

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

Interview with Rowena Arshad, University of Edinburgh

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## Introduction

My name is Rowena Arshad, and I work at the University of Edinburgh in the School of Education.

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

What is inclusivity? That's a very good question. I think it is about being aware of the norms that we operate in and working to reflect on whose voices are excluded, whose views are not being heard, is there a dominant view that we need to disrupt and in fact in not treating our student body as though they were homogenous.

Why do we need inclusivity? Well I think that if you're not included, you're not going to learn very effectively. What we want to do, to borrow from the Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence Framework, we want successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals and effective contributors in society and in our workplace. And I think that inclusive learning, inclusivity in the classroom sets the start for that, so that learners can really achieve, engage and do their best in our classrooms.

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

I'd like to suggest that you have a look at the [Queensland Government's Productive Pedagogies Framework](#), very easy to find, just Google it. In there, they suggest that there are four approaches to use. One is thinking in terms of intellectual quality. In all the work we do, how are we developing higher-order thinking in our students about their environment, about who they are, their social context and their ability to engage with issues of diversity? So I think it's about skilling and giving knowledge to our students, so that they have the toolkit to negotiate their way with diversity and inclusion issues.

The second thing that they suggest is the connectedness that we need with the backgrounds of our students. Inclusivity is not about the four walls of the classroom, it is about engaging with our students as learners and as people who have lives outside the classroom and they bring those issues into the classroom. So it's about how we actually engage with our subject area and our discipline, using a problem-solving approach, but also using real-life examples that we can draw from our students, capitalising on their background and their knowledge.

The third area that the framework suggests is developing a supportive classroom environment. That means actually being prepared to set the rules of engagement in our

classrooms where comments [that] are divisive, stereotypical, corrosive, are dealt with quickly, nipped in the bud. But not just in a punitive way, but actually as a learning mechanism. It is about actually engaging with our students in terms of what matters for them. It goes back to my previous point that inclusivity cannot just be within the four walls of the classroom. And that supportive environment must be known by the students and felt, so that those who are feeling excluded feel that they can come forward, have our confidence and tell us so.

The fourth area, of course, is recognising difference. If you're going to include, then you've got to see everybody as individuals, and not labels. And that means engaging with issues of diversity, but also multiple identities and intersectionalities. We are several things in one person. I am a woman, I am a mother. I also happen to be somebody from a minority ethnic community. So there are many facets of me and those are just but three characteristics I have chosen to discuss. So I think that recognition of difference is very important and not having a kind of blind approach, almost as though talking about difference is somehow wrong.

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

My feel is that actually we are often our own barriers. Our attitudes, our fear of getting it wrong, our fear of being seen to be ignorant. So I think we've got to overcome that part of our fear of just not wanting to engage with diversity issues. I also think we need to move away from an 'oh what now?' attitude. I sometimes see colleagues who see students who are different, coming in, into their classroom, or into registry, and think[ing], "Oh crikey, what do you want?" They are a student coming in, they're not a problem walking through the door. So I think staff attitudes would be, for me, one of the areas we would need to tackle.

The second thing is institutional complacency. Most institutions would like to create an image for themselves of being fair, tolerant, socially just and caring. But this might mean that actually we don't talk about issues of discrimination, we avoid anything that's negative and *that* creates a culture of complacency. So I do actually think that institutions, the structures that we work in are potential barriers and areas that we would need to concentrate on making far more inclusive for all our students.

So how might we overcome some of these constraints? Well I think that our greatest resource is our staff and our students. So that's where we need to actually invest in. I think recruitment and selection are very important areas. Equality and diversity areas and issues are not often included as part of academic interviews of would-be applicants. I do think it's important to know how people think about these issues. In a way it doesn't matter what you're teaching. You might be teaching about copper piping, but actually you might also have diversity in the classroom, such as English-as-additional-language learners that you might have to think about. You might be doing research on health and older people, but do you then think also about the diversities within [the] older people population and who you might include in your sample size? So I think getting academics and staff to talk about issues of equality and diversity and inclusion are important areas to explore within recruitment and interviews.

## How can inclusivity be mainstreamed?

I think there are two approaches to this. I don't think we should just look at mainstreaming. I think there is...it's as important to have a discrete element. Yes one can mainstream issues by thinking about equality and diversity within whatever policy we're developing, materials that we are using to teach in, but equally I think we need to be discretely engaging with the different diversity issues, whether that be on ethnicity, on language, on faith, sexual orientation, age, disability, gender and so on and so forth. So I think it's a two-pronged approach. By all means we can be thinking about how we include issues of equality and diversity in any aspect of our work, but we also need to be tackling these issues in their own right.

What amuses me though is that people are often expected to mainstream these issues without actually adequate knowledge about these issues. How can I start mainstreaming something tomorrow when I don't know about the issues today? So I think continuous professional development is very important, sharing ideas with each other, having days which where staff have time to, in fact, talk to each other and develop their thinking collectively.

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

I have to say that I'd like to see greater diversity within the staff of educational establishments. I suspect where I work in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, race issues are fairly high on the agenda because actually I make sure they are. I'm not so sure that if I was to go away, whether that would happen. Perhaps it will. I noticed in another institution that I work with that they have a lot of black minority ethnic social work students, because they have a black social work professor. Now, you might say, well that's just coincidence, but I do think role models do have an impact because they inspire and they create legitimacy. Another hope I have is that institutional managers stop denying that these issues exist. Inclusion is important, but in order to include, we really need to grapple with how we exclude at present.