

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello, and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching and learning and sustaining community for the whole of 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'emlups te Secwepemc within the unceded traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And if my voice sounds funny this week, it's because I'm sick. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So it might surprise you to know this, but I'm very, very bad at being sick. I don't like to take time off. I don't like to rest. I get super cranky when I'm limited in what I can do. My son changed day cares this fall, and as a result, he's sick because kiddos always get sick when they change day cares, new germ ecosystem, and he's brought it home with him. And thankfully, the kind of disclaimer you have to make, when you're in the middle of a plague, we've been through the self assessments. We've talked to public health. We haven't been sent for testing, thankfully, no fevers, just so much snot. Not me, him. Him, I swear. Me, just, like, sinus pain.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You can hear in the background that I'm not on my own and haven't been all week. And it's interesting because I know that for about six months, I did this every day, right? For about six months, my house was a day care. This is how we worked. And yet I'm not sure if it's the duration that all of this has gone on, or something related to burnout or what, but I feel like my brain is just full of bees. Like someone took my brain out of my head and just replaced it with thousands of bees. That is what it feels like to be inside my brain right now, just bees. So many bees. I'm thinking about all this this week, because I can't think about anything else, because I haven't gotten anything else done, but also because it's a good reminder that I can speak as intentionally as I want to about rest, but unless I actually am able to enact it, I'm not going to make any change. And I think that means both personally and systemically.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Anyway, you'll hear in the interview this week that my voice is not what I usually hope it would be. Although maybe it's a nice kind of like Lauren Bacall thing. Do you think I can sell it? And maybe I should have just taken the week off to rest, but I didn't. This whole thing, this whole being human thing, it's a real learning process. Hey, I'm not sure. I'm not sure I'm ever going to get better at it. I keep hoping I will. Every time I'm sick, I'm reminded of the role of embodiment in our pedagogy, right? We can say all the right things, but can we embody them? Can we enact them?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This week I'm feeling like a bit of a hypocrite, but that's okay because I have a great conversation to share with you with someone who does embody progress and being fully human. I'm joined this week by Alicia Ashcroft, and I'm grateful to her for the vulnerability and the openness she shares in our talk this week. I'm going to leave it up to her.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I am here today with Alicia Ashcroft. I feel excited to be the person interviewing you Alicia, because I think you are normally in this role. Would you mind introducing yourself to listeners and let them know where they might have seen you around campus or online?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh yeah, absolutely. So yes, my name is Alicia Ashcroft. My pronouns are she/her, and I am the writer and storyteller for the faculty of student development. And where you would've seen me most likely most recently is hosting What's On at TRU, which is an Instagram live show that we do each week. And we've done lots of videos over the past couple of years. So students definitely know me from our video production side of things.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Tell me about this role of being writer and storyteller. How did you come into that and what does day-to-day life look like for you on campus?

Alicia Ashcroft:

All right. First of all, it's so important to acknowledge, yes, I'm so rarely on the other side of an interview, this is a real treat for me to be just led through a conversation as opposed to leading. So I've been in this role at this point, actually I just celebrated my fifth anniversary. The writer and storyteller position was based off of a role that had been very successful at Ryerson University, and I stepped into the role and at the time it was a permanent... There was a couple of very short little contracts and we weren't entirely sure what the work would look like. And actually primarily at the beginning we were featuring staff and faculty, but over time as we've grown in the work and seen what people are interested in, not that they're not interested in the lives of staff and faculty, but we have been featuring students a lot more. And then that staff and faculty are behind the scenes in that narrative.

Alicia Ashcroft:

So I often think about the formula of the work that we do in terms of connecting students with our programming. Our student services is, what was the struggle? What was the solution and who helped you along the way? So we really always try to touch on those in our work. And over the past three years, we've been increasing the work that we do with students. So I manage a student storyteller squad. Thank you very much. And we're working with co-op students and work study students and Riipen-funded students. Actually this year we have a team of eight. And so then the work is becoming a lot more about featuring the students, helping them make sense of what they're dealing with and resolving those issues in real time and reporting on that to others, to really help break down the barriers of accessing supports.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to say your role must have changed quite a lot last year, just in that it's always been a community building role, but all of a sudden how you go about building community really, I would imagine anyway, it really shifted last year.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Well, actually, and it's so funny that you say this, because I was just reflecting on that today as we're finalizing our annual report. I mean, last year was a banner year for content creation because that's really all we had. We weren't able to gather, but I think when I think about the work of last year and I think of the pandemic in general, what will never fail to touch my heart is how people try to reach each other and how people try to connect. And I think the students, and we really see that now being back on campus, there is a real hunger for connectivity to be seen, to be heard, to be part of a community. And so I think there was that same drive over the pandemic. And so the work really became about working with the students by MS Teams and texting and FaceTime and really creating a virtual community, and honestly working with the students over the past year.

Alicia Ashcroft:

I mean, I always love working with students. They're the heartbeat of my work, but over the pandemic, that I think was so crucial and critical to be connected with students, to keep you grounded in the purpose and never losing sight of what we need. So I mean, last year we did Instagram Lives that I or the students were hosting or student groups were doing virtual coffee sessions. And so there was an infinite amount. So as we were reflecting for the annual report, we were overwhelmed with the materials that we had created with the students. And that's really fun. I think that's definitely the biggest shift of the work is I'm not necessarily the one solely creating, it's working with the students to create an idea and then helping them bring it to life as part of the team, because there are other people that work with the team as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Such an interesting transferable skill to be working with students on, right? This ability to tell a story in a way that is meaningful. It's surprisingly not a huge part of often the curriculum of their classroom. And yet it's so critical to their ability to translate what they do here out into their life beyond, right?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh, absolutely. And I think about that so much about what skillset a student has and really sometimes having to stop and think, okay, well, let's learn how to write an email. Let's [inaudible 00:10:16]. Let's develop those administrative skills before we necessarily get to that project. And I think that's been really educational for me. I think sometimes, especially when we get really busy, I think we can talk in shorthand and I think with the students, you really do want to break it down really clearly. I'm going to give a shout out to my comms coordinator, Krista, who always refers to clarity is kindness. And so that's a big part is we want to be so clear. We want to break it down in the steps, and so a big part of the output is the learning, how to facilitate an interview, how to do a call out, how to write a blog and edit. And I think that's the thing.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Sometimes it's like, oh, we'll write a blog and post it on WordPress and then we'll post it on social media. Well, there are so many more steps to that process. And so I think students need to be reminded of how many steps, and we need to be reminded of how many steps are required to get through an entire project. And then that helps the individual make sense of that. Because I think it's really easy to feel very overwhelmed by how much work any particular project is. I'm really trying to prevent that creative paralysis, if you're like, as we all can identify with, when we're staring at a blank page or being

faced with an enormous project and not knowing where to start, and that becomes a big part of it is, where can we start and what are the steps and how can we work collectively to get to the end point?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I'm fascinated by all of this because this is so much of what we do on our side of the desk. You can say to someone, "Just post it to your Moodle or whatever," but if they don't know the steps, then that's not helpful. And I've been thinking about that clarity piece a lot, just around miscommunication. I feel like you can tell the rhythm of the semester over at Moodle support because there's a point in the semester where people just get... they just stop reading their emails. They're asking for help, but it's difficult to communicate what they need and it's hard to get the response back. It's a stress level thing. And I was thinking that as excited as everyone is to be back on campus, we have hit that point much earlier in the term than usual. I can really feel the sense of just uncertainty and anxiety. And I can always tell it around this communication piece. It's like when communication starts to break down, I know that folks are hitting that point. How are the student students doing? You get to work so closely with them. You must have a good sense of the effective experience of being on campus right now for students.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Well, you can't see it, but I've been listening to you and just nodding my head very slowly. And I will preface it by, before jumping into how the students are. We think about that so much in communications, and thinking about how we can get students to just skim the material. That's what I ask. Just skim it. Just give it a little peruse, see what... Because it's all of those materials give you the clues, the tips, the insights, the next steps, that help you get the support that you need. And we think so much so about how we can't control how someone perceives or receives or responds to our materials. So we can't. And again, thinking about the next step of like... And that's a huge part of our work is thinking there are people that have heard about the services and yet haven't accessed the services. And why is that?

Alicia Ashcroft:

And so thinking, how do we take those communications and how can we help propel it into some kind of action and then I'll connect it to the work that we do with students, in which any student that has worked with me knows that they'll say, "Oh, I'm having a problem with this." And it's like, "Okay, okay. Here's a solution, but also this is content." So reminding the students that they're not alone, and that this is really helpful. If a student doesn't know how to use Moodle or doesn't understand a term. Like we were in a meeting and we were talking about tabling, which is standing at a table and greeting people and having swag. And someone goes, "Okay, sorry, what is tabling?" Wow. okay. Let's take a quick minute. Let's explain that then.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And I was really struck by thinking, we're talking about tabling and we know what it is, and then not necessarily making space or just not catching that someone's like, "This whole conversation is lost to me because I don't know what you mean." And so I just said, "Thank you so much for asking that, because I'm going to assume that you asking also indicates there are other people that are quietly, like, I don't know what that is, but I might not..."

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Totally.

Alicia Ashcroft:

So that's part of that, and to respond to the other question about how students are dealing, I think it's a real mixed bag. I think that there's a real enthusiasm to connect socially. I know our team of storytellers. They have a group chat and it is lit, and they are really... they're hanging together. They're having fun together. They're really excited to be with each other. But then I also think that that can really impact time management and also just the facilitation of your projects. Like someone was like, "All of these due dates and deadlines are rolling in. How dare they?" So I think that, and I know for myself, I have absolutely no qualms about saying, I feel really fractured mentally in the return, because it just feels like a whole new ballgame. And I think we have a heightened sense of sensitivity around just the outside world.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And so I think that some students are feeling really excited, but then it's hard, I think, to manage your energy and that there's a possible sensory overload. So all of the students are really ricocheting between different checkpoints of their emotions. And then this is where we're coming in and thinking, well, this might be a good opportunity to check in with a counsellor, check in with Early Alert, check in with the Wellness Centre, and looking for solutions and coping strategies to help them navigate these really high highs and these potentially low lows.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's so interesting as you say that, because I've been reflecting on this a lot. I've noticed as I talk to faculty that there's, depending on... I mean, not everybody can, right? Depending on your schedule, but it's certainly something I've found for myself. I'm really settling into a rhythm, not this week, because I have a sick kiddo at home, but generally a couple days on campus, couple days at home, sort of floating between those two. And I'm liking that because I do find now that being on campus for a long period of time, it's draining in a way that it didn't used to be, like I was standing in the Starbucks line, which is somehow still infinite and I was thinking like, wow, there's so many people. And I'm thinking so much about where other people are in proximity to me. And I'm thinking about the sensory experience of wearing my mask, right? There's all these things that were never part of my world before. And then I think about the fact that I can choose to do that. I can choose to be on campus a couple of days and off campus a couple of days, but many of our students can't, their schedules just don't work out that way. And I'm talking to faculty more about managing this sense of overwhelm and thinking about how we're feeling it and how others are feeling it. For some reason, I particularly think about second year students because they had such a strange first year experience, and second year is supposed to be when you hit the stride, right? You got to figure things out right before that difficulty jump that comes in third year. And they have like a new, another first year as they start to navigate all this stuff, how we make space for each other to manage these very different experiences of the return that we're all having.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh yeah. I feel all of this. And actually we have said there's the new-to-TRU students and then there's the NEW-new-to-TRU students. There's a lot of... And again, I have to remind myself, I am very open about the fact that I live with a mental health condition and that I had to put a lot of, honestly, a lot of planning and prep and reflection in preparing for the return. And honestly, I kept really trying to manage my language to say I don't want to... Actually, this is Trevor Noah, the talk show host who said it, but he's like, "I don't want to go back. I want to go forward." And oh, that has stuck with me, that I really wanted to think about it as going forward and doing things differently.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And actually over the summer I had booked a counselling appointment. I booked a Reiki appointment. I booked because I like to do body work and energy work. And I booked all of these things that I've had these appointments over the past couple of weeks. And I was like, "Past me, kudos to you for looking out for present day me." Because I have felt really, really emotional. And I have felt mentally fractured because I think too, one of the... To me, as having a very active mind, a monkey mind, if you will, that there was something about remote working that I really liked because it helped me really narrow my focus, where a message from a student, I'm going to respond. An email's come up, I'm going to respond. You were able to have this very singular focus.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And then I've had moments where that there are many students in front of me and each one has a question and I need to respond to that question and set them up for them to move forward and just feeling really activated by that. And I said to someone, I said that I keep thinking that the Levi's jeans label on the back of jeans where the two horses are pulling the denim in different directions. And I'm like, "I am that denim, I am." And so that's been something to be really thoughtful about for myself about like how I can ensure that I'm caring for people, but also caring for myself and managing those pieces. So I think we're all in this really funky place. And so we've been chatting amongst our team and our students of how do we provide context? How do we make space for follow up? How can we possibly apologize or check in?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Again, that feels like, I think again, a real concern for me is just like I don't want to accidentally cause harm because I'm sitting at my desk really dealing with some internal push-pull and then someone inadvertently comes over to ask a question and I'm not able to receive them in that way. And I feel like that's a fear for me and then having to just go, "It's okay. It's okay." If you feel that you've stepped a foot wrong or been sharp in a response, that you're able to check in or that people will understand that we're all... And I have to remind myself that I alone have not just been on the moon and I'm returning to earth, that everyone else has been living normally, that everyone has been dealing with their own world, their own inner and outer world during the pandemic. And we're all coping in different ways.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, it is so interesting, isn't it? That I think a lot of the rhetoric, the discourse around this moment has been like, yeah, you're right. A return or a going back or everything is sort of normal. And there's definitely been, I think a lot of faculty are struggling with the guidance they receive around like, well, just do what you would've done before, except that what I would've done before, didn't have like 10 students absent and three who don't want to come in the room and a bunch who don't want to do group work together. What I did before doesn't feel realistic right now. And so there's this sense at which I think many of us feel like we should feel better about the being back and when we don't, that is another whole thing to navigate. Our team is very... we tend to all have quite sarcastic senses of humour. We definitely use humour as the valve release when we're under pressure. And we've all recognized that we just have to be a lot gentler with each other, with our humour, because things aren't landing the way they once did and this sort of openness to changing our approach, open to apology, open to talking about struggle, in this moment when all the discourse is about celebration is really kind of... I don't know what the word for it is, disorienting a little bit.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh, I really feel that. And to extend on that thought, there were lots of times during the pandemic where working remotely, where my central nervous system was in the best place.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, me too.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And I have lived a life with lots of trauma punctuating different points of my life, and it really impacts me mentally, emotionally, as well as physically. It manifests in lots of different ways. And so there were times that I was at peace and it was like my dirty little secret because I felt that it would be so disrespectful knowing that so many people were literally in danger of their lives. And it was a pandemic, but it was something that I had noticed because you just didn't have those same social impacts. And I know that for anyone that's listening, that knows me and knows that I was very active in the community and I was a performer and a host. And I was involved with lots of things. And I don't know if that's something that I can return to at least at that pace.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Because I look back on that and think, that struck me as being manic behaviour, because you really had to be like, go, go, go, go, go, go. And you didn't really have those points to recharge. And then there was something again about the pandemic that it felt like permission to slow down. It felt like things were taken off of your plate. And to me at that point in March, 2020, of course you didn't know how long the road would be, but it did feel like a relief to have less to do. And there was just something about just all of that. And so moving forward into a more public capacity, it's been something that I've really struggled with and been open about.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And then thinking, well, how do I care for myself? How do I survive this? How is this going to be sustainable? Because I think, and I hope that the culture can continue to shift that there will be hybrid model options for more people as we move forward. Because I think we can't put this genie back in the bottle. There are things that we have done differently that could be continued to be done differently or finding a new way to achieve that mix of that public front-facing collaborative performative work and making space for that deep thinking productivity in which you're having to write something.

Alicia Ashcroft:

If you're constantly having that flow interrupted, not only is it problematic for your productivity, but it's really challenging mentally. We've had moments where we're trying to chat with someone actually. And I live in hyper-vigilance and that's something I haven't had to deal with. And I find I'm going to need one of those neck braces, because I'm like in the hallway and talking to someone and it's like my head just keeps jerking at all these different... Because it's like, squirrel, person, what? What's going on? And then afterwards the brain is like, oh, you weren't necessarily successful in that social interaction. I thought you were weird. And I don't know if you've had that where you have a social interaction and afterwards it's like, was that weird? Was I okay? Did I say a wrong thing? And I checked in with someone about something and they were like, "Oh, that did not register." Oh really? Because I obsessed about it for a solid hour afterwards.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's like learning how to be in the world again. And some aspects of it, I don't want back. I've been thinking especially, I have a four-year old and I didn't think of us as a particularly over-scheduled family before. But when everything after school and weekend got canceled, it was great. It was like, oh, we don't actually just have to spend our lives rushing between things in this fever desire to enrich every experience. And then I think about how we have that conversation with our students too, who are in this moment, I think. From the few students I get to speak to, it really seems like they want to make up for lost time. They want to make up for last year, they want to pick up on all the experiences they didn't get to have.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And my heart goes out to them because that feeling is awful to be living in, and at the same time, there's no rush, right? And I could not hear that message when I was 21, when people told me there was no rush and there was no timeline and I didn't have to sprint through my undergrad. Those were messages that I couldn't hear. But I so badly want to have those conversations because I hope if we learn nothing else, can we put away hustle culture after 18 months of pandemic? I don't know.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh my gosh. 100%. And I thank you for saying that because I have to remind myself when working with students that I'm a grown woman and I have been through a lot of work in myself. But when I was a student, I was not an exemplary student and it took me really up until I about graduated basically, that last year where I was like, "I finally figured it out. Oh, I graduate now? Okay." So reminding myself of where the students are at in their lives. Because I honestly... There were points in the pandemic where I think I was having what I could describe as end-of-life feelings. And not that I thought I would die, but I really felt like a chapter of my life was really closing.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And so I was able to reflect on, I've had some good times. I've worn some crazy costumes. I've had some really grand adventures in terms of my performative life. But feeling as though I didn't know how that would look in the post-pandemic world and what my place would be in that. And if that was something I felt that I was capable of in terms of energy output, because it's a big job. It's a lot of energy, it takes a lot of recovery. And so reflecting on like, I'm really glad I had all of these things and all these opportunities and experiences. And perhaps that is what's driving this new chapter of feeling like I do not have the capacity to do it all. And I need to be very thoughtful about what I choose. And at this point being like, "I want to be really good at my job." And that's not just my output about my relationships in my job, about my relationships with my students, about how I take care of myself in this work.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And then also taking care of my relationships and my home outside of that and feeling like, okay, my plate is really full. And so thinking though that there is that urge that students and other folks are feeling of that we need to get back to living. Although someone had said that, that we need to get back to living our lives. And I was like, "Oh, I've been low key living my life." Because I think you had the chance to rest and slow down and read a book and those things. So I think there's lots of different definitions of how you can be living your life. And I think I would encourage a student to write it all down, make that long list of all the things you want to do. And then let's choose one or two right now. Because again, I think that potential of trying to do it all, and I can attest to it, that you wind up doing a whole bunch of things



poorly, or that you sacrifice your own health and wellbeing to do all of those things. And you have to think about what that return is.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And also the great joy of actually taking your time on the things you care about, right?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So often what ends up happening when your plate gets so full is you move quickly through everything, and the outcome might be fine. The person who is on the delivery end of that might be like, "Well, this is great." But did you get to spend that growth and development time with the thing that brings you great pleasure? And if the answer is no, then I'm increasingly coming to the question of, well, then what is the point? Where does my own personal fulfillment and growth fit into that very heavily latent plate?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And I think too, I can [relive-review 00:32:33] my own life and the work that I've done and the things that I've achieved and really assessing what I was looking for. And did I get that? Is that what I needed at the time? And so I think it's really, again, that was space that was made. I mean, I'm an avid fan of therapy and I've been going for a number of years. So there's always been that thread, but in particular, in the pandemic, especially losing a lot of things that were entangled in my identity about being a performer, about being a particular kind of personality. And the students know me on campus as the ridiculous Ms. Ashcroft, and that's still a portion of who I am, but that is not exclusively who I am.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And I can attest to the fact that over the year, I guess more than a year, that I've really come into my introversion. And I think that maybe that was what was causing a lot of tension, was really feeling as though the expectation of me was to be this outlandish extrovert. And then being at home all of this time and just really like, wow, I am at peace, there is a calm. Not to say that there weren't stressful points, but that there was a general sense of wow, the outside world impacts me so deeply. And that was one of my key concerns about moving forward into the post-pandemic realm was, how am I to manage those pieces?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, this is... it's funny. Last week or a week before, for another project I interviewed Cate Denial, she's writing a book called Pedagogy of Kindness. And one of the things she was saying in that interview is this idea of like, the critical nature of the examined life, if you're going to help other people. And so whether that's being your best self as a teacher, or being your best self as a mentor, that's impossible to do in the absence of an examination of your own life. And I was like, "Well, that was mean, don't say that to me directly. I was thinking that this is you and I talking." And it's really true because as we help people to navigate through this very complicated time, it really does demand a clear sense of what you need and who you are, and who that person is. And it's complicated. It's just such a complicated time.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh, it really is. But I feel like one of the things that I have stopped pushing against, or at least I've gotten better at catching myself, is having an unrealistic expectation of myself. I really have just come to settle into the idea that I have a mental health condition and there are certain things that I will always, always, always need to look out for and check in with and maintain. And I've stopped thinking that there's going to be an endpoint of, I will have fixed it or cured it or solved it. It will just always require a certain amount of management. And I have been so supported by the faculty of student development in particular, Sarah Wolf has been my ride or die on this journey and all along, she's known that that's something that I've been grappling with and working on. And of course this moving forward into being on campus has been really emotional for me and she's... So then it makes it easy.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And I tell this to students, that sharing your context and making a mental health plan, you want to do those things on a good day because you don't want to have this panic attack and it's, "Okay. Well, let me just quickly tell you this story. It started the day I was born." And the more that we can have these conversations, so when an emergency strikes or something happens that someone understands and they know, and it's okay, and they can help you. And so that's a message that, again, I think that's part of it too, is having this narrative and being so open about what I was like as a student, what I had been through as a student, how my mental health impacts me, how I manage that.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And that is an open book for students because I really, really, really want to normalize mental health support and living with mental health concerns. And you can still be a fabulous, spectacular, productive person, but that might just be something that you need to manage. And I think, and I hope that that does mean something to students, so that knowing that this wisdom or advice is coming from a deeply authentic place, and from a lived experience, and being able to share that. So if you ever catch an Instagram Live, it would be not uncommon for me to say, "I was in counselling last week and my counsellor brought this really interesting point, and I want to pass that forward and pass that along." Because I want people to feel as though that that's not a secret, we don't have to whisper that. We want to just shout it out that we're getting help. And isn't that spectacular? Isn't that brave?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's such important modelling. And it's so different than my own experience as a student, which is not so long ago. But I think about how different the conversations were around accessing support, how unlikely it was to hear an instructor or a mentor or someone in a position of authority say, "Not just you should go and get these resources, but here's how I made use of these resources when I was a student. Here's how I look after myself now." Those conversations absolutely didn't feel possible and they're totally possible now. And isn't that remarkable?

Alicia Ashcroft:

It is so exciting to me, honestly. And I had submitted an essay to the TRU history book as one of their influencers, which was a tremendous honour, and reflecting on... Actually I started university 20 years ago this year, which was very confronting to look at them, figure that out. I was like, "Oh my God." And really thinking about, when I was a student experienced a life disturbance. I was sexually assaulted and it was very devastating. And I didn't know about supports, and really the supports as they are today were not how they were 20 years ago. There wasn't a sexual violence prevention and response office.

And a big shout out to that team for their incredible work that they do. So obviously for me, as a young person that went through that, there was so much I didn't know, and I didn't know to access supports. And you're not thinking clearly if you experience anything like that.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And so that's, again, a huge thread of importance in this work, is being able to model by example and look to where we can create those narratives, that it's not just that these services exist. How can you utilize them? How could they support you? Who are the people? What would that look like? And with SVPR, it's really important for me to express when we do presentations, it's not just for recent survivors. If you're a historic survivor, you can access that support at any given point, because grief is a shape shifter, and you might not be ready to tackle that at any particular point, but when the time comes that you're like, "Okay." And that happened to me that it really started to encroach. There was just this shadow that I couldn't seem to move away from. And that team actually was one of my very first step when I first started in this role. Because it was like, wow, right, there's a real trauma hotspot for me at this place.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And they were able to really help me get to a place in which then I have that consistent support and have the ability to manage and maintain those trauma experiences. And again, then sharing that with other students and normalizing it so that they feel as though like, yes, I too could change my life with the help. And I think too, it's so important to know you're not alone. You might feel so alone in whatever it is. It doesn't have to be a significant trauma. Sometimes it just hurts to be alive. You feel it, school is hard and learning how to learn. I was not a strong student academically and I definitely did not get high marks, especially in my early years. And that of course takes a toll on your confidence, right? So I think there's something about remembering as a student, that you're learning how to learn. You're learning about this subject.

Alicia Ashcroft:

I often say, otherwise you'd be the professor teaching the class. You're here in this space because you're not familiar with this subject, but how do we help you have all of those pieces in place in terms of your social, academic, personal wellbeing, so you're able to come into that class and focus? And if you're not focusing, that there's a support for anything that's plaguing you and that's possibly where you have to grow into that self-awareness. And I think there are lots of points in my life in which things were happening to me or I was experiencing things emotionally and not really understanding what the cause of it is.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Whereas now it's like if you have an emotional or reaction that I think of it as like a tire popping on the highway. It's like, okay, I just need to get off the highway. I need to pull the car off on the side of the road. We've had an emergency. And so having that capability, so it's not like... It's just, okay, there's been an accident. That's fine. We can get to that place of safety. And I think that's also really important helping students have the tools to identify what they need and then have those solutions to follow.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Alicia, I'm so glad you're here and doing this work for our students. It is such a critical change in the way we approach students. I also, I started about 21 years ago, I guess, and I... Well, no, 20 years ago. It's 2001, right?

Alicia Ashcroft:

Yeah.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That would be 20 years ago. Yeah. That's when I started too. And I think about how it was still very much a time of like students and faculty are brains in jars. They come and they do their intellectual things and then they leave. And there were spaces, people trying to carve out those spaces. And my heart always goes to women centres and how critical they were as really the only space where some of these conversations were able to be had, but also how they were often stigmatized places on campus. Many of us were still whispering the word feminist at that point in our lives. And so to actually access those resources was so hard. And it's amazing, the idea of seeing ourselves, each other and our students, as whole people. We're not there yet 100%, but it's an amazing transition that we're in the middle of, I think.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Yeah. Absolutely. And I wanted to ask you, as I was reflecting on when I started university and of course I think we were maybe less than a week into school when 9/11 happened.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh yeah.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And I was reflecting on it because I started that year and then the year that I was set to graduate, the stock market crashed. And I was really struck by the idea where it feels like just when I was starting or ending something, the world is ending. And I think about that for the students as well, because it does feel like we are living in incredibly harrowing times. I think it's very easy to get some apocalyptic blues. And then really thinking too like, what is my purpose? And how do I attach in terms of like, am I still supposed to write this paper, even though I feel like the world is ending? And then so thinking about where can we tap into when we're looking for meaning? What is the meaning of this work? So, yes, I mean, this paper might not feel important to you, but it is about doing the work and completing it and moving through the course. And I think that's really important.

Alicia Ashcroft:

So if someone's not feeling connected to their sense of meaning, and again, if you don't have that yet, then that's okay. But just having those ways to check in. And again, it comes back to building up that community that can help, where someone can see you from the outside and make space to just go, "Is this what you're thinking or feeling or needing?" And it's like, wow, I knew that, but I didn't have the words for it. And again, this is where I'm so grateful that student services has grown so much that students can have those conversations. And again, it's not just in counselling, like the multi-faith

chaplaincy, and there's all kinds of opportunities to just talk it out in an informal way that then you can start to grow into yourself.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Because again, it's not just that you're in school to get a degree and get a job, it's, you're learning about yourself. And I think it's really important for all of us to remember. In the same way, I hope students remember for us that they are coming into this space with their own context, their own struggles, their own issues, their own traumas, and those two worlds really collide, whether they're dealing with housing or food insecurity, or they're queer and haven't been supported at home, or they're experiencing racism. And all of that is causing harm and impacting confidence and not giving an individual a sense of safety in the world of connectedness and community.

Alicia Ashcroft:

And so I think it's on us to be mindful of those students, because we can't just say a place is safe and not be doing the work ourselves to ensure that we're doing everything we can to be safe people in those safe spaces. We cannot expect anyone to get it right. We're not looking for perfection. I think what we're looking for is genuine effort to ask questions when it's appropriate, to do your own research when it's appropriate. And I think that's always appreciated. I think anyone can appreciate someone trying to learn and grow and expand. And then I think that really opens up that conversation of like, "Oh, I'd love to be able to help you learn a bit more about this." And then again, there's lots of potential in that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

This has been such a good conversation and I'm loathe to end it, except that we're getting to the end of our time together. I just thank you, not just for your time, but for your willingness to really dig into and be so vulnerable about these issues. Because it's just so critical, not just to how people learn and move through the world, but to create the kind of campus environment that allows people to grow and to move through space in a way that's meaningful. So thank you for your time today, but also just for being this voice on our campus.

Alicia Ashcroft:

Oh, it's such a gift, honestly, and I've reflected on that. And as I had said, I'd written that essay and reflecting on being a student. And I really carry that person with me when I do this work. I remember being younger, because I'm very young and fresh still.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Me too. Absolutely.

Alicia Ashcroft:

But I think that has to be a thing that we tap into. And actually that's maybe where I'll go with this is, I always remind students about that. And when I interview like President Brett Fairbairn, asking him about being a student and being an undergrad and tell me about a time where you got it wrong or you made a mistake. And people are so generous in sharing that. So I think it's just really important to remember as a student, that we were once students too, and we've also made mistakes and we've gotten it wrong and we've fallen down and we've gotten back up. And that there is so much potential in those really hard moments. I know that's where so much of my growth took place. And there are definitely moments in my life where I'm like, "I wish these things hadn't happened to me," but now I

don't think I would trade any of it because of how I have been equipped to pay that wisdom forward. And I think we all have that potential to pass that along in our own way.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That is a perfect and inspiring message for the beginning of term. I think it's important for us all to hold on to. Thank you so much for your time today, Alicia.

Alicia Ashcroft:

I could chat with you forever. Thank you so much for inviting me, and thank you so much.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care.

Alicia Ashcroft:

You too. Bye-bye.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode four 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 yougotthis.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, and it echoes back to what Alicia talked about. I wonder if there's a space in your class this week, not just to introduce or share the resources that we have available to us here at TRU or to our students, but if there's a way that you can maybe contextualize them, did you make use of a writing centre when you were a student? Did you wish you had? Did you go to a wellness centre or did you struggle with wellness-related issues that maybe could be helped by that resource? I often think that it's not enough to just let our students know where these resources are, but critical that they understand that accessing support and help is actually an expected natural, normal, good part of the academic journey. Can you provide that to your students this week? They'll be healthier for it and you will be too. Speaking of health, I'm going to go lie down. Thanks for putting up with my croaky voice this week. I'm hoping it's back to normal next week. And until next time, take care of yourselves and each other. And I'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye.