



Building an Inclusive Classroom

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. I'm the host of the "Beyond the Podium" podcast series at the University of Florida, where we laugh a little and learn a lot. The UF podcast series is on teaching and learning, and today's topic is building an inclusive classroom. Our guest is L.B. Hannahs, Special Assistant to the Vice President of Student Affairs.

L.B. Hannahs

So I actually got my bachelor's degree in music education, and I thought I wanted to be a music teacher. And I had some strong mentors at Syracuse University is where I finished my undergrad degree. And they showed me an opportunity of entering the field of higher education administration, and a graduate program there.

And I got my master's degree and I worked as a graduate assistant at their LGBT center there, and then came here to take the director of the LGBT office in 2011. And over that time, ran that office, was an administrator, but also had a lot of great opportunities to teach, both at the undergraduate level and the graduate level, in the honors program, in the College of Ed, and then started my PhD program, and grinding away.

Alexandra

L.B.'s commitment to higher education is evident. She will share from her wealth of experience in multicultural and diversity student affairs and inclusive teaching. Now, inclusive teaching takes into consideration that our students are individuals with different strengths, needs, and ways of learning. They can bring great things to the classroom, but they may also need help to meet the various personal challenges that they face. Students will rise to meet the expectations of their teachers, and as teachers and instructors, we can help guide students through each of their challenges.

L.B. Hannahs

When you talk about inclusivity, you're talking more about the people work, the emotional part, the intellectual work, the experience of building an environment, and practices, and policies that reduce the amount of barriers to as many people.

Alexandra

Removing barriers is an essential aspect of inclusive teaching. Creating a friendly learning environment allows students to feel safe and relaxed. Fostering a warm environment in the classroom helps students to be willing to take risks.

This is especially true for those students who have had challenging educational experiences in the past. A friendly learning environment is the key to help those students take more chances in pursuing their educational career and goals. As instructors, we can start this at the very beginning of the semester with activities that encourage students to get to know each other and us.

L.B. Hannahs

I think part of it, they're kind of no-brainer ones. They're kind of ones that folks do pretty often. But I think it's the how, and the process by which you do it. So you know, I'm thinking about those note cards and those name cards that I've had lots of instructors over the years-- share your name, share your UF ID, share your hometown, tell me one thing about you-- little ways to-- little things to add to those kind of information cards.

You know, what kind of pronouns would you like me to use? Is there a name-- what's your name on your official documents? Is there another name that you want me to go by?

So I'm thinking of our trans folks. I'm thinking of transgender folks. I'm thinking of, maybe, international students that choose different names to go by in the classroom, so that me as an instructor, as I go through these, I can kind of match up who's to which name. And I don't necessarily want to call someone's name out or embarrass them ahead of time.

So I know lots of instructors do that. That's not a mind-blowing activity, right? But you could also add different kinds of questions, like, tell me how your-- for first year students in particular-- how your first semester at UF is going.

How's your first week at UF going? How are you settling in? How-- thinking outside of the box about how you open up avenues for communication.

Alexandra

In addition to establishing a foundation that creates opportunities for communication, students also get a sense of shared ownership in a course when given an opportunity to help establish the shared ground rules.

L.B. Hannahs

And again, another simple kind of technique to creating a classroom that's participatory, we hand them a syllabus that has lots of rules, right? Like, no cheating. Here's all the assignments we want you to do. Here's what you have to read. And we kind of say, this is what you have to do.

So to get a little buy-in and make students feel like they can have ownership of the classroom, walk them through a process of shared ground rules around how you want to participate, how you want the professor to show up as a human in the classroom. How do you minimize power dynamics? Really helps the students feel like they can participate in a way that they can show up as more of a human, rather than just like an empty vessel that's getting content dropped into them.

Alexandra

This process is not limited to first day or first week strategies. Instead, instructors and students can keep this going with activities that promote inclusivity.

L.B. Hannahs

I think there are some that are less cheesy than others. Just, turn to your partner and talk about a high and low. Tell me a high of your week and a low of your week, so that they can bring their full self to the classroom. So again, not mind-blowing stuff, but really humanizing, information-seeking kind of activities.

Alexandra

This kind of open sharing helps establish an environment where the whole student can thrive. However, there are some students for who this might still be a challenge, such as international students or introverts. There are tactics, however, that can specifically help to honor those students.

L.B. Hannahs

You know, a lot of classrooms have participation points. That participation, the way in which we capture participation typically, really benefits extroverts and not introverts. And so how do we think really strategically about different avenues of access for introverts or non-native English speakers, so that we're not just saying this is the only way you can get participation?

So I think that article said-- one of the tactics that this professor had used is, the student-- she had seen that the student was struggling to participate in class. And so she met with the student one-on-one and said, after class, write me your reflections in an email, and what you thought throughout the class. Doing so showed me that you were actively engaged in the conversation. You weren't daydreaming.

And you can show me what you learned and what you would have wanted to say, if you were either processing it at the time or you felt like you could you could share it. And so they would go back and forth over email, and she would give her feedback and kind of have a little dialogue over email that would allow the introvert to get participation credit. Now, it's a little bit more work, but it's-- all of these kind of strategies are going to involve more work on behalf of the professors.

Alexandra

Remembering that students not only learn from the instructor and the materials in a course, but also from each other, is essential. Developing group activities gives students an opportunity to gain even more from the diverse knowledge their group members bring to the table. Research has shown that the diversity of groups and the time invested in allowing the group members to get to know each other results in far greater learning.

L.B. Hannahs

How do you really utilize partnerships or pair-shares? And thinking strategically and intentionally about, OK, are we going to pair people up or put them in a small group over the course of a semester? Really think strategically.

Maybe they have a task to do. Maybe it's a chemistry group, or maybe it's an engineering group, and they're in the same small group for 16 weeks, or 10 weeks, or 5 weeks. Can you build into that experience?

They still have a task to do. That's probably pretty objective. But is there some responsibility, or could that group produce a better product, if they know each other well?

Can you, as an instructor, rather than just giving them this task and hoping that the interpersonal dynamics work themselves out, put some intentionality around, OK, here's what you're going to

do in your first meeting? You're not going to talk about the science part. You're going to have a conversation about you, like you're going to talk about each other. You're going to learn how to communicate.

You're going to put these ground rules for that group. So have them talk about when conflict comes up, how do we want to strategize around this? When we feel like someone is doing more of the work or less of the work, how do we want to communicate that to each other? And at what point do we feel, like, empowered to communicate that to the professor?

Alexandra

How can we encourage reluctant students to invest in getting to know their classmates?

L.B. Hannahs

Build the importance of why good interpersonal dynamics are going to make a better product. They have to know why. They can't feel just like a fluff thing, like you just want us to get to know each other to be nice. No, like, if you all are highly-functioning and you know each other well, you can come and bring your full selves, this end product is going to be that much better. You're more likely to get an A because you've worked better, not harder.

Alexandra

Creating these opportunities for increased learning requires thoughtfulness and strategy. How can we, as instructors, do this?

L.B. Hannahs

I don't necessarily know if we always ask students how they best can show up in the classroom. We assume a lot of things, and even the best of us kind of build in multiple ways of showing us how they learn. And then there's also space to ask.

So what can you do in the beginning of your classroom to say-- and being really intentional. Like, I recognize that folks learn differently and process differently. Here are the strategies I've built in already to my syllabus and to my curriculum and my pedagogy. What's missing?

And turning to the group and saying, what's missing? A lot of students know what they need, but we don't always ask them or provide them an avenue. So asking them to come see you, what's missing, or having them group-think about it, or having them email you about it-- help me help

you-- because more often than not, they're going to come and say, actually, this is what I need. In this format and this assignment, here is the pieces that I'm going to struggle.

Alexandra

Asking students and listening to their answers shows that we're interested and invested in their success. As instructors, we do not always have to have the answers, or even the solutions, but we can always maintain open communication and a willingness to hear what feedback students have to offer.

L.B. Hannahs

A lot of folks do a good job of being very open and asking for feedback, or a lot of avenues for communication in the beginning of a semester, but as time grinds on and we get in the thick of things, we're less attentive to it. So how can you build in regular check-ins? What's working right now? What's not working right now for us, as a group?

Tell me-- you know, here's an avenue. You have a crisis or you're having a bad day. What worked for me at week two, when something happens or stress builds up, may no longer work for me at week eight. And that's OK. We don't necessarily always have to have all the answers ahead of time. We just have to provide the avenues for communication and the willingness to be flexible when that stuff comes up.

Alexandra

When students come to you with struggles and difficulties you do not feel equipped for, it may sound overwhelming, but remember, there are ample resources on campus for you.

L.B. Hannahs

So the Disability Resource Center is really great. I'm thinking of other ways of learning and knowing. There's lots of different kind of resources. And multicultural diversity fairs around cultural things, the International Center around our international students-- really use your resources to think ahead of time, not just at the beginning when you're building the syllabus, but throughout the semester. And I know that can feel really overwhelming for folks, especially if we're in the thick of it, but if you can stay in front of things or address them in the immediate, you're going to have less issues in week 15 when you're taking the final exam and students are just crumbling.

Alexandra

Students are not the only ones who face challenges and struggles throughout the semester. We all do. It's simply part of life. And when we're open and transparent with our students, we make it possible for them to see that making mistakes, having difficulties, facing challenges, is OK, and that they can still achieve their goals, because...

L.B. Hannahs

It can be scary to like, bring yourself into that classroom, because you want to, in some ways, have control over that space. But be open to the fact that you can still have control and let students see you. And be you in that classroom. How do we as instructors and professors bring our own stuff and be transparent in the classroom?

And I think, having been trained as a teacher, we're taught to like, be, here's my professional boundary and here's my personal boundary and let's not mix those too much. But there's a lot to be gained. And in this Gatorship class that we teach, my co-instructor and I are very transparent about where we're at.

This makes me uncomfortable. This is where I'm struggling. Here is this tension point. Here's this goal that we have, but when we do this, we're not necessarily reaching the shared goal that we have identified.

So how can we, as instructors, participate in the process as much as we do in the content delivery? And just show up as like-- I keep going back to this, like, human beings piece. Like, how can we be transparent about where we're at?

Alexandra

By creating a warm and inviting environment, we make it possible for all students to participate and maximize their learning. There are of course additional steps that we can take to ensure that the needs of all students are considered. So herein lies the problem. What can we do as instructors to make our classrooms as inclusive as possible, so that we might meet the needs of all students, even those that have previously been omitted? One way of doing so is by developing courses with Universal Design of Learning in mind.

L.B. Hannahs

In its simplest form-- right, so Universal Design came from disability rights and disability justice, around how do we build physical spaces in classrooms that are universally designed so

that anyone can access them with ease. In terms of the learning process, I think if you take a step back and say, what elements of my class have barriers to them, in the small ways and the details?

Like, when I show videos, are there subtitles? If a person with a visual impairment were to be in my class, what are the things in my classroom that they would not be able to access? So just trying to think about, what are all the ways in which people physically, intellectually, emotionally might have barriers to being their most authentic, full self in this classroom?

Alexandra

Since people learn best in very different ways, then it makes sense that they might also be able to show what they've learned differently.

L.B. Hannahs

It's pretty common knowledge around the different ways of learning, the tactile and the visual and the audio. And how do we also provide multiple opportunities of folks, based on how they best communicate what they know? Are there other places where folks can sit down and have a conversation about what you know and how to communicate what you know?

Or given the option, if you feel like this was limiting to you or you didn't bring your best self, here's another opportunity. Giving folks other opportunities, not this like, one-and-done, show everything that you know in this one episode, and then that's going to make or break your grade or your ability to show what you've learned.

Alexandra

As an instructor, it can be daunting to imagine how to assess students' success. But don't be afraid to establish the objectives, and then ask students how they can best demonstrate what they have learned.

L.B. Hannahs

Providing folks opportunities to also ask students, like, what is the best way for you to show me what you've learned? Here's what I need. You can still make the rules.

Like, here's what I need you to show me that you've taken from this class. Here's this very-- a rubric or whatever. This is what you need to show me that you've learned. What works for you?

I think part of the work around being an instructor is letting go of some control over knowing exactly how things are supposed to go and look, in terms of showing what they've learned. So most of the work, for me as an instructor, would be like, let me take a step back. Let me give students some more agency in this classroom. And then they'll surprise you with actually, like, oh, that was way cooler than I could have even imagined.

Alexandra

Traditionally, productivity has been measured in such a way that all students are expected to learn a given amount of content during a course. However, this method of measuring productivity does not take into consideration other kinds of learning that take place throughout the semester. L.B. suggests that productivity might be measured a little bit differently.

L.B. Hannahs

So I think there's always this tension around what students need to know and how much they need to know, in terms of our traditional understanding of productivity. And I think, in the world that we live in, we're seeking greater and greater amounts of productivity in the same amount of time. And when that happens, when we've defined productivity in a very narrow way, like, here's all the things that they need to learn or show me that they've learned in 16 weeks, as that amount increases, something has to give.

And what I think often gets set aside for a greater amount of productivity is the like, lived experience, or the process. And so if we're really focusing not solely on productivity and more on the learning experience overall, there's-- I can't imagine anyone giving even 10% more attention to building a more inclusive classroom or a more equitable classroom that would be bad for the learning experience. It's only going to be advantageous.

So yeah, they might not get to knowing about this level of information. But what they've gained in terms of learning about how they learn, learning about working with other people, learning about how to take feedback and critique and criticism, and how to give it in a respectful and human way, that's another measure of productivity that we don't necessarily pay enough attention to.

Alexandra

As instructors, we have the opportunity to continue to implement strategies and make changes a little at a time.

L.B. Hannahs

Each semester, how do you build in pieces and strategies that kind of address this issue and address the classroom environment more and more and more? And then students' capacity to take on more learning and more content is going to be bigger, because they're open. They're not coming in with their walls up.

Alexandra

Creating an inclusive classroom, one that diminishes barriers for all students, is an ongoing process. It takes time and effort. But the results and the outcomes for students make it all worth it, because, after all, inclusive teaching actively engages and challenges all students.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the "Beyond the Podium" podcast series. For more tips, tools, strategies, and resources on teaching at the University of Florida, or to find out more about future episodes, visit the teach.ufl.edu page.