

Building inclusivity: engagement, community and belonging in the classroom

Interview with Vicky Gunn, University of Glasgow

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Introduction

My name's Vicky Gunn. I'm the Director of Glasgow University's Learning and Teaching Centre, and I have a particular interest in issues around equality and diversity in the classroom. The first question is basically:

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

I have a particular research interest in inclusivity related to LGBT community [Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community]. For me, inclusivity means not just toleration within the classroom but actually fostering an environment in which students and staff can explore issues without feeling that things that they say are going to be regarded as unacceptable by other members of the classroom. Now, that doesn't mean that I think it's alright to say *anything*. What I think I'm trying to say is that inclusivity generates an environment where folk can explore things reasonably safely without feeling that they are actually going to be discriminated against in terms of race, sexual orientation, religion, age, gender, all of the protected characteristics.

Why do we need it in the classroom? I think we need it in the classroom for two key reasons. The first one is providing an environment for exploration. And that means that people do need to feel they're part of the classroom rather than an excluded group within a classroom. But I also think it's a bit more profound than that. I think we are led towards our study subjects through things like our identity, our desires and the things that motivate us. And if we're in a classroom where it's quite clear that those things are not important and not just not important, but are actually prohibited in people's speech or in the way that they design their classrooms, [then] I think students are much less likely to engage with their subject matter.

So, two issues: one is inclusion because it makes the environment safe for exploration in all of the subjects. But the other one is actually epistemological. It's about the ways of thinking and how we lead students towards the subjects that we love as academics.

How can inclusivity in the classroom be created and sustained?

I think creating inclusivity requires different levels of intervention. So at the macro stage, at the institutional level, it actually requires a whole raft of protocols and policies that make it very clear that certain things are acceptable within an environment like a university and

certain things are not. And on top of that it probably needs research to look at the campus climate and check that students do experience the campus, the whole campus experience, as inclusive.

I think at a local level there needs to be recognition on the part of the staff and students of the general atmosphere and how this atmosphere is fostered both in the designs of lesson material but also in the daily communicative actions that occur. I think that sustaining inclusivity is both a social aspect of teaching and learning and it's also a practical aspect of the design of the whole curriculum. And I think one of the things that is quite difficult in higher education in a way that it's not within a school system, for example, is that we each come with our own research specialties. We tend to teach from those specialties and those specialties tend to reflect certain aspects of our disciplines, and may not, in themselves, include representation of all of the different and diverse groups.

On top of that, in some areas, disciplines will have emerged out of nineteenth-century values around what was necessary in an undergraduate programme and what was not. Now although much of that has been challenged, if you actually look at the core curriculum for certain types of history, certain aspects of medicine, the way labs are run, you might find that the cultures *silence* minority groups without even realising that they're doing it. The best example I've got is in terms of history, in terms of what was actually edited and translated in the Victorian period and what was decided was inappropriate to edit and translate. And a lot of the material that was then considered inappropriate would now be considered worthy of translation because it's evidence of minority groups within given periods of history.

So I think for academics the sustaining it is actually an aspect of their research orientation, and whether or not they challenge what limits their interests and whether the things that limit their interests are social values which may actually be quite exclusive at one level.

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

I think challenges to inclusivity tend again to be at different levels. So at the, at the social level, you're looking at challenges that come from just everyday types of discrimination or prejudice that minority groups might experience in the street, in the playgrounds that they would have experienced, even in their homes. And I think that universities are not...they don't exist in a vacuum, so the university itself will mirror back and sometimes represent some of the broader values which orient them towards certain types of discrimination.

I think in the subject areas, to a certain extent some of what I've said previously holds, which is that being research-oriented means that you focus on discovering those things which you believe to be really important to discover or develop or innovate within. And these do not always correspond with what minority groups may consider to be of importance. With the freedom that academics have, without some kind of incentive to actually look at that broader context that we operate in, it's actually quite difficult to think of how we can get complete buy-in. I suppose what I would say is that over the last ten years, there has been a shift in the academic community to quite a large extent, and questions that used to be asked on our postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching,

about inclusion, are much less naive, they're much less about, you know, what's called benevolent inclusion, which is basically trying to make the best out of a bad situation, but actually not ever fulfilling a reasonable adjustment.

Those sorts of things are happening much less. I think people are aware that students need to see themselves a bit more in the curriculum, certainly in the early levels of a curriculum and therefore aspects of what's contained within a curriculum may have shifted. Where that can't happen, then student groups which deal with the minority groups tend to provide the first port of call for students who are trying to see whether or not the university is inclusive. And I think support from student representative bodies to student associations is absolutely critical as well.

How can inclusivity be mainstreamed?

I think mainstreaming inclusivity is quite difficult. And I suppose it's difficult because philosophically it's quite hard to get your mind round it. Inclusivity is not about equality in the way that equality was discussed in the seventies and eighties, which was 'we have to level the playing field'. Inclusivity is actually these days about levelling the playing field but making sure that different groups can operate on that same playing field *as themselves*, so they don't have to change to be more like the normative group, we have to embrace their difference. And that makes mainstreaming really difficult because, on the one hand, you almost want positive discrimination. You almost want people saying, "Right, we are actively going to make sure that the student body and the staff body looks commensurate to the society in general in terms of all of the protected characteristic groups." And to do that you would actually need to make positive affirmative action. Now most folk are very uncomfortable with that.

The other question, I suppose, is 'what do we mean by mainstreaming?' Normally, when we talk about mainstreaming, we mean taking an idea or a practice and ensuring its implementation uniformly across a given institution. That isn't really how universities work, because universities aren't schools and neither are they further education colleges. Universities are effectively environments in which people who are excellent at their subject come together to work collectively and collaboratively to generate new knowledge, and to enable students to acquire either new knowledge or fairly well founded knowledge. Mainstreaming in that situation is really difficult because you cannot say to an academic that there are certain things they *must* include in their teaching. You can say there are certain things they must not do because they're discriminatory, but if you have a look at the actual Equality Act for 2010, you'll find that there's a specific exemption, and that specific exemption relates to the content of teaching materials delivered within a university setting.

So another way of mainstreaming is quite often to legislate for it. But, in fact, academic freedom makes legislating for it very difficult. Therefore, if you really want to mainstream, you've got to mainstream by getting buy-in. And you've got to mainstream by illustrating to people who have been in post for quite a while that there is something worthwhile doing here that is of benefit to the students, is of benefit to the disciplines and then has a more broad benefit to society. But mainstream is a funny question. I mean you could almost say you can't mainstream equality and diversity because of the diversity aspect of it. Actually what you're saying is, if a group is identifiably unique, then that group needs to be provided

with an inclusive environment in which it can continue to function as *it* believes it needs to function.

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

I'm fairly consistent in my hopes around inclusivity. And I think it's quite important to note that there have been real strides in terms of changes in the way our community, with the way the academic community in Scotland and the way the academic community in the UK, deals with issues of inclusivity.

I suppose if I was to say what my absolute hope is, it would be that all universities become physically accessible because at the moment we're still operating in an environment where many buildings, particularly in the older institutions, are just not accessible for all. And, you know, I'd like to see a situation where no student actually has to worry about whether or not they're in a wheelchair, because they can just attend a class like any able-bodied student. And that's true not just for folk in wheelchairs but with any kind of physical disability that makes their movement a little bit more problematic.

I think 'inclusivity' itself is a difficult word. It tends towards making people think that it's just about being nice to everyone. And whilst appropriate manners and anti-discrimination in the university are absolutely essential, I think I'd like to see inclusivity to go one stage further and actually be involved in ensuring that minority groups do get to take their place in our society in exactly the same way that groups of individuals who are not within minority groups can just almost take for granted. And I think there's still a lot of questions about whether that's the case, I think particularly for black and minority ethnic students, I think particularly for students who are from non-traditional backgrounds. I think there are still gender issues. You know, all of the protected characteristics still face issues.

I think one other area that is not well researched and needs more time spent on it is how you make the university a safe environment for the trans community, because trans students still have to deal with probably the excesses of prejudice within the protected characteristic groups. And I don't think any of us have quite worked out what the best way of doing that is, so we're still tinkering around the edges about what inclusion actually means.

So I think my hope would be a fully accessible campus, a campus where nobody feels fear wherever they are on campus because there is a zero tolerance attitude towards any forms of discrimination. I think that's quite Utopian, but I think it's worth aspiring to.