



## My Classroom is a Safe Place: Empowering Trans-spectrum Students

### SPEAKERS

Jonathan Howle, Sherry Zane, Tierney King

#### **Tierney King** 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Last summer I attended our Teaching Professor Annual Conference, one of my favorite conferences that we host. If you haven't been to it, I highly recommend attending it this year in New Orleans. You can check it out at [www.TeachingProfessorConference.com](http://www.TeachingProfessorConference.com). So when I attended last year, I went to a session by Jonathan Howle about empowering trans-spectrum students, and he said something that I'll never forget. He said, "Your space and your class may be the only safe space that a student has. Your class being a safe space, could save lives." So today, we're going to talk about strategies that instructors can use to create safe spaces where transgender students can feel as if they belong without fear or stress, and ultimately, help them grow personally and academically. To start, Sherry Zane will provide insight on her own anecdotal story, and provide insight and how you can contribute to an environment of mutual esteem and respect, in her program, Simple Strategies to Create an Inclusive Classroom for Gender Variant Students.

#### **Sherry Zane** 01:22

So I'd like to start today by sharing an anecdote with you. I began teaching in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at the University of Connecticut in 2012. And I was hired to teach a course called Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life with 150 students. It was the first time I was going to be teaching a large lecture course. And the person who had been assigned to teach the class before me got another job. And so I had two weeks to prepare for this course I had never taught before and also to stand in front of a large audience. So it was a little bit unnerving. That being said, my PhD is in American history. And so a lot of the context I have for gender and sexuality comes from these historical references. So when I was teaching the course, the textbook had already been assigned, and I was a little bit nervous about some of the content that seemed more sociological in its method and focus. But I tried to stay two steps ahead of the students. And it came to the time when I needed to talk about transgender identities and issues in society. And I prepared the lecture, and I relied on a lot of the historical knowledge that I had about people who identified as transsexual over time. And I went back and forth talking about these two different terms. So I thought that I did OK given the fact that it was the first time I'd done the lecture, and so many students in front of me. But when I got back to my office about an hour later, I had an email from a student who said that they identified as transgender, and

they had some issues with the lecture that I had given that day. Now, of course I emailed the student back, and the student had said they wanted to meet with me. And I emailed the student back and said, of course, I'd be happy to meet with you. Although, to be honest, I was a little bit defensive and concerned because I knew that this lecture and this material was a bit new for me. So when the student showed up to my office, I had pulled up the PowerPoint slides, and the student walked in, and I can tell that visibly this person was exhibiting signs of anxiety and stress about having to talk to me about the issues that they had. And so the student sat down. And again, I don't know what my body language was at the time, but as I confess, I was feeling a little bit defensive and kind of prepared to be schooled about what I had done wrong. So the student sat down and started talking about some issues they had with my historical references and then switching to current references about the term "transgender" and felt that, because the large lecture of a 1,000-level course with many students who don't even know what "transgender" means might be confused the way in which I presented the material, and might think that it's OK for them to use the term "transsexual," or to use it synonymously with "transgender." So as the student was talking, they were becoming visibly more and more anxious, shaking, sweating. And so I decided that it was really important for me to check my ego under the desk and to think about how the student could educate me so that I could better educate the students, and perhaps share these things with some of my colleagues. So we sat down, and we went through the PowerPoint presentation. And together, we constructed something different. And I thanked the students profusely for sitting with me and taking the time to go over this material, because again, it's not the student's job to educate me, but I was very appreciative of it. And the student smiled. And that student showed up for class all of the time and was able to succeed in the class because they felt that I was open to their questions and comments and wanted to work together to make that space a more inclusive, educational space. So again, that is how I came to the project. And I started working with transgender students at the University of Connecticut to do just that, to share this information with others. So one of the things that I have suggested with many of my colleagues in talking to them about classroom spaces is that many of our disciplines, no matter what discipline we teach in, our fundamental academic assumptions, texts, and research are focused on a strict adherence to this gender binary of male and female. And this largely ignores and invalidates transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and intersex individuals. So what are the things that we can do to be more self-reflective about how these biases even operate in our classroom, not just in the curricula, but in the ways that we teach? So one of the things that I like to do is to think about other terms that we can use as opposed to men and women, boys and girls, husband and wife. So I'll sometimes use "individuals of all gender identities," or simply use "people" or "folks." Instead of "husband" and "wife," we use "partner" or "significant other." Avoiding titles such as Mr., Mrs., Ms. Instead of calling the class "guys"—so "guys" is something that—I think it's one of the hardest ones to be self-reflective about, because I find myself using the term "guys" all of the time. And once your brain gets trained to use certain terms, it's hard to stop yourself. But "guys" is not a gender neutral term, even though it's been appropriated that way. So "guys" certainly meant people who identified as male, right? So I use "folks," "everyone," "you all." And it takes a lot of practice to do this. When you use those terms that are not gendered in a space—it doesn't even have to be a classroom space but in a workspace, or in faculty meetings or administrative meetings—it makes people feel more comfortable because even if you don't have transgender people in that space, we have such gendered assumptions about the way people perform based on their gender identities. So there have been all kinds of studies done about instructors who, when they come into a classroom, they have different expectations for students that are seemingly female or students that are seemingly male. Also, and

even though I wrote “in class,” it’s not just about in class but even in workspaces. So I’ve been in many spaces where we’ll have a workshop, or a seminar, or a retreat, and you’ll do an opening activity or exercise to get people talking. But avoid gendered direction. So instead of grouping people by gender, or to group people in different ways, to use random selection, count off, pass around a bowl with numbers. And like I said before, to think about how gender norms or ideas about what men and women should be like are enforced in your classroom or even in your workspace. Because gendering groups or using gendered terminology alienates people, especially trans and gender nonconforming students. So some of the things that we can do to think beyond is to, when appropriate, incorporate positive information about transgender issues in the curricula. The existence of trans people is often erased or only included in a highly stigmatized way in the teaching of any subject, as well as in the media or in pop culture. So one of the things that I do in some of my classes is I acknowledge the limits of some of the text and the research that I use. I’ll say, this study only focuses on cisgender heterosexual men in New England, or this study only focuses on white women in North Carolina. Cisgender women, heterosexual women in North Carolina. Just by acknowledging, yes, we’re going to look at this material, and this material is important, but let’s think about what the limits are of this material, also creates a more inclusive space because it lets people in that space know that you are aware and that you’re not just appropriating that information and saying that it covers all people.

**Tierney King 08:36**

As you begin to think about the ways in which you can make your classroom a safe space, Jonathan Howle also offers numerous strategies to make small inclusive adjustments in his program, *How Can I Move from Supporting to Empowering Trans-spectrum Students?*

**Jonathan Howle 08:51**

The words diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are so important to me, as I know, they're important to everyone in higher education today. What's most important to me though, are the meaningful actions that we take behind those words, you know, and these words are especially important to me because I myself am a member of the LGBTQ plus community. And so part of my life's work as an educator is to advocate for students who identify as LGBTQ plus. You know, I myself, I'm a white cisgender male. I'm a very, very privileged member of the of the LGBTQ plus community. So I feel that I have a real responsibility to try to make change, and most importantly, to try to create spaces of belonging for LGBTQ plus students in higher education. Before I look at some strategies on how we can actually go about this, how do we go about making our classrooms spaces of belonging, I want to focus on two frameworks from adult learning that really sort of bring this home for us and really give us a lens through which to look at the efforts that we make to support trans students. Now I'm a big, a big disciple of transformative learning, and transformative learning, of course, as many of you may know, was founded by Jack Meziro in 1978. And the transformative learning theory has been studied by many, many theorists all over the world since then, nowadays included. And in this theory, we look at how someone experiences in their life what we call a disorienting dilemma. And for all of us who are in the LGBTQ plus community, at some point in our lives early on, maybe later on in life, we come to a point where we can no longer deny, or try to run away from who we know we are, right? And so we come to a real disorienting dilemma. And I'm going to change the focus on this now and speak about our students. For our students who identify as trans, they come to a point where they know who their gender, they know who they are, you know, in terms of their gender identity. And it's very

disorienting at first, you know, and when you come to a disorienting dilemma, everything that you have been through so far in your life, all the ways that you've thought about the world, well, they no longer seem to work. And you have to sort of go through a series of stages, where you, you know, you experience guilt, you experience self-assessment, critical reflection, you then try to go about and gain knowledge. You then go about and try to practice, get practice with your new identity, you try out different roles, and then you start the process of trying to integrate all of this newfound knowledge and language and information into your life. And ultimately, you integrate all of this into your your your life, this new perspective, and you move forward with this sense of transformation. And that is, you know, while that theory originally was not about trans students, it is certainly applicable in any given classroom. No matter where you are in the country, no state is not a part of this, right? All states are included. Wherever you are in any classroom, we can have trans students who are at a variety of different points, right? So it is essential that our practices and our policies are welcoming, and make trans students feel a sense of belonging. Now while we're on the subject of belonging, I want to talk to you about another framework. Vincent Tinto, who I'm sure many of you've studied for many, many years. Tinto studied student retention, and how do we how do we retain our students, but in 2017, Tinto expanded his theory, and looked at why students persist. And instead of looking at retention, he looked at the factors that impact student persistence, and what he discovered was that a sense of belonging is one of those central factors that impact why a student will persist. So these two frameworks really show us, they really give us a way to contextualize how to serve trans students and why our actions or sometimes lack of actions can have such a powerful impact on our trans students lives. What I recommend, is that is that faculty either you know, whether it's through a Google form, or Microsoft Office form, send out a brief information form, a brief get to know you form, that students can complete prior to the first time you meet, because what can happen is students can share some really pertinent information that can give you context before the first day of class. We want to send signals that we are safe spaces. Politics and pronouns have nothing to do with one another. So and that's one thing that sort of upsets me some, I'll admit, but this is about saving lives. This is about making our students feel that they belong and a pronoun will do that sharing your pronouns will do that. The research is there, qualitative and quantitative. It matters. So please, please, please consider doing that if you aren't already.

**Tierney King 15:09**

Although it's best to implement some of the strategies before class even starts, there are also ways to make your class a safe space throughout the semester.

**Jonathan Howle 15:17**

The midterm is all about, you know, the midterm exam or a midterm project or a midterm paper. I strongly recommend doing check-ins at the at the midterm as well, and I'm talking about a qualitative check-in here, where you reach out to your students and ask, How is everything going? Is there anything that has surfaced in the first part of the class that is presenting a challenge to you, that's presenting an obstacle for you? Is there anything you'd like to share? And you never know what might come across them, and then you might be able to connect that student with one of the many great resources on your campus or in your community that might help them. This is something that could really help a trans student, particularly if they are struggling. So really use that midterm check-in point as a point to get to know your students again, and to give them a safe space to share any challenges

they may be experiencing. In closing, I want to say, your classroom, your class, I don't care what the subject is, I don't care if it's math, engineering, English, nursing, plumbing, welding computers, biology, chemistry, I don't care what it is. Your class may be the class that saves the life of a trans student, just by your embracing one or two, or three, or even all of those strategies that I mentioned. Someone who is really struggling, who's really fighting the battle of whether they should end their life or continue, because the suicide rates among trans people, not just trans students, continue to climb as well. But your class may be the one that does it. I want you to after you've watched this, I want you to go back and look at your rosters. And every semester that follows, I want you to look at your rosters. And I want you to say, "My classroom will be the safe place for these students. Somebody is going to need what I have to offer. Somebody is going to need the changes that I'm going to make to my classes, and it's going to save their lives."

**Tierney King 17:45**

Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.