Hi and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and learning and pivoting to digital for the whole TRU Community. I'm your host, Brenna Clarke Gray, Coordinator of Educational Technologies. And this podcast is a project of your friends at Learning Technology and Innovation; we're housed over in Open Learning, but we support the campus community.

I record this podcast Tk'emlups te Secwepemc territory within the unceded traditional lands of Secwepemcúl'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you.

Welcome to our first episode of You Got This! The intention of our podcast is to provide programming and support and engagement through this difficult fall semester. We've had a great time providing Summer Camp workshops and other really exciting, fun programming all summer long. But we recognize that as the workload goes up for everyone, including us, our ability to offer programming -- and your ability to attend programming -- is probably limited. So instead, we're putting together this podcast to keep engaged and connected with all of you, to keep talking about really important issues to deal with digital pedagogy, to keep celebrating all the great work that you're doing across campus. Every week will bring you some just-in-time advice about issues that you're dealing with as the semester unfolds. And we'll also bring you a conversation with a member of the campus community, someone who's doing something really interesting, and also the members of our team, so you can get to know us a little better.

So this week's theme is that crucial first week and I guess we better jump right into it.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know when I tell you that the first week of classes is critical to setting the tone and establishing the environment that you want for your learners all term long. I know you know that, but sometimes when we move into the online space, it can be kind of daunting to think about how we set up a learning environment that means something to us. So I want to give you five tips, five things you can do in the first week of classes to really orient students to the learning environment and establish the kind of tone you want to have going forward.

Okay, so number one, you really want to survey students and see if you can get a sense of when or how they'll be accessing your course materials and what, if any, barriers they're managing, especially if those barriers are different than what they're typically used to encountering. This may be things like internet connection or a shared devices among family members or newfound caregiving responsibilities. We're going to include a link in the show notes to some resources for how to set up those surveys with some sample questions and some ideas.

Number two, you want to introduce yourself and humanize yourself. It's very easy in an online space to forget that we're people, right? I mean, just read Twitter. So I don't want you to do anything more than what you're comfortable with, but, you know, posting a picture of your pet or a picture of where it is you sit when you do your marking, or an introductory video where you tell them a really bad joke. All great ways to remind your

students that you're a human being and that you're going to extend grace to them. And that you'll hope that they will extend grace to you.

Along the same lines: number three, make sure you're making space for students to introduce themselves to you and to each other. So you can invite them to be personal with pet photos or maybe a favourite music video. You don't need to push them to be confessional or vulnerable so early in your course. But give them a chance to show as much of their personality as they would like to. Discussion forums are great for this. You can also invite students to make introductory videos. And you can use the tools within the learning management system to set up a space that will become a social space for students.

Number four, while we're thinking about space, you really want to build some kind of orientation to your space. Even if you're using Moodle and you feel like everyone's using Moodle. Students know how to use Moodle. That's true. But everybody is using it a little bit differently, right? Maybe you're using a different format. Some disciplines use different themes. It's a good idea to show students how you expect them to move through your course space. This is doubly true if you're working outside the learning management system. Great opportunity here for screen casting. Just record yourself moving through the Moodle space and, or the virtual learning environment, and explaining to students how you expect them to engage with the course material. Don't make assumptions about what digital natives do or do not know. Just because many people now use digital spaces in their personal lives, it doesn't mean they have a good understanding of how to learn in those spaces. So take the time to teach them what they need to know.

And then finally, number five, consider making a group charter for the online learning experience. This is new. Everyone, you know, we have 20 years, more than 20 years of really great research on teaching and learning online. But that's all research on people who chose to learn online, right? Not people who are forced into it in the middle of a global pandemic, which I don't know about you but causes me no end of stress day-to-day. Consider a group charter where you talk to students really openly about how they expect to be treated in the online space, and how they intend to treat each other. What makes a good learning experience? What experiences have they had that have been not-so-good? How might we avoid that? I think this is especially important rolling into this fall because those remote emergency teaching experiences we had in the spring are gonna be colouring the experience for a lot of students. It's worth asking them what they didn't like about March and April and wondering how we might do better in September and October.

So those are five ways to think about your first week that centre care and that establish the tone you want to have going forward so that you can have the best semester possible under the circumstances. At this point, I'm going to segue to the interview portion of our show. And I'm going to get better at this every week. It will be a little bit less awkward. That's my goal.

Brenna: Okay, so for today's conversation, I'm here with Brian Lamb, Director of Innovation. Brian do you want to introduce yourself in case there's someone who doesn't know who you are, what you do?

Brian: That's hard to believe, but yeah. Again, my name's Brian Lamb. My job title is Director of Learning Technology and Innovation, and I'm on the same team as Brenna. Our group kinda has a bit of a dual relationship. We serve both our quote unquote, campus courses and we also do production for online and distance Open Learning courses.

Brenna: Yeah, I was actually going to start by asking you to talk about the team a little bit. I think people don't necessarily know where we're housed or sort of what the structure is when they when they go looking for Moodle Support or IT support or teaching and learning support, there's sort of all these different directions that they go.

Brian: Yeah.

Brenna: Could you talk a little bit about particularly like the Moodle Support and learning technology aspect of things.

Brian: Sure thing. So the team itself is anywhere between 20 to 25 people, depending where we are in the cycle, auxiliaries, sometimes co-op students, things like that. And I would say three quarters, maybe even more of that stuff is quote unquote, dedicated to the Open Learning side. So they receive course materials from instructional designers and then they actually really start building those things into fairly feature-rich, structured online courses, usually in Moodle. A few years ago we started to take on responsibility for the quote unquote campus side, which obviously as we record, this doesn't mean what it used to mean. These courses obviously tend to be cohort base. They will be starting in September. They usually on the semester system. Part of programs that are fairly traditionally structured like any other university in Canada. And our role, because we're not staffed to do the same kinda production work -- like in Open Learning, we get the raw materials essentially in Word documents and images and PowerPoint files, we then pretty much shape those into courses -- we're not staffed to be able to do that.

Now, I mean, really depending how you count it, we have two to four people that are focused on that side, which in terms of numbers of instructors and learners is more than half the activity at the university. So, I mean, we want to be helpful and I think one thing we all do share is I think we all, we try to think of ourselves as yes people. I think we want to be helpful, but obviously we need to kinda maintain certain boundaries and our expectations because we, we have to really be more about help. We're here to help you along in building your course. So it's kind of a different relationship with our faculty and students.

Brenna: Yeah, we draw on Production, expertise from the Open Learning site, but they have their own jobs to do. Okay.

Brian: Yeah, when we did the so-called pivot in March, we were able to draw on them for a short period of time and I think it's safe to say we wouldn't have made it without them. And we do ask them questions and drawn them all the time, but just -- over the summer our Open Learning side, first of all, because we don't have in-person exams anymore, had to either create alternate assessments or proctored exams, which are quite labour intensive to develop for all of our Open Learning courses, which again is essentially a small university in itself (or a not so small university). And that's OK. And then in addition to that ongoing reworking, a lot of courses over the summer and some of the other, the majority of Open Learning courses, are cohort based, right as we're recording, we are getting ready for a bunch that are program oriented. I should have said, cohort based as opposed to continuous entry. Launching September, including things like the MBA, which are quite high touch courses. So yeah, as we're going into fall semester, we don't have quite as much of their time because frankly, they're overrun as well. And it's been a challenging time right across the entire team. So it's definitely been a test for our ability to work together.

Brenna: Yeah. Yeah. So you said that sort of full time campus support, it's anywhere from two to four people day-to-day depending on how things are shaking out. And I don't think people will realize when you say that oftentimes you are one of those two to four in terms of manning the support desk and answering questions. So I think people are always surprised that our team is so small. And I like what you said about our being kind of a guide, like we're there to help you make the most of your course, but it does remain your course. Whereas with Open Learning courses, that's not quite the same, the relationship between the faculty member and the material they're delivering. So with all that in mind, we're releasing this episode one week before classes start. If you could say anything to the campus community -- and I'm assuming every single person is listening to this very first episode of this podcast that we just came up with --

Brian: -- and minutes of it dropping, no doubt?

Brenna: Absolutely. What would you what would you want to communicate to campus community about these first few weeks that are going to be so intense for everyone on campus?

Brian: Well, from our point of view, if they don't feel confident with what they're going into, I sure hope they'll take part in some of our training. Again. You know, I still get emails from and I was getting them this morning where someone writes me directly going, hey, can you show me how to do this? In a normal time? If I have time, I'm happy to hop on a session or if it was normal time, I guess we'd even meet and sit down and we'll walk through things with them. But we're just not we're just not set up to do that right now. And I know you make yourself available for a certain amount of one-on-one time. But again, if you're doing one-on-one time with one person, that's means you're not available to the rest of the university. So if only for reasons of scale, I mean, if you're new to teaching online or using digital technology to teach, I sure hope you'll take advantage of the training that we set up, the Moodle 911 for next week. Because those really are geared to people who are starting from zero. And I think those will be

immensely useful.

And yeah, on our Alternate Modes space, I think. We launched that as a bare bones absolute minimum set of resources. I think it's grown out pretty -- I mean, it's kind of a sprawling site now. And, but, I think it's because we've been putting, you know, when we get questions, we've been trying to capture those answers and put them in that space. So before you just kinda write with a very basic question, check it out, especially if you want to be able to get on with your day. Please do take a look at what we've already developed and we have, you know, we had a -- really you did, I should say. You led, certainly, a wonderful Summer Camp series of sessions on all sorts of online learning topics. And you've continued doing programming in August. You know, take a look at some of those archived sessions, take 45 minutes to sit through a session on the Gradebook or assessment. Maybe a better use of your time than firing a vague ticket out to us and then waiting for us to be able to find the time to work with you one-on-one. Again, not to say that we don't work with people one-on-one. And you've done it this week and I've been doing it this week. But it's helpful when we're doing that with people who've already done some legwork and have begun to orient themselves like just for sheer scale.

Brenna: Yeah, it's -- I often extend the open invitation to folks to just take a look at my Moodle or my Outlook calendar and schedule an appointment and we'll get together and chat. And I had somebody say, I tried to do that in your calendar is just like one big block right now. And it really is. It's hard to find one-on-one time right now for folks. And a lot of those sessions were scheduled, you know, well in advance at this point, so yeah. There are a ton of resources there that are available to people. And you're right, it's a good point that 45 minutes for a session might seem like a while, but you're almost certainly going to wait 45 minutes for an answer. So even if you do both, fire off the ticket, but also check out the support materials and see if that takes care of your issue.

Brian: And I guess I'm not -- it's a philosophical issue which is less about... preserving everyone's sanity? You don't have to do everything at once. I think something I've been telling people -- when they come to me at least -- terrified, what are we going to do? A few people have been very wisely saying on places like Twitter, including you. People don't necessarily remember the instructor who blew their mind with how sophisticated they were with using every learning technology at their fingertips. What they do remember are the instructors who were available, who showed heart, who listened to what their students were saying. And I think really the most important and effective techniques are pretty simple.

And, and it really is about just being available. Looking for, first of all, talking, open up those lines. Communication meaning students getting clear with where they are, being as clear as you can be with what your expectations are. And I would say, don't be afraid to show a little vulnerability, feel free to say this is the first time I've done this or I did this last spring and this went well, this didn't. And we're gonna do this together and have a little bit of vulnerability there. Don't pretend that you have to be able to be a master of

every element of online teaching because I don't think anyone expects it. And I think it's just going to create more anxiety for everyone all around.

And usually the support challenges that I find most challenging are the people who get themselves in too deep, who over-structure things who, who want to use every single feature that Moodle has to offer and boy, Moodle has, has its strengths. I wouldn't classify it's sleek feature set as one of them. You can get yourself in a lot of trouble if you click every activity, every setting. And for the most part, the defaults work just fine unless you really have a specific need. So again, yeah. Keeping things relatively simple if you're not feeling especially if you're not feeling confident, you know, I, I don't think anyone expects you to blow us away with your tech skills.

Brenna: Yeah, I think least of all students, right? They're not, they're not expecting a fully kind of immersive online experience there. They recognize the struggle that we're all in the middle of. I like the idea of being vulnerable with students always, but especially now, right, there's no need to pretend an expertise that you don't have. I don't think our students expect it of us. This segues nicely into the theme of this week's episode, which is the first week. So we're thinking about how to best approach next week, that experience of the first week of classes. And I wonder if you have any advice for instructors who are feeling pretty nervous right now about -- whether because they didn't teach in the summer and March was kind of a scary experience or because they did teach in the summer and they're just feeling a little bit overwhelmed. Give any advice for instructors rolling into that first, we're not really sure what to expect, and feeling a bit anxious.

Brian: I'll just briefly underline what I said in my previous answer, which is when we hear complaints about instructors from students, it's again, it's rare about them not having this amazing setup right off the bat, but that they're just not perceived as accessible. So open up that line of communication. But if I may, Brenna, I would like to turn this on you because as I recall, you wrote a pretty impressive Twitter stream. I thought it was impressive. And I think others did too, about literally how do you approach that first week. And I don't think I can come up with an answer as good as what you would say.

Brenna: Thank you for that. I think that the most important thing you can do in the first week is not try to cover any content. And that can often be really counter-intuitive for instructors because you have this limited window of time and you have all this coverage that you're supposed to get to. The sort of obsession that we have with making sure we've, we've covered off on all the subject area. I read somewhere online a few weeks ago that it's better to address 70% of what you would get to in a face-to-face course, but do it comprehensively and make sure that students are connecting to the material, than to cover a 100% of what you would cover in your face-to-face class, and not really know if students had mastered it are not really know if it had landed with them.

And they think that a lot of that has to do with building community in the classroom from day one, which I think if anybody's been coming to Summer Camp, they're sick of me talking about it, but it's two-thirds of a student's learning experience. If we think about

that old school Community of Inquiry model comes down to instructor presence and social connection in the classroom. And online really demands that we be very intentional about how we set up that space. So I would really urge folks to just forget about the content this week. I mean, you know, it's, it's still your course and maybe you talk to students about what brought them to the material or what they hope to achieve in the semester. But I don't think you have to necessarily quote unquote, teach anything this week. I think it's okay to focus on how do you orient yourself to the learning environment? How do you connect with your classmates? What are our expectations of each other in this space? And how are we going to demonstrate that continued connection all semester long. So whether it's discussion forums or you're doing blogs, or you're experimenting with Mattermost, or you're going to have a synchronous office hours where students can come and talk. I think making all of that really explicitly clear. And really spending the first week getting everybody comfortable in the space is going to set you up for better success with the content. Because students will know where to go for supports. And they will feel like they're part of a learning community. Which is, I mean, that's the hardest part I think for a lot of folks of learning online is that this is all stuff that we do intuitively when we're face to face with our students. And you just have to think it through with little bit more explicitly in the online space.

Brian: Yeah. When I was listening to you, I was thinking that how much of what you were saying has analog with the vast majority of face-to-face courses that I've been a participant in or an observer. That first class, at least, if not, the whole first week, is very rarely got any actual content in it. It's usually about, hey, here's the syllabus. This is what I'm hoping you'll get out of it. Here's a little bit about me. Here are the things that are important to me in terms of expectations. Things like that tends to be the conversation. It's very rare that you go to your first class in the first week. And, you know, and if you think about the experience on campus, you know, you're doing barbecue or do whatever too. And it'd be cool if we could give ourselves a little bit of that permission online as well. To say, this is about and boy, if you can even find a little bit of space for humanity and a little bit of humour and stuff too. Because we all know that you need a bit of that to learn. Like you can't do this all if it's just this grim death march.

Brenna: That's the tagline for this episode, you can't do it if it's just a grim death march.

Brian: Not a grim death march, we gotta remind ourselves about that on the help desk too over the next few weeks as well, you know?

Brenna: We do. Yeah. We're expecting volume to be high and where we're, you know, at least in part hoping for patience. And I really encourage instructors to, to think about. We talk a lot about enacting care with our students, but how we demonstrate care to ourselves and each other. It's going to be really important. It's going to be a long semester. It really is like think about how long this summer was. Like, I think it was 4.5 years, approximately.

Brian: Yes.

Brenna: And with that, it's going to be I'll push and they think, you know, this is that kind of extending that vulnerability, right? Like let's talk about the fact that it's hard and how we're moving through it together. And that's really important.

Brian: It's hard to do. And a lot of trust. I was actually venting to a colleague because I feel like, well, I'm not going to go into it. Dirt on another -- one of those things where we're working with another service unit that themselves are having a really challenging time right now, and getting -- I was feeling a little frustrated that I wasn't getting more information as much as action. And, but I think, you know, if I'm going to extend the same kind of consideration I would offer to a student. I mean, I think there's just an issue of like, well, they feel vulnerable. They feel overwhelmed. And if they acknowledged that vulnerability or sense of like we're not quite sure what we're doing here is sort of what I think they want to be able to say. What can they trust me to respond with understanding and try to work with that or will I come back at them like why you just, you know, so it really, you know, if you want to be vulnerable, really, and real, it really does depend on trust and humanity and it, and it doesn't just relate to the teacher-student relationship. It really is about how we relate to all of our peers at the institution. And I see that happening. And I mean, you and I have talked offline that we're more worried about the people we're not talking to. I think people we've been talking to, for the most part, we're pretty confident. We're going to be okay with that. I mean, some of them are going to require a lot of effort to keep them on the rails. But for the most part, I'm really heartened by the conversations I'm having with people when we're actually talking and working with them. I think there's going to be some really cool class was happening this fall. In all honesty, even under some really challenging conditions.

Brenna: Yeah, it's interesting because we've been certainly overworked this summer and this past spring and probably well into this fall. But it's remarkable to see the progress in some of the conversations that we're having on campus around digital pedagogy. You know, I was only hired a year ago. These are conversations that I can't really imagine having had pickup in the fall, last fall. And we're already seeing just huge engagement with a body of research that is really robust and rich. And we've been able to share with faculty through the Summer Camp. I think we're getting to this point where it's just, you know, it's just, we just need to put the pieces of the course where they need to be right now. And folks are really just worried about pushing the right buttons and making sure everything's in the right space. But behind that is a layer of awareness about some really complex and interesting issues. And I'm just really impressed with how deeply engaged campus community has been. This past summer, I just I can't say enough good things about everyone. It's been a really rewarding experience, even as it's been exhausting.

Brian: The discourse has been amazing. And I think in part, weirdly enough, because of the circumstance and the adoption and the participation, almost especially with an online discussion. Sometimes if the discussion, it builds a certain momentum that you can't get with four people. I mean, you can have a great conversation with four people.

But when you get a 100 people or more participating in a topic and each providing a lens into what they do. That's we're actually digital technology starts to shine. And, and then you can have people coming into the conversation who weren't able to join when it first started, but they come in and provide their own lens on it and jump off of it. And we've been saying that. And that's when coal, it has been cool.

Brenna: And I think there's an analogy for the classroom space they're in that you don't need to feel like you're the only person who can provide the content you're teaching on the internet. There are -- last time I checked, Brian -- lots of things on the internet, many of which may be relevant to the course material, right? And so I think if instructors are feeling at this point really pinch like the semester is starting and I don't have all my pieces in place. Like, looking to where you can invite other voices into the classroom through whether it's a film or like an open museum exhibit or podcasting, whatever. These, these things that already exist out in the world, these artifacts online and, and treat at least some of your course as an opportunity to curate the real-world conversation about your subject matter. I think that can be very joyful experience for students too. And a chance to see how this material that they're learning in the classroom actually impacts people's real lives day-to-day, regardless of the subject matter, discipline, resources and people.

Brian: And certainly people have been coming to Summer Camp. I think a large number of them now feel comfortable to be able to bring in an outside voice to the group or to extend their, their activities beyond the classroom walls in a way that they couldn't have done before without money, you know, to fly somebody in or whatever.

Brenna: Yeah, it's true. It's true. It's we talk a lot about the inequities that have been caused by this scenario. And those are very real and we can't forget about them. But there's also opportunity here. And I'm really in a mood to feel excited, Brian, cuz this semester.

Brian: I mean, sometimes you, when somebody -- there's a piece of work they've done and you go, isn't this great? And you send it to me, so keep doing that, please. Like because yeah, it's amazing how yeah. For every time where you feel a little bit rundown because you're like, oh, this isn't as good as we want it to be. And we feel that acutely here. I mean, where we talked about this in the beyond Moodle session we did 10 thousand years ago where, you know, when people complain about this feature of Moodle that isn't really as good as that. You know, if it doesn't handle discussions or notifications as well they would like and it's like, well, yeah, we get that and we feel it acutely. We work with the toolkit that we have, with the resources that we have and the time that we have. Believe me, we would love to make everything better. Although of course we have a very diverse set of people who have diverse sets of needs and ideas of what would be better. But I'll leave that aside. But anyway, given all that, yeah, I know. I think we're going to -- I don't know if celebrate is the word... I don't... I'm not hearing Casey... That's not Casey. Who was the group that did that? But who did the song? Celebrate good times.

Brenna: Oh God, I have no idea Brian. Gosh, I don't know if I've mentioned this to you, but I'm very young.

Brian: It's an early, it's an early eighties pop hit with, with horns and anyway, Kool and the Gang!

Brenna: Okay, sure.

Brian: Celebrate, good -- I'm not hearing those horns right now. At the same time. Yeah. I mean, we're going to see cool stuff. And actually, that's one fun thing about being in direct contact with instructors a lot of times and they're saying, Hey, can you help me with this thing and you go look at what they're having a problem with. They're actually building some really cool, really cool.

Brenna: It's so energizing and I hope -- I know I would never want this to come across as patronizing, but I'm genuinely proud of what everybody's been building this summer. And I, it's true when folks email me something really great. I often turn around and say, Well, we gotta look at this.

Brian: This is while I vicariously feel like I own a little bit of every disappointment. So yeah, I mean, I guess somebody and somebody does some good. I don't want to feel like I'm taking credit for it, but I'm proud to be associated with it. And if our team plays a small role in making some some connections happen and to moving the things forward, that's, that's satisfying. Hopefully we won't lose sight of that. You know, when we're up to our necks and Gradebook questions and videos from Kaltura disappearing and all those things.

Brenna: Well, at least in part, I think this podcast is an opportunity to stay connected to the bigger picture with campus so that we're not completely just mired in help desk tickets, so that we're still thinking about the larger community and how our work plays into it. So at least I hope that's what it does. I don't know it's episode when it could be a gong show.

Brian: And I'm sorry to get your, your very well conceived series off to such a bumpy start. But I want to congratulate you for that. And I think one of your many very, very special things that you bring to our university is, you know, Summer Camps is a good example. Even when it would be very, very easy to just get bogged down in the sheer amount of what we're trying to wade through and push through and move from one pile to the next. You've always really made a special effort to stay, stay focused on ways we can kinda elevate the discourse a little bit and find a way to, to, to keep our eyes on what could actually be pretty great in, in all of that and, and that the work could actually end up with some some cool outcomes. And so thank you for that, Brenna.

Brenna: Thank you. I call it belligerent joy. No. I think we'll wrap up this conversation. Thanks so much Brian, for taking the time to chat.

Brian: Thank you again.

Brenna: And that's it for the first episode of You Got This! If you want transcripts or show notes, go ahead and check out yougotthis.trubox.ca. You can always email me, bgray@tru.ca, or find me on Twitter at brennacgray, that's Gray with an A.

I'm going to leave you with one last tiny teaching tip this week. You know, students aren't going to remember a single thing from this whirlwind first week, except for whether they feel like they can learn from you. So be open, be yourself, centre care. And I'll see you next week. Thanks so much for listening. Take care of yourself.