

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello and 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 into 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 this week, like many of us, I've had occasion, I guess, to think a lot about, well, reconciliation. Let's get into it.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I'm recording this essay on Friday, October 1st, the day after our first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. It was an interesting day. I wasn't really sure how to manage it with my child who is four. I thought about how I came to understand the truth of this country's history and I'm still learning it at 38 years old. And I thought about what Cindy Blackstock said about the importance of raising a generation where Indigenous kids feel welcome and part of the community and non-Indigenous kids don't have to apologize anymore. And I think a huge part of that has to start with doing the work, doing the learning. I was grateful to CBC, the kids section had some really good videos, introductory explainers on reconciliation. And we already have quite a few books by Indigenous writers. So we spent some time reading and talking and my son asked really thoughtful questions.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It was long and emotional day obviously. I think it was for everyone. I think at least in part that's the point, but one of the interesting pieces was, I asked my son to help me decide where we would donate some money yesterday and I'll share some links to charities in the show notes that I think you're doing especially good work. And the way I tried to frame question to him was to ask him what he had learned today that he wanted to take an action on. What was something that he learned about today that he wanted to try to help with. And then I started thinking about that for myself too. It can feel so overwhelming this notion of reconciliation and for settler scholars and for people who work in education as settlers, we have to recognize this whole abusive history that we sit in the legacy of all the time.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I guess for that reason, I tend to gravitate towards educational charities, but more and more I'm wondering what reconciliation will look like in the university when the rubber really meets the road, for lack of a better less cliched phrase. We're really good at the language piece, but I'm not so sure we've figured out the action part yet. And while I agree that the role of the settler scholar is very much to listen, at a certain point we have to put that listening into action. I'm not sure I know what that looks like yet. I signed up yesterday for an edX MOOC on Indigenous education from UBC. I'm really excited to learn more and to have conversations about what practical change looks like in the institution and whether decolonizing an institution so profoundly rooted in white supremacy and colonial systems of thought, is that even possible?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The truth is, I don't know. And I try to remind myself that it's a massive change just in my lifetime that we're even having these conversations. They didn't have a place in my education and they will have a place in my son's education. I don't believe that time always bends towards justice. We have to do the

bending and that's hard work. And sometimes we shy away from it. But perhaps that's what a day like yesterday gives us, a venue and time and focus, change has got to come though. It's got to come.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Something that does give me profound hope for the future is talking to our students and I'm so excited that this week I get to bring you a conversation with one of our students. Amna Qazi is a nursing student and a student storyteller and an all around dynamic person. I think you're going to really enjoy this conversation.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I am here today with Amna Qazi, which is a real treat because we don't often get to chat with students on You Got This! So Amna, would you introduce yourself and maybe let people know where they might see you around campus or the kinds of roles you fulfill.

Amna Qazi:

Hi, Brenna. It's so nice to speak to you. I've heard your podcast and I've seen it advertised and I've been a little bit curious about it. So my name is Amna. I am a second year nursing student, so that consumes a lot of my life. My life is centred around my textbooks and clinical hours. I'm also the BC nurses union student liaison for my year, as well as part of multiple different like volunteering things within the school of nursing. So I help out with the CNSA conference that's coming up. I also am part of the Dean-student liaison committee. So just multiple different volunteer roles within the school of nursing. I'm also an intercultural storyteller in the faculty of student development. So I come up with intercultural learning resources and promote the ones that are already existing. So that's a really big part of my life as well. I'm also the biology undergrads societies president. So you may be able to see me a lot of places.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to say, Amna, you're extremely busy, like extremely busy. That is a lot of hats.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. That is true. But I think a lot of people think of these hats as responsibilities, but for me they're like unwinding time. They help me find a purpose to life because if I'm just sitting in class with a textbook and that's all that's going on in my life, I start feeling like I am not progressing anywhere. Like where is this taking me? Sure. It's getting me a degree. But it's just this weird feeling that I get that I'm not fulfilling a life purpose.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So just a low bar for yourself entirely. I want to ask you a bit about your role. Maybe we'll start with just your role here at TRU as a second year student. I have to say that second year folks in second year of programs are people I'm thinking about a lot right now because you're supposed to get into second year and hit your stride and know the lay of the land and feel super confident because you're about to usually encounter a difficulty jump in third year, but you had such a strange first year experience in nursing last year, obviously. So I'm just wondering what that experience has been like for you, the transition back to campus and how you're feeling now about being at TRU.

Amna Qazi:

Well, for me, Brenna it actually wasn't my first year.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that helps.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. No. No. Well, I graduated high school in 2018 and went straight to university after that. I was very set on being a microbiologist. I wanted to study viruses and bacteria which of course is very timely.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I was going to say.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. May have been the wrong time to switch out of that field but I wanted to be a microbiologist and I wanted to study patterns of diseases and really the more microscopic effects that micro organisms can have on your health. But as I was analyzing career opportunities and different pathways and where I could go with that, I started feeling like I miss the actual human interaction part of health. I'm very passionate about health literacy and health equity especially, and helping people be able to make... Well, not making decisions for people, but helping them make the best decision for their health which is backed by evidence and backed by science.

Amna Qazi:

And so as I looked for career projections, I realized that I had overlooked nursing as a possible pathway. And I realized that nursing is not just about the bedside. And I know that's what people think of when it's nursing. They think of bed pans and they think of maybe starting IVs or just things like that. But it's a lot of thinking and it's a lot of health promotion. And so while for a lot of people it might be the bedside that attracts them to nursing, for me it was the more health promotion aspect and philosophical, theoretical aspects of nursing which I still really, really love.

Amna Qazi:

So that's a very long winded answer but essentially my first year of nursing was online but that wasn't my first year of school. If I had chosen nursing straight out of high school I would be graduating this year, which I'm not because now I'm second year again. But I find that for the nursing program, the jump between first and second year is a bigger one compared to the second to third year one. So second year is where it gets really hard for nursing.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

How is it? How's it going with the return to campus and that transition out of those online classes? Do you feel... I guess the question I want to ask but I'm sort of sheepish to ask that you can tell me to go jump off a cliff if you want, but did you feel prepared? Did you feel okay to walk into second year? Now you had a few years behind you and obviously a passion for maybe some of the aspects of first-year nursing that might be intimidating to some students, but yeah, how has it been?

Amna Qazi:

Well, I loved online school. It's such unpopular opinion but I loved it. Well, the stress levels for me at least were way down because it cuts out all that anticipatory anxiety of getting ready in the morning and going out and putting on a face and meeting people.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Now I'm nodding as someone who after my last Zoom call of the day immediately puts on my pyjamas. I'm like, mm-hmm, yeah, I get it. I get it.

Amna Qazi:

Well, Brenna, who told you I wasn't wearing my pyjamas the whole time?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love it. I love it.

Amna Qazi:

Yes. No. I was on my comfy pants on and I have a shirt hanging on the back of my chair and a tube of lipstick on my desk. So anyone coming in would think I was super just put together, but I found that my stress levels were so much lower. And the ability to just synthesize that information on my own time, it helped me with my time management a lot. And I find that being on campus it's... Well, for the nursing program, it might be different for other people, but for the nursing program, the way we have our week structured is that we have two days of classes. So that's when we have all our classes, all five of them on those two days. And mostly it's like, well, five classes a day, one day of lab and two days of clinical. So our weeks are really hectic and we don't have much downtime which is why I really just loved online learning. And everybody here thinks I'm a little bit of a hermit but it's I've found stress levels going back onto campus were enormous.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's so interesting. And I was talking about this with Alicia on the podcast last week that I think that there's a bit of a pressure to be super happy about the return to campus and to be like all systems go and if you don't feel that way, I think it could be a little bit alienating.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. I read an article last night on, oh, God, now I don't know. I think it was on The Globe and Mail, something like that about how it's a complete mental shift. And I was in the Dean student liaison meeting with Rani Srivastava who's the Dean of Nursing yesterday and she was talking about how we need to realize that going into COVID we were all very conscious of the fact that we're in a mind shifts here, it's a new system of doing things. But she said that over the year, that became our system of doing things. Eventually we got into that habit and now it's another mind shift.

Amna Qazi:

So while it might be a return to campus or a returned to normalcy, for our mindsets and our bodies it's not return to normal anymore because that had become our regular pattern. And so she mentioned being gentle with yourself and giving yourself time to readjust back. But the only problem with that in students is that we don't have that time. This semester is very limited to four months. And so it's like

you have to hit the ground just running immediately. That's definitely been a challenge that I've noticed in myself and others as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Interesting. And as you speak, I can hear how the threads of nursing and health promotion and storytelling probably come together to make you a good resource for people who are struggling. I was wondering why do you sound like you have this really good head on your shoulders about how to move through the world. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how your storytelling work folds into your work as a student, maybe how you engage with other people, like how do we tie all these? That's not a metaphor that works. I was going to say, how do we tie all these hats together? You don't tie hats together, do you?

Amna Qazi:

And I think he could, if you wanted to, you'd have just some long necklace of hats and you choose which one you wanted to wear. I was attracted to storytelling because I love theatre. I love acting. I love being on stage and I love producing material as well. I like seeing things come to fruition and have people enjoy work, which is why I love theatre, because you can see like you went through all this effort to make something happen and it becomes something beautiful and you can really tangibly see the effects of your efforts. So that's what originally attracted me to storytelling. And because I think people connect really well through stories and through other people's experiences, I would much rather... So in nursing school, our professors are incredible people who've had years and years of bedside and/or office experience and leadership experience in nursing.

Amna Qazi:

And when they tell stories about, maybe one of them is a retired military nurse, when she tells stories about her years in service and the different considerations of nursing I learned more that way. I remember more. One of my other professors right now was in palliative care. And when she tells stories about how she engaged with patient families, I learned much more. In people there can be this, especially in today's very fast paced life, there can be an aspect of removing the human from public figures or from just people. And I think telling stories and weaving through experience and failure and success, you can rehumanize the world again because we're not just all Instagram photos or we're not just two dimensional videos, we're real people and it helps with empathy building.

Amna Qazi:

The way it all kind of ties together is, I like to do a little bit of self-reflection sometimes and I've noticed that all my roles tend to be centred around advocacy and promoting the best possible atmosphere, health outcome, etc, just a lot around providing people who may not be able to advocate for themselves, or may not know how the opportunity to feel safe. And so that ties in with my role at BCNU, where I hear about different ways that students can feel supported by the union. So mental health supports if you're a nurse and/or a student nurse who identifies as a person of colour where you can get that support from, what are your rights. And then with the liaison committees, it's about helping students feel heard, and their concerns feel heard. And then transitioning over into things like storytelling where I accidentally fell into the intercultural role.

Amna Qazi:

I didn't set out to be an intercultural storyteller. I set out to just be a storyteller and connect the student experience and little tidbits that I had picked up over the years and put those into stories and stories are just, hello, today I'm going to tell you a tale of a Knight in Shining Armour or -- it can be a media production. So it can be a written blog. I think we just need to redefine stories but that aside I started out with just regular content.

Amna Qazi:

And over the year I had noticed that I repeatedly felt the need for advocating for minority students. And it wasn't something that I had intentionally done or realized that I had been doing my whole life where sometimes when you're a minority or you're a woman of colour, or just a person of colour in general, you feel that you have no choice but to be an advocate because it doesn't just affect other people, it affects you and everything about you.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Ultimately at the core of all these things is something I really care about which is care, right? Whether it's nursing or health promotion or advocacy, these are all elements of care. I wonder if, I don't want to put you on the spot, but I'm thinking about your ability to articulate story. And I'm thinking about your passion for advocacy. And I'm thinking about our primary listenership for this show which is faculty and staff, people who are in positions power over student experience, and lots of different ways. I'm wondering what you would think that audience needs to know about particularly the student experience this year and how you and your classmates are doing right now.

Amna Qazi:

Well, first students are turning back to campus this year. I think it's really important to keep in mind that everybody's in a different Headspace and we all got used to living in our houses. And I think it's really important to remember the level of anxiety and stress that students go through on a daily life. And then adding in the academic pressure is pretty immense. And one thing that I like about nursing is that we like to look at the person as a whole.

Amna Qazi:

So instead of just looking at students as two dimensional students or people that come to class and learn, it's important to look at people with a whole lens and understand their context which isn't always possible directly, but you can get an idea of the population that you're in. So looking at things like, do they have financial pressures? How has COVID impacted students financially? How has their mental health been affected by the stress and pressure? How is the fear of racism impacting students? Just understanding that there's so much context behind people and you have to truly put in some effort to get to know your students if you can, which I know in nursing is a little more possible because our class sizes are around 40 people, but in a 200 student class, that's not as possible, but you can still analyze the population that you're dealing with, right? You can look at the statistics of the people that are in the university and then have representatives and figure out ways that you can provide supports. As well as that, it's important to look at the ages and stages of people.

Amna Qazi:

And we talk about ages and stages a lot in nursing, and you need to look at where students are in their Headspace. Are you expecting them to act or be able to deal with stuff in a way that someone older than them would be able to? So understanding that they might not have all the coping mechanisms under

their belt. They might not have that time management skill built into them yet. Because again, you have to look at the ages of people and then maybe some students might have children. They might have to deal with all of the pressures of being a parent. So it's understanding the context behind students and not limiting the stereotypical or the prototype of a student to one.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's an interesting point that you make because I think something that happens -- and I speak for myself as a faculty member here -- this process of ongoing growth, it's really easy to get fixed in your head one particular version of the student. And it might be the student from when you were a student or maybe the student from when you were first grad student teaching. But it's really easy to get fixated on this one human being who maybe doesn't even exist anymore, right? And I think that even in a large class, there is space to ask, right? There's space to ask students about what their experiences are and to take that into account in the way we engage, the way we deliver material, the way we reach out.

Amna Qazi:

One thing that I've noticed with nursing that I appreciate the most is that our instructors seem to take some time to get to know us. And of course, understanding that instructors are super, super busy people. Everything's busy. Everyone is busy. Students are busy. It's really hectic. And it's not always feasible to try and get to know everybody but even if you don't get to know every student, having expressions of care. Yeah. So I think sometimes when instructors express that they care for their students, it makes a huge difference.

Amna Qazi:

I love knowing that my instructors think of me as a real complex human being because a common complaint from students can be that, do instructors don't realize that we have more than one class, but when instructors take that moment to go, it's okay, I know you're stressed where everybody's trying to do their best, just do the best that you can. And we'll work from there. Or instructors that are open to having a conversation about the class with you or just saying hello at the beginning of the class and asking, how's it going? It makes a big deal of difference when you treat people like complex human beings.

Amna Qazi:

And sometimes I know in the hierarchy of things and in the scheme of life, we get very stuck up on roles and the different roles that we have. So I'm a student Brenna, and you are a faculty member. So when I interact with you, I'm going to be two dimensional in that I'm going to be formal and I'm going to ask you how you're doing, but not actually engage with that too much. Whereas sometimes it's important to make space for students to say, yeah, we're having a really rough week this week but it's okay, after this test we'll feel better. And just checking in, it's okay for people to be real people.

Amna Qazi:

And I think sometimes we can get caught up on the fact of pretending that we've got it all together. And especially as students, because I've never met a student who had it altogether because if they did, I'm sure they're faking it. I'm faking it and people think I have it all together all the time, but I really don't. I struggle with figuring out how to make deadlines all the time.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

The secret is that there aren't any faculty members who have it altogether either, and we are equally faking it, right? Like the number of times I was writing a lecture very, very early in the morning hours before I was about to give it. The truth is everybody is just trying their best and I think that one of the most important things that we need to remember is everybody else is struggling just as much as we are, right? And the more we can remind ourselves of that the gentler we can be with each other.

Amna Qazi:

Right. And I think it's really great to an instructor say that, oh, I've been really busy. And I haven't been able to get to that, or I don't have the answer to this question right now but I can double check and I'll let you know because again, it breaks down that... I'm not trying to get rid of hierarchy in total, but it makes people real which is why I love storytelling and I love nursing because we try and look at people as real people. And it's sort of that image of perfection because we look up to our instructors and if we see our instructors as people, it's a much better of a role model, because I want to know that you're stressed but you're okay because you've come to class and you've still done that.

Amna Qazi:

So for instructors taking a sick day, last time with me I wanted... If you say that, I'm not feeling the best today, we have to postpone class or, well, I'll put the notes up. I like hearing that. I like hearing that you're busy and then have other things going on. And it makes you seem like a real person and it helps connect people together because ultimately to have a good learning environment, everybody has to feel safe and they have to feel validated and they have to feel like they can make a human connection with each other. Like you don't have to tell us your life story. It's okay to say that you were up awake doing that, you know?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. Well, it's important modelling too, right? Not being procrastinator, although I do model that in everything I do. But in general modelling the idea of fallibility and coping, right? We don't learn how to cope and how to manage unless we can see examples of that working in real life.

Amna Qazi:

Right. And it changes your perspective on people because, do you ever read books written by famous people?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Mm-hmm.

Amna Qazi:

And isn't it so much better when you listen to things or read a book and go, oh, okay. I see. Like Michelle Obama's book, I loved reading about the fact that she wasn't liking it as a lawyer and her decision process because... When did her book come out? I'm not quite sure. But whenever it came out, I was in the process of switching to nursing. But microbiology had been something that I had wanted to do for years and years, all throughout high school ever since I learned about viruses and bacteria, it had been something that I'd really wanted to do, but like learning her from her experience of switching careers helped me feel, okay, she's a successful woman who switched a career and that's okay. So I can do that too. And I can still be successful.



Brenna Clarke Gray:

I love that. I also love that you were thinking of somebody like inspirational and describing Michelle Obama's book. And the first book that I thought of that I had that reaction to was Jessica Simpson's autobiography.

Amna Qazi:

I have not read that one yet. I have Michelle Obama's book up in my bookshelf and I look at it and I just randomly pick out pages of it to read and then I put it back.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah. No. I loved it too. I did. Apparently my brain goes to slightly fluffier places these days. Amazing. Amazing. Amna, thank you so much for this. I wonder if there's anything else you would want to share about either your experiences or the experiences that you're seeing around you with other students before I let you go today?

Amna Qazi:

I think it's keeping in mind that everybody's a little bit apprehensive and it's a little strange. And there is varying degrees of stress going around and unpredictability, and this weather is changing into the colder months and we've all had a difficult summer at least in the interior with all the smokes. And so it's just remembering that it's okay if you're not doing the best. It's just like get through the semester, get through what you can, and we'll reevaluate as we go. And if you feel like you're taking on too much just drop a little bit down and it's okay not to take five classes, you can take four courses. That's fine. You're still going to graduate. It doesn't make a big deal.

Amna Qazi:

If you feel like you have a dinner with a friend that you really wanted to go to but you're feeling overwhelmed. That's okay, just cancel, reschedule. It's okay. It's just reevaluating yourself and making sure that you're not getting caught up in a fight to be perfect because I do that. I try to be perfect all the time and I try to get the best possible grades like 100% is always my aim. And I try to look like I have it all together all the time. And that itself is a full-time job. And so it's okay if you don't want to do that, like you don't have to be perfect all the time.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's really valuable. It's a good lesson. And it's something that takes everyone... Everybody's probably got somewhere where they're pushing really hard in their life and giving yourself permission to just take what you need in this moment. I think that's pretty wise advice in a pretty good way to leave our conversation today.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. Thanks for having me on.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, gosh. It's just a real privilege and a delight to have a student voice on the podcast and I can't believe it took me a year to get here. So I'm really grateful.

Amna Qazi:

Well, we were all invisible students for a year, so it's okay.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That's true enough. Thank you Amna and yeah, I really enjoyed meeting you and chatting with you today.

Amna Qazi:

Yeah. It was great to be here Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season two, episode five 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, maybe just a tiny life tip, but we've got a long weekend coming up. And I always think of this is the first long weekend of the term because Labor Day isn't really a long weekend, most of us spend it working. But all this to say, have you given space for your students to actually take some downtime this weekend? And have you given space for you to do it too? This might be a moment to take a look at your course outline and see if there's a way to lift your foot off the gas just this weekend, just so that everybody can take a breath. And whether you celebrate Thanksgiving or it's just another day to you or maybe the notion of Thanksgiving is wrapped up in all kinds of emotional weight. All three of those things are a good reason for rest. So it's worth taking a look and seeing if your students can take the weekend off from your course and if they can, encourage them to do so. And maybe this is a moment for you to say to your students that you won't be checking email on Monday, that you're going to give yourself a break too. And maybe you don't need to mark anything this weekend. Maybe you can take a rest.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to take my own advice, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try really hard. And if I do any schoolwork this weekend, it's going to be on that new edX MOOC I'm taking on Indigenous education. Something that will fill me up, not leave me depleted. So that's my wish for you this long weekend, is to find something that fills you up. I'm going to try to do the same and I'll meet you back here next week. Talk soon. Bye-bye.