

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and learning and sustaining community for everyone at Thompson Rivers University. I'm your host, Brenna Clarke Gray, Coordinator of Educational Technologies, and this podcast is a project of your friends over at Learning Technology and Innovation. We're housed within Open Learning, but we support the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc within the unceded, traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. Today, I'm thinking about play and joy, and I'm thinking about these things, even when I don't always feel playful and joyful, because I'm thinking about how we access that energy and bring it into our classrooms. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So, first of all, I have to tell you, I am still adjusting to this, working on campus, working at home thing. I'm recording this audio essay for the second time. I recorded it on campus on Tuesday when I was in my office, but between the massive amount of background noise and traffic and people walking in the hallway, I decided to rerecord it just to save you all of that. It's funny, isn't it? This transition we're going through. I don't love being back on campus. Don't get me wrong, I love seeing people, but my anxiety is definitely ever-present. And I can tell I'm not a hundred percent myself. I think that anxiety, uncertainty, these things are going to be with us for a while. And they're teaming up with our good friends, exhaustion and burnout to cause some trouble, I think. For me, I know that I'm struggling when I have a difficult time accessing feelings of playfulness and joy in my work.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

One of the best things about my job is I get to play with cool tools and toys all the time, and I get to show them to you. And I get to see the fun things you do with them. It was great on Tuesday because we started our Let's Play series. I'll link to that down in the show notes. And Brian and I were making animated gifs and memes with a group of attendees and it was super fun. I'll link to the results from the workshops so you can see what we got up to. I love that aspect of my job, but it was particularly good for me this week to remember that I do. And particularly to remember it on a day when I was on campus, I'm sort of two or three days on, two or three days off, depending on the week. And most of the time it's a good balance for me, but it was good to remember that I can actually have tons of fun on campus too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm thinking about this, not just because I'm having difficulty accessing playfulness and joy, but because I think some of our students are too. Anxieties are high and we don't really know what life experiences, often, our students are bringing to the class that might make them feel a little more vulnerable right now. I was talking with a student today, it's Thursday when I'm rerecording this essay, and she has close family in Alberta, and they just declared a new state of emergency last night. And she's feeling very disconnected and far away from her family and worried for them. Those feelings, they can't help but be coming to class. We come to class with our whole selves and our whole bodies. I'm advocating for playfulness and joy this week, not to ignore the reality of what our students are going through. You probably know me well enough by now to know that I would never recommend that, but to just be mindful of the role that our affective selves can play in the version of ourselves that we bring to class. And if there's a way you can help your students access joy in their subject material, I think it's probably a good time to tap into that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Speaking of joy and play. I think you're going to enjoy our interview today with Lindsay Blackstock. Lindsay teaches in the chemistry department here at TRU and she's got a lot of energy. She's an absolute delight, but listening to her, you can see how play and joy are central to the work that she does here at TRU. I think you're going to enjoy this one, but I'll let Lindsay take it from here.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Okay. I am here today with Lindsay Blackstock. Lindsay, would you introduce yourself and let people know where they might've seen you around TRU, if at all, you're kind of a new arrival. Sort of.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Thank you so much, Brenna, for having me on. I am really familiar with campus. In terms of in a capacity as a professor, I am newer here last year, 2020, in the fall was my first time ever teaching as a university professor. And before that I actually was a student at TRU so TRU was very close to my heart and I was a student here from 2009 until 2014. Other places, maybe, you might've seen is I did an Instagram takeover last year with TRU's Instagram page. And I have an Instagram page as well, Chem With Me, if you're interested in going along.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that.

Lindsay Blackstock:

It's my goal to be more involved with my Instagram and community outreach this year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Chem With Me because you teach chemistry?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Chemistry, yeah. Learn some chemistry with me. Come with me, learn chemistry. Either which way you want to put it together.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I like all the rhyming. This is good. Yeah. I think maybe of all the people I spent a lot of time working with last year, no one sort of scaled a larger mountain than you Lindsey, you got thrown into the experience of basically managing all of the first-year chemistry labs, right? Pretty much last year, fully online?

Lindsay Blackstock:

That is correct. It was a massive undertaking Brenna, and I wouldn't be here this year without the help of you and everyone else on the Moodle Support team. That's for sure.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. Well, I mean, it was a big job because not only did you have to learn the tools, but you guys, as a department, and really as the faculty of science as a whole, you really had to reconceptualize the idea of

how labs worked to make them work in a fully online context. Can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Sure. So what ended up happening last year, going into the fall semester as we were in the middle of the pandemic, there was a decision made that the first year chemistry labs would be delivered online. Traditionally, they're face-to-face, students are getting their hands in there, hands on the glassware, doing the experiments, collecting their own data. But because of the sheer number of first-year students, there's over 300, typically, each year, there was no way to effectively deliver that number of labs in a safe way. So we did move them online. And that was one of the biggest challenges of my life. I think.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Can you tell us a little bit about what kinds of activities students were doing online versus what they might've done face-to-face?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Sure. So if you can imagine, we historically had maybe eight different experiments that students would come into the lab and do, and the students would come in, they'd have their lab manual and they would follow a procedure. They would do some simple experiment, collect data, and then they would analyze that data or do some calculations with it and complete a lab report. Then they would hand that in for the next week. And what I needed to do was find a way to deliver those students the same learning outcomes without actually being there in person. So that included a lot of me doing the experiments and filming myself during the day and then editing those videos and coming up with fake data sets and coming up with different Moodle activities like H5P tour activities or different Moodle quizzes, or all sorts of different things to try to give students that tangible experience because when students are just given numbers and they're expected to work with those numbers and find meaning from that data, it's a huge disconnect for those students that haven't been in the lab and know where those numbers came from.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

How are you feeling about those students moving into second year and now really getting hands on, I would presume, with the science-y things? My degrees are in English, Lindsay. I have no idea what most of the stuff you talk about is.

Lindsay Blackstock:

That's okay. I don't know much about English either, except for what sounds right when I read it back to myself on the page, it's gotten me this far.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's not a bad way of doing things. It's the number one way I recommend. But anyway, do you have any worries about those?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Yeah. Back to those students. Yeah. I can talk about all my personal academic deficiencies to make everyone else feel comfortable. But for those students, it is a conversation that we had in the chemistry faculty. And because chemistry first year, it touches a lot of different degree programs in the bachelor of science. So you might have to take chemistry for a biology degree or natural resource sciences or all of these different streams you might be going down. So what we try to do is ensure that the key learning outcomes, that concept that the student was still able to take away that main message from the labs.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Now, students that are continuing on in bachelor of science, like in biology or chemistry, and have to take that core organic chemistry course, which is in second year, the organic chemistry coordinator, Christina, she is ensuring that there's going to be a lot more emphasis on these fundamental laboratory techniques that are going to be incorporated into this year's second year organic chemistry cohort. So we're trying to make sure that any of those students that are continuing on and doing any sort of chemistry labs, we are giving them additional support and training in this year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, cool. Well, that makes sense. I was going to say, it sounds like you're doing that really organically, huh?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Well, organically, I like, I liked that. I liked the pun. Is it a pun, would that be a pun?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I feel like that's a pun.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Is it? See again, here's my lack of English skills. You can teach me a lesson.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I want to ask you a little bit about the experience of teaching in a fully online way. Last year, you had this sort of unique position of being new to the institution and new to the very idea of being a full time university professor, and you kind of got thrown into what we can lovingly refer to as a mess. What was that like for you? What was that experience like?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Interestingly enough, TRU, so for a bit of background, Thompson Rivers University, I have been laser focused on coming to TRU throughout my entire PhD program. I have dreamed to come here and I'm so proud and grateful to now have a tenure track position here. And the reason why I wanted to join TRU is because it's student focused and I felt like there would be a really nice work-life balance, ha ha ha, coming to an institution like TRU that is student centered. And I actually had a very intense PhD program and I took a maternity leave through my PhD program, and I thought, wow, there's no way I can work harder than I did through my grad school. But yet we came here in September, in the fall. And it was the most work I've ever put into something in my entire life. And I feel like nothing, except for finishing a PhD with a newborn baby in the middle of a pandemic, nothing could have prepared me better for this experience.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It is so funny to hear you say that because when I started here in August of 2019, I had been teaching at a community college for nine years, and I had been teaching a four-four load for nine years. And I was pretty burnt out. And I had come back from my maternity leave and was like, I marking papers at like two in the morning and I was like, I don't want to do this anymore. I've got this kiddo. I love teaching. I love being in the classroom, but I'm a zombie around my own kid because I've got no time because I'm working English papers until two in the morning. And that was a big motivator for me and moving over to faculty support because it was like big, it's sort of nine to five, good work-life balance, you get a lot done during the day, but don't need to take a lot home. And that lasted for seven months.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I honestly, as soon as you started talking that I had the biggest grin in a weird commiserative way thinking, oh wow, you thought you were going to get some sort of reprieve and you joined the Moodle Support team Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's been such an intense year for everyone and our students have had an intense and dramatic year and our families have had these intense and dramatic years, but there's something particularly about being at the centre of the storm last year and the ways in which we all kind of flailed our way through it, I guess. It's a pretty unique experience. I'm not going to say I'm glad I had it, but it's definitely unique.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Well, one thing at least, and maybe I'm putting the cart in front of the horse a little bit, is it brings me to my positive mantras and getting through this year, it's something like Nelson Mandela. It always feels impossible until it's done. That is the positive thinking quote I introduce to all my first-year students to the semester with. And definitely if I can look back at everything that I had to accomplish and I'm sure for you as well, if you look back at the sheer amount of work that had to be done last year, it truly would feel impossible. And I don't know if I could do it again. It definitely felt impossible until we got through to the other side. But look, we made it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And on top of everything else, you also successfully competed for a tenure track position in the chemistry department here, right? Like, in the middle of all of that, you also accomplished that this summer.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Absolutely. It's one of the greatest, proudest things I've done. I feel so proud. I feel extremely grateful because I know how scarce the amount of tenure track positions are, especially for anybody that has their doctorate. So there was kind of like a two-fold situation happening last year where I didn't know that that job would be posted, but I was so set on being a professor here at TRU, it's truly been my dream. So I thought, wow, this is all or nothing. I am going to throw myself at the wall for this. And at least my personal philosophy in my personality type is that you can do anything as long as you put the effort in. And I just felt like, well, if nothing else, I will put in more hours and I will sleep less. And if anybody's going to try hard, it's going to be me. So I just felt like I will put in every spare second of the day towards it. And somehow we got through.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, I was thrilled to bits when I heard you had gotten the gig Lindsay, because I really enjoy working with you. And I was really impressed by the work you accomplished last year because it was massive.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Thanks.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Let's turn the, newly officially tenure track human that you are now, let's turn and think a little bit about this year. So I guess my first question is, you've been back in the classroom for like a week-ish. How's it going?

Lindsay Blackstock:

It has been really great so far. So one thing for sure last year that kept me going was student feedback. Now, granted, there was the good with the bad, there was students that were not happy and they were so unhappy they would tell you, very clearly, but you know what, that's understandable. You take it with a grain of salt, because everybody's in a hard position. But the amount of positive messages that I got from students last year really felt like the time and effort I was putting into it was worth it. And I was so excited because I have a very, to say the least, performative, enthusiastic personality. And I just...

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It doesn't come through at all.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I feel like you're being a bit sarcastic. For example, when I would film my videos in my office, I would always include my webcam on and I'd be trying to do things. And I talk with my hands. I'm very, again, performative. And sometimes I really struggled. I felt like I really just can't get across what I'm trying to say. So I got so excited for this year and it has been really fruitful in terms of even in the first two days I've had over five students come to me and just thank me for having an engaging class and that they really enjoyed my class. And a lot of them, it was their first class ever in university at all. So I really have been trying to put a lot of effort into prepping my lectures so that they can be really dynamic and have different bits of health and wellness, like sharing, I do a positive quote of the week. So I've done two of those so far and we'll see.

Lindsay Blackstock:

So, so far it's been great. My first class, I was very nervous. I was shaking and I was sweating and I was telling the students with transparency that this is my first class ever teaching humans with blood flowing through their veins in my immediate vicinity. So I think that they probably appreciated that I was honest with them and they felt nervous too. And it was nice that we kind of went through that first day together.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I like that. Is there anything, despite the modality being so different, is there anything that you learned last year that you're carrying forward with you into this new frontier?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Lots of things. Well, first I guess, the first one is how effective it can be to do a voiceover screen capture to explain a concept. If a student has a question through email and it would take so long to type out, you could just do a little screen record video and you can bring up the lecture side or you can, for me, I have a stylist and a little artwork, digital pad. I don't know what they're called, and so I can do a little mini five minutes lecture post it to everybody and we can all share and it's a really effective use of time. And then all students get to benefit from the same question. So that's definitely something that I think maybe before last year being thrown into being so tech savvy, that's something that maybe I would have felt was a much more arduous task than it actually is. And it's a big time saver.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I do that on Moodle Support all the time. I'll start to type a response to someone and I'm like, Hmm, you know what? And just fire up Loom and walk them through the steps. And it's a minute and a half long and they get it all in one go and they can watch it again. They can go over it a couple of times. And it's amazing how much a part of my regular workflow that has become. And I don't think it would have before last year for sure.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Absolutely. I'm a hundred percent agree. The other thing that I am carrying forward, I guess, so this will carry on, I guess my mantra for this year, as I mentioned, I'm very into mantras and positive thinking. My mantra for this year is less is enough because I'm a more is more person and more is more just leads you to more burnout and sometimes less is enough. And there's kind of diminishing returns, sometimes, when you stay up, I'm a perfectionist. And sometimes spending that extra time to really perfect something isn't going to take the students further. So that is one major thing. So less is enough. And that kind of translates into my ensuring not to underestimate the time it takes to administrate things...

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, you learned that the hard way last year.

Lindsay Blackstock:

...in a lecture. Yeah. On Moodle and things. So especially this semester, coming back, needing to accommodate students that are being at home. So it's this really interesting. I was of two minds. You don't want to penalize students that are staying home because they're quarantining or they're unwell. And they are trying to be a good community member and not spread their illness. So you don't want to penalize those students. You don't want it to be a detriment to them that they haven't come to the class, but also it's not feasible to do dual delivery of recording lectures or administrating to these students. If a student emails me and they say, oh, I missed the lecture. It's just not possible for me to go in and restrict access for them to see one lecture.

Lindsay Blackstock:

So I really thought long and hard about how I would do this because with two sections of first year chemistry, I have 140 students. So if I'm accommodating students being at home, there's essentially not going to be any time through the whole semester that all the students were there. So I decided to do dual delivery through the BigBlueButton. So I have went full force into BigBlueButton this semester and I am very, very happy about it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was a little scared, heart in my throat a little bit when people start talking about BigBlueButton.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I am loving the BigBlueButton specifically due to its minimal administration requirements. I love it because I am advertising my BigBlueButton as a broadcast. I am not advertising it as a virtual classroom because it's not possible for me to check in on that BigBlueButton class as I'm lecturing. But what I do is, I start a BigBlueButton and then I get the room going and for whatever reason, in the room that I'm in, in the science building, the little microphone on that tiny little webcam just doesn't want to connect. So I hook up my wired headphones and I string them around my neck and I'm kind of attached to the computer, but I share my screen. I get my audio going and I have the webcam going and that's enough for the students to be able to tune in and they don't miss out on anything.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I don't do any notes on the whiteboard. I do all my notes on the screen. And so far it's been great. And because I have two sections, I'm teaching the same course twice. This last week, there's been several technological hiccups with me., for example, I didn't notice that the webcam audio wasn't working. So I blindly trusted it and there was no audio. And then another time, oh, I got my headphones working, but then I muted my headphones from the little toggle control on the wire. I didn't mute it on my BigBlueButton screen, but I had muted it on my headset.

Lindsay Blackstock:

So I am lucky because I teach two sections the same class each day that I can very simply import my recording from the other class. And I'm just telling the students, look, you have thinking capable minds. I shouldn't need to change the name of this recording. You can just sort by the date and find it yourself. So it's very much a, I record everything, I don't think too much about it, and it's still quite low maintenance for me to maintain. So I'm very happy with the system I've figured out.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love this for a couple of reasons. The first is that you set expectations with students, like this is a broadcast to help you keep up when you have to be home. It's not a replacement for being in class. It doesn't have the sort of question and answer component. That's something that happens in class, but you can follow up in office hours if you have questions. And yeah, it's there, the date's on it. You can figure it out. I love both of those pieces. The expectations are really clear for students. So often one of the things that we hear a lot in our office is that students have these really high expectations of what's going to be available to them. But I find that that is often sort of a spinoff of them not having enough information. If they know where you're coming from and what you're able to offer and what your expectations are. They're pretty happy to just have those parameters in place and work with them in my experience.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I agree. And I think another thing that I learned as well is not to lower the bar for students, because I think the students, especially if they're coming from high school, we don't know what their high school was like. And some students in high school, maybe they had a lot of support from their teacher and maybe their teacher really helped them out more than they maybe needed to. So it's left these students



without the skills to look for the information themselves and as the instructor or the professor, you know the information. It's so easy for you to just answer their email.

Lindsay Blackstock:

But what I'm learning this year is to spend the extra two minutes to, instead of telling them the answer, showing them where to find it, so that they then can figure it out for themselves later, rather than them just coming back to me the next time for a really fast answer. And I find that making the students work a little bit more for a piece of information that's very clearly listed in the course outline, it helps me out in the future. I'm helping out my future Lindsey self by having those students have the skills to check the course outline first, as an example.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, no, it's a really good point. And it also sets, again, you're setting the expectation. You're setting the expectation of what students should be doing. They go to check the syllabus before they send you an email. That's a great workflow for any student who has a question in a course, and it's a workflow that will be consistent for them across their courses if they get into the habit of it in first year chemistry. So it makes a lot of sense for their own university careers as well. This has been great. You're very inspiring. You get me really excited about being here and I don't always feel that way these days, so I appreciate that.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I will always cheerlead your life. That's my biggest thing. I love to be a cheerleader. I am so optimistic and enthusiastic a lot of times, it actually annoys my husband because he is not that way. And I love to get excited for people and if I believed in myself even more, I would be a motivational speaker. I believe so much, but it's actually this great thing because wow, teaching first year chemistry, I kind of do get to be a motivational speaker because I can tell students, you can do it. You're capable of doing these chemistry calculations. Let's break it down. Let's make you feel capable. I want students to leave my class feeling like, wow, this really makes sense. And, and chemistry is not nearly as bad as I thought. It's always about just finding the way that inspires the students to pay attention or coming up with a mnemonic that they won't forget. And I am happy to make myself the butt of the joke for the benefit of the students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love this. I love this. We're getting just towards the end of our time together. Is there anything else you want to share with listeners about your teaching and learning experiences so far, or your hopes for this year or any other positive affirmations you want to leave us with before we go?

Lindsay Blackstock:

Sure. Well, at least for me, I really care about student experience because I've been a student my whole life. I still cringily feel like I could be one of the students in my classroom. It doesn't feel that far away. So I want the students to have a really great experience and effective teaching's really important to me. And I really value at the University of Alberta because I had set my sights on coming to TRU. I took it upon myself to do the graduate teaching and learning courses. So there was several different levels that I took of that teaching training and joining TRU here, I take a lot of courses with CELT, or the CELT Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, and I find that their courses are so helpful and they provide a

really great foundation. As well as definitely like just, just taking advantage of the resources that are at TRU.

Lindsay Blackstock:

And I find that, for a new faculty member, it's not always clear how many resources you really have at your fingertips. And remembering that because TRU is a small university, that it really is a human being on the other end. And it's somebody that you can talk to and that really probably wants to help. So reaching out like, I can't say Brenna, you know how much I spent in the Moodle support, how much time. So I'm happy. I like to throw myself into all sorts of different types of education. And I feel like if it wasn't for being really open-minded and having a really low ego, as much as I love to teach, I acknowledge that I'm very early in my teaching career and that there's so much for me to learn. So I am always trying to find mentors and trying to take classes and do all sorts of things, get feedback surveys for my students. I'll try to improve my teaching. So that is kind of a long-term, I want to be really great professor. That is my goal.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Lindsay, this was great. You're such a delight.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Thanks Brenna. You too. You're like my E-bestie.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. We've never actually met in real life. That's so strange.

Lindsay Blackstock:

I know.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I know. Well, soon.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Very soon. Well, thank you so much, Brenna. I'm always happy to chat with you. And I guess also if somebody made it this far into this interview, you can always Google pee in pools and you can check out some of the weird and wacky research that I did during my PhD. And if you like Mark Rober, I did a video with him on YouTube too. So if you're ever curious about pee in pools or artificial sweeteners, you can come email me or knock on my office door. I'm always happy to talk about that too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

When Lindsay told me about the time she went viral re pee in pools, I spent like three days reading articles. So it just, yeah, totally. It was fascinating. And also it made me grossed out about pools.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Oh no. We have to have a follow-up conversation then. It's all about the relative risk and the perception of risk.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I know it wasn't really, I know that wasn't your take home message, but...

Lindsay Blackstock:

But that was the media's take home message. And that's why we'd have to be critical thinkers and critical readers of the media because the media is lazy. That is what I learned in that experience.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's true. Some day I want to talk to you about your viral experience. I think that'd be fun.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Absolutely. I'd love to anytime, Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Right on take care of Lindsay. Thanks for your time today.

Lindsay Blackstock:

Have a great day.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode three of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. And 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 [yougottthis.trubox.ca](http://yougottthis.trubox.ca). And of course you can always comment on individual episodes there.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. My Tiny Teaching Tip this week is to bring that joy and levity and playfulness to your classroom this week if you can. You can see how Lindsey does it. I think that if you've got a funny YouTube clip that relates to your subject matter, maybe you teach English and there's a great Simpsons clip about a text you're looking at. Maybe you teach something in the sciences and you can bust out some very retro Bill Nye to share with your students. Maybe there's an activity or a game you can play. Maybe you ask students to explain a concept or review a text using memes or gifs. Whatever it is, I hope you can find a little place to let your students blow off some academic steam this week. We're early in the semester for it to feel this uncertain across campus. And I think just being mindful of the way our students are feeling and helping them to access the joy that we have in our subject matter, it's a good moment. Until next time, I'm working on my own joyfulness and playfulness. I hope you are too. I'm looking forward to seeing you next week. Take care.