of you.

Robin Westland:

Thank you very much Brenna.

Twyla Exner:

Thank you so much Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So, that is it for season three, episode 22 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 @Brennacgray. And in both cases, that's Gray with and 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 or maybe just a tiny teaching encouragement. And that is, I wonder if Twyla and Robin have inspired you a little bit, whether it's to think about learning in community, think about authentic assessment, think about ways to engage your learners in the kind of project-based community work that Robin and Twyla are talking about. What would that look like in your discipline? I'd love to hear your thoughts and ideas and remember that while we were really frank about some of the missing supports, you can always come and talk to faculty support folks about your plans and we can at least help you connect with the right resources.

I think there's so much potential for fascinating work in this city and the integration between the university and the city makes it so that yeah, we're really present and we're really here. And I think that's something to be really embraced and celebrated. So if you've got ideas, if there's any way I can help, I'd love to. But also reach out to your pals at CELT, the research office, find the folks who can help you achieve what you want to achieve. And well, I look forward to hearing about it. Maybe let me know, come on the show, we'll have a conversation. In the meantime, take care of yourselves and each other and we'll talk real soon. Bye-bye.