



Research that Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 8: Creating Inclusive Classrooms Part 2/5

Addressing Cultural Events in the Classroom 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 part two of the 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 had been designing some faculty development on inclusive teaching practices as part of their participation in the 2019-20 cohort of Research that Reaches Out Faculty Scholars. 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.

So for students, it's the importance of creating a welcoming environment for students so that they are more comfortable engaging with the material, whether it's by taking a student's commuter status into account when designing assignments or acknowledging the value of trans students by using gender neutral language and syllabi. And for faculty, they highlighted the value of improved student outcomes in the course, but also the role of inclusive teaching in driving innovation. So part one was all about why this is important, and today in part 2, we are going to be discussing how faculty can handle issues in the classroom that happen on campus or in the larger community.

So welcome back, Vicki and Laura. I'm looking forward to talking more about this with you today.

Vicki Luther: Thank you so good to be here.

Laura Simon: Yes, thank you. Happy to be here again.

Hannah Nabi: I'd like to take some time at the beginning of our conversation today to acknowledge the Black Lives Matter protests that have been taking place all over the country in response to the murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Brianna Taylor in Louisville, and Ahmaud Arbery in South Georgia. And right now, at the time of this recording, people across the country are in week three of protests against police brutality and racial injustice. As part of the recent rise in awareness about structural and systemic racism in the United States, there's a

call for action among higher education and a kind of a surge in faculty who are seeking resources to help their students navigate these issues.

So I want to ask you for faculty who are teaching right now or for faculty who teach during any kind of major crisis or incident that can impact students' sense of well-being, of belonging, or identity, whether it's on campus, in the local community or, as is the case right now, a national crisis. Should faculty be addressing these kinds of issues in the classroom, even if it may not seem relevant to course content? And what are ways, if the answer is yes, that faculty can become more informed and skilled so that they can address these situations with students in their classroom?

Laura Simon:

So Hannah, I will take the lead on this question as a sociologist who works and teaches and researches directly the discipline and subject of sociology of race and ethnicity. And I actually recently spent a lot of time thinking about this. I feel, at a time where we're not in the classroom, I recognize a lot of students wish we were. So they wish there were a place where they feel like they could have an informed discussion with a faculty member, but also with their peers. And I've had students reach out to me and tell me as much. So I think that when students are reaching out to faculty saying, I wish we were in class, I wish we could have these conversations, it absolutely tells us that students want us to address these things in our classrooms. And now, I am a sociologist, so my students are reaching out to me, perhaps because of my discipline.

But at the same time, I've also had students share with me when conversations around race, or race-related issues, or really any topic that's personal and can be challenging to discuss, I've had students tell me about times where they've gone wrong. So with that in mind, I feel that faculty should always acknowledge these major social upheavals in their classroom. So don't walk into class if you're teaching right now and act like everything's normal. You can acknowledge students' pain. You can acknowledge the struggle. You can acknowledge the uncertainty and the confusion. But you don't necessarily have to lead a full discussion on it. So absolutely, recognize your students. If you don't feel like you are the person who should be leading the discussion, you have some options.

The first is look for resources that you can share with your students. So identify resources that already exist – people have done the work for us – that you can give to your students. For example, on Mercer's campus right now, the Diversity and Inclusion Office is holding events. Direct them to those conversations, to people who are doing work in these issues, if that's what they need, if you can't lead that conversation.

The second is arm yourself, for lack of a better word. So build yourself up with resources of your own. So as an educator, one of my favorite texts on this is *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks. And this actually talks about education as the practice of freedom and how we can use education as a tool to make sure

that freedom is insured for all. So bell hooks does great work in this area. I strongly encourage that text. Another one that's getting a lot of attention right now is the book *How to Be Anti-Racist*. So again, preparing yourself as a faculty member for those materials is a good way to make sure you're ready when you step into that classroom if a discussion comes up, if you address it and people have questions.

But also, don't feel like you have to lead that conversation, especially if you are not familiar enough and you haven't done the work yourself to prepare you to lead it. So acknowledge what's happening. Make sure your students feel represented and heard, but also be willing to know when you haven't done enough work to actually lead on that conversation. Direct your students to resources, but also consider the work you can do for future moments where this might happen again.

So that is my perspective on how we should handle this in the classroom. It's challenging and it's complicated, but silence can really tell our students that we don't care about the issue. And that may not be true. But when we're silent and we ignore, we cue them that it's not at the forefront of our mind whether that's true or not. So think about, as much as what saying the wrong thing, getting it wrong and imperfect can say, what your silence can say as well. So resources, educate. As educators, let's keep educating. And tap into the, honestly, hundreds of resources that are out there for the taking right now. Simple Google search will get you access to all sorts of things specific for educators.

Vicki Luther:

Thanks Laura. That was a lot of wonderful information, and I don't have too much more to add to that. But I am going to just reiterate a couple of things that you said. One of the things that I do want to mention, I wholeheartedly agree with Laura in the sense that one of the forms of bias that we can have is the unreality of just basically glossing over what has occurred and what is occurring. And basically saying, you know, kind of that ostrich with the head in the sand kind of visual where you're thinking about glossing over unpleasantness, unpleasant facts. And basically, ignoring the fact that these things are occurring. And so I think that as faculty, we want to be very mindful that, like Laura said, going in and acting like everything is perfectly okay and perfectly quote unquote normal is not the right approach. And just being aware ourselves, you know. It doesn't mean we have to be watching the news 24/7, but just having that awareness within ourselves to know what is happening. And just starting to recognize that these are very critical conversations that a student or many students may want to discuss.

One of the things that I think is so pivotal in our role as educators, as faculty, a lot of times we think that we are the one giving all of the knowledge. Which we are hired to do that, and we do have expertise in areas, but I can never say that I know what it's like to be someone else. And so one of the best anti-bias approaches that we can think of is to kind of get away from that mindset of, we know everything, we're here to teach you. It needs to be a two-way street

where we're wanting to learn more from our students, especially when it comes to discussions about discrimination or racism. We want to make sure that we're thinking in terms of how can I best teach you by learning from you. And so it's really important that we give students that ability to have engagement and voice within our classrooms, especially at a time like this.

And basically, it allows us to kind of start to hear the struggles that maybe a lot of our students may be experiencing, or maybe their feelings of fear. And it allows us to really hone our skills as an educator by being more minded about what our students may be going through, may be feeling, and it just kind of sets the stage.

One of the things, and I'm in education, but one of the things is that students will never care about what you know until they know how much you care. And that's really true whether we're teaching an education course or sociology or business or any other course, to be really mindful when students know that we truly do care about them, that's when they'll start caring about the subject area we are trying to teach. And so just looking at it from the mindset of what can I learn from my students. Not just what can they learn from me, but what can I learn from them.

Hannah Nabi: Thank y'all, both for addressing that. And I would just like to add that I think, Vicki, your advice about being open to learning from students is really important. But, and y'all may want to clarify this, just that there's a difference between being open to learning by listening, and then trying to initiate conversation by tokenizing students and calling them out as representatives of whatever their identity group may be. And so I just don't want people to misinterpret that.

Vicki Luther: Absolutely, and yes. Thank you so much because I kind of got on a roll and forgot to bring it back a little bit. Sorry about that. But yes definitely. Our role is, whether we're just being more intentional about really listening. I think that a lot of times we get so focused on, Here's what I'm going to do in my class, that we forget to really listen. And listening can a lot of times be verbal and also non verbals. And not calling a student out or not saying, Tell us how you feel about this, but watching and observing and listening to their needs, whether they're talking to us one-on-one or whether we're just kind of watching what's going on when they come into class. But yes, it's never a calling out. It's never a, Let me embarrass you. It's always done in a sense of, I may not be the best person to lead a conversation. And that's the thing that I think Laura was saying. A lot of times, we think we're the ones who should be leading conversations. A lot of times we just need to let it be organic and let the students maybe share from a point where they're experiencing some trauma or some feelings and go from there. And let them lead us, sometimes, versus us always leading them.

Laura Simon:

Right, and I will echo those sentiments. And I think this actually ties in really well to the work of this podcast and our plans for creating what we have kind of termed inclusive classrooms. When you create a space where students feel represented, when students feel comfortable, when students trust you, as your professor, as your educator, beyond just that they're going to take what they learned, but that they see that you value them, you can create a learning space that extends beyond the boundaries of just the professor sharing with the students.

And yeah, to echo what Hannah said, you never want to put a student on the spot. Right, well, what do you think about the protest? That's problematic. Don't do it. But you will also find when students want to talk, when you created a space that they feel heard, they will share with you. And within all of this, just to echo and make sure it's very clear, we should not need – and speaking directly to the protests right now – we should not need the pain of black people to convince us that equity is a reasonable and achievable goal. We should not need stories of very clear racist x. We should not need videos of murders taking place to convince us that everyone should have equity in the world.

And so what you don't want to do in your classroom space is lead with the idea that there's even a question of that. And that's when I said sometimes conversation goes wrong, when we act like it's up for debate whether or not black individuals in America deserve equal rights, equal protections from whatever system, be it policing, be it education. If you're not prepared to lead those kinds of discussions in a way that does not re-traumatize or risk added harm to your students by even bridging the idea that, well, maybe...right, and we know all the narratives. We can go, umm, if ABC, if, if, if, if, but what about, what-about-ism, right. All of these things that we talked about. That's the risk of leading conversation before you've done the work on your own to actually address anti-racism, in this case, but more broadly anti-bias. So in these times, I encourage us all to consider what we're talking about and the starting point where we're at with the conversation. So just reiterating and kind of clarifying. Um, yeah. So I'll leave it there.

Hannah Nabi:

Well, thank you. Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Laura Simon, for this really thoughtful insight into how faculty can think about and address major community or cultural events in their classrooms. Your challenge to all of us to be honest with ourselves about our own self-awareness and preparation to lead discussion on issues related to bias is particularly important.

For Mercer faculty who are listening and thinking about whether and how to address the current social and political upheaval in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, I encourage you to reach out to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives for resources and supports. There is an anti-racist reading group that began in May of this year for Mercer students and faculty, and there

are a few other trainings and resources that have emerged in the wake of the nationwide protests in support of Black lives.

And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. Be sure to check out the next part, Part 3, as we broaden our conversation to learn about the seven forms of bias and explore some low-stress inclusive teaching strategies faculty can try in their classrooms.

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.