

Brenna:

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. This podcast is a project of your friends over at Learning Technology and Innovation. We're housed within Open Learning, but we support the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc, within the unceded, traditional lands of Secwepemcúl'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you.

Today's episode is about bad days. Its week four, everybody, and we are what, a quarter of the way into this thing, a third? Somewhere between a quarter and a third. It's not even actually October yet and I feel like we've been at this for 32, 33 years. How old am I? 37. Okay, about that long. I want to talk about bad days. I want to talk about looking for support, and I want to talk about having a good team. So, let's get into it.

My big worry, as we started this semester, was losing touch with the community. Not literally, I guess, because I answer support tickets all day long and emails, so many emails. Wow, you all are good at sending emails, just teasing. I'm not really, actually, my inbox is out of control, but you are good at sending emails, but I don't mind. I like hearing from you, but losing the sense of community that we built over the summer. It was really cool getting together once a week, especially in May and June, once or twice or three times a week with some of you to do our summer camp, to engage together, to talk about teaching and learning. I'm worried that as we all hunker down into the work, that it's easy to lose track of the sense of community with each other. Easy to lose track of the available supports, easy to lose track of ourselves and our collegial relationships. Often on the show we center the relationships with students, and to me, that's always the most important thing. That's why I get out of bed in the morning, and I'm sure that's true for most of you.

But I have to remember that my collegial relationships are the things that sustain me, and I'm not always really good at keeping that in mind. Yesterday was a super bad day. It was a lot of video conferencing and there's a lot of bad news around the institution right now. Obviously, we are hearing about layoffs that impact friends, colleagues, people we lean on, people we rely on, and that spectre doesn't feel like it's going away. Everybody's talking about budgets and all of that stuff. It's hard to hear the doom and gloom all the time and not let it get to you, and not let it impact, keeping your eye on the goal, which is supporting students through this difficult time. All of us, no matter what we do at the institution, at the core, our labour is about supporting students. But anyway, I had a bad day yesterday and I just had a hard time feeling ... Well, I was feeling really alone. I was feeling really isolated in my stress and I was struggling. It was a good reminder to me that I need to reach out to the people on my team, to the people who know what I'm going through, to the people who care about students as much as I do, and to talk to them. Sometimes, that's venting. Although sometimes, doesn't venting just make you feel worse in the end? But sometimes it's just about seeking out supports.

I've been thinking a lot about how we can support each other through this time. Really, that was the genesis of this podcast. I wanted to still be able to talk to you. It's a more one-sided conversation than when we're in workshops. I know some of you who have been to my workshops are maybe like, "No, Brenna, you always talk this much." But I really wanted to maintain a connection to all of you and to keep thinking about these big issues that really matter to the things that help us get through. I'm wondering about best ways to support and engage each other through this difficult period. We're in the early stages of talking about introducing some new programming for the back half of October, as we start to look towards a winter term that will also be fully online. I'm a little bit stressed at the thought because it's more work. It just is. Everything is right now, but I'm also really energized at the thought of getting back in touch and having real conversations with all of you about that hard stuff. So, I'm looking forward to hearing more from all of you through those workshops about the kinds of lessons you learned, what's gone well and what hasn't this semester, what we want to change for winter and what we want to hold onto. I think opening up that conversation is going to be really valuable and maybe reestablish a sense of community.

It's important, when we talk about things like trauma informed pedagogy, like you're going to hear me talk about today in our conversation with Pamela Fry, that we're not onboarding the trauma, that we're focusing on the pedagogy. So, what do I mean by that? Well, one of the things that I always say when we talk about trauma informed pedagogy is that it's not about you being a mental health counselor, unless you are one. If you're listening from counseling services, gosh, I love you all. Thank you for the work that you do. But what I'm thinking about here is a trauma informed pedagogy that acknowledges that we're in this time of trauma, and help students connect with appropriate supports. So, Pamela is going to talk today about some of those resources on campus. That's why I've invited her to chat today, particularly, as we think about support. But I'm hoping that this little conversation will prompt you to think about what you're doing to support yourself. Are there people on your team who you go to? Is there a colleague you can meet for a virtual coffee, or a virtual drink to talk about what's going on?

If you're feeling isolated and alone, I know that you wouldn't want that for your students. I know that you wouldn't want that for your colleagues. I hope that you realize that you also shouldn't want it for yourself. Finding people who can help you make sense of what we're all going through is really important, and it's hard now. I say this as somebody who is being very conservative about how I engage with the world. I've got a kiddo in preschool, we've already done the COVID test thing. I don't really want to do it more than I have to, and so I stay home a lot. It's easy to be isolated in this time, and especially if like me you're a little bit of an introvert. It's really easy to be isolated, because it's kind of cozy, but it's also not great for our mental health. So, I'm thinking this week about who I should be reaching out to for support, and how I can be a better colleague to the folks on my team and to all of you to support the work that you're doing. I hope that you're thinking about how to care for yourself. If you're not thinking

about it right now, I hope my conversation with Pamela Fry will get you thinking about it. I invited Pamela to come on because Pamela is the learning strategist for Early Alert, which is a service that I think we probably all need to know a lot more about. So, I'm going to let her do the talking.

So, for today's chat, I am here with Pamela Fry. Pamela, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself and your title, what you do on campus. Then, I'm going to ask you to tell people how they might know you from campus, where they might've seen you, where they might've bumped into you, that kind of thing, in the before times.

Pamela:

Okay.

Brenna:

So that people have some context for you and what you do.

Pamela:

Okay. Thanks so much, Brenna. I want to thank you for accepting my invitation for you to invite me to be on this show. My not so subtle nudge that I wanted to do your podcast with you. Thank you.

Brenna:

That's great. I love it.

Pamela:

Yeah. So, I'm Pamela Fry. I've been around campus since about 2006 in various capacities. At the moment, I am the Learning Strategist for TRU Early Alert, which is a program that supports students who are struggling in their courses. We can talk a bit more about that later. I've also been a sessional faculty member at TRU and I've taught in the Department of History as well as in ESL. I worked as a writing center coordinator as well as a coordinator in women and trades. So, I've worn a bunch of different hats at the university over the years, which gives me, I think, some good insight into how students cope in different departments and what some of their needs are.

Brenna:

Yeah, definitely. That's a range of experiences with students. I do want you to say a bit more about Early Alert. I say that as someone who has sent you a student and you've been like, "I will get this student some help, but this is not what Early Alert is for." So, I clearly don't fully understand Early Alert. So, could you let listeners know what the program is, how it works, and what students you're targeting with it?

Pamela:

Sure. Well, Early Alert came out of the recognition that there were students struggling on campus and that faculty members don't always know what the issues are that the students are experiencing. Nor do they necessarily have the time to support students, particularly when there are personal barriers to academic success. So, Early Alert functions in two different ways. The first way is that faculty can send me referrals of students that they perceive as struggling. That might be students who are doing poorly in terms of their marks, students who are not showing up or showing up late regularly. Students who are displaying behaviours that are unusual or that create some conflict in the

classroom. It can be any number of observations that faculty or staff members have made. They refer the student to me, and then what I do is I send a very friendly, upbeat invitation to the student, letting them know that I am available for optional support. They're not required to get in touch with me, but if they want to talk to somebody about what's going on and find out what services and resources are available at TRU, I'm the person that they can come to.

Brenna: So, in general, how many students would cross your desk in say a semester? Do you keep those kind of numbers?

Pamela: I don't really have those numbers, and it varies week to week-

Brenna: I'm sure, yeah.

Pamela: ... and over the course of the semester, but since the program started, thousands of students have been referred. The number is also higher because the other part of Early Alert is that I do proactive outreach to students who are at risk of academic probation.

Brenna: Oh, cool.

Pamela: So, there's a list generated of students who have completed 24 credits or more at TRU, but are showing a lower GPA. I send an invitation to those students as well and just say, "Hey, I know some ways that we can work on that if you want to. Let's talk about what some of the barriers are that are getting in your way."

Brenna: That's very cool. Is the take-up good when you reach out to students? Do they tend to take you up on the offer?

Pamela: I think the numbers are lower than I would like them to be. I think part of the reason is that when students are struggling, there's that feeling of, "I'm the only one."

Brenna: Yes.

Pamela: "I'm the only one, and I'm in trouble, and I'm a disappointment." Those kinds of feelings can be really hard to step across, to reach out for help. So, getting the message out about Early Alert that this isn't about anybody being in trouble or the university being disappointed. It's just about wanting the students to have the best experience that they possibly can, and connecting with me is one way to sort of get on that path.

Brenna: Do you see an increase in numbers since we switched to virtual delivery in terms of either faculty reaching out to you or students who need help?

Pamela: Yeah. I have seen an increase in faculty reaching out to me in particular, and I haven't had a lot of time to think about what's going on there. But off the top of

my head, and my guess would be that communicating is different now, and communicating with students and checking up on their wellbeing looks a lot different now than it did in February. I think faculty members are looking for support with that.

Brenna: Yeah.

Pamela: Yeah. They can't look out at the faces and see how folks are doing. So, they need some intervention.

Brenna: Yeah. I was going to say, talking a lot about how faculty workload has shifted and changed and increased since we moved into this mode of delivery. I'm thinking about that looking out for support, that trying to find somewhere to send students for help, I think, is probably bigger now. I think just faculty are looking for lifelines as well to try to help students.

Pamela: Yeah, and it's confusing. There are a lot of supportive departments on campus, but like for example, advising, there's wonderful academic advisors. But they're located across all the different departments, as well as general academic advising, international student advisors. All of those names, and who are they, where are they. That can be confusing for students.

Brenna: Totally.

Pamela: So, one thing that I can do is direct students to the person they should be talking to.

Brenna: I can see that as being really valuable because I'm thinking back to my experience as a student and I was a good and diligent student, but I never accessed any resources. I just didn't really know how or whether or not they were for me. I think back to like, I never went to office hours.

Pamela: I know.

Brenna: I struggled a lot for no reason. I went without help for no reason. So, I like hearing about more proactive strategies on campus to engage with students about these things, because I certainly wasn't a student who went looking.

Pamela: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. No, absolutely. I didn't go for help either. I certainly didn't think that that was something that was for me. I meet a lot of students and I feel that they feel like they should already know everything. I try to always remind students that if you're like in an uncomfortable place, you're probably learning. That's what you're here to do, right?

Brenna: Yeah. It's actually my ongoing complaint about learning, the part where it has to be uncomfortable.

Pamela: Yeah, it's going to hurt.

Brenna: If could change one thing, I would change that. I don't enjoy it.

Pamela: Exactly, exactly. I think also students, again, going back to when I was a student many, many years ago, I started a university career without understanding what a bachelor's degree really is. What's the difference between that and a master's degree? Why would you do the next level, or graduates? Those kinds of things, as a first-generation learner in my family, I didn't really understand. I just knew that I probably should go to a university, and that was that. So, one of the things we can offer students is a little bit of transparency around our programs, the project they're taking on as a university career. What they will and won't get out of it. Those kinds of conversations, I think, are more important now than ever.

Brenna: Yeah. I think back to that hidden curriculum part of university, and the story I always tell is, I legitimately had no idea what a syllabus was until second year. I got through my entire first year and the first semester of second year, and I just ... people kept using this word. I was like, "I don't know. Well, I don't know what's in the syllabus, but a lot of the same information seems to be in this course outline. So, I'm going to look at that."

Pamela: Yeah.

Brenna: It was like this moment, halfway through second year, and I was like, "Oh, those are the same thing."

Pamela: Exactly.

Brenna: I look back at that story all the time, because I'm like, I thought of myself as a student who was pretty on top of things, and I still was missing so much, like there's so much that we just don't ever explain to students. Yeah, I remember, I was sitting in a second year poli-sci class and the instructor said, "We'll just take a look at the syllabus. Now, some of you might call it a course outline." That was all it took for me to be like, "Oh." But it took three terms before somebody actually bothered to do that.

Pamela: Right. We have a really bad habit at the university of using inaccessible language and acronyms to describe places, and programs, and things, and it's very confusing for students. So, trying to be as transparent as possible about what we're talking about, what it is, why it matters, those are things that can really help students, especially now.

Brenna: If we think about it, when we first arrive at the institution as faculty or as staff, it's confusing enough for us as people who have, I mean, ostensibly navigated these systems before, like how many meetings do you sit in your first year? Oh my God, my first year at TRU and everybody just kept using these acronyms, and

I was always the person at the meeting holding my hand up going, "I don't know what anybody is talking about."

Pamela: Exactly. It's a really easy habit to fall into once you're in the group and you've been around for a decade, but if you're new, it feels like, "I'm completely lost."

Brenna: Yeah. So, we think about how that's compounded for students.

Pamela: Right, right.

Brenna: I guess I'm very curious about how your conversations with students have changed since you moved to virtual delivery. I'm not sure how much you're doing virtually versus face-to-face. I know there's some blending in some parts of campus. So, maybe you're back to face-to-face, I don't know. But much like my conversation with Stephanie last week, you're having really sort of intimate and difficult conversations potentially with students. I'm wondering how you've been navigating that via virtual delivery.

Pamela: Yeah. There's been a significant change for me, actually. I am providing online appointments for students and meeting with them face to face. They seemed to be, the appointments seemed to be a lot more problem focused. We seemed to get to the issue a little more quickly, and I'm not sure if that's because students are spending so much time online that they don't want to have a prolonged, virtual meeting. But in the past, I found myself tip toeing the line between being an Early Alert advisor and counseling. There's a lot less of that now. I think the students know, are starting to learn, in any case, what the difference is between counseling, which is also available through online appointments. Early Alert, which is really more of a referral service, there are some practical skills that I can provide in terms of helping students plan their day. Do some goal setting, a few learning skills, things like that. But the counseling part of it is not happening as much as it was before. Maybe it's that separation that's created by virtual appointments, there just isn't that coziness about it. As much as we try to still be welcoming and personal, that doesn't come across, I don't think as well through the video link up.

Brenna: It's hard too, because something we talked about, I guess a couple of weeks ago on the show is this idea of whether or not the student's space is private. Maybe their parents are home and they want the study skills, but they're not going to get into like the whole thing right now.

Pamela: Yeah, exactly. That's a big concern. I know that one of the considerations the university is thinking about is student's safety at home. Those kinds of issues. How comfortable really is it for students to study in their home space? Some of that information and research, I don't think we're going to have for a long time, unfortunately. So, we just have to do the best that we can right now, but students are looking for ... They need information. They're as confused as everybody else. One of the things I'm getting from students is that they have

signed up for courses that they haven't necessarily known ahead of time what type of learning they're getting into. If it's primarily asynchronous learning, or by email, or through Moodle, or that kind of learning, they weren't expecting that and are unprepared for learning that way. So, a lot of what I'm doing now is providing students support with doing this new kind of learning.

Brenna: I'm sure that's necessary. There's this whole constellation of issues that go into it. Some of those courses weren't staffed until like a week or, I was going to say a week before, but sometimes a week into the term, sometimes more.

Pamela: Exactly.

Brenna: I just thinking about students logging in and seeing that empty Moodle shell and wondering, "Okay, what's next?"

Pamela: I think we need to do better. I think we need to make sure we have instructors in place early enough that they can provide students with information. I think that's doable. What this new context has provided us is a fantastic opportunity to rethink how we're doing some of the things we do that do leave students wondering until the last minute, "Who's my instructor?" It takes away some choice from them.

Brenna: Totally.

Pamela: Yeah, and I think right now, to support student's emotional, mental health and wellbeing, the more information we can give them ahead of time, the better service we're giving them.

Brenna: I agree completely. It's interesting because I'm thinking back to myself as a student, I never signed up for classes where the instructor was TBD. I was an arts student, so I had a lot more flexibility. I wasn't a program area student, but yeah, even if the prof had a bad reputation, it was at least the reputation that I knew-

Pamela: Right, you knew.

Brenna: ... which was really different than the TBD situation. I never signed up for those courses, even if they sounded interesting to me.

Pamela: And it's stressful, right?

Brenna: So stressful.

Pamela: It's stressful to students to not know whose class they're going into or what the expectations are going to be. Especially when it's connected to things like how good is your internet server? What kind of software do you have? Those kinds

of questions? Our students want to be prepared ahead of time, which makes sense.

Brenna: Yeah. We're starting to think about our programming for the back half of October. We had originally said, we wouldn't be doing any fall programming on account of we're exhausted, but it's becoming clear that, especially as we go into winter, online delivery people continue to need support with course development. One of the sort of lessons learned, I think, is getting that information out to students early when it is possible. When you are in place in the course, and you do have a sense, even if you don't know a hundred percent, you can reach out to the students and let them know what's coming. That way, the courses that are really just straight up not staffed it will just be ... there would just be fewer of those question mark courses, if everybody who is in place can get that information out to students earlier.

Pamela: Absolutely, that would be great.

Brenna: Yeah.

Pamela: It just gives everybody time to breathe a little bit, which we all need so much right now.

Brenna: We really do.

Pamela: Yeah.

Brenna: Okay. So, let's imagine that every faculty member at TRU listens to this podcast.

Pamela: Hey, hi everybody.

Brenna: I'm learning as an interviewer not to be like, what's the one thing, but what would you want faculty to know both about Early Alert, about supports that are available, and about the kinds of questions students come to you with? Are there things that faculty could ameliorate, whether at the course design level, or at the engagement with students level that would help right now?

Pamela: I think faculty are doing an excellent job, just let me say that, first of all. The ones that are communicating with me about their students, I know that they're doing their best to be supportive. I do want to make a suggestion though. I took a Coursera course at the beginning of the pandemic, a little shout out to the University of Illinois. The course is called E-learning Ecologies: Innovated Approaches to Teaching and Learning for the Digital Age. It really provides a very optimistic view of how this online e-learning future that we're facing can be so exciting for instructors and students. So, I'd encourage any faculty member that has a bit of time to do this free Coursera course, because it has great ideas about how to put courses together that are going to be great for your students. I also want faculty to know that, I remember when I was a faculty member in

ESL, I felt a great personal responsibility for students. Especially when they're facing those interpersonal barriers, whether it's financial issues, relationships, all the things that you deal with when you're a student, that right now is not the time for faculty to try to be managing all of those things.

Brenna: No, no.

Pamela: That's why I'm here. I'm not the answer to all those things, but I can get the students to what they need. So, if faculty need my support, all they need to do is email earlyalert@tru.ca. Give me the student's name and TID, and just a very brief description of what the situation is with the student. I send an email that doesn't name the referrer. So, I don't say to the student, "Your professor says." I just say, "A caring member of the TRU community has asked me to reach out."

Brenna: Oh, I like that. I like that approach.

Pamela: Then, it's the student's choice if they want that help. For students too, I guess what I would like to say to students is just go easy on yourself right now. We're in a context now where you can sit back a little bit, think about your values. What's working for you in your university career and what's not, and be willing to make changes if needed.

Brenna: Yeah, it's interesting. I know a lot of my friends and colleagues who are sort of early career academics or finishing up grad school are really in this place of like, "Oh, wow, we can rethink what we're doing." On the one hand, we have no time to breathe, and on the other hand, this is kind of a moment to decide what really matters to you. I think that's true for students, too.

Pamela: I absolutely agree that it's true for students, too. Our role as people who have gone through the system before them is to let their ideas come through, and listen to them, and adapt, and make the changes that they want to see for their education and their futures.

Brenna: I'm really glad to know you're there. I'm really glad to know that Early Alert is there.

Pamela: Thanks.

Brenna: I just think the more we can be proactive about student needs, I think especially right now, and I'm glad you could come on today to talk to folks about it because there's so many programs and resources at the university and it's hard to keep them all straight. But it sounds to me like sending an email to earlyalert@tru.ca is one way to start a conversation, and get a student connected with the resources that they need in a one-stop shop way. That's what it sounds like to me.

Pamela: Absolutely. It's no different than what you're doing in your role or what Stephanie Tate's doing in her role. We're just trying to take care of each other here, and that includes faculty, staff, and students. I feel like everybody's doing their best to do that, but you don't have to do it alone.

Brenna: No, and I'm really glad you brought up that idea of like, this is not the time to be taking on all of the student's personal issues or concerns. We talk a lot in our workshops about trauma informed pedagogy, which is not counseling.

Pamela: Right.

Brenna: It's the first thing I always say to faculty, or staff, or instructors who are interested in learning about it. It's not counseling. You're not mental health professionals. What it is is being aware of the unique pressures on students right now, and being proactive about engaging the real supports that are out there. Not you stepping into that support role, but you helping the student to make the connections they need.

Pamela: Absolutely, Brenna, and just validating.

Brenna: Yes.

Pamela: Validating the uniqueness of this time and their experience. Sometimes, that's all students need from me and then I don't hear from them again and that's fine. They just need to feel heard. Then, they're ready to move on and get back to doing whatever it is they need to be doing. That's part of what the Early Alert service tries to provide as well. Just, "I hear you, that's valid." Maybe we all need that as well right now.

Brenna: Yeah. I was going to say, I think -- I keep reading these tweets about how we're all using the word normalizing too much, and that's probably true, but I like it. I do think normalizing support right now, normalizing the need for support, whether that's creating a little space in a course shell, where you have links out to the writing center, and wellness services, and counseling. So, students know like, "Oh, those resources are there all of the time. This isn't just something somebody brings up to me when they personally think I'm struggling." Also, just normalizing checking in with each other. I'm thinking all the time about those of us on campus who are in sort of caring or caring adjacent roles. Yeah, I talked about this to Stephanie, but I really feel that that absorbing of other people's anxiety, which you must get in your role too, right? Learning to care for each other and to be on teams where we can support each other through that work, I think, is equally important for faculty and staff at the university, too. Not just for students. Although, I think sometimes we think about it for students first.

Pamela: Yes, we do, and it's important because we can't be effective as educators if we are just overwhelmed with anxiety and stress, and acknowledging that dealing with emotion is part of our job. I think that's really important.

Brenna: Yeah. I think too often the university has sort of sold us this life of the mind as though that's something that can exist separate from bodies and hearts.

Pamela: Right, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. We like that fantasy, but that's not the truth, unfortunately.

Brenna: No, it's really not.

Pamela: No.

Brenna: I wish it was sometimes, but here we are.

Pamela: Yeah, me too. Me too.

Brenna: Well, I really appreciate you coming on to chat and I'm going to include both the links to the Coursera course you mentioned and, of course, to Early Alert email and the website in the show notes today, so people know where to go to find you and to reach out to you for support for themselves and their students.

Pamela: That's excellent. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today, Brenna. I appreciate so much the work that you're doing and I hope we can continue to touch base over the next semesters.

Brenna: Oh, thanks so much. It's been just fantastic to hear about proactive services on campus. It's just good to know that things are changing from when we were students.

Pamela: Absolutely.

Brenna: Thanks so much.

Pamela: Okay, bye for now.

Brenna: Bye.

So, that is it for episode five of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter, [@brennacgray](https://twitter.com/brennacgray). In both cases, that's gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougottthis.trubox.ca. Of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there.

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. It speaks back to that normalizing support thing I was talking about with Pamela. Is there a section of your online course environment, wherever it is, where you've provided support resources for students? Those might be disciplinary support resources, those might be links to the learning center, the wellness center, the writing center, counseling services. I'll add some links in the show notes, things that you can

draw on. Oftentimes, we don't remember to tell students about those resources until we've already decided they're in trouble. One thing I learned way back at the beginning of my teaching career, when I was a supplemental instructor as an undergraduate, is that if you wait to talk to students about resources that are available until they're in trouble, then they come to see those resources as things that are just for people who are in trouble and they don't seek them out. So, I'm going to encourage you today that if you haven't built a section in your course for learning supports, that you take the time to do that now. It's early in the term. It's week four. Students haven't hit the hardest part of the semester yet. So, let's talk to them about those supports now, when maybe it still feels a little more possible for them to reach out.

While you're at it, this isn't a teaching tip, it's like a life tip and probably something I need to hear, but have you reached out to anyone to chat about how you're doing? It's week four, it's only week four. This is a marathon. Let's find the supports we need now, so we can make it to the end. Until next time. We'll talk soon. I'm happy, and lucky, and grateful to be in your community. Take care of yourself.