

Hello and welcome to You Got This! a podcast about teaching, 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, housed over in Open Learning but supporting the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc within the unceded traditional lands of Secwepemcúl'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you.

And today's episode is about surprises. Mostly about bad surprises, and how we navigate them with grace. So let's get into it.

My friends, it is Thursday as I record this episode, and the semester started yesterday, on Wednesday. Which is also the day you might know of as when Big Blue Button died. That was a surprise. And a difficult surprise, for us and for our whole team. I don't want to downplay the frustration and the disruption that this caused for all of you: trying to teach, having a plan, and having the plan go so pear-shaped, so fast. It's incredibly stressful. I get that. For us, I think the frustration, well, it's two-fold.

Number one, we don't have full control over these tools. We share them, with other resources, other institutions. Big Blue Button isn't house right here in Kamloops, it's not like anybody can go and just, like, ask it what's wrong. It's stressful and frustrating to have a tool fail and not be able to fix it, or not be able to fix it immediately.

The flip-side, though, or the second part of the frustration – and I'm feeling it, personally, really strongly – is that we worked so hard! We worked so hard all summer to build a suite of resources, to help you folks feel comfortable teaching online, to get you in the space where you felt like you had a plan, and a plan you could exercise well. We worked so hard to teach you so much in such a short period of time about digital pedagogy and online best practices. And you all worked so hard to learn it. So when the systems failed us on day one, I was heartbroken.

It's so hard to navigate a surprise that is really a disappointment – and kind of a wild one – with any sense of grace at all.

I've been thinking a lot about surprise lately, even before yesterday happened (I hope that doesn't mean I willed it into being). But I've been thinking about surprise when it comes to classroom material right now, and I think the reason I'm thinking about it is because I'm thinking about the way our classroom materials are meeting students in the most intimate spaces in their lives for the first time. I mean, obviously students always do some work at home, they do their readings at home, they prepare their assignments at home, but right now, for the first time, you're in their home. You're in their bedroom, or their study, or their living room and you're helping them work through material – and maybe that material is really difficult. I'm thinking about surprise, and I'm thinking about how surprise is experience by students who live in difficult situations.

You know, I've talked before about the fact that I was a literature prof in my past life, and I taught a lot of difficult and complex material. I taught Canadian Literature for nine years. A lot of creepy stuff happens in CanLit, not sure if you're familiar. Lot of creepy stuff. But I also taught a lot of courses that were explicitly about race, and identity, and sexuality. I taught books like *Angels in America*. I taught books like *I Have AIDS!* by Sky Gilbert. Pretty intense books about topics that a lot of folks really struggle with. And I loved teaching that material to students, and I loved teaching that material in particular to students who hadn't thought about those issues in those particular ways before.

But because I taught that kind of content, I was also really aware of the experiences of students who, for example, couldn't take their books home. They weren't comfortable doing their readings for school where their parents could see. So they had friends hang on to their books for them, and then they did all their readings at school or in the library. Perhaps they didn't buy the book at all because they knew they couldn't take it home, and so they would get hold copies out and furtively read it in two-hour chunks in the library. I'm thinking about those students right now because I'm thinking about all the spaces they were able to find for themselves to do their learning and keep themselves safe. And I'm worried. I'm worried about those students right now.

You know, the idea of a "trigger warning" is super controversial, and I'll link to some essays and thoughts on trigger warnings and academic freedom and all of those kinds of ideas that get wrapped up with one another. But I'm wondering if in this moment, we might think of them less as trigger warnings, or less as political ideas, and more as a tool to head off surprise. I wonder if in this moment we owe our students a heads up about the material that's yet to come, and we owe them a sense that we're thinking about how that might be more complicated for some of them than others.

I don't think for these students – or at least it has never been my experience that for these students it's about not wanting to learn the material or not wanting to be exposed to the ideas, but more about the kind of home life they come from, and whether or not they feel they have the space and safety to explore these ideas. And I'm thinking about being inside that student's home – through the computer – lecturing or talking about these concepts, and that student being surprised by that content. And I'm wondering what the consequences might be for that student.

These are the kind of thoughts that keep me up at night.

I wonder if the way we approach it in this particular moment is to think about our classroom spaces less as our private classroom spaces where we can build the walls safely so complex work can happen, and more like we are being transported into other spaces that realistically may or may not be safe for students, and to tread carefully when we're there.

That doesn't mean there's anything I want you to not teach, of course not. I think that the students who are most caught by this particular problem are also the best served by having

complex and also sometimes scary or difficult conversations. But I think we need to think about how we prep them for it right now. And we need to think about how our classroom space is not just our classroom space anymore. When I was particularly stressed out the other day my brother said to me that I had to remember that I wasn't working from home, anymore. I was living at work. And the hours that I work, in spite of that episode about rest, really underscore that for me. But just the same way, we're not teaching from home. We're teaching in our students' homes, and they're living with our teaching. And how we set them up for that so that they can do it successfully – whether it's just to wait until folks are out before they start that video lecture, or make sure they're using their headphones when we start to talk, or just to make sure they have a private space for learning, to the extent that's possible – I think that's really important.

We all know, thanks to Wednesday's outage, that bad surprises suck. And ho-boy, do they ever throw us off our game, hey? That's the part where I feel most empathetic to all of you. My heart goes out to you so much. I know that feeling. You think you're ready to go and you think class is on and everything's good and then the tech fails you and you feel foolish? Maybe? I know I do. You feel like you can't deliver the experience to your students that you had hoped to. And you feel negative. It's hard to move forward from that.

I think we need to think about what those bad surprises might be doing for our students, too, and look for ways to plan around them. You know, there's all kinds of conversations going on about where students are learning and what the political environments might be and we talk about things like firewalls and freedom of speech and academic freedom and restrictions. And those are all really important, lofty conversations, and I would never try to silence any of them. But then end user in that debate is an individual human being who is trying to move through course material and trying to stay safe. And I think that maybe our number one focus needs to always be on facilitating that to the best of our ability.

Okay. Today I'm really pleased to be chatting with Jon Fulton, not just because suddenly video is the number one topic of conversation around here, but because he's an all-around great guy. Here's our chat.

Brenna: Jon, can you introduce yourself and your title to the listeners, and then let them know how they might have interacted with you on campus?

Jon: Sure! My name is Jon Fulton, I work as a video producer in Open Learning, my job is to create and facilitate learning objects that are based out of video to help with learning for the students, so I work with Instructional Designers and Course Developers. At TRU, mostly I work with the online faculty, but there are instances where I am around campus quite a bit. Helping with Convocation, doing live streams of Convocation, or going in to classrooms to do mini-workshops for some profs, and I also used to do... what did I used to do on campus pre-Covid? When I used to be able to just wander?

Brenna: Well that's a good point actually, Jon, because I feel like it should be acknowledged that since Covid you now have basically two jobs. Because you're still doing all of your video production work from OL, but on the campus support side we really rely on you for help with faculty video, so Kaltura and Big Blue Button, you handle the lion share of support tickets about those two items as well.

Jon: Yeah, that's correct. Since March I've been diving in. We kind of quickly grabbed the ball with Kaltura. We were going to have a much more robust slow roll-out. But because of Covid we had to just turn it on and go.

Brenna: My plans! For that great roll-out! Where everyone knew how it worked and what to do!

Jon: I think there's still a ticket that Nicole has about – in Jira, our content management system – about designing the rollout.

Brenna: Yeah! She was going to make all our promotional materials for that! That thing that totally happened!

Jon: Now everybody knows it. But yeah, so I had to jump in to try to learn that as much as possible to try to help the load on everybody.

Brenna: Yeah, we couldn't have gotten through the pivot or now without you, that's for sure. And I think I would be remiss if I didn't mention – you know, Brian calls you the King of Kensington, like, Kamloops Edition, because people will also know you from your many projects within Kamloops, right? The Film Society, Brewloops – you're involved in a lot of different things in town?

Jon: Yeah, I've been volunteering and I've been on some boards for years and years now. So the longest running has definitely been the Film Society, I've been on the board for that coming up, well, eleven or twelve years now? And that's been amazing, it's an amazing group of people, and you know its been great to bring films to Kamloops that normally wouldn't get screened here. Although of course with Covid that completely changed. We were in this amazing situation with the Film Society where we got the opportunity to run the theatre. The local business developers, Kelson Group, bought the Paramount building when Landmark decided they weren't going to have a theatre anymore in Kamloops and just leave it up to Cineplex. And so we were able to jump in and continue screening films out of the building and keep the theatre running. But with Covid, of course, we've been shut down. So that's been interesting.

Brenna: I think of you as sort of my primary welcome into Kamloops, because before I knew anybody in town, I would always see you at Saturday mornings, because we use to, in pre-Covid times, take our little guy and go to the library and to Amplified for coffee every Saturday morning. And we would always see you. And it was really nice. You were the first person who made me feel like I really lived here and knew people and had connections.

Jon: Aw that's nice. That's good. Yeah, I definitely miss seeing you guys in person, for sure.

Brenna: We see each other every day on Big Blue Button.

Jon: Yeah. But that's much different.

Brenna: Speaking of seeing you on Big Blue Button, I'm – the theme of today's episode is surprises, and you and I are recording this on Thursday of the first week back in classes, so we are on Day Two of the Big Blue Button outage. And I've been thinking a lot about how we do support and how we help people through these kinds of difficult surprises, which is what so much support work is. I'm just thinking, as we navigate what has been probably the hardest week in a long time, for all sorts of reasons, at work, I wonder what advice you might offer to folks who really want to have – you know, they want to be present in their classes, they want to have engaging experiences with their students, they like the idea of using video, and they're kind of nervous now about relying on a live tool like Big Blue Button because it's not been sure reliable for us this week.

Jon: Oh yeah. It's such an interesting technological challenge that we've had to deal with, because, I mean, it's not just us, right? It's not just TRU's systems. It's every university. I have colleagues at UVic and SFU and everyone's reporting the same thing. Even Zoom has been down, and all that. And if you look at the stats, like, the system itself is handling it, there's just kind of like a logjam because everyone is trying to do it together synchronously. And you know, we've talked in the past about trying to create a different paradigm of a classroom online and not have everything synchronously, for multiple reasons, and one is this technology reason, right? So pre-recorded welcoming videos and small pre-recorded lectures that students can access when they're able to I think is just really key. And then, I don't know if you want me to talk about the engagement side of that as well?

Brenna: Yeah! I would love that.

Jon: Students are used to coming into a classroom and engaging with a teacher, learning from a teacher directly. And now they're sitting at home with mostly text on a screen. And I think having your presence, if you're the teacher or the instructor for the course, your personality should come through in those videos. I really encourage people just to, just relax. Just be yourself. This isn't Hollywood-produced stuff. You need to engage with them so just be yourself. Because that's what you would do in the classroom. Right? So just kind of keep that relaxed, more casual interaction online I think works really well.

Brenna: Yeah, I think so too. I think if you can try to treat making a video in your office or at home – if you can try to make that feel, you know, more like your demeanor in office hours with students, right, so not feeling like you're kind of performing for a lecture hall, not feeling like you have to be scripted, just kind of having a set of points you want to get to, and delivering

it the way you would deliver to one student sitting in your office. I think that's much more the kind of vibe you want to bring across in video, if that makes sense.

Jon: Yeah, and that's what I was going to say next. The tendency might be to, let's say if you are doing your lecture and pre-recording it, is to say, to talk about, you know, "You guys," or "You girls," like as if you were talking to the entire classroom. But I think it's better if you try to focus and think in your head that you're just talking to one student. And then your delivery will be different, it'll be a little bit more engaging, when they're watching it they'll feel more connected, cuz they feel like they're talking directly to you or with you, as opposed to just being another person in the classroom. So I think that helps with the video aspect of it, if when you're preparing what you're going to say and how you're talking about it, think in your head that you're just talking to one student, like you said.

Brenna: I think sometimes there's a resistance to creating the recorded videos as opposed to doing it live because recording feels like a performance, whereas live teaching, even though it literally is a performance, I don't think we think of it that way sometimes. And I'm wondering, Jon, you've got a ton of experience working with faculty with all different comfort levels with being on video, recording themselves. What do you – I did this to Jamie in the last interview, where I was like "tell me ONE THING," so I'm not going to do that to you because that's hard, I've been told – but what do you think are some things that folks should remember just in terms of making themselves comfortable in front of the camera. I guess, like, how do you make faculty comfortable in front of the camera when they're not?

Jon: Oh exactly, yeah. One aspect of my job is I do one-on-one interviews with instructors where they're telling, doing some kind of lecture. And in those situations, when we're kind of getting ready to do the recording, there's a lot of performance anxiety. And I hate it! I'm never one to be in front of the camera, I'm happy to be behind the camera. Sometimes you get in front of the camera and your brain shuts down. So to kind of get around that I'm always like, I always tell the person I am recording, which in this case would be yourself, so you'd have to tell yourself, you know, you're in control of it right now, right? If you make a mistake, it's okay. For two reasons: one, it's like, it's kind of an engagement level. You can, you know, the students can be like oh, they made a mistake, whatever, they're more human. But then the other aspect is like, you can edit that out later. You can redo it, right? It's not as immediate, and you can cover up those mistakes later. So just, relax, and I always say, you're in charge. If you feel like you misspoke, went down the wrong rabbit hole in your thinking while you were trying to discuss something, just stop. Regather your thoughts and start again from that point, and then just clip out the stuff that was a mistake. Don't worry about trying to be so perfect in one giant take. I hear sometimes from instructors that are trying to do stuff on their own, that they do spend time trying to make the one perfect take. And they do like a five to ten minute piece over and over again. It's like, no no, if you make a little mistake, just acknowledge it in the video. You don't even need to edit it out necessarily. You know, if you said the wrong word, say, "Oh, no! This is really what I actually mean." Because two things. That will actually, students watching that, when they hear that, it's kind of more of a prompt to be like, "Whoa, wait, what did I

miss?” Right? Like there’s kind of an engagement thing there, like, wait, did I hear that wrong? So I think that’s good that way too, right? Kind of awakens the attention.

Brenna: I saw someone on Twitter last week who was using the same Kaltura Quiz functionality that we have – and, you know, I’ll link to our workshop on the Kaltura Quiz with the show notes, so please, folks can check it out – but it was really cool. She did her sort of six to seven minute lecture in one shot, and then she went through and she used the Kaltura Quiz button – function – to be like, you know, “Professor Jones misspoke here. What should she have said?” and then had a multiple choice question where students could answer it.

Jon: Oh, that’s excellent.

Brenna: Isn’t that cool?

Jon: Yeah, that’s really nice. I like that.

Brenna: And you know, I think modelling that humanity is really important for students, too, especially if you’re going to be asking them to present to class, you know?

Jon: Definitely, yeah.

Brenna: It’s okay to make mistakes. Like, we’re all new at this. We make mistakes all the time, right?

Jon: Right. Yeah. In terms of maybe a few more technical things, making sure that you’re comfortable with the technology, you know how to start the recording, you know how to stop it, you know where it’s going to go, you know how to edit the metadata around it, you know, in terms of the title and all that stuff. That’s one thing I’ve noticed on Kaltura, we have over 6000 videos and so many of them are just named Kaltura Recording and it’s like, no no, you should probably name it something so you recognize what it is. One thing that would be really nice is try doing your recording standing up instead of just sitting.

Brenna: Oh! Okay! For energy?

Jon: Yeah, for energy, and also for flow. It helps your diaphragm a little bit. When we do voice overs I always get people to stand up. And then in mimics more the lecture style that you’re more used to when you’re walking in front of a classroom.

Brenna: Right. Oh interesting.

Jon: But when you are standing up make sure that you’re, you know, so whatever recording device you’re using, if you have a microphone, don’t start walking away from it, right, if you are standing up. Because then you know your voice will start drifting away and come back. If you have a headset, that’s perfect: you can move your head around, more comfortable, you get

that kind of body engagement. Standing up definitely helps for multiple reasons. Then you've just got to make sure that your recording environment is set up nicely, right? In terms of, you've got good lighting and stuff. Make sure you won't be interrupted. Turn off your phones. That kind of thing. I used to have this spiel, and it doesn't really directly apply to when you're doing your own, but it's like – somebody would come in, and I would chat with them for a few minutes, put the microphone on them, and while I'm chatting with them I'm actually checking the recording levels and figuring out – like, I'm asking them what did you have for breakfast, how did you get here, and just watch what type of speaker they are. Because then they're relaxed, and if you're more of a hands talker, be aware of not putting your hands near the microphone and rubbing them, don't bang on the table. A lot of people, well, I've noticed currently in my set-up I have my headphones on right now and I have an external microphone. I can't hear myself, so I didn't realize that the microphone was picking up the cabling noise, right, like if I move my head too much. So the cable of my microphone was actually making quite a bit of noise, which I noticed on listening back. So being aware of that kind of room environment and what's going to be recorded. So, like, make sure your windows are closed if there's somebody mowing the lawn next door to you. Tell your family not to come into the room. That kind of stuff.

Brenna: I agree with all of that because I think if you set yourself up, then you can feel a bit more relaxed in the moment. But if your cat jumps into the shot, that's just a value-add, as far as I'm concerned.

Jon: Oh yeah, totally. It's back to surprises, right? It's a happy surprise. I mean we've all seen the newscasters that are doing their things from home and their kid runs into the shot. And whatever! It's like, just handle it. It's not a big deal.

Brenna: Yeah. And we keep coming back to this idea we keep talking about about modelling grace. Modelling comfort. I also think I want to go back to something you said about using a tool you feel comfortable with or getting yourself comfortable with the tool, and the flipside of that is, like, if you feel most comfortable on video when you're using your iPhone camera and you're outside on your back deck, or you're going for a walk, that's okay too, right?

Jon: Oh yeah.

Brenna: You can record those short videos, we really strongly recommend that you record short lecture videos, like much better to have little short blasts of video that students can watch at will, than hope that somebody's going to sit through a three-hour video. Like, I can't sit through a three-hour movie, I'm not gonna sit through a three-hour lecture.

Jon: Yeah. Normally you'd be in the classroom and you could get the vibe of the students and you would know when you're losing them if you're talking for twenty or thirty minutes, and you would adjust.

Brenna: And you wouldn't lecture straight out for three hours! You'd do little activities, you'd at least take a break in the middle, all those things that you don't do – but I think if you can find something that does make you feel more like yourself, right – like, maybe you feel most like yourself when you're walking Peterson Creek, and there's a spot where you can sit and record some conceptual video about, like, I don't know Derrida? Like, right on. That's awesome. Because you can upload any of those videos up into the Kaltura system, and then it's just like you recorded it sitting at your desk using Kaltura.

Jon: Oh definitely. Don't formalize it too much where you're like oh, I have to sit at my desk, I have to do this. I've seen some really good examples of people who do that, just grab their phone, wander around a little bit, stop, chat, you know. But then again you just have to be a little bit more aware of environmental noises, airplanes, cars, the noise of your hand on the phone, things like that. But for the most part, one thing to remember, and it's a technical thing, is cleaner audio is more important than clean video. Students will watch crappy video, so if you're a little bit too shakey or it's off-frame, your lighting is bad. But if they can't hear what you're saying, because of the background noise, that engagement level, that really is tiring on the brain, it's distracting, it's harder to focus.

Brenna: And if you're captioning that video later, it's a nightmare. Good audio in equals good captions out, right?

Jon: Exactly.

Brenna: I wonder if, you – we're getting to the end of our interview here and I'm wondering if you could leave folks with just some practical advice in terms of when to use video for engagement? You've helped to build so many courses in your time with OL. I'm wondering about best applications for video or when you think video can really pop for a class versus when maybe it's just extra work or unnecessary noise.

Jon: Right, yeah. Because making the videos is a lot of work. And especially, it's a new cognitive load on the instructor, and trying to figure out, "How am I going to present this material?" One thing, like the very first meetings we would have with developers when they were going to develop a new Open Learning course, I'd always ask them, "Is there something in the course or in this material that you've known that the students aren't getting. So, there's a visual arts course, and it has some amazing videos for it, but the instructor – which was great, because the developer was also the instructor – he recognized that in the assignments he was getting, students always seemed to miss this one particular concept of the colour wheel or something, and so we developed a really specific short piece just to address that. So if you can find something, because, you know your subject matter, you know what the students have been doing, hopefully it's not the very first time you've ever been teaching, but if you can think of something that the students just aren't getting, or a concept that's harder, it's always easier to show than talk about something. Like, how do you tie a shoe? How to tie a knot is something you need to see on video, you can't just read text about it, right? But often, on the flipside of that, it's like, don't do a video, don't do a three minute video that could be one sentence.

Brenna: Yes. There's a lot of that going on.

Jon: I do talk myself out of a lot of work sometimes, because people will have great ideas, pre-Covid, anyway, about being like we should do this little video about this and this and this. But, okay, if the student can understand it in one sentence, why spend all this time making them watch it.

Brenna: Well, and that's a really important point, just like, there is – you know, Jesse Stommel has this wonderful piece out right now, I think with Sarah Goldrick-Rab, and it's called "Teach the Students we Have." Not the students we wish we had. And I'll link to it in the show notes. But one of the aspects of that is students – there's a very rare student who is going to sit there and watch, let's say you do record three hours of content every week for fourteen weeks, that's an extremely rare student, someone deeply committed to the discipline, probably looking towards grad school, but even then, you know, maybe not. And so rather than putting yourself through that to do all that labour to do all that labour to have it not be utilized, you're much better to be sort of precision-oriented. Like, "Do this reading, and then here's a two-minute video where I recap the things I think are most important in it." Right? Like, that's a way better use of your time than sort of a three-hour dissection of that reading itself, that a student's never actually going to watch. And I think it's so easy to get overloaded when you're teaching online, to think you have to do everything and to think video is the be-all and end-all. Like you and I have been talking a lot with people about how podcasts are a really great solution for content delivery.

Jon: Oh, exactly. And I was going to say, if you don't have anything that you're really, really showing, why have a video, right? The videos should be something that's demonstrative, or experiential, not just you're a talking head, lecturing. The talking head lecturing stuff is amazing for engagement, it's for when you want to build that connection with your student so that they see you and they understand who you are and they get your personality. Because even then, after you have those intro videos, and this is what we were doing in Open Learning before Covid, too, is trying to get instructors to record their own little intro videos, and then that kind of voice permeates through the rest of the course. When they're reading your writing, they see and hear your voice now, in their head.

Brenna: Yes. That's very true. And I think the power of something like a weekly video blog, where you take two minutes to check in and see how things are going, over the time investment on a super-long video that a student's not actually going to their way through? Like, just bang for your hourly buck, that's worth doing.

Jon: Defintiely.

Brenna: All right, Jon. Well, thanks for taking the time to chat today.

Jon: I hope there was something in there for you.

Brenna: It was fantastic. And now I think we both probably have to go back to trying to fix Big Blue Button.

Jon: Well. We can't do much to fix it. We just have to --

Brenna: -- answer questions about it!

Jon: It's coming!

Brenna: It's coming! We are working so hard! Anyway, I think that's going to be the theme of this episode: I swear to god we're working so hard.

Jon: Well what did we say, that it was 35,000 connections in one day?

Brenna: Yes! So on Tuesday [Brenna misspoke and meant Wednesday] when Big Blue Button went down, there were 35,000 unique attempts to connect to Big Blue Button.

Jon: Yeah. That's a lot.

Brenna: That's a lot. It's a lot. And it's across the sector, right? So we just have to all muddle our way through and embrace some surprises. Thanks for chatting, Jon.

Jon: Yout bet.

Brenna: Talk soon.

Jon: Anytime.

So that is it for Episode 3 of You Got This! As always if you want to write to us you can email me at bgray@tru.ca and I'm also on Twitter @brennacgray (and that's Gray with an A). All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca, and you can also comment on individual episodes there.

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip: on coping with surprise. You know, I think the best thing we can do right now for our students is to model, well, grace – we've talked about that a lot – but also, just model rolling with it. You're going to have other bad surprises this semester, and not all of them will have been my fault, and I just want you to think about how you can model moving through a surprise for students. As we talked about today with Jon I don't think you always need to edit out the bad bits. I think sometimes it's helpful to let students see our imperfections. To let each other see our imperfections. I feel like I definitely show you mine. Until next time – we'll talk soon. Take care of yourself. Buh-bye.