



Research that Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 9: Creating Inclusive Classrooms Part 3/5

Low Stress, High Impact Strategies 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 three of the 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. When their original in-person workshop was put on hold because of Covid-19 social distancing restrictions, they shifted gears and moved this into a podcast for us. 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 readiness to address students' well-being in the face of major community or cultural events, such as the nationwide protests in support of Black lives in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

Today, in Part three, we are going to be discussing the seven forms of bias and learning about some strategies faculty can use in their classroom that are low-stress but high impact. So let's get started.

Y'all talked a little bit in Part 1 about there being some steps that faculty can take, that are high impact, on creating a welcoming inclusive environment for students and sending signals that indicate that perhaps they are worthy of trust, but that are low stress or low-input on the faculty side. Things like, you know, changing pronouns in the syllabus to be gender neutral – they and them. What are some other strategies like this that faculty can try?

Laura Simon:

Okay, so I am going to briefly link us back to our original format. This podcast was originally planned as a workshop, and in that workshop we have framed a lot of the materials around what have been coined as the Seven Forms of Bias. And I think it's important to clearly identify those seven forms of bias and kind of what they are. So real briefly, I'm going to move through all seven and give a very brief snippet of a definition. I'm not going to give an example for each because I don't want to take up all our time, but as we discussed, I know Vicki and I will both kind of reference back to these types of bias. But I wanted to make sure that we had them up front. So again, seven forms of bias. I got this information from the Sadker organization, and so if anyone's looking for it,

finding materials, if you look up seven forms of bias, that will come up and a list will show you if you miss any if this as we're going.

So the first is invisibility. So essentially, who's not represented in the classroom or the curriculum. The second is the use of stereotyping. Stereotyping, I think we all know what it is, but essentially applying a rigid set of characteristics to an entire group of people. So we do this with race, for example. So we say, there's millions of people in racial groups, but we make this one claim. So that's a stereotype. Rigid set of characteristics that we say applies to everyone. And we can see this, sometimes harmfully in education, and sometimes more innocently. You might give an example, but it's built upon a stereotype.

The third are imbalance and selectivity. So this is the incomplete events or lack of viewpoints. I think one example that was given is, we say women got the vote, but we don't talk about the work of suffrage and what it took for women to get the right to vote. A nod to our 100 year anniversary of having voting rights! So if we just say women got the right to vote, it kind of implies that, like, people just did the right thing on their own, and like, okay, women can have the vote. That's not the full story, right. So there's an imbalance and selectivity in information there.

And the fourth is unreality. So this is glossing over unpleasant facts. So historical context, our conversations about race and racial history right now, how what we do or do not know about Tulsa and Rosewood, Seneca Village in New York City. How we teach history in this context. But this also applies to other disciplines of how we got the information we have. Sociology has issues with this that I'll talk about a little bit later, and other examples, but whose voices kind of rise to the top? And how that can transform what history we learn, again history as a discipline, absolutely, but also history within our disciplines that we're teaching

The fifth, fragmentation and isolation. So this is done when you isolate specific groups within a text. And as soon as we isolate a group, we're treating it as peripheral. And this is actually a really significant issue in sociology of race and ethnicity texts. A lot of them are designed by chapters, by group. So you'll have the group on what's often coined as African Americans, or kind of this large group, and that's problematic. Because it says there are these differences, when we know about social constructions in history, that it's much more nuanced than that. So how we talk about those groups really matters. And just speaking to my own discipline, we see it arise there, and there's work being done to address it.

The sixth form is linguistic bias. So, how we frame events and/or people. Bias in language choices. A good example of this that can be very subtle is just language choices we use. This is actually, I have my students do a media analysis in race class. When the word, relevant right now, although in the context that I teach in, I'm actually talking about Hurricane Katrina. There's images that came out, post-Hurricane Katrina, of individuals carrying goods. And when it was a person of color, specifically a black person in this context,

they would use the word loot. But when it was a person who we would racialize and identify as white, they would use the word find. So the white individuals found things, the black individuals looted things. And we certainly see this loot versus find happening right now in the imagery and media representations of people. So loot vs find, right. It's just a language choice, but it holds a lot more than just words.

And then the seventh form of bias is cosmetic bias. And this is when you might use an image to kind of cast illusion of equity and inclusion. So maybe someone said, our textbook has too many pictures of individuals that identify as white. We're going to throw away. Pictures of people from a variety of backgrounds, but nothing within the actual content changes, right, so it's just a cosmetic, kind of making it look shinier and more inclusive.

So with that in mind, we can think about, if we work through our own courses, in our own materials, one starting point that has high impact but is honestly low stress is to go through and see what forms of bias exists in your course materials, be it your textbook, be it your lectures, be it your assignments, your examples.

Vicki Luther:

Wow. I mean, there are so many ways that we can unintentionally make a student feel lesser, and so many times it's an unintentional act. And we, even with our textbooks, like you were saying, just making a student purchase a textbook and then realizing that they are not identified and they don't see themselves in that text. And we know that faculty are teaching so many different subject areas and disciplines, and we all know that time is a valuable commodity, but there are just some very small things that we can do that make big impacts.

One of the things that individuals can think about doing is doing an audit, like a classroom audit. Which means, ask a colleague to come into your class when you are teaching. Just sit in the back of the room and then just do a, you know, was I mindful? And something as simple as, was I mindful to give enough wait time for every student when a question was posed? Did I allow students to think critically and give them higher order questions that would allow them to think outside of the box so that there's more of a discussion and dialogue that's taking place? So actually having a colleague come in, and the colleague doesn't need to necessarily be from your discipline, or could be. But just having them come in. It's not a gotcha. It's just more of a, tell me. Because when we're up teaching, and we're talking, and we're really into our subject areas, a lot of times we forget that maybe we called on a gender more than the other, you know, or more than another group of individuals. Meaning did we just even call on all the students in the front? Did we forget those that are sitting toward the back of the room? And so there's a lot that we can do with that.

Another thing in terms of an audit, quote unquote, is doing a midterm audit where, it's kind of like, a lot of times we give midterm tests or midterm exams. But just giving them a little chance to say, what do you like most about this

course? Or what are you learning most? What are some topics and discussions you would like to see us talk about more? How do you feel about group learning? How do you feel about working in groups? And just, it's not for a grade. It's just more to give you, for the second half of the semester, a chance to think about where my students feeling. What are they thinking about at this point in time? Are they thinking that you give too many individual assignments and we really would like to work together, to get to know each other more and learn from one another. And so just little things like that that we can do that wouldn't take a lot of time, but it would take some opportunity for you to see how your colleagues or how your students are interpreting what you're doing within the classroom.

Another thing that you can do is think about the group work, which I know a lot of times people say, Ugh, the dreaded group work. But a lot of times, that's an area in which students can learn from each other. And when done appropriately, not forcing people but when done appropriately, and doing a project-based learning activity instead of just always having paper and pencil. And in this day, you know, computer, obviously. But instead of having those types of assignments always, doing something that would be more impactful in a project. And again, different disciplines can lend themselves more so. But thinking about, how could I have my students work together, learn from one another. And then also have them create something that would be beneficial as a project versus just a paper or a test.

Another thing that you can do is, you can do something called reading against the grain, which basically means that you have the text, and we always assume that everyone's going to get the same information from the text. But instead of just reading the text for its intended purpose, you can actually have students analyze and look at the text to determine, like Laura was saying, are there any gaps? Are there any beliefs or attitudes or persons that are not examined in the text? And so it's basically not just reading for reading. It's also opening your eyes to see. does this text really help all learners? And you can do this, as well, as you're trying, and I know that every semester we have, months before our semesters begin, we have to do our book orders. But this could be something potentially you can think about for the spring semester where you look at the, don't just look at the content but you look at the book a little bit against the grain. You look at the text against the grain and say, would all of my students feel that they could learn from this text based on what is there and also what is not there?

Hannah Nabi:

Well, and I'll say that Vicki, your recommendation to survey students midway through the semester, several of my professors did that in my grad program. And the first time it happened, I was weirded out. And I was like, what is happening? Why? What, everything's already planned. And then the professors, in each instance, I think maybe four or five times throughout my program we were surveyed mid semester by different faculty in the program, and they

implemented changes based on our feedback. And you know, and it happened once. And so the first time that they implemented changes and I realized, Oh, they're actually listening! They actually care. It's not just an exercise to check a box. So then I started being more thoughtful in my feedback because I trusted that it was valued and being considered, even if it wasn't implemented, all of it. You know, if I saw something implemented to a certain degree, it made me feel more engaged as a learner as well.

Vicki Luther:

Absolutely! And I, I love the idea of actually having our students have that feedback and feel that it is a safe space for them to be able to say, I wish we were doing more of, or. It's not a gotcha experience. It's more of a, how can I best help you for the remainder of the semester? And so I think it's just a really good powerful way to get that student feedback and that information that we, you know, want them to do.

One thing that, and again, this is something that you could try or not try, but a lot of times we have so much to cover in a given timeframe. And you know, time is of the essence when it comes to making sure that all of our course objectives are completely done. But I know that there are some faculty members, as silly as it may sound, that do something called happies and crappies. And basically what that means is, tell me something good that has occurred this week, or, you know, since we last talked. Or tell me something that's not going quite as well that, maybe you can have a discussion. And it doesn't have to take long, but it's basically what's something that's really going well, and this is something that. It's not to take the whole class. It's not something that you could, you want to do for more than a few minutes, potentially, but A) it helps you to see the outside life of our students. Not just what they do when they come into your class, but also what's going on with them. You know, a lot of times they don't tell us these great things that happened, you know, in terms of, I got into a fraternity or sorority, I, I did this, I made an A on my chemistry exam and I was really nervous about it. And when they come and know that we're listening to them, it builds relationship with others, but it also builds that student who's not really engaged in saying a lot, they may want to speak up. And so just involving the whole class. So you can call it anything you want. But, you know, basically it's, tell me something good, or tell me something not so good. But just getting them involved in the class session. Sometimes people like to do that just to get to know their students, and then maybe they don't do it as much, but it's still one of those great things that might be helpful at the beginning of the semester.

Laura Simon:

Absolutely. I think we're aligned here. What I find emerging from both Vicki's examples and Hannah's personal experience is this theme of student agency. And what happens when we incorporate things into our classroom that give our students a little bit of agency in what they're learning. Whether that be a mid-semester survey where they can reflect and say what's working and what

isn't, or perhaps one assignment where the student gets a little bit of choice. There's always framing. There's always a way it has to be applied, but they get a little bit of a choice in what they can pull in and how they can think about it.

I actually, I'll give a little plug to Research that Reaches Out and the QEP office. A lot of the directives are aligned with that, so what does this have to do with broader social issues? And then students can give input into how they're critically thinking about that. An example from my own work and I, this would be, it would vary in discipline and how we could do this. But I like to give students assignments, where they bring material in and they do have to still use the course objectives, right, use the core themes for how they assess it or critically think about it or analyze it.

So for example, in my theory class we teach all sorts of theorists, and one assignment that I have, and it's one assignment that I put into the classroom, is that they have to build a theory portfolio. And what goes into it is up to them. They analyze a movie, they analyze news articles. But they use theory to do that. I don't tell them, go analyze this movie. Pick this news article. So the tools I'm giving them are the theories that we're learning as a class, the core objectives of the course, but then they get agency in how they're going to apply those tools. And that's a really powerful way to pull your students in and engage with them. And then to bring it back around to the classroom to have them share with their peers. So for many of my students, they will select things that are personal to them, feel personal. Especially in theory, where we have a wide array of diverse authorship that we cover. And so students will select specifics, and then I have students lead, usually it's a short five to seven minute thing on one of their portfolio presentations. So then their peers get to hear from them. And I tend to, and this varies by class, and I know again, kind of looking back, we have certain constraints. I leave about a week in my course schedule to give students agency, whether they're bringing things in to present, whether they're working with material that they're selecting. And what I find is, it's twofold.

One, it gives them that sense of seeing themselves in the course material. And second, it kind of forces them, in lots of ways, to engage with it in a way they wouldn't have if it was more simply memorize the theorists and tell them what they said. And so we can think about, that's obviously more difficult in different types of classes, but are there ways that you could, in a course, that you could bring in, and have students bring in material from outside. And it could be, you know, five minutes of your class once a week or ten minutes once a week. It doesn't have to take a ton of time. You can get creative in the ways that you have students engaging in material, and that alone allows them to see themselves in more of the material because, oftentimes, they'll add that personal spin on it. So kind of taking all that we've said, there's lots of different ways you can do it. But sometimes it's building one assignment, one really key assignment, that you thread throughout the semester. Or you thread in at a

certain time that allows for that level of engagement that just inherently produces this kind of goal of inclusivity.

Vicki Luther:

I love your idea, Laura, because there are so many ways that you can make choice an option for the students. And it's all, at the end, the course objectives and the standards are still being addressed, but maybe done in various formats in different ways. Because as we know, our students are all so wonderfully unique, and they have so many strengths, and creativity is a big strength that Mercerians have. And so just allowing them that opportunity to say, I want to show you what I have learned, but do it in a maybe a different way than someone else in the class, is so great.

One more thing that I wanted to add. This is something I know that we talked a little bit last time, about the syllabi that we use and just making sure that everything that we put in our syllabi, we go back and just kind of look at it again with that lens, and just that inclusive lens. But one thing that maybe, something that is done would be maybe a classroom contract. And I have done this before in my class. It's basically a contract that can be put into the syllabus that basically is saying we are a community of learners. We are all here to learn from one another. And then, it basically just addresses, we're going to listen to the experiences of others with respect and we're, we're going to, you know, this is a non-judgmental environment. Things like that that we can maybe put in there so that we, first of all, it's a good way for us to keep going back and saying, wait a minute. This is a contract. This is, this is binding between myself and my students, and I have to make sure that each and every day I adhere to this contract, as well as to the students. It can also help when we're thinking about dispositions of our students. And making sure that they're aware that sometimes, our students may not be aware of something that they say in class may be very harmful and derogatory to a classmate. And so just thinking about putting just a small classroom contract in which everyone says we are a community of learners and we are respectful learners.

Hannah Nabi:

Well, thank you very much, Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Laura Simon. This has been a really great introduction to some strategies that faculty can use for inclusive teaching, and I'm looking forward to our next conversation in Part 3 when we dig deeper into more inclusive teaching strategies that can serve to not only broaden our students' knowledge of the discipline, but our own as well.

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 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.

