

# Building inclusivity: engagement, community and belonging in the classroom

Interview with Bob Matthew, University of Stirling

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## Introduction

Hi, I'm Bob Matthew. I'm Director of the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning at the University of Stirling.

### What is inclusivity and why do we need it in the classroom?

It's a kind of a given, I think, that in the classroom we're trying to make the learning appropriate to everybody that's present. And therefore *that's* inclusion. And whether it's covered by the recent legislation or whatever, we want everybody in the classroom to feel that they're part of the learning community that's going on in that particular classroom. Why do we need it? I think we need it because everybody who comes into the classroom has something to offer, and we need to make sure that we tap in to all the experience and expertise and hear all the perspectives and viewpoints from everybody who's present.

### How can inclusivity in the classroom be created and sustained?

Well, in my wilder moments, I argue that, in some senses, it needs quite a radical rethink about, not just what we teach, but *how* we teach. And that's true for a lot of the agendas that we face in higher education today and perhaps I can illustrate it by means of a little example. Many years ago when I was working in an engineering department, we had large numbers of Greek students present. And we were thinking a little bit about what we taught and its relevance to a substantial number of the students. And I happened to point out that one of the significant differences between life in Greece and life in Northern England was the fact that there were very few earthquakes in Northern England and yet it was quite a common occurrence in Greece, and our curriculum at that point in time contained nothing about the design of structures to resist earthquakes.

So it seems to be it's that kind of fundamental rethink about what are we teaching and why are we teaching it. It's – like a colleague that I worked with at Stirling recently, who worked on an MBA course, where the vast majority of the students were from the Asian subcontinent, and yet all the case studies that they traditionally worked on were from Western companies. And so the rethink was about, how do we better prepare these students for going back to their own country, when all they're doing is looking at Western case studies. So we revamped the case studies and used lots of case studies from developing, Third World countries. So I think it's created by working with staff to radically rethink what they're doing and why they're doing it.

## What are the challenges to inclusivity and how can they be overcome?

Well there's a kind of an interesting question about higher education in general: how do you change staff and student perspectives and expectations about what they do, how it's done, what it's all about? I think my argument has always been that you start on day one, year one. And staff development is a key part of changing the agenda. But staff development on its own isn't sufficient. These days, I think, we need to look at what's in it for staff? What's the reward for doing it? And we need to think about reward mechanisms for staff. But we also need to think about how we're going to support them to change it. And so my philosophy has always been to look for examples or case studies or vignettes or whatever it is that we can offer to members of staff, to kind of show them how it can be done. And, at the same time, to do, what I describe as I think, as pandering to academic vanity, which is to say, "This is being done at the university of such and such. And we think we are better than them and we're not doing it." That usually acts as quite an incentive to staff to kind of get it on board.

Increasingly, what I've found myself doing in my job is working with the *students* to get the students to act as the driver for change. And it seems that, at this point in time, we're in a situation where, with the advent of tuition fees, key information sets and all the rest of it, the student voice is increasingly becoming listened to. So, working with course reps, school officers, sabbatical officers in the students' union, to say, "What are the issues about inclusivity in the classroom that are cropping up from the student perspective?" So that for example in my own institution we recently identified that there was an issue with particularly some of the postgraduates who run tutorials and seminars, coming from a cultural background that tends to see women as having no place in higher education, far less having a voice that's listened to in a seminar or a tutorial room. So we've instigated now a notion of compulsory training for all postgraduates prior to them being allowed to take seminars and tutorials where part of what we talk about is how to create an environment in the classroom that's conducive to all students feeling that they have a voice and that they're being listened to and that they're being respected.

## How can inclusivity be mainstreamed?

It seems to me that there are a number of ways that you can approach the problem. In the first instance you can use certainly in the Scottish setting the external drivers to support that. So whether it's through end-of-year course reporting, the internal quinquennial review of provision or the external QAA visit [The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education], and actually ask the institution searching questions about how it's going about mainstreaming inclusivity in the classroom...is the kind of the big stick approach.

It seems to me that the kind of slightly more pervasive form, and I think the more successful way of doing it is perhaps through what you call the bottom-up process, which is what I was talking about earlier, in the sense of using the students to drive the change agenda. I think with ten years of working with the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland, there is now universal acceptance of the importance of the student voice in commenting on their experiences as a student. And in taking that voice seriously, so that using course reps, school officers, union sabbatical officers to drive the change agenda, to make sure that schools and departments *do* mainstream it, is a crucial way and one of the best ways of ensuring success, I think, at the present time.

## What are my hopes for the future of inclusive teaching and learning?

What are my hopes for the future of inclusive teaching and learning? In a number of fora, particularly with regard to the disability agenda, what I've said is that I think the key measure of success, when we really have a curriculum that's inclusive, is that we won't need at all to have, within institutions, student disability officers, because it will be mainstreamed. Academic departments will know how to deal with it, and particularly the notion of making reasonable adjustments to the assessment process, the reasonable adjustment to the assessment process would be that there are a choice of assessment methods available to the students, so they don't need to carry a prescription to get it.

So, in a sense, my measure for measuring success in terms of the inclusivity agenda is that we won't need people in our institution to remind us that there is an inclusive agenda. It will just happen. We'll stop talking about internationalising the curriculum. We'll stop talking about international students having needs that are somehow different to the rest. We'll stop talking about black minority ethnic students as not doing as well as everybody else, because the playing field will be completely level and people will be succeeding regardless of their background.