

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hello and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching, learning, community, conversation, and your digital life made 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'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 today, I'm thinking about what we talk about when we talk about open. Let's get into it.

Okay. So this is going to be coming one week late because, well, a day late and a dollar short is my middle name these days, but I'm recording this during Open Education Week. Open Education Week will have now passed by the time you hear this, but because I've been giving and attending a whole bunch of talks this week about the idea of open, I'm thinking a lot about what that word means. When we talk about openness in education, we're usually having a conversation about access and affordability, and I think primarily when we talk about open educational resources, that's the lead of the conversation. Let's make textbooks affordable.

And to be clear, that is also my number one goal. Everything I'm about to say is on top of the goal of affordability. I think where I've been placing my thoughts this week are the places where open is doing the affordability piece but not the rest because there's, there's more to access than affordability.

There's accessibility for one. Man, OER. There's a whole range of quality around whether or not they're enacting values of accessibility. That's for sure. But also when we talk about open pedagogy projects, when we talk about giving opportunities for students to learn in the open, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to engage in open education ethically, issues around student consent to be open and their ability to revoke that consent later.

It's not that I don't think open initiatives are important, I really do. I've centered a lot of my career around the value of Open, but I'm increasingly thinking about places where the ethos of open may come into conflict with other values. Like it's not informed consent, it's not meaningful consent if you can't revoke it. Right? So when you engage in an open project, what's your plan for if a student or a participant changes their mind later?

It's not that I don't think that when folks are working in the open, they care about these things. I think all of us are trying to do good work, but I think that sometimes we don't prioritize these kinds of questions. I was giving a talk at UBC the other day as part of their Open Education Week events, and this was exactly the theme I was going along with what are the ways in which we can think about why we are working in the open and how we communicate that to students.

And things like when does a project end and how do people take control of their work again, and to what extent is choice a part of our conception of open? I'll share some links in the chat, including a wonderful collection of essays edited by Mahabele among other editors that has really changed my thinking around open.

I think I used to think of openness as the single most important ideal in learning. I'm learning how to complicate that. This came up on maybe a policy level, at one point a couple years ago when I was having a conversation with someone and they saw open as being in conflict with indigenization as an institutional goal, and I can see where that thinking comes from, right? Because if you would hear really rigidly to one perception of what it means to do open education, then that would come into conflict with, say, a perspective on knowledge sharing or knowledge keeping that says that a particular story belongs to and within a particular community and isn't for sharing openly.

That's only something that comes to loggerheads. If the values of open are so rigid that they lose track of the actual ethos of inclusion and access that is central to the mission of open. You know what I mean? I think we could be more flexible in our thinking about open in order to allow for other ways of knowing to join that larger conversation and then in turn, be able to champion better those goals of access and inclusion that I think are ultimately at the core of what most open practitioners want to do.

I think we just need to be maybe a little bit more explicit and intentional about it. Speaking of explicit and intentional, I have the most delightful conversation to share with you today. Charlene Barnes is the learning strategist for the Faculty of Arts. This is a brand new position and a temporary one. It was really interesting to me to talk to Charlene about the specific needs of art students and how we might go about serving them better. I'm going to let Charlene take it from here.

So I am here today with Charlene Barnes. Charlene, can you introduce yourself to the listeners? Maybe tell us your job title, anything you want to share about who you are and then where people might find you on campus.

Charlene Barnes:

Hello. Thank you for having me on this podcast, by the way. So I was hired in January as the first faculty of Arts Learning strategist, so brand new position and I will be working until March 31st. I can be found at the arts and education building. My office is 205, but because it's a shared office, sometimes I'll leave a note on the door to say, I am across the hall with a student, or I may be going for a walk with somebody who's coming to see me and just want some more private space, and that's where I can be found.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So I'm so fascinated by this role. I'm not sure if other faculties have learning strategists in place, but I found out about you on the faculty of arts Instagram account. Actually, that's where I found out about your role. I was thrilled to hear about it. Do you think you could tell us a little bit about what the intention of your role is and the kinds of things you've been finding yourself doing?

Charlene Barnes:

This job has been so stimulating. I honestly don't even know how to get started because it's been an absolute whirlwind. First of all, I met with the people who've been working here a long time, the arts advisors, and just sort of got a sense of where I could support via wraparound service or meeting with students one-on-one or collaborating with other learning strategists. It has been an experiment, again, because this is a brand new role.

I'm kind of co-creating it. I'm letting the students lead my next steps. Ultimately, I really believe in student-centered learning and teaching. Meeting with faculty. I visited, boy, I think 75 classes. I was so overwhelmed and grateful for the positive response I got from the faculty. And when I went into classrooms, I didn't speak for long. I basically wanted to introduce myself. "This is who I am. This is what I look like, my approachability." And really highlighting the fact that I love helping people learn. I love learning. I can talk about learning forever and ever.

I'm a lifelong learner and I really believe that all humans are lifelong learners. Whether or not we want to admit it, we just are. We're a highly adaptive species. Because I am someone who's been teaching for almost 30 years, I really wanted to drop as many of my lenses as I could and see TRU through the eyes of a new student, possibly someone new to Kamloops, which I am. I moved here in the summer and get around campus, go into as many learning spaces as possible to see what it feels like from a new student's point of view.

My focus has been a help the first and second year, probably art students, and that's why I'm probably just going to be referencing what is the life like here for first and second year students. I have been so impressed by the services available to students, the amount of caring that is shown in so many different ways, the capacity for people to network across various platforms.

There's huge potential here for any learner. And so my focus is what is something specific I can do? How can I fit into this network, this community really and offer my unique skillset and my unique experiences and interact with students and co-design with them actual learning plans that will help them to move forward.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, it's so inspiring to hear someone coming in and really having that focus on the learner and optimizing the learner experience. I mean, you don't have to speak in any specifics, for sure, but what kinds of issues are students coming to you with when they come and find you when you're having that one-on-one conversation with them?

Charlene Barnes:

What I'm noticing is the students will ask a question and it usually is a simple question. It's linked to academics, and as we talk, it becomes obvious that their particular concern is also intersecting with other facets of their life. And actually, I shouldn't be surprised because I fundamentally believe in holistic learning. I don't think we can separate out, we're just academic. We're just intellectual or we're exclusively social or whatever box people can put themselves in.

So as I'm meeting with students, I'm learning about their health and wellness, perhaps their financial situation. There were concerns over housing issues, inadequate housing. It has been so varied. It's been amazing to me the variety of topics students want to talk about. And ultimately, it's an opportunity for students to talk about their unique lives, which I think is invaluable to have that chance to assess who am I? How do I learn? What do I need? What do I think I need? What is working? What's not working? It's really amazing to have that time with students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

To have that stuff validated. Sharing that with someone who recognizes its impact on their learning, I think is really important. Do you see a particular advantage in having a learning strategist who is embedded in the faculty the way that you are, as opposed to some of the other learning strategist positions that are housed more within student development?

Charlene Barnes:

I do. I think that there is something unique about every faculty. So faculty of arts within itself is hugely diverse. It also includes fine arts, for example, which some people don't know from the onset or they're not sure what does that even mean. So it's a huge variety of programs, learning styles that is embedded in those programs as well. But I think what is really valuable is I have that experience as an arts educator, and I also am an artist. I am always reading. I really all about the arts and a huge advocate for the arts. So I'm on their team and I'm someone who doesn't assess their work. I really have no agenda other than just simply to be there to serve the students.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Those are often such important roles in students' lives. I don't think we always recognize the role of someone like a learning strategist or a librarian or a peer mentor, these people who have expertise in various areas of education, but who aren't... As you say, you aren't in an evaluative relationship. Right? That level of intimidation or anxiety that a student might feel bringing a question to the person who is actually marking them, they don't have that when they approach you, I would imagine. I'm guessing that's a key component of the dynamic that you have with students.

Charlene Barnes:

Oh, absolutely. I also view myself as part of the general team. There are amazing people here that work as learning strategists or are in the health and wellness center, for example. I do refer students. I do support those programs that have been going for a while and they're going to continue to roll. And that is really nice to understand from the student that they have this particular need. There's someone on campus that can help them. They just need a little bit of affirmation. And it's interesting when we often have a chance to say out loud to someone, I'm basically a stranger to them. To say out loud what we think we need, sometimes that's all it takes just then to take the next step to go into the specific learning space and meet with that person or go online and make an appointment.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's really interesting. Going back to what you said at the beginning of our conversation where you talked about trying to take the lens of a brand new student or someone new to Kamloops really trying to see these experiences from the perspective of the student. I think our listenership is primarily staff and faculty on this show, and I'm wondering if there's anything that you've learned in this very intense, it sounds like three months, that you'd want to share with the community as a whole about our learners or about their needs or about anything you've kind of encountered in doing this work that you'd want to share with the larger community?

Charlene Barnes:

As I was visiting the classes, I had this comment more than once from faculty members, something to the effect of, "Boy, I wish I had someone like you in my first year, someone who can be a catchall, who knows what's going on around TRU or has the time and passion to find out on your behalf. And that is something I try to reinforce as well with students is they're busy. I have dedicated time and space to help lighten their load, but, again, they're in charge. We are co-creating. I'm not doing their work for them. I'm just simply someone to help the faculty support and the desire to feel connected.

So faculty members asking, well, what has it been like for you? What's going on in other courses with other people? What is happening around TRU in whatever talk we happen to be discussing? They're also sharing this desire to feel connected. I think collaboration is really necessary and finding ways to build communities within communities and have this giant, messy web of interactions where we can be many different people. We can really explore our various identities.

For example, there was a science student who came in and wanted to know if I could help them as well. I am dedicated to the faculty of art students, but at the same time, this is a learner, period. So I think as humans, we innately want to feel connected, and that's what I love about this job. It's an opportunity to do that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Are you seeing themes? I mean, I'm hearing this theme emerging about people looking for connection and looking for ways to feel a sense of belongingness. Are there other themes that are emerging in the sorts of questions that students come to you with or the kinds of conversations you're having across campus?

Charlene Barnes:

Really, I think there's an assumption that because there is so much available online that people know how to find it or are motivated to do that. I think that is an assumption definitely that is out there. I'm not sure. I feel that every institution is kind of experiencing this where in the pandemic we put a lot of resources online and we did that, and now we're not doing that so much. But it's an assumption that we all have the skillset to navigate what is out there online.

Counter that then with the experiences that I've been able to have, which is very much in group, live gathering and community. So I had the privilege of attending sequential language lessons with Marie Sandy and she throughout an acronym I hadn't heard before TPR. Do you know what that is? Have you heard that before?

Brenna Clarke Gray:

No, I have not.

Charlene Barnes:

One of her teaching strategies is using total physical response. So there we were in this lovely circle on comfy chairs. A very diverse group. There were people from the city of Kamloops, social workers, nurses, faculty members, students. All together we were learning numbers one through 10. Marie's way of teaching that was to get us on our feet and to play a game, which was an elimination game where we would count from one to 10 in succession and the person that got to 11 would invite the next person to sit down.

Marie is very encouraging. We were all clearly out of our comfort zones, which I think is actually very important to work with learners. We have to also take those giant risks and fail publicly which is what I felt I was doing. But Marie was so encouraging. We were moving and we were learning other... In a different game as well. We were spinning around. We were dancing on the spot. We were pretend running on the spot.

People were laughing. They were engaged and I felt bonded. I was only there for not even an hour. It was just such a nice feeling to be part of a community that was there for a purpose. It was very enjoyable and I wish that every student could have that experience as often as possible.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh wow. That sounds amazing. I'm curious about where you see a role like this continuing? I mean, don't want to put you in an uncomfortable position and I know that currently the role is temporary, but we've been talking about the value of students having access to someone within the faculty who can really speak to their needs and issues that are unique right to that faculty as well as the sort of more general concerns. I'm wondering what you would see as the long term growth of a role like this. If it were to continue on, where do you see the work of a learning strategist within a faculty going from here?

Charlene Barnes:

I would love to do learning sessions that are small scale, small group, include both faculty members and learners and whomever else wants to join in just to really touch on very specific themes that a student or a learner can come to this session and then leave with something that is tangible, impactful, working from their area of strength and be able to completely personalize that experience.

There are so many wonderful workshops that are hosted at TRU, say for example, supplemental learning through the Wellness Center. So people are doing these larger scale workshops, and I feel there's something a little bit different about... Well, I mean if I can meet with a student one-on-one, that's brilliant as well. I mean, that's optimal. But if a student wants to feel connected to other people, but in a way that's maybe less intimidating and also very specific to their ways of learning, I think that would be a really enjoyable support to bring to what already is happening at TRU.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, I love that. I think we forget about how important community and relationality is to learning, right? It's not just about receiving content, it's about making those explicit connections to community that's so important and so valuable. And I think you're right, providing those kinds of experiences for students, I can really see the value of doing that in a faculty specific discipline, specific kind of way. That makes a lot of sense to me. I wonder if you might share respecting the confidentiality of the learners who come and talk to you, but I wonder if you might share a little bit about the challenges you see students experiencing, having these fresh eyes and this fresh window into the experiences of our learners over the last few months.

Charlene Barnes:

One thing that has emerged is looking at diversity of learning abilities and knowing that within accessibility services, if there's some diversity in the way that you learn and that's been documented by a healthcare professional, fantastic, great supports here for you. But if you haven't been able to do that for a plethora of reasons, then you're trying to start that process. You're perhaps trying to even find a doctor that is an issue on mass.

So it has to start with that. And by the time, you see the appropriate people, you would go to the appointments, you do whatever testing needs to happen. By the time you get supports, it might be too late. And that is something that a lot of people are concerned about. Everybody's working as hard as they possibly can, but I think it's just an issue in the system, in the systems that we have in place. So again, the assumption is that wherever someone was before they came to TRU, this has already happened and that's not necessarily the case.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

No, that's such an important thing. Actually, we were talking about this last week on the show is that difference between access and accommodation, right?

Charlene Barnes:

Yes.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Accommodation is, it's the process that goes through all the documentation, but we miss a whole bunch of students if we think about that and not about access as a more broad principle perhaps.

Charlene Barnes:

Another area of concern for me is housing. I know I mentioned that earlier, but it really is dire. I'm not sure what is being done, what's currently happening as we speak, but I do know that there have been students who have been really desperate. Their current living situation is not working out and they have nowhere else to go. They don't have the finances to get into a different situation. And again, someone from my position just assumes that the learning environment is safe, it's comfortable, it's optimal even, and we really cannot assume that.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

No, that's such a key component of being able to learn is being safe and secure and having a sense that you have a safe place to go and do your homework, for example. And that's a huge thing that we can't take for granted. It's something that came up at the TPC. When the provost gave her opening remarks, she said there were a lot of things that we could pretend we didn't know before the pandemic.

Charlene Barnes:

Yes.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

We can't anymore. Right? We know that housing security and food security, that these are very real issues that impact our students and they impact their learning. Right?

Charlene Barnes:

On that point, I was at an event that was facilitated by the learning strategist of the nursing faculty, Noah Fisher, and he had invited me to attend a soup event that has been running... I don't know if it's every week, but I think there had been at least a few sessions. I had never been in a nursing building and there's a lounge. There's this beautiful soup that was made by scratch and people were there just to get soup and sit down and eat or take it to go. It was very simple, yet you could just see that there was just that need even just a really delicious, nourishing bowl of soup can get someone through the day.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's simple. Right? When you put it like that, it's simple, and yet it seems to escape us to resolve it. I'm heartened to know that a role like yours was prioritized and developed and giving a place for students to make connections around those larger issues so that they can focus on the work of learning that's supposed to be their primary focus here. I think it's a step in the right direction.

Charlene Barnes:

Absolutely.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Well, Charlene, I've really appreciated you coming in to talk about your role and the work that you're doing and your connection with the students. I hope we see you around for a long time to come, because I think that the work you're doing is so vital.

Charlene Barnes:

Well, thank you very much. It was a real pleasure and thank you for having this podcast. It's a really great thing to have. So thank you again and be well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Thank you. You too. Take care.

Charlene Barnes:

Okay. Bye-bye.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season three, episode 14 of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me. I'm bgray@tru.ca. I'm also on Twitter and mastodon.social @brennacgray. And in both cases, that's gray with 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.

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip. As we are resolutely in March now, which like seems fake. I'm not sure I believe that we are fully in March, but we are, and it's time for us to spring ahead and for me and my six-year-old to have a week of terrible sleep. As we look ahead to spring and we think about open, I wonder if it's a good time to take a look at your own courses and think about where there's space for opening rejuvenation refreshment.

It's a difficult time of year to get that kind of work done, but it is also a time of year when we're often right knee-deep in the problems that we've created within our course development. And a good time to start thinking about potential solutions. Maybe you don't fix it right now. Maybe you just make a note to yourself for later, or maybe you make an appointment with my pals at Kelt or someone in my office to take a look at what needs to be done. It's easy in March to just put your head down and keep your focus on getting through the papers and getting to the end of term, but it's a really valuable time for reflective practice no matter what your role is on campus.

March is hard and if you can see beyond the frustrations and the stress right now to try to look towards a time when there might be a solution, it can help the March be slightly less marchy. So you do that, and I will keep trucking on here doing the exact same thing with my own practice and we will meet back here again next week. So until then, take care of yourselves and each other and we'll talk really soon. Bye-bye.