

Rise, Teach, Learn - Season 4 Episode 5

Language Matters

00:03

Welcome to the Rise Teach Learn podcast. I am Dr. Chiara Ferrari, Director of Faculty Development at Chico State. And we are happy to make this resource available to our campus community and beyond. The podcast is hosted by Dr. Jamie Linn Gunderson. And she will engage in timely conversations with faculty, staff, and students and give you a taste of the Chico experience. Subscribe to our podcasts and explore the many resources available on our website. Thank you for listening.

00:35

Hello, and welcome to Rise Teach Learn. I'm your host Jamie Gunderson. In this episode, we explore the impacts of language on our professional and learning environments. And I'd like to start by welcoming this episode's guests Dr. Catherine Lemmi and Dr. Bretton Varga. Catherine and Bretton, I'm going to just give you a little bit of a moment to introduce yourself to our audience so they can get to know your voice. So, Catherine, we'll start with you.

00:59

Thank you. Thanks so much for having us. Jamie. My name is Catherine Lemmi. I am an assistant professor of education at Chico State. I teach our literacy development class to our credential candidates, as well as our access and equity course to our pre-credential students. Really excited to be here. Thanks, Jamie.

01:24

Thank you, Jamie, for having me. My name is Bretton Varga and I'm an assistant professor of history and social science. And I work in the School of Education with our teacher candidates who are taking classes on how to teach social studies education, I work in both the multiple subjects and the single subject programs. And it is truly an honor to be here and hang out with you both. I'm a big fan of both of you. So thank you for thank you for putting this together.

01:53

Yeah, I'm super excited to have Bretton and Catherine because they are colleagues of mine in the School of Education. So, we're doing all good things for future teachers. And Catherine and Bretton have really been leaders in our department on some of our work around our mission and vision. And we're going to talk about that in just a moment. But one of the things I wanted to have Bretton and Catherine on to talk about was specifically how we use language to talk about identity. And so, Catherine, I was wondering if you could talk us through positionality statement?

02:27

Sure, thanks. So, positionality statements are something that scholars and researchers sometimes write in their papers, when they're doing work that discusses identity, or really any work that involves people, right? So social science research. And the reason is because you know, we want to tell people who we are in relationship to that work. There's a lot of different reasons for that. So, one of the reasons we give a positionality statement is to acknowledge our own knowledge gaps, right. And so, I'll just give you an example of a really brief positionality statement for myself. So that you know what I'm talking about when I say positionality statement. So, I'll tell you a little bit about my identity and who I am. So, I am a cisgender, white, middle-class woman, I am from Memphis, Tennessee. And I'm from a family where both of my parents went to college. And so, these aspects of my identity really matter when I'm teaching and writing and talking with my students about identity, about race and how that matters in education, about socioeconomic status, and how that influences people's educational experiences. So, it's important for us to state who we are so that, you know, we can be clear that we have knowledge based on our own experiences, but there's a lot of there are a lot of experiences that we talk about that we have not had. So, I'll let you and Bretton also kind of give your positionality statements as well.

04:08

Thank you, Catherine. So again, I'm Bretton Varga and I identify as a cisgender, heterosexual white male. And just to build a little bit on why we want and why we are advocates in the School of Education for working with identity is when we think about fostering critical consciousness and thinking critically about the world. Really, the work begins with us as thinkers and as members of society looking inward and looking at our own identities. Thinking about how we want to be seen in the world, thinking about how we are seen in the world. And once that work begins, then we can start to look at how other people are seen and want to be seen in the world, which ultimately gives us a foundation for which we can build and start working towards critical consciousness.

05:00

So, I want to embed this in my teaching. But I have to tell you, I'm a little nervous as to what to include in my own positionality statement. So, can you help me figure out? Do I just decide to include components of who I am that I think fit in that context? Or? Or how do I go about selecting which variables of my identity do I display in my positionality statement?

05:30

Thank you, Jamie, for that question. And I think something to consider is that there is no pre-described way of approaching this. There is no list, there's no checklist that needs to be ticked off in terms of what you are sharing in terms of your own identity. We talk a lot in our classes about our teachers maintaining this sense of agency and our students maintaining a sense of agency. Identity work and agency is of the utmost importance that we keep those two ideas in very close conversation, meaning that my identities are something that I have the power to share or not to share. And that can always be in flux, it can always be changing. So, when you think about a positionality statement, I would encourage someone to think about what are some identity markers that you feel comfortable with sharing, and start from there, start from your comfort level of what you would like people to know about

you. And then you can get a better sense of how to move forward if you feel like developing that or, if not, so it's really all about the person and how they share their own identity.

06:40

I really liked that. So it makes me feel very comfortable with sharing my positionality statement, which is, I am a white, first gen woman from Las Vegas, Nevada. So, I want to throw it back to Catherine. So we talked about what a positionality statement is, we talked about how important it is to identity. But can we talk about the why behind it? Like why is this so impactful in our teaching?

07:07

It's a great question. I think, first of all, I just want to say, you know, I really don't consider myself an expert in this at all. I'm a learner. And I consider myself a learner in the early stages. And I'm just trying to learn about these issues, because I don't want to harm, you know, anyone through the work that I do. So, I'm trying to be an antiracist educator, who's aware of these things. So I don't feel like I have you know, the best answer to any of this, but I'll tell you my perspective, Bretton can add to it. And, you know, our students have so much knowledge about this, as well. So I encourage anyone who's listening to kind of tap into your students' knowledge of these issues. So why do we do this?

Researchers often write positionality statements to acknowledge the limitations of their research, and to provide transparency on their relationship to the people that they're researching. So as teachers, we kind of do this for similar reasons, right, we want to acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge and our perspectives that we're sharing with our students. We also want to provide transparency about, you know, our relationship to the content that we're teaching. So, for example, you know, as a woman who you know, identifies as white, I have experienced privilege based on how people view my race, and I have also experienced some level of oppression based on my gender. So, I have these two different experiences. And just acknowledging those aspects of my identity is important for students to know, because it's important for them to understand the both the limitations of my perspectives, and also maybe some affordances of my perspectives that I can offer based on my identity.

09:03

So, a couple of things I would like to add to the conversation. And I think, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is also really important to this conversation. And what Dr. Crenshaw gets at with this concept is that people's identities are often overlapping, and they're intersecting and within those intersections, injustice and oppression and racism is often compounded. It's not so much about stacking up identity markers that have been racialized, as much as it is, it is a way for us to think about the complexity of how racism and injustice is felt and registered and articulated and responded to by different people through their identities. In our 302 class, access and equity, one of the main projects that we asked students to do is called the I search paper, which the I can stand for identity, identity search. We ask our students to look inward at how their identities impact how they have lived in society. And there have been multiple occasions where I have students who are very forthcoming in how they identify, they identify as being white, and that they don't have a lot to talk about in this paper, because identities and identity work is not something that they ever had to think about throughout their, their life experiences. And I think that gets to this idea of privilege where certain people are forced to confront their identities on a daily basis, on an hourly basis, minute to minute, identity plays a huge role in how they navigate the world. And so within this, you know, relationship of power and privilege and identity

and intersectionality, I think this work is of the utmost importance for us and our students to get to know each other better. If we're going to work towards a world that is rooted in justice and hates less, and is about love and joy and respect, it really starts with us having the tools to get to know one another on a more complex level.

11:09

Bretton and Catherine, as you guys are talking, and we're talking about this idea of identities and sharing our positionalities, and, you know, the complexities of, of privilege, and discrimination, and all of these things that are built into our identities, it makes me think of, and I'm just going to call attention to I don't know, if you've read *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown, is just one of her newer books, but she talks about this idea of belonging versus fitting in. And I think we have these discussions in our classrooms, we really get to know all of the facets of a person and how they present within that context. We start to, to cross that bridge between students fitting in in a classroom space and students actually belonging to a classroom community. I love bringing this this into our classrooms. Can you talk to me a little bit about some ideas you have for embedding this in our courses?

12:04

We kind of brainstormed a bunch of examples earlier when we talked to Jamie but one I think that is a nice starting point for people. If you know if you're just starting out in this work and thinking about identity, is thinking about gender and our language around gender. And so quite often, especially in education spaces, you know, we work with K 12, educators in the School of Ed, we say things like, or we hear things like "Good morning boys and girls" and that language places students into a gender binary, when in fact, we know that there are more than two genders, boys and girls are not the only genders that exist. And so a lot of teachers have shifted away from saying boys and girls to saying many different, you know, gender neutral greetings to students, for example, you know, "good morning, Wildcats," or "good morning everyone" or "Good morning children," there might be some more more creative ones out there that teachers have come up with, but shifting away from gender binaries, shifting away from, you know, sorting students into groups based on gender, and, and being careful about students' pronouns. So asking students if they would like to share their pronouns, and being careful about identifying them by the correct pronouns is something that we try we try to do in our classrooms. So it's just one example of how language can foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in our classrooms. And or it can do the opposite, right, depending on how we talk about gender.

13:52

I want to pivot and talk a little bit more about what this means with our colleagues. So, can you tell me a little bit about the work that you're doing in leading our department with recrafting the language of our mission and vision?

14:05

Yeah, absolutely. So something I want to underscore throughout this whole conversation is that language matters. And Catherine gave a few examples of what it could look like for our teachers and students. And something that's an important part of this conversation is the historical context of how certain terms have been used or deployed over the course, and the meanings there within, have been used over time. I think even the term mission and vision statement is something that we are working to

undo because of the the way that Chico State is located in the state of California and the very insidious and problematic history the state of California has with a mission system that was established that did terrible things to indigenous communities. I think that it's important to, for us when we think about language, how have terms, you know, getting at that historicalness, within the terms. I was just in a meeting with you both actually a couple hours ago, well, an hour ago. Yep! And something that was brought up by one of our colleagues was there was this question going around about, is there a master list is there a master schedule. And as somebody who tries to think in a critical, conscious way, about language, my ideas go to the problematic nature of that word master. Considering the context of the history of, of the US society built on slavery, and built on dispossession of indigenous communities and land theft. So, I think it's imploring your colleagues to just be mindful of what they say, be open to, you know, learning to grow, nobody's perfect. We're all humans, we are infallible, we're imperfect, we're always works in progresses. And I think, you know, fostering this sense of community to where we can approach our colleagues when something is said that is maybe problematic. How can we turn that into a learning opportunity so that there's growth that happens, because ultimately, this work is not about pointing the finger at people saying, you Jamie or you Catherine said, this, this is wrong, as much as it is, hey, there are more responsible, more considerate ways to say what it is you're trying to say, here's a couple of examples moving forward.

16:27

Bretton, I really love that you brought up this idea of being mindful. And in my work, and in my research, for preparing for this podcast, I listened to, it was a really great podcast on microaggressions. But what I learned is, it's not just about what you say, it's not just about language, there's also a component of action, that's a piece of this work. And so I wanted to, you know, after I listened to that podcast, I reflected on my actions. In my, in our startup meeting, at the beginning of the year, we had set aside time as a department to do some of this mission and vision work, or I'm sorry, would it be best to call it vision work?

17:11

Vision and purpose is, I believe the two things that we're using, purpose and vision or vision and purpose.

17:19

Awesome. So when we set aside time, in our meeting to do the vision and purpose work, I unfortunately got had another situation with a student, I had to step away from that where we were all engaging in discussion around what we wanted our vision and purpose to be. And after listening to that podcast, I understood, I kind of like thought a little bit about how me stepping away in that moment, even though my intent was to help a student that might have been a micro invalidation to my department on how important this purpose and vision work is. And so when you talk about mindfulness, I think it's on you know, us as colleagues to be thinking about not only how do our words impact, you know, our departments, but how do our actions impact that? And, you know, what do we do when there are mistakes that are made? So, being that that was my reflection in that my big aha moment. I wanted to talk about, you know, okay, now we've identified a mistake was made, where do we go from here? And how do we, how do we work to to evolve in that moment?

18:25

Thank you for that, Jamie. And you know, I can't help but think about this wonderful book by María Puig de la Bellacasa, called *Matters of Care, Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. And what what is talked about in that book is, like you mentioned, it's it's having this thoughtfulness, it's having this mindfulness that our actions matter, our words matter, even the fact that you brought up that instance, and that you are thinking about it, I think speaks volumes to how you approach ethics in this work and how you approach ethics within the community building that was going on during that, that time together. You know, when I think about microaggressions, I also think too, about the action component that we want our teachers to take when they are hearing microaggressions that are happening in classrooms or that are happening in the workplaces and I think you know, Abram X Kendi would certainly say, one of the most powerful ways to interrupt racism and interrupt injustice, is by calling it out in a way that is productive. It's naming it, it's being forthcoming with, hey, something didn't feel right about what you said, here's a different way that we can go about talking about something. And so, for the teachers out there listening, I think when you do come across microaggressions it's to step in, in a way that says, hey, something didn't feel right about what I just heard, and how can we say that differently or how can we help our colleagues and peers become attuned to how different people are understanding what is being said, ultimately working towards that thoughtfulness and mindfulness that you were just mentioning.

20:11

Catherine, I want to throw it to you, because you and I had great conversations about what do we do when we're the teacher and we've committed this microaggression? And how do we evolve in that moment? So do you have some great nuggets to share?

20:25

Yes, I have so many examples of times when I have done, you know, said things and then realized that they were microaggressions. And so this is one reason why I'm trying constantly trying to learn more about microaggressions to make sure not to continue. And so, you know, one of the things my students taught me many years ago is this idea of calling someone in. And so often my students have called me in to this conversation about language and identity and kind of given me new perspectives on on language and I thank them, right. So, you know, I think we can call things out, we can call people into a conversation. One example that I can share is that I had a transgender student in the past, and I was continually misgendering the student, I was using the incorrect pronouns for the student. And the student corrected me several times, more than more than once. And so, you know, I apologized to the student after class, and the student said, you know, I just want you to get my pronouns right. And so what I did was in that moment, you know, I just made, I started Googling it. And I made an effort to come up with a strategy to make sure that I never said the wrong pronouns again, right. So I, a couple of suggestions that I found just through reading was to practice it in the mirror and, and to make a plan within your lesson plan for when you are going to say the students name and pronouns intentionally, you know, maybe three different times so that you've gotten that practice in class of saying the correct pronouns. And so that's what I did, I just made a real intentional effort to not misgender the student again, there's also you know, an apology process that that often happens. So you know, when when, if you say something that you realize, or someone tells you is a microaggression, you can start by saying,

Thank you, thank you for telling me, I needed to know that. This is something that my mom says to me a lot when I, you know, call her out for things. She just says, Thank you, I needed to know that. You can also say it's not okay that I said that, and I'm sorry. So straight up, apologize. And you can even describe why it's not okay. And you can make changes, right, you can either tell the person, this is what I'll do differently in the future. Or you can just do those things differently and make a plan to change your language or your behavior in the future so that it doesn't happen again. It's important not to say things like I'm sorry if right I'm sorry *if* you were offended, I'm sorry *if* I offended you. The "if" places the onus on the person whose identity was you know, micro aggressed. And so you want to really take responsibility by saying it's just not okay that I said that. And so you know, I think it's it's also just really important to be in conversation where we can share these things, you know, and I think saying thank you will open up space for people to to let you know again in the future, if there's anything you say that they notice.

23:47

And there you have it, folks, today we explored the impact and importance of language in our learning and professional spaces. I'd like to thank doctors Catherine Lemmi and Bretton Varga for their contributions to this episode. Please don't forget that you can access previous episodes of Rise Teach, Learn as well as all of the resources associated with this and other episodes of our podcast through our FDEV podcast web page. A big thank you to you for listening and until next time, we got this Wildcats.

We would like to thank the Mechoopda on whose traditional lands this recording is taking place. Without their support and continued positive presence in our community, we would be unable to afford the cultural and educational work that is at the heart of this recording.