Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello 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 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 Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And our community has learned some tragic news in the last week. This is my first recording since the 215 children were found murdered on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School here in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc. I am not intending to re-traumatize anyone, and you'll find as the first link in the show notes, a link to the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and their link to the 24 hour crisis line for survivors. I do want to make reference though to the fact that as educators working in this space, we work within the legacy of the residential school system. And we also work within institutions that have privileged particular ways of knowing for a very long time. By privileging particular ways of knowing, we feign surprise when the stories of survival that members of the sSecwepemcweat community have been sharing for generations are deemed to be true.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm sitting with that legacy and I have been all week and it's not comfortable. It's not easy. I encourage you, if you're a settler listening, to consider donating either to the recovery effort at Tk'emlups te Secwepemc or to the Indian Residential School Survivors Society, they provide no cost counselling and therapy to people affected by the news this week. It's difficult and critical that we recognize the complicity of all the work we do in the kinds of systems that have allowed this to happen. I'm going to pause here and we'll get into the show proper after the break.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. This week, I'm thinking a lot about what it is that we mean when we talk about inclusion in our classrooms, I'm looking towards fall and I'll admit to a continuing baseline level of anxiety about what we're going to find, but I'm recognizing the ways in which the last year have changed me. And I'm thinking that I'm probably not alone in that. What will it mean to us to create an inclusive classroom when we have folks who aren't comfortable yet sitting in a crowd of people; who have found that for the last year, learning online has afforded them the opportunity to learn more about themselves. They've recognized what works. And in many cases, what doesn't work for their own learning. Will our classrooms be a place where students can voice anxiety or share their teaching and learning preferences? Will our classrooms be a place where anyone listens when they do?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm not imagining that we can accommodate every request for every reason there's workload implications. And everyone is in a different position when it comes to that, there's all kinds of reasons why precarity and not getting your class until the last minute and number of courses and number of students and balancing multiple institutions. There's all kinds of reasons at play that would prevent someone from being able to necessarily accommodate everything that crosses their desk. But at the same time, I often feel like the kinds of things we hold rigid to our make-work projects for ourselves, as much as they are potentially harmful or negatively impactful for our students. I'm thinking for example

of something like deadlines, right? We set deadlines often pretty arbitrarily. Let's be honest, right? Essay number one is due when I say number one is due because essay number two has to be marked and back before the final exam and the final exam has to be in this week, right? That's pretty arbitrary. It's not like there's some sort of hidden truth to deadlines. And when we hold rigid to them, we set off a whole cascade of impacts students experiencing stress and panic. Maybe students having to reach out to accessibility services to achieve an accommodation, maybe students who don't have that option or don't know they have that option reaching out to a tutoring company that's more like a contract cheating firm, and I'm not sure what we gain by having rigidity.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

When it comes to something like deadlines, I've actually always found it easier to manage my marking load when I have a least, a little bit of wiggle room and deadlines, because then they don't come in all on the same day. I don't have to carry that horrifying stack home on the bus. Although I guess we're not really doing that anymore. I'm assuming most people are going to keep collecting essays digitally, but feel free to correct me if I'm wrong. I guess the reason I'm raising this is because I'm a little bit worried about what back to normal rhetoric means when the normal wasn't really working for all members of our community. And I'm wondering what calls for inclusion mean if they're not tied up in commitments that do unfortunately end up touching on workload academic freedom. I attended a deeply distressing conference presentation this last week at the Canadian Society for Studies in Higher Education that was about academic freedom, conceptually, and cases where accommodations have been denied because they were seen as an infringement on academic freedom. I'm not sure that academic freedom was ever meant to be wielded as a weapon like that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

In many ways. I know I'm preaching to the converted -- folks who listen to this show are open, flexible, generous educators. So I guess maybe what I'm asking is to have you carry that conversation into difficult places, like maybe an uncomfortable department meeting or a coffee with a colleague who's more rigid than you to talk about how your flexibility is part of your planning for fall to create the kind of inclusive environment that we put on all the posters for the university.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Ecause I'm thinking about inclusion and because so many of you have been asking me questions about what accommodations are gonna look like in the fall and how we might best manage them, I thought I should actually probably turn to an expert at this point. And so today on the show, I'm delighted to be interviewing Sarah Walz. Sarah is director of student access and academic supports here at TRU. And she has a lot of thoughts about how we can make our classrooms more accessible places for everyone. So I'm going to let Sarah take it from here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay, I am here today with Sarah Walz. Sarah, would you introduce yourself and let folks know maybe where they might've seen you on campus in the, in the before times?

Sarah Walz:

Sure. So I'm Sarah Walz and I'm the Director of Student Access and Academic Supports at TRU. And I'm housed within the Faculty of Student Development and primarily focused on supporting the Accessibility Services team.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Fantastic. And that's exactly why I've invited you on the show today. So over in LT&I we've been running a series of we call them Pandemic Pedagogies, but just lunchtime discussion about issues that may come up in the fall. So I think faculty have been asking me anyway, like I know the answer, I do not, a lot of questions about what they might expect around accommodations for say a student who has to miss like 14 days for quarantine or 10 for self isolation. We were looking over the go-forward document in one of the sessions and you know, it, it has this emphasis for good reason on ensuring that students who find themselves in that situation not be disadvantaged. I'm wondering from your side of the desk over at Accessibility Services, what you're anticipating faculty do in that scenario or how the institution as a whole is planning to accommodate students in that scenario.

Sarah Walz:

Yeah. I mean, I'm hopeful that the, the full go-forward forward guidelines that are coming might go into this in a little bit more detail, but certainly, you know, from an Accessibility Services perspective, we do not provide academic accommodations for students who are sick with a cold or a flu or short-term illness. So we, we won't require, you know, students with COVID or self isolating with COVID. We won't require them to obtain medical documentation or to register with Accessibility Services. And so I think I would encourage, you know, faculty to support students, you know, to the best of their ability as they always have. If they've had a student in their class who's been sick, you know, in the past, but, you know, that stated -- this is going to be a challenging fall, you know, and, and many students, I think, will be impacted by the return to campus either because of COVID or something like an episodic mental health condition, you know, anxiety, depression, PTSD.

Sarah Walz:

So if there are ways to incorporate increased flexibility as a faculty member, you know, around attendance assignment, due dates, missed quizzes in class, you know, for really all of the students in the class, I think that would be extremely helpful in reducing stress and anxiety that you know, many students are feeling. And if there's any possibility that faculty -- faculty could take a bit of a proactive step to ensure easy access to the course material, I think that would be huge. So, you know, posting copies of all the PowerPoints or lecture materials, encouraging the class to share notes amongst one another, you know, and even I would encourage faculty to use their phone or recording device in class, and then post the lecture recordings, you know, we have students with accommodations for this, and if it was provided to all, I think that would be really fantastic. But those would be some of my suggestions in preparing for that particular type of situation.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. I think it's really useful to know sort of the line of when Accessibility Services steps in as well, because I think for a lot of faculty, like a 14 day absence, so say you're a twice a week class that's potentially for classes that a student is missing. And I think a lot of faculty that's outside of what they're sort of normally kind of ready to accommodate for, but we should probably expect that it's very possible, right. That we will see students who have those kinds of needs. And you've given some suggestions about how faculty can kind of prepare for that proactively, which yeah, it makes me super happy. I think the more we can think about those kind of universal design approaches to courses the better for all students, right? One thing I've really learned through -- well actually it was like when my son was born, I said this on the show before, but like I never used to think about closed captioning. And then when I had a really fussy kid who didn't sleep very well, I only watched things with closed caption,

you know, the ways in which, like, accessibility tools can kind of expand out the learning experience for, for all kinds of people. I wonder if you have any other advice or strategies on how faculty might design their courses to maximize accessibility from the jump, I guess, and then ultimately, well, I guess if we're maximizing accessibility, what we're really doing is kind of trying to be proactive on accommodations, right? Yeah.

Sarah Walz:

I think they go really well together, sort of hand in hand. There's certainly, I think, colleagues at TRU and elsewhere in the province who have more expertise than I in curriculum development. So for example, in, in, in may we posted a blog story about four faculty members at TRU who really excel in that area, they called it Accessibility Advocates: Faculty Edition.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh nice. I'll make sure we link that in the show notes so people can check it out if they missed it.

Sarah Walz:

Thank you. Yeah, it's on the TRU newsroom website. So I think check that out and connect with CELT. But yes, I, I, there are certainly things that I think would make a big impact. Designing for diverse learning needs is really just ensuring that learner diversity is unintentional part of the course and not an afterthought, which so often seems the case with accommodations. And I think you know, it demonstrates to students that we care about their learning. I think also it's important to consider that hidden curriculum and the messages communicated, you know, by your classroom or Moodle space, can all students see a place for themselves in your discipline? Do they feel welcome in your classroom space? You know, are you considering the variability in the room? Right.

Sarah Walz:

And so there are many things I think faculty could do, like you said, that would really mitigate the need for a number of classroom and exam accommodations we provide really all of the time through accessibility services. And so some, I mentioned already, you know, lecture recordings, copies of PowerPoints, captioning, thank you for the captioning plug. Yes. Essential for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. I mean, absolutely. And I think becoming a proactive part of course design now, but certainly wasn't in the past pre-COVID. But other, other ideas: clear outlines of upcoming tests and assignments seem straightforward, but not always provided and really helpful for folks with episodic disabilities or chronic illnesses. Just building on, again, flexible due dates, scaffold, maybe, you know, larger assignments and some more manageable chunks. And particularly for this fall, I think in the classroom setting, you know, students know just to let students know that they're free to step out, you know, if they need a moment, excuse me, and that you, as the faculty member, you're not going to make any comments. If anybody leaves the room. I think just having those conversations will, will provide such peace of mind letting students know you'll be flexible, ideally, you know, if they miss class on occasion even building an extra time with quizzes or with exams for everybody. Right?

Sarah Walz:

So, and then I think the last thing, you know, really, if I wear my UDL hat, that would be really impactful with course design, I think is providing some choice for when it comes to assessment. I think this really aligns with that that UDL principle, multiple means of action and expression, which I'm sure many faculty are familiar with, but by giving students some choice in how they'll be assessed, I think would

really reduce the level of stress and anxiety for all students, right. And maybe gain a little power back in a time where I think everyone maybe is feeling like they don't have full control all over their lives. Right. And choose something based on our own strengths. Right. And our own current situation. So if I consider the students, we work with you know, different assessments elicit different panic or anxiety responses from different folks, different students, right? So some will really struggle most with a presentation or with group work. Others will really struggle in that traditional exam setting because maybe they're having impacts to their memory or information processing. And then others will struggle absolutely. With a written assignment, the most right. Particularly, you know, particularly students with learning disabilities. So I think just as a faculty member asking yourself, you know, can students choose due dates? Can they choose from a range of modes or formats? Can you build in a blanket extension policy? Could you offer choice around feedback type things like this, I think would, would really impact the accessibility of all courses.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that you brought this up because you know, so many faculty spent so much time and effort over the last year, learning all kinds of new modalities, right? Learning how to take in an audio assignment or a video assignment, learning how students could present their ideas in a discussion forum without necessarily just using text. Right. And we've learned all of this stuff and we still know it. We don't have to get rid of it just cause we're going back face to face. Right. We can maintain that kind of the kind of flexibility and choice that some of these options offer, even as we go back into the classroom. Right. And maybe we could look at a best of both worlds kind of version of the fall.

Sarah Walz:

Oh, I love that. I think that that's a bit of a fear maybe for the folks that work in the area that I do is that some of these amazing gains we've made through the pandemic will be, you know, hopefully not lost as we transition back. So I, yeah, well said, I certainly hope that's the case.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was also struck when you mentioned the sort of acceptance of just being able to step out of a room for a moment. I've been thinking a lot about what it's going to feel like the first time I'm back in a room of 30 people. And I don't love it to be honest, you know, I don't know. I had to I had to fly back to Ontario back in February for a family emergency and it was, I've never been nervous about flying. I've flown lots way too much from environmental standpoint, my whole life. And didn't really, I've never thought twice about it. And I boarded the plane in Kelowna, 'cause that was still when Kamloops didn't really have any flights. And I boarded the plane in Kelowna and I had this moment of real genuine panic. Like my whole chest seized up. I couldn't believe I was in this tiny tin can with all of these other human beings. And I had kind of forgotten that until you just said it. I think that the classroom is probably going to be that space for lots of us, the, for the first few weeks anyway, the first time we've been around a lot of people. And yeah, having some understanding of the different ways that might come across in our affect is going to be really important for all of us. I'm thinking about meeting rooms too -- those rooms are tiny!

Sarah Walz:

So true. Yeah. And those are some of the accommodations that we would provide to a student, you know, with an anxiety disorder or something like that. It would be yeah. Ability to, it's an actual accommodation on their letter ability to step out of class for short periods of time you know,

preferential seating so that they could potentially make a quick exit or they're at the front of the back things of course, like I mentioned, extensions on assignments and, and may miss class on occasion. But if these are things we can just do for all, cause you're right, we're all gonna feel a little anxious going back, staff and students alike.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, this is a really good segue actually into my next question for you, which is, you know, I try to keep up on higher ed, the higher ed blogosphere, let's call it for lack of a better term. And I'm noticing an increasing number of stories about sort of predictions of what new accommodations or additional accommodations are going to be necessary in the return to campus. You know, I'm seeing some folks predicting a rise in diagnoses around anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, all the things you actually mentioned off the top already. I'm wondering if that's something accessibility services, I'm sure it's something you're thinking about, but I'm wondering if you do have concerns about mental health and wellness for students as both now -- because I find now a really uncertain time, actually, I feel way more uncertain about things now than I did last may. Like last May I knew kind of what was coming and this May, I feel like I don't -- and as we return to campus,

Sarah Walz:

Yeah, I, I don't, I mean, obviously it's hard to predict what the long-term impacts of COVID will be on mental health, but certainly I shudder a little to think about it. And I do anticipate an increase in students coming forward with those diagnoses. Or maybe who already had those diagnoses in the past, but, but didn't necessarily feel that they needed support through our office. And so that's why I think UDL is going to be just so darn important and flexibility will be so important this fall because it will be many students. I agree. And I think as mental health is top of mind for so many of us at TRU. And I think some of the things, like I mentioned before are really going to help students with mental health conditions that have that as part of their lives or as, yeah, like I mentioned, students who experienced those symptoms, but potentially don't have a diagnosis. I think, like you mentioned about your experience on the plane, right? So these conditions are episodic in nature, you know, so there's students are going to have periods of wellness and then periods of disability or when they feel unwell.

Sarah Walz:

So yeah, that flexibility is just so key and just as faculty to encouraging students to connect with the resources available on campus. So often students just, I think, need to feel supported and validated about the way that they're feeling or what it is that they're going through. And so another idea too, is creating space in your classrooms to talk about mental health, potentially provide some education, be vulnerable yourself about this topic, which I've tried to do with my staff, and considering diversity as well. Of course, when having these discussions, knowing that everyone in the room will be different and will be on a different journey. I think it's also helpful to note too, that for students in particular, with mental health conditions, it, isn't always this goal of finding a cure or, or getting fully better. But you know, often it's finding ways to live with these conditions and thrive as it being part of their life. Right? So having those conversations, I think, and making those spaces is, is a fantastic place to start.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You've sort of raised it. And we've been talking about, you know, what Accessibility Services does support and doesn't or at what points Accessibility Services steps in to, to document for a student. One thing I've been asking faculty to be maybe more generous about is to think about the fact that students

have now experienced a range of modalities of learning that they may have not experienced before. And they may have found something that works better for their learning than they knew they could ask for or access before. And it's not that I expect faculty to give every piece of material in multiple modalities, huge workload implications for that. But I have been thinking about the students who, you know, have maybe thrived is not the right word for every student, certainly, but who have found things that worked for them. And I'm thinking too about, you know, I'm reading all these news stories about the fact that sort of retreating from society for these last months, seeing folks, you know, coming out as trans or recognizing their own neurodivergence or sort of, it's been this time of self-discovery for lots of people because they've been home with their own thoughts and things. And so, I don't know, I guess my question is if students start to divulge information like that to faculty, at what point do you think a faculty member should say, Hey, maybe you should connect with Accessibility Services versus sort of trying to address the needs flexibly on their own. I mean, I know it's not a hard line, but I guess at what point would you guys want to be looped into a conversation like that?

Sarah Walz:

Oh, it's a, it's a great question. And I think sometimes it's something that can be a little tricky for faculty to navigate when, when, when you, you make the handover to Accessibility Services. And I think if you, if you are seeing things in your classrooms, when it, when it comes to disability, it's helpful to focus on the needs you're seeing for students rather than maybe a particular challenge or problem you're seeing. And so if there's a need and you think that Accessibility Services could potentially fill that need for this student, that would be, I think, where I would start the conversation, you know, I've noticed that you were only able to complete about 60%, your exam, you ran out of, you just ran out of time. Do you think you could benefit from an accommodation for, for more time on your exam? Have you heard about Accessibility Services -- so focusing on that need, right, that you think, I think would be helpful. And certainly we're, we're very student driven, right? So I mean, letting students know about the services on campus is key, but that is a real personal decision as well for students. You know, we obviously unlike the K to 12 system, we don't reach out. We would have no idea who would need our support unless they come forward and ask us for it. And, and some students, it's a bit of a spectrum. Some students know exactly what they need. They take a lot of pride in disability as being part of their identity and they come in and they know exactly what they need. And then there's still students who are struggling with the stigma and feeling less comfortable to come forward. So I think really just helpful to have those conversations and reminding students that we are here for them, we exist if they feel they could benefit from, from the support we provide or from academic accommodations.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, this is a perfect segue to sort of the end of my conversation with you today, which is really, I wanted to ask what supports you most wish faculty would underscore for students? Something we did back in the, in our training for our last fall was we really encouraged faculty to make a space in their Moodle shell, where they linked to different resources. So where they linked to you know, Indigenous Student Services, where they linked to the Wellness Centre, those kinds of things. I'm wondering if you had like a, you had like sort of a greatest hits list of things you wish faculty would direct students to more often, what would, what would those be?

Sarah Walz:

Oh, I think for this fall, I really do anticipate students will be, you know, will be feeling impacted by the return to campus and maybe feeling anxious and nervous. So certainly letting students know, letting your class know about Accessibility Services would be great. And we do have we have a PowerPoint slide

it's on our website that you can incorporate into a PowerPoint if that'd be helpful or, oh, the presentation. Yeah. a link

Brenna Clarke Gray:

To that as well in the show notes. So folks can find it quickly.

Sarah Walz:

Great. So certainly of course, but, but also to let students know about the other supports on campus: Counseling, and we have an Indigenous counselor that's specific to Indigenous students with what's been going on lately in particular; there's a Why Mind support group run through Counseling, which support is a support group for, for students with anxiety as part of their life. They usually meet Wednesdays. That's a great thing to let students know about. The Wellness Centre is doing some fantastic work and funding lots of different supports and services and events. So those, those in particular, I think for this year will be really key. And in the same topic, there's some fantastic apps out there. If you want to let your students know for things like anxiety, depression: Mind Shift is a great one, Calm there's, one called --

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm a big fan of Calm.

Sarah Walz:

Right? I know I love Calm.There's a -- for anxiety in particular, the Anxiety Canada website's great. And I was recently told about a resource that that I really have been referring to a lot called Kelty's Key -- yeah, K E L T Y Kelty's Key -- and it's a website and it was funded by Vancouver Coastal Health, and it's a free online health tool. So you can go use the tool to be connected with online therapy, or you can use the tool to guide yourself through self-help courses, which some folks would prefer. So there's topics for anxiety, panic, depression, substance use grief, all kinds of things. So that's another really cool one to refer to. There is a lot of support available, you know, also through, through TRUSU. So I think just letting students know that there's a whole team of people that our full-time job is to support you and your, you know, personal and emotional and academic success. So to, to just reach out and, and ask for help, but if you need it,

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I definitely remember feeling like I was the only person who was struggling when I was an undergrad and it wasn't until I got to graduate school and found a community of people who were talking more openly about just the impact that even just day-to-day stress has on our wellbeing that I really realized that, oh, you can actually like seek out resources for these things. And so, yeah, I think the more we talk about it with our students and with each other the more we, we normalize that seeking of support, that's so important.

Sarah Walz:

Absolutely. And, and it really is in all of our lives, right. We all are impacted by you know, disability or accessibility, one in six folks, right, have some -- in Canada -- some form of disability that impacts their life. 20% or so. Right. 22% was the TRU stat. So yeah, let's talk about it. Let's normalize. And, and I think, yeah, because it is it's, it's in part of all of our lives.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, it is. And you know, I, I was at Congress this last week at the Canadian Society for Studies in Higher Education and I was on a panel and one of the people in the panel said, you know, we could all do better as activists and allies in the higher ed space if we recognize ourselves less as able-bodied as like an identity character and, or an identity category, sorry. And more as though we are temporarily abled, because disability in some form or another, whether temporary or chronic, comes to everyone over the lifespan. And so thinking of it as something that we just all will need at some point in our lives, rather than a special circumstance that has to be dealt with on the individual level. I think that can be really helpful to understanding why something like UDL is such a necessary sort of change to make it our practice.

Sarah Walz:

Yeah. It's such a proactive way to look at life. I think that's fantastic and certainly aligns with UDL. And that, yeah, we will all need this one day, so let's build it in. Fantastic.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for your time, Sarah. I really appreciate it. And I'm so grateful because these questions have been coming up so often in sessions. So I'm just really grateful to have like half an hour of your time distilled down to share with people. So thank you so much.

Sarah Walz:

No, it was a pleasure, my first podcast experience.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh! You were great. You were a natural.

Sarah Walz:

Thank you. It was, yeah, it was. Thanks for having me.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care and we'll talk soon.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for episode 31 of You Got This! As always if you want to write to us you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter @brennacgray. And in both cases that's Gray with an A. All of our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. Of course, you can always comment on individual episodes there. I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. And I'm reflecting here on the kinds of supports that Sarah asked us to share with our classes.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Last term, we talked a lot about, as I said in the interview, building a little space in your Moodle shell to post resources. I'm going to ask you now that fall shells are appearing on your Moodle courses to think about doing the same thing for fall, and also to open up space, whether it's on your course outline or in conversation with your students to open up the conversation about access, to give space for students, to ask you for what they need. And maybe if you're open to it to spend some time now thinking about

what you're going to be able to accommodate and what you won't, and kind of having a plan for having a conversation about flexibility and deadlines and everything else we're rolling into a difficult fall. I think we all know that to be true. And the more we can plan for inclusion plan for kindness and plan for generosity, the more likely we are for that to be our baseline state, when we're called to do it. I learned that from my husband, who once upon a time was a Reservist, and he talked about how they train, they train so that their baseline level of competency in everything from shooting a machine gun to administering first aid is higher than it would be without training. Because when you're in a crisis, you fall back, you fall back to what you've practiced. So let's all practice to be the kinds of educators we want to be in the fall. And until next time, take care of each other and yourselves, and we'll talk soon. Bye-Bye.