



Quality Student Interaction

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Just imagine discovering your passion at a young age, the theater. Imagine succeeding, exceeding all expectations in nearly every endeavor you tried. And actually reaching the very pinnacle of any aspiration in theater, performing and directing on Broadway. All this before the age of 30.

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. I'm the host of the Beyond the Podium podcast series at the University of Florida. This podcast series is on teaching and learning. We're here with faculty who offer their best tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching with a little humor.

Our guest today is Mikell Pinkney, professor of dramatic theory and theater at the University of Florida. In 1998, Dr. Pinkney was acknowledged as both the College of Fine Arts and the University of Florida teacher of the year. He's also a published essayist on African-American dramatic theory.

Dr. Pinkney worked as an actor and director for Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway. And served as the artistic director at the Billie Holiday Theater in Brooklyn, New York and the Harmony Park Play House in Detroit, Michigan.

For Mikell, it all started with a love of school.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

I always loved school. I've also been performing since I was six.

Alexandra

Now because of his love of school, opportunities lined up for him.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

My father thought I'd lost my mind when I turned down a history scholarship to Dartmouth. And I got a biology scholarship somewhere else.

Alexandra

But instead, Mikell's heart pulled him in a totally different direction.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

When I was a junior in high school I was invited to a theater institute at Hampton Institute College in Virginia, a Historically Black College in Virginia between my junior and senior year. And I think there were 35 students from all over the country that were part of this thing. It was terribly exciting.

Alexandra

He realized exactly what theater meant to him and to others.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

And that was the summer that I realized theater not only had parallels to science, but it was a place where almost every field of knowledge and endeavor came together. And I thought, this is fascinating.

Alexandra

This single experience allowed him to discover his true passion and gifts. And he gave those passions and gifts an opportunity to bloom.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

I think I've been very blessed in a very real way in terms of the kinds of things that have happened to me, the experiences that I was able to have. I became an artistic director of a fairly prominent off-Broadway theater in New York by the time I was 27. About three or four years after that I became artistic director, founding artistic director at another theater in Detroit, Michigan. I was going back and forth. I was guest artists at several places. I directed a Broadway show by the time I was 30.

Alexandra

However, his journey from the stage to the classroom was even more spectacular.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

One day, for some reason, I was at the theater. I don't know if it was early on I used to make a habit of doing things like that. But I found myself alone on the stage looking out at the audience, which was empty, of course. And thinking, is this it? I don't feel satisfied. There's something I'm missing still.

Part of that was that the play that I directed had been a great success off-Broadway for a year and a half it had run. And then it made the transfer to the Great White Way and it was attacked by the critics and it was going to close in a month. And I thought, what's the difference? Why am I not getting? There's obviously more that I need to learn.

I decided I wanted to go back to school. But as soon as I had completed my comprehensive exams for the doctoral degree, I got this call and said we've had this meeting and we've decided that there's this job in Florida and you're the only person we know that's talking about the kind of stuff they need.

They really need somebody to do cultural studies, and we've never heard anybody talk about that kind of stuff but you. That's what they need. They don't know it yet, but we're recommending you for this job. And I thought oh no, god.

I came for an interview and I went away thinking oh, I don't know. When I got back to Ohio I kept getting calls from students who had been in the workshops and things that I had met when I was interviewing here. They are the ones who sold me.

Alexandra

And that is how Dr. Pinkney's long career at the University of Florida began. It was student centered then and it remains student center today. In order to remain student focused, Dr. Pinkney first and foremost focuses on the students as individuals, as people.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

One of the things that you really have to focus on, particularly in teaching young actors, is how to calm down, how to learn to trust themselves. It's called acting, but we spend a lot of time teaching them how not to act but to be human.

That characters are not people, they are essentially ink on a page. The only way that they can come to life is through the breath and body of a human being, which is the actor. So I have to be able to get them to do that.

And one of the clear ways of being able to do that is to give them a place of comfort, a place of trust, and whether I'm able to say it out loud all the time or not, I know that I'm really teaching their spirit. And I must be able to give their heart a place of warmth and comfort. They have to be able to trust me, not fear me. They have to be able to not try to please the teacher, but to allow the teacher to become a guide a mentor.

And in that way, if you do it properly, there's still respect. You don't have to force that kind of respect. I think one of the incredible things that I hear, that I've heard in the past and I continue to hear from certain students is that you teach us by who you are.

Alexandra

With providing your students with more knowledge about any given field, whether it's engineering, medicine, acting, law, it doesn't matter which field it is, with providing them with knowledge, you also have to provide them with an example on how to use that knowledge. And that is the responsibility that we carry as instructors.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

There is power in what you're doing. Because we're doing theater, you have the power to make people feel things, to laugh, to cry, to believe things that aren't really true. That's power. And that's responsibility. So we have to understand how important it is to keep ourselves in a balanced, clear minded place in order to lead by example.

Because that's what we do. When you're on stage, you're leading by example. The audience comes in, they willingly suspend their disbelief. They believe you when you say you are in Norway at Christmastime and it's 1863 when it's really Florida in the middle of summer and it's 102. So if they are willing to go there, you have to be willing to understand what you're doing and to use that for a positive purpose.

Alexandra

Now more than ever, quality interaction between instructors and students is a partnership, one in which both parties contribute enormously. Students want to know that what they offer and bring to the table is valuable. And that is what Dr. Pinkney does best.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

Just today, sat at my desk with my graduate assistant trying to figure out Canvas. Just like, this is making me crazy. But everything is changing and there are choices that I can make as a teacher.

I can get frustrated, angry, and upset. I can retire. Or I can calm down, drop my shoulders, breathe, and do what I've learned to do in the last couple of years. Call in a student and say, help me. Help me understand this new stuff.

Because I have things that I can share, but all the stuff I know is old. That's all I can do is teach you all this old stuff. You have to be able to together, we're here together so we can figure out how to frame it in the present.

But it's up to you guys to take it into the future. You've got to take this old stuff, just like I did, figure out how it makes a statement about where we are, and figure out, OK, how can I use this to move forward and to inspire the next generation.

Alexandra

Every great instructor faces challenges. Mikell's greatest challenge is to make the material relevant to the younger generation. Sometimes as Mikell is teaching he sees a room full of confused faces. And that is when he stops and thinks to himself--

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

OK, there's somebody in the room who might be able to translate this to the current generation. Because I'm very aware that my references and my jokes are just duds now. They don't go anywhere. They don't know what I'm saying if I make a joke about a certain thing that long preceded their birth.

So a lot of the examples that I used to be able to use don't really go anywhere anymore. But if I keep trying to explain, somebody will say oh, that is sort of like this. And everybody else will go oh. And I'll think oh, OK good. Explain to me what that is so I will know the next time.

But the real point is that yeah, we're all in this together, you know. I can-- I just don't see the point in trying to be the one who knows everything.

Alexandra

Every one of us has, as instructors, different gifts and talents. And it's most important for us to really realize and understand what those gifts and talents are and to know what we love and to be

willing to communicate that passion and enthusiasm about the fields we've studied for so long to genuinely share that with our students. And for Dr. Pinkney, as a performer, he can grab his students' attention and hold on to it by acting in class.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

I remember when students used to read. They don't read anymore. So one has to figure out, oh god, what do I do now? How do I communicate to them?

Well, I have a slight advantage, a slight blessing. I'm a theater professor with experience as an actor and a director and all those kinds of things. I act a lot in class. It's exhausting, because it's often, I mean, it's a performance.

I mean, one of the things I have to explain, we have to explain to these students, what does the word "entertainment" mean. It means to grab and hold the attention of the audience. I got to do that every time I go into the classroom. And I have to do something to get them off of their computers, out of their cell phones to pay attention.

Alexandra

Now this may not work for everyone. Some of us are far more relational, and so we have to find ways to interact and connect with students differently. In doing that, the most important thing to remember is to communicate your passion. You do not have to be a Broadway performance actor, you just have to be passionate about the field that you love and share that with enthusiasm.

In addition, what works today may not work tomorrow. So don't be afraid to change things, because your students are changing every year and so are you.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

This happened last year where I realized in a course that really relied on people reading material, that nobody was reading the material. They don't even read plays anymore. And I say to them, you guys are not reading. What is this? How can I get you to do that? No, we don't read. We can Google that.

And I thought, you know, you're right. Hmm. But there are certain things if you're a theater student and you're taking a class like this, you just really need to know. It needs to be part of who you are.

So one of the things I discovered that OK, well, theater is a very collaborative art form. Let's make better use of that. Since you all are not going to read all of the plays, OK, and this is stuff

going on in my head at home, of course. OK, why don't I just make these group assignments and see what happens so at least some people will read some of the plays.

What I discovered was that the incredible amount of enthusiasm that comes out of those group experiences and that they then become the incredible fire standing up in front of the room telling everybody else in the room, you have to read this.

Alexandra

If you put the effort into creating opportunities for communication and a willingness to change things up when change needs to happen, amazing things will happen. And to remember above all else to be amazed when those relationships contribute to a great learning experience.

Dr. Mikell Pinkney

I almost never cease to be in tears when I'm grading those final papers. When I realize-- I don't know how much they realize-- how brilliant they actually are, how clearly they actually can think and how much they actually, no matter how much I complain about them not reading or whatever, how much they have actually gained during a semester. So that's another one of my mantras that I'm constantly reminding people. And I know it's written, I can see it written on peoples' books and things now. Education is for life, not a semester.

Alexandra

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium webcast 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.