



Research that Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 7: Creating Inclusive Classrooms Part 1/5

The Why Behind Inclusive Teaching 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.
- We have a special episode for you today, part one of a five-part segment on creating inclusive classrooms with Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Laura Simon from Mercer University. Dr. Vicki Luther, who you may recognize from Episode 6 of this podcast, is an associate professor in the Tift College of Education at Mercer who teaches about, among many different topics, theory and development. Dr. Laura Simon is an assistant professor of sociology at Mercer whose areas of expertise include the sociology of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and health disparities. Dr. Luther and Dr. Simon are part of the 2019-20 cohort of Research that Reaches Out Faculty Scholars. As part of the program, they developed a workshop for faculty on fostering inclusivity in the classroom. When Covid 19 derailed the original plans for delivery, they regrouped and have agreed to join me in this podcast episode to explore the topic. Vicki and Laura, thank you so much for joining me today.
- Vicki Luther: Thank you. Good to be here.
- Laura Simon: Yes, thank you very much.
- Hannah Nabi: I want to talk to you a little bit about your backgrounds in this area, but first let's define the term inclusive teaching because I think inclusivity can mean different things to different people in different contexts. So for the purposes of our discussion here today, what does inclusive teaching mean?
- Vicki Luther: In my view, I feel that that being inclusive means just being understanding of how to include every student and continuously giving opportunities for students to do well within the classroom environment and outside of the classroom environment.
- Laura Simon: Yeah. And just to echo those sentiments, to me, inclusive teaching is about embracing diversity in kind of all forms, whether it be gender, race, ethnicity, ability, disability, socioeconomic status, and all the other things we can think

about. And really to think about our theme here on creating classrooms, it's how do we design classrooms to foster all talents of all students and, rather than an emphasis on just, you know, knowing every student's identity and information, using methods that are just kind of best practice to bring in all students together so that before we walk into a classroom, we can feel confident that it's as engaging and accessible in all the different ways that it needs to be for all students of those diverse backgrounds.

Vicki Luther: I think Laura really hit that so well. A lot of times people think inclusive practices means everything's done the same, but it's actually differentiation. So you're looking at students in different lenses, because what you're basically saying is, how can I help you to succeed. How can I best support you, and like Laura was saying, those best practices for making sure that students feel confident so that they will feel competent within the classroom environment.

Hannah Nabi: Thanks for clearing that up. What's your background in this area, and how did you get interested?

Laura Simon: My background is, well, I'm a sociologist by training. So, inherently, in what I do from a research and teaching perspective, I often teach classes that are about the very topics I just mentioned about being inclusive. So I teach the sociology of race and ethnicity. I teach sociology of gender and sexuality. I teach health disparities. And more so some of my interest patterns with my research and with the work I did as a scholar. So then taking that scholarship into my role as a teacher-scholar and thinking about how those same inequities, those same barriers, all of those factors matter, not just for people in day to day life, of course, but also students in our classroom, day to day. So as a sociologist, if I'm going to teach my students about what happens for those who face socioeconomic disparities, then I also need to recognize how that might play out in the classroom for them. For someone who comes from a lower income background or who simply doesn't have access to resources, I need to think critically about how their college experience is shaped. So that really is what, what I teach and what I do, were my initial kind of entry points. And then once I unpacked it, I realized, oh this isn't limited to sociology, that this is relevant and important for all disciplines. And what can I do with my expertise, with my background to help scholars in all those other disciplines bring this into their classroom as well. And if you're listening and you're like, well is that relevant for my discipline? We will be talking more about that to get at the importance for you.

Vicki Luther: I think my my background in education lends itself, like Laura was saying, we both have a background that kind of firmly puts ourselves into this mindset that we do want our students to succeed. Because we're looking at them

holistically, but we're also looking at them individually. And my background in education kind of lends itself to this mindset that we are doing more inclusive practices in the private and public realm of education in P-12 learning. But a lot of times we forget that that's not when, once you walk across the graduation stage in 12th grade, that's not where your differences end. So our goal in this is to basically show our colleagues that no one size fits all. And we know that, but a lot of times we may, accidentally and without meaning, forget that. That once a person gets into a class in the university arena, a lot of times we just think, okay, everyone's going to be the same. And that's just not the case. So I think that our inclusive practices need to be universal. They don't stop after high school, and they shouldn't stop after college or graduate school. Because we all are so unique and so different in our backgrounds, in our interests, in our ways of thinking and our ways of perception, etc, etc.

Hannah Nabi: So y'all have touched on this a little bit, but I want to dig in a little bit more about why inclusive teaching matters. And I know you're gonna get more into details about what it can look like in different contexts and in different disciplines. But before we dig into the how, let's talk about the why. How our students impacted, and how our faculty impacted?

Laura Simon: So I will talk a little bit about the benefits for students first, and then I'm going to throw it over to Vicki to talk about the faculty as well. So one of the things to think about is when you're in any space, whether it be a classroom or a meeting or an event, that if you feel a part of that space, if something about that space has made you feel invited into it, that you are that much more likely to be engaged. So if we take that notion and we think about our classrooms, we can think simply if a student looks through one of our course syllabi and says, I see myself here, and whatever that may be – a recognition of diversity of authors, an explicit statement of access for students that have disabilities. whatever that looks like for them – but to have them know, even in a syllabus form, oh this class is for me, or I am welcomed into this class, that increases their engagement with the course. And we know that's kind of our buy-in for when we see increased measures of student success. So engagement is certainly one thing that's really important for students.

In addition, I think it's also a really important act of role modeling. As faculty, we are all in a position of leadership. Whether we coin it as such or not, we are. We are leading the classroom, and we all have different leadership styles, but nonetheless we're role modeling for our students. So there's this notion of, either by your own identity showing a student, Oh, I could be in this role someday too, or through your practice within your discipline of the authors your using, again, or the methods and tools you're using, that makes students go, I could do this. I can do this. Either by giving them self confidence in their learning and their process or by showing people who look like them in this discipline. So again, it's not just changing your syllabi and supporting authors.

It's also the methodology we use to inspire student engagement and student confidence.

And for those disciplines, for the student benefit component, if you have a discipline where you feel like it would be challenging for you to raise the voice of a diverse array of authors, you can think about, is there a space where you could acknowledge that for your students and say, Listen, we know there's a gap in the literature in this particular subject from these particular groups not having access to this institution in this way, and that too can be an engagement factor and a role modeling factor to show students how they can get an inroads into having the potential. And this might seem like, okay that's relevant for managers, but we know especially coming from a liberal arts background, students need to feel invested in some way in the material as they make those decisions about their future. So even a general education requirement, if you can show a student the relevance to them, it's going to have a powerful impact long term and short term for their success in the class.

I will piggyback on Laura's statements, and she said role modeling, and that is something that I wanted to touch on as well. So thank you Laura because we are models for our students. As an educator teaching pre-service teachers, teacher candidates, about to go into the field, it would be very unethical of me, I feel, if I were to say, you should do such practices and you should use inclusive practices in your teaching, but I would not be doing that. That would be, in my opinion, unethical and just very unfair for the students.

And so I really, in my mind when I, when I think about this, I think about how we are actually touching future generations by what we do in our classrooms each and every day on the college campus. Because we are setting them up in, hopefully in such a way that they can go out and use practices in their jobs, be it if they are a business major, a sociology major, pre-med major, whatever it may be. We're setting them up to say, these are practices that will serve you well but also serve the general population with whom you will work after you graduate. And so there are a lot of benefits, I feel, for the students but also for the teachers, for faculty.

Because I feel that we are giving them a greater, we allow our students to have a greater connection to our content when we are showcasing that everyone has a a space in our classroom, everyone has a space in this particular topic, and you are a welcome person in here, and your ideas and your thoughts matter. We are allowing them to make a better and deeper connection to the content, which in turn makes it, in a lot of ways, easier for us to know and recognize that our work in the classroom is actually going to be used and it's going to be something that they will be able to look back and say, I was treated in a way that I wanted to learn more about that subject area.

And if they are making connections to the content, and we are making greater connections to the students, it basically is a win-win because what we're

basically doing is saying., you have a safe space here to be heard, to be respected, and we're allowing you the opportunity to teach us as well as we are teaching you. And it's a two-way street. And I think that is so important.

Hannah Nabi: That's a really interesting point that y'all make about role modeling. And particularly Vicki, what you said about how you're touching future generations, not just your students in that particular class at that particular point in time. I think that's really relevant to Mercer's motto, at Mercer everyone majors in changing the world. And you know, service-mindedness is a very common value among higher education institutions and also feeds into the, you know, the broader yet far less defined idea of global citizenship as well. And Laura, I wanted to ask you, you talked about the importance of making a person feel welcome in a space so that they can be more engaged. But why would a student not feel welcome? You know, if they're in a university, if they're at Mercer, they got accepted so clearly they're supposed to be there. What factors or characteristics or issues might surface that would create a feeling of being unwelcome that could impact learning?

Laura Simon: I think that's a great question. I'm going to answer this in kind of two ways. The first, kind of what I know from literature on the benefits of group inclusion. But then also just speaking too, broadly, about student experiences I've heard about throughout my, kind of, teaching career. So to speak to the first part, we know that to feel a part of a group is a really important kind of notion of connecting with others, and I've kind of already established that in the broad connection. But there's being part of a group, so being accepted to Mercer and being a Bear, right. Go Bears. And then there's feeling represented within that group. So the representation within that group becomes the most powerful component. So it's not just that you're in the group but that you feel like the group is raising your voice. Not that it's raising the voice of others who are also in the group and you're just kind of tagging along. And so that's kind of a metaphorical sense, but I think, I hope it resonates to think about the power of that.

So for example, and I'll throw myself out here as kind of one example of where I didn't do well with this, when I first started teaching a course titled the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, I designed my syllabus in a way that I thought was really wonderful as a scholar. So I pulled the best articles, I got the best information, I knew how race was measured in my discipline. And so I was really, you know, like, here's the data, so let me tell you about the experience in the country that we live in, because I focus on the United States in my courses. But then I started hearing from students like, first of all, a lot of the research in sociology that is the most frequently used, because of the way we measure race and because of the data that kind of rises to the top in the social sciences – so big data, large sample sizes. I was mostly giving students examples of black and white comparisons. So I was talking to them a lot about wealth and equity among black and white individuals and inequity in rates of incarceration. And I

have students tell me, like, okay, this is important, right, we feel it's important to know. But I don't see myself here. I see these large-scale trends. I see that it matters. But you're not talking about all these other racial groups that are really important. You're not talking about this more identity component that I feel as a biracial student and that I experience. And especially that note – this integration from a teaching perspective, as teaching about a topic related to race, I became really aware – I'm not doing a good job of representing all groups. I was doing a really good job of bringing some of the best literature I had and some of the most important information I saw from my lens, but I wasn't that in tune with what students needed or what students wanted to learn. So they were getting as engaged as they could in my classroom. But some of them were also feeling isolated in my classroom, of wondering where their voice was in the readings I selected or even in the conversations we were having.

So there's kind of one example of how students can be unintentionally kind of left out. And what happened when I started to rework my syllabus, rework my teaching methods, rework how I ran discussions in the classroom, which we'll talk about methods in the future and what we can do. When I started to do that, I started to notice all of my students became invested. It became less of a narrative of, well, that's their problem or this problem, or that's not my problem or I'm not here, and more, well, what can we all do. So this collective kind of buying in and engagement.

So that's really what I noticed in terms of the importance for students and what that looks like. So even though they're in my classroom, they're all a Mercer Bear, it matters for how they felt engaged or not. And those methods of discussion also matter for whether a student felt comfortable to engage. So for example, when you have a classroom of 35 students, not all students are comfortable raising or asking questions, or having discussion about really sensitive issues in front of 35 peers. But as soon as I started to also use small group discussion, I gave those students who were more hesitant a space to feel welcome to discuss, welcome to ask questions. So a modification of the class, a really simple thing, opened a whole new window of engagement for my students there.

Vicki Luther:

And I'll just say one thing, that I believe that there are so many ways – and we're going to delve into different ways that we can really model that inclusive focus within our classrooms – but one thing that Laura said that just kind of jumped into my mind. I have been that person that oftentimes, I will assign groups and I will say, okay, you three are working together. And what I found is, I'm not taking the time to think about their own personal schedules. I'm not taking the time to think about their personalities. And so, for example, you may have someone who does not live on campus who's in the same group. And their grade is dependent on working together, but I have put them in a group together. And I'm not saying that there aren't times that that should be done or

could be done and it can work, but I have found that when I allow them to have the opportunity to think about who, who in your class, who are your peers that you feel you would most likely connect to really get the information from this assignment and really hone in and work together, because that's a critical part. It's a what we call a soft skill, you know, working with each other. But it's something that, it's not, it's not a soft skill. It's something that needs to be done. And so just, you know, my own thought process about, well, this didn't quite work because this person is taking 18 hours and is playing a sport and may have a part time job, and and so giving them the opportunity to really, you know, do things where they have more flexibility and a little bit more decision making really does play a part and make a big difference. And so I've been doing that the last couple of years, and I have found that that really is seeming to help. And so there's a time and there's a place for everything that we do. But I think just thinking about maybe what we consider to be little things, but those little things can be really important for the students.

Hannah Nabi: So it sounds like inclusive teaching practices really does span everything from looking for content that students can relate to all the way to things that are not necessarily content or discipline related, but more course design or things like that. So even if a person is teaching in a discipline that, maybe you don't have as much flexibility with the text that you choose, or the author sources, that there are other ways to think about how to support student success through engagement.

Vicki Luther: Absolutely.

Hannah Nabi: So in the next part of this episode, we're going to talk more about the mechanics or the methods of this. And I know y'all have have worked really hard to develop some recommendations for how faculty can adapt existing courses with pretty minimal input, depending upon available time and resources that they have, so that they can still be adopting inclusive practices. Are there any terms or ideas that you all would like to highlight here as sort of a teaser for part two?

Laura Simon: Well my hope is that this first part of the episode is encouraging faculty to think critically about their courses. And so one thing I wanted to highlight now was one, a concept that I think we all should know and be aware of, and then two, a question that faculty can kind of ask themselves as they work on course design.

So the first is the concept of unconscious bias. Oftentimes, so unconscious bias is sometimes referred to as implicit bias. Very similar terms. Essentially, the notion that we all hold bias, but we're not always aware of the biases that we hold. So for example, for a very long time, when I wrote my syllabi and I wanted to use gender neutral language, I would write he or she. He or she, he or she,

he or she. And I didn't think anything of it. I wasn't aware of how that might land for students who identify as trans. So it was unconscious. I wasn't doing it with ill intent. I wasn't trying to leave students out. It was commonly used, right. It was a common practice. But I learned from a student graciously reaching out to me that I was unintentionally, kind of, letting the student know that that wasn't something I was thinking about, And they weren't angry, they weren't fired up. They were just saying, hey, when I read this, it feels like, where do I fit. And so I very simply switched my syllabi to they or them, kind of a gender neutral term. Which actually makes it easier when typing syllabi. I don't have to do he or she or he/she, right, I just say they, but it was that unconscious.

So back to the root of the term. This bias that we hold, that we're unconscious of –and this is very sociological, right, so here's the my roots of my discipline coming out. I want to challenge all of us that are listening to this to think about how we are all socialized in the same system. So no matter where we're born, we all have a social system that tells us what we believe. And certainly we have patterns that we can follow, and we think for ourselves. But we get a lot of messages about groups. So the media shows us messages of particular group patterns. And we can think of body image for young women, right, and all the messages we get about body image, and we start to have this bias. So we think about body image – I'm using this as an example just to contextualize the concept of unconscious bias – we can think about all the messages we receive about good bodies versus “bad bodies” and how that kind of seeps in unconsciously. So we might catch ourselves judging someone unnecessarily simply for their form. And I do think there's really wonderful work happening in that movement.

So in the same way in our teaching. For example, I teach a sociological theory class, and the majority of classic sociological theory is written by white men. Not all of it, but the majority of it. And I could say, well, yeah, that's just who the classical scholars were, but there's an unconscious bias there. And, well, why are they the classic scholars? Women were certainly writing at that time. People of color were certainly writing at that time. So there's this unconscious narrative that gets into our structures and our systems. So just having an awareness of that and challenging us to think about the things that we're not aware of that just kind of seep into our day-to-day Or maybe when we write our syllabi or maybe in our classes, some kind of assumptions were making. So that's my first kind of concept I wanted to bring forward now to get us all critically thinking.

And then my question, and I wish I had come up with this, but I actually read it in a Chronicle article and it really resonated with me. And that is, as we're designing our classes, as we're selecting the methods that we want to use, we can ask ourselves ho is being left out as a result of this approach? So again, not my direct quote, but we can think about in the approaches that we use in our classroom. And I think Vicki's example of scheduling and groups is a great example of this. Who is being left out? Again, maybe not intentionally, maybe in an unconscious way, but challenging us to think about, instead of who are

we including, who are we leaving out. So those are my kind of big takeaways as teasers for the next part of the episode.

Vicki Luther:

Yes, and I, I think that in our thinking about this, and Laura and I have had many discussions over this past year about these practices, and one of my, that I keep going back to is wait time. And I know that sounds a little silly, but in thinking about in your class how much time do you give for your students to actually think about a question? Or is it a situation where you give certain students more wait time than you give other students? There was actually a study that was done, and this was for elementary school students, but there were actually researchers that went in and actually looked at the amount of time teachers gave students and find out whether it was gender specific, to find out if males were given more time than females. So that was just one example of a study that was done a few years ago. But just, you know, taking a look at how much time am I allowing my students to actually think and ponder, or am I calling on students? Do I call on the same students? Do I do it in a meaningful way, or do I allow students the opportunity to ask questions throughout the course of my class, my daily class schedule. Things like that, that can be really, really important.

And one of the statements that I know everyone knows is stereotyping. And we oftentimes think of stereotyping as, Oh, I don't do that. But it, like Laura was saying, a lot of times things that we do, we don't even think about and stereotyping can be a lot of different things. For example, we may look at a student who comes in late to our class and just automatically say, well this student doesn't want to be here. The student, you know, is not really serious about their academics. But then we may find out later on there's an underlying reason. And so just not assuming is such a big thing when we're talking about inclusive practices. And making sure that we're looking at students as means to, we want to learn about them so that we can help them. And so, kind of like Laura was saying it's, we can say, oh, leave your bias at the door, but that's not, what we're saying is, we want to, we want everyone through this second session that we have to really start to think about, oh, I may be doing something that inadvertently is harming a student's success within my class. And I did not mean to do that in any way, shape, or form. I'm doing it because I have just been unaware all this time that I was doing that. So those are the little things that can make a big impact in the class.

Hannah Nabi:

So I like to close each episode by asking our guests to share how the work that they do is Research that Reaches Out, but this topic is a little bit of a break from our typical stories about service-research. But it's no less relevant to the mission of our office or the university. How does this topic of inclusive teaching practices connect with Research that Reaches Out?

Laura Simon: So I think there's many connections here. And one of the things I've thought about as the benefits for faculty broadly on this topic is the innovation that some of these practices can lead to. And I love watching all the incredible service learning oriented projects take place in our classrooms, and I really think inclusive teaching only serves to foster that goal of designing classrooms with this and, as Hannah mentioned earlier, this notion of Mercer majors in and changing the world. And so the more we engage our students, the more we build classrooms that represent the diversity of our student body, the better served we are to engage in that Research that Reaches Out component and be better trained and well skilled to deal with diverse communities of people. So I really see it as a core tool for many of the goals in the Research that Reaches Out office.

Vicki Luther: And I find that this is a topic that, like I said before, is something that is far reaching. And it goes beyond Mercer University and it goes beyond the college context. And in my particular field, I'm out in schools and I'm out working with pre-service teachers preparing to go into the field of education. So every week, I see the community, and I work with teachers, and I work with administrators who really truly do want what's best for the students of Bibb County, but also, you know, throughout the state, throughout the country, throughout the world. And I think that this is just far reaching in the terms of my research, where we have students from Mercer who go out and do tutoring, and I think allowing students to recognize in the college setting that they are being included will help them to make more of an impact on those students when they do that service learning tutoring that they do in our Title I schools.

Hannah Nabi: Well, thank you very much, Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Laura Simon, for joining us today. This has been a really great introduction to the inclusive teaching practices ideas, and I'm looking forward to our next conversation. In part two, we will directly address the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police and will talk about whether faculty should address major cultural events like these in their classrooms and how they can do so in a way that does not cause additional harm to their students.

And thank you to our listeners today for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. Be sure to check out all five parts of this special segment on Creating Inclusive Classrooms. You can subscribe to our podcast on SoundCloud.com or check us out on our website at QEP.Mercer.edu.