



Research that Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 11: Creating Inclusive Classrooms Part 5/5

Fostering an Inclusive Mindset with Dr. Laura Simon and Dr. Vicki Luther

Hannah Nabi: Hello and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Today we're in the final part, part five, of our special segment about creating inclusive classrooms with Dr. Vicki Luther from the Tift College of Education at Mercer and Dr. Laura Simon from Mercer's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

For those who are just listening in, Dr. Luther and Dr. Simon designed some faculty development on inclusive teaching practices as part of their participation in the 2019-20 cohort of Research that Reaches Out Faculty Scholars. This was originally designed to be delivered in an in-person workshop, but when Covid-19 changed everything, they graciously agreed to bring their information onto our podcast so we could still share this with our community.

In part one of this episode, they define inclusive teaching for us as designing classes that support students' engagement with the course by working to serve all students. In part two, they talked about how faculty can acknowledge and assess their own readiness to address the impact on students' well-being in the face of major community or cultural events, such as what's going on right now with the nationwide protests in support of Black lives in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In part three, we learned about some low-stress, high-impact strategies faculty can use in their classrooms to be more inclusive, and then expanded on these ideas in part four. Today for our final portion of this segment, we are learning about how faculty can remain open to feedback and foster an inclusive mindset.

Alright, let's get started. So y'all have mentioned that constructive feedback from students can help faculty think differently about course design, and throughout our conversation, you've mentioned several different things that faculty can try. But I wanted to ask you, what can faculty do to remain open to feedback, whether those are steps that they're taking or things that they're doing with their students, or even just sort of a check on their mindset or their attitude. What can they do to remain open to feedback from students in order to have a more inclusive mindset?

Vicki Luther: Well, I think that one of the things we have to remember is we, first of all, we are not a perfect society, obviously. And we ourselves are not perfect. And so being open to constructive feedback is sometimes very difficult, but it's also so important. And sometimes there are things that maybe a student will say that

we just can't control that. For example, you know, if you receive feedback that the room temperature is too cold or too hot, or I don't like the time of day that this class is offered, you know that's not necessarily something we can always focus on. But we can definitely focus on our teaching and our students' learning.

And so first of all, I would just say look at it from a lens of how can I better my craft? How can I make my teaching better to help all students? And when we look at it in those terms, sometimes it stings. But we don't want to look at a student who is really trying to ask us if we can adapt and do things differently to help them understand and help them better obtain the knowledge that we're trying to give them. We don't want to just kind of shoo that away. We want to make sure that we're very mindful of what we can control and what we can't control. And if it is something that's going to impede our students learning, then we should take a deeper look at that. And that's why I said like, you know, maybe starting by doing maybe a mid-term audit. That actually can help us to figure out what we're doing for the next part of the semester to help our students better learn. And that can, in turn, yield better results for them, but they also yield better results for us when they do their course evaluations. So looking at what we can adapt and can change versus what is just something that cannot be changed.

Laura Simon:

Right, and I will mostly echo Vicki's sentiments there. There are certainly points of feedback that we will receive that are just, you know, we cannot control the room temp, or are not necessary. My personal favorite of student feedback – one semester, a student kindly told me I wore too many cardigans, which is, you know, maybe not wrong, but not useful. And now I use that, actually, in classrooms to talk about gender bias in the classroom, right. It would be unexpected for a male colleague to get comments on his wardrobe, but it happens a lot for women. So in terms of taking in student feedback as a faculty member, it's really hard. We are the experts, and we did a ton of schooling, a significant amount of schooling, and we have been teaching and researching and working in our disciplines. So then you have a student who is new to the discipline or new to school, and it can be really hard to take a step back and not immediately go on the defense.

But we also have to remember, and this is true not just in student/faculty spaces, but in many places, that perspectives shift for us as we move through spaces. So if we remember graduate school and the graduate school faculty relationship, what it was like to be on the graduate student side of things. So if we remember our undergrad, what it was like to be on the student side of things. And to not lose sight of that, to not lose sight of we still had valuable information as undergraduate students to give to our faculty members. We still had valuable information as graduate students to give to our faculty members. So if we accept that and we can get there, we can understand, like, Yes. And then there are sometimes right where maybe we, our feedback wasn't particularly valuable or helpful, I should say. And to really recognize that we are,

there is a power dynamic between faculty and students. So sometimes the feedback is not delivered in a respectful way. Oftentimes it is. And learning how to listen and take that in, and as Vicki mentioned, disentangle kind of what is useful, what we can control versus what is, kind of, noise.

And my students always tell me they have to read and write too much. I remind them they're in a sociology class. But if a student writes to me and says, I was really disappointed we didn't learn about ABCD because I know this is a really important component of sociology, then that's on me to reflect and say, Why didn't I cover that? Right. Why didn't I include that particular content area? And there are things I cannot, because of time, cover in my classroom. And what I have shifted to, for students, if I know I'm not going to cover something that I know either should be covered or typically is or practices in the book, but I'm kind of going, you know, kind of skipping over it for content reasons, I usually acknowledge it and own, it's not because it's not important. It's because I've designed this class, but here are resources you can access. If you have questions, I still know these things. We're just not going to explicitly cover that in this classroom in depth. So sometimes listening to student feedback, but then also before the feedback, being really clear with them why or why not we're doing specific things. So that communication between us can be really helpful. But remaining open, I really think requires us to step back a little bit and remind ourselves of where we are now isn't where we've always been, and recognizing that as our power dynamics change, we still know, and we know this, that our students have some of the most important insights into our teaching to offer us. It doesn't mean that we're not the experts. It doesn't mean that we still don't control the content in all of those things. But we can listen and see. We can at least consider the value of the feedback that we're receiving and use our education and our knowledge and what we've learned about pedagogy and what we've learned about all the work that we've done to decide how we can address that, or whether we should or not.

Vicki Luther:

You bring up really great points, Laura, and I just want to reiterate, I wholeheartedly agree with you. I have never liked this term, but it just kind of came to my mind. People have used it before about throwing the baby away with the bathwater, which is such a weird term to me. But, you know, it's basically not lumping all student comments or, getting feedback, lumping them all together because there are some meaningful. And then that can lead to dialect and can lead to conversation. And you brought up something that I completely forgot to mention, but a lot of times we are in a society that, we are very much instantaneous. And so a lot of times, undergraduates can often forget that learning is a process and you grow. So every class is a developmental class that goes and builds on another class. And I had the same issue when I had a class one time.

There were actually two parts to the class; one is in the fall, one is in the spring. And I realized I didn't make it explicit enough that we weren't going to learn everything about the content in one semester. And so after the first semester of teaching the class, I realized that I had not been as explicit as I should have been on that. And so I was receiving feedback of, I really thought we were going to learn about XYZ, and we didn't. And so, from then on, I use that to be able to say, Keep in mind this is a building, we're building on and this will help you next year when you're a junior. And so just helping our students to realize that it's not an instantaneous, things take time.

But I also agree with you that we are definitely experts in our field. We are definitely, we have, we've done a lot of work and are still doing a lot of work, but we also want to remember that oftentimes the way we deliver can be different if that is what our students need. And it's not saying completely change who we are, completely change our mindset. We are ultimately still the experts in that particular discipline, but if we realize that the majority of our students need extra on something, or they need, instead of just doing complete lecture, they would like a chance to have some discussion time. You know, things like that, that can be really helpful to the faculty and really helpful to all of us as we continue. It's basically every, every time we think about it, it's now 2020, and if we think about how different our classrooms are from maybe even 10 or 20 years ago. It's really, really incredible how things have changed.

Hannah Nabi: So let's close out our conversation about creating inclusive classrooms with a final question and a final word from each of you. So please tell us, what have you learned and continue to learn about inclusive practices? And what final comment would you like to make to our listeners?

Laura Simon: So one thing thing I have learned and continue to learn is the work is never done. As our students change and grow, as knowledge changes and grows, I think it's really important that we continue to learn and grow ourselves. And that's honestly what drew me to higher education in terms of, as a career, is this beauty of the pursuit of knowledge for the pursuit of knowledge. But also recognizing that that knowledge has implications for our social world. So how we construct identities, how we construct social systems is a really powerful tool that shapes experiences for different groups of people. And as our systems change, and as our constructions and understanding of identity changes, then inherently our knowledge is going to expand and change with it. So my biggest point of learning has been continuing my own growth and understanding via academic sources, via, you know, autobiographies, personal narratives, experiences. Listening. I do a lot of listening and taking it in.

I am always driven to seek numbers because I'm what's coined a quantitative scholar, which means I like to see data and play with numbers - that gets at my graduate school training. But also to recognize there's not always going to be

statistical analyses or convenient data. And I'll save my lecture on being critical consumers of data for another day, but let's just be clear that not all data is equal, and we have to contextualize it into what we're actually looking at. So we need to be mindful of that. And I would love to see that in our classrooms as one of our points of inclusive teaching. How to be good data consumers could be something we all do in our classrooms of, this is how you look at data, and if data is broken apart by, for example, racial groups, you have to contextualize those numbers back into the percentage that that racial group pulls in our population. Without that, the data is meaningless. I didn't know that for a long time, so that's a recognition of my own growth and how I continue to learn and think critically about the social world in more nuanced ways. So my final comment, I guess, is to acknowledge it's not going to be easy, but to decide it's worth it to do it anyway to put in the hard work to create classrooms that will lead to high impact, strong engagement for our students and really give them the best outcomes that we can provide as educators.

Vicki Luther:

Students are not going to care how much we know until they know how much we care. And I think that's the whole premise of inclusive practices, is knowing the student in a way and it doesn't mean that we have to know every part of themselves or of their relationships but we know them enough to know what they need to be productive in the classroom and beyond. And so I think that one of the things that draws me to this is just making sure that students recognize that we recognize how varied, how different and that we use differentiation of our instruction, whether it be looking at our syllabi and just making sure that it would be appropriate for all of our learners or how we conduct ourselves in class. So I think the thing that I've learned the most is, it's actually a state of mind, but it's also how we live our lives. If we try to help students to recognize that they are all unique individuals who have many strengths and talents and they're not all the same. And we differentiate our instruction, be it whether we change our syllabus to show that all learners would be able to be successful in understanding what the class entails or how we actually changed our methodology and our teaching in some way, shape, or form. So what I have learned from this is just, it's a constant journey. And I would say my final thought is For the good of our society. I think we need to think of things in inclusive practices to help our students, both in the in the classroom at Mercer and then obviously well beyond their years at Mercer.

Hannah Nabi:

Thank you so much, Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Laura Simon. You have given us such great information and insight into inclusive teaching practices, and I'm really looking forward to seeing some of these strategies implemented on campus.

And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at QEP.Mercer.edu and subscribe to our show at [SoundCloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com).