

Rise, Teach, Learn - Season 1, Episode 7

Teaching Racial and Social Justice

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We acknowledge and are mindful that CSU Chico stands on lands that were originally occupied by the first people of this area, the Mechoopda, and we recognize their distinctive spiritual relationship with this land and the waters that run through campus. We are humbled that our campus resides upon sacred lands that will sustain the Mechoopda people for centuries.

00:27

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 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 podcast and explore the many resources available on our website. Thank you for listening.

00:59

Hello, and welcome to Rise, Teach, Learn. I'm your host, Jamie Gunderson. In our seventh episode entitled teaching racial and social justice, we discuss the dynamics of teaching and talking about race. And we explore practices that serve to create brave learning spaces representative of all of our learners.

01:22

All right, so I am here with Dr. Nandi, a professor in sociology, and multicultural and Gender Studies. And I'm also here with Paul Bailey, a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. And I am really excited to engage in this conversation on teaching racial and social justice for this episode of our podcast. And I have to tell you, in just full honesty, and transparency, I did everything that I would normally do to prepare for a podcast I read, I did research, I explored the topic, until I felt like I could identify a theme. But when I actually sat down to script questions, I felt like I there was I couldn't figure out what questions to ask. And I didn't really understand, you know, where I could start. And so after a lot of thought and consideration, and some counsel with other professors and and people that I look up to, I just want to approach this and be honest that, as a white woman, I recognize my experiences do not mirror the experience of others who are different than me. And I know that there is like, so much work that needs to be done, you know, not only for me to do better, but you know, to leverage my role as an educator for others to do better. But I just really am unsure of where to start, or how to engage in those conversations. And I don't want to harm anybody with my ignorance or my bias, I just want to be open to learning more. So I asked Nandi and Paul to come on today, and maybe just open up this conversation about how we might engage in doing this work, and and how do we leverage our experience in the classroom to better our experience as humans?

03:09

So um, thanks for having me on, Jamie. Um, the first thing I want to do is ask that we name what we're talking about, because so far, you've just been referring to it as this work. And I guess I'm wondering if you're referring to anti racist work?

03:25

I am I am. And so that's one thing. Thank you for bringing that to my attention. Because that's one thing that might seem a little uncomfortable is is what do we name it? And what do we call it?

03:37

Yeah, if we're trying to do anti racist work, we can call it that. And so if your question is, how do we begin the conversation, the conversation has begun at a national level, and a local level, and is happening at an interpersonal level all throughout this country. And so I guess what I'm my reason for bringing that up is to say, we don't have to broach the subject, like it's a new thing, like people are alert, and they know, we're seeing bumper stickers everywhere. We're seeing t shirts everywhere, even people's masks are saying, you know, I'm not gonna be silent. I'm, I'm engaged some kind of way. And there are many folks even driving around this community in Northern California with flags, American flags, even on their truck, and we get a sense, we may not get it right. But many of us have a sense even of where, you know, what their perspective is on race relations, on politics and so forth. So I say all that to say the conversation has begun, but Paul may have some more depth.

04:43

No, I think you nailed it. And I'm glad that you took that angle you took with it in one, like, we got to name the things we're going to name not being able to name what it is that we're working on. What we're talking about the work that we're doing, in itself can be a barrier to getting this work done. So I think that helps that so that we can get comfortable being uncomfortable talking about these things. And then yeah, the conversation is going like so we're either gonna go with it, or we're or we're not.

05:15

So I'm drawing a connection with a lot of our like supporting students in crisis and trauma work in that we have to name it to tame it, right. So we have to recognize the things that we want to change and control in order to be able to take steps to change and control them. And what I'm hearing is that we are like I, you absolutely hit the nail on the head, we are engaging in this conversation, this is happening, something that I need to work on is how do I put myself as a professor in this conversation? How can I use my platform as an educator to extend this conversation to continue this anti racist work within my field in my scope?

05:55

Yeah. So one of the things that immediately came to mind and and I apologize, because I'm terrible with name recall. But there's a scholar who, and I'm going to paraphrase, essentially said, it is way more important for us to do something, anything to get us towards progress, then to do nothing, in fear of not doing everything right, right. Like, we got to be willing to do the small things, right. And plenty of mistakes along the way to make progress happen. We can say, I don't know the answer yet. So I'm just going to be frozen.

06:28

Right. So I would say the first thing that I would advise any, not just instructor but people in in a position where they have an audience. So whether you're a parent, or your high school teacher or coach, the first thing you got to do is be willing to be uncomfortable, because it is not a comfortable conversation. And I sometimes tell my students, I'm the most uncomfortable person in the room, because I can't be quiet. Like, if that's what we're talking about, if we're talking about whatever the issue is human trafficking, prostitution, any kind of, you know, hard subject, particularly if it's racism, I, I gotta say something, I can't just listen to the crickets, and then move on to the next subject. And so the discomfort is all around for a lot of people. A lot of folks are developing some courage, and are working through their discomfort, people are dealing with the backlash of speaking through their discomfort, but that's the first thing. And I would say the second thing is, or maybe the first thing and the second thing is to deal with the discomfort, the first thing is to read something, is to listen to people who know, it's to tune into some documentaries, it's to, to be empowered. And you know, we all know, as educators that people who claim they know it all often don't. And it's the ones who say, I don't know, a whole lot tend to know more than they think they know. And so, you know, just as my senior seminar students are turning in their final papers this week, and I'm having to explain over and over the purpose of a literature review, I always say, imagine you're talking to somebody who claims they know something about the subject, and you're thinking, do you even read it? Have you read a book on the subject? Well, your literature review is a way of proving I've read, I know what people are saying. And now I'm going to give you some more of my own perspective. So you got to you got to learn some stuff. And sometimes that means Shut up, and listen to people. Now, every person who speaks isn't speaking or any person who's speaking isn't speaking for everybody else. They're only speaking for their own experience, but they're also sometimes giving voice to the bigger picture. And we've just got to be able to discern that and take it in and find a way to not make it personal. Because people are showing up with their story. And we show up with our story. And sometimes our being whomever I'm not, you know, personalizing this, but sometimes people show up with those stories. And then it becomes a when you're attacking me, no, I'm not attacking you, once you understand that it's a really big picture. And that the picture has so much complexity woven into other areas of life, and history, and that it goes just beyond personal experience. It's easier to not feel attacked or beat up when somebody is trying to tell you the story.

09:26

I'm trying to do my best to arm myself with knowledge. I guess my question is, how can I take the knowledge that I'm gaining? And the perspective the new lens that I'm looking through? And and put that into action? What does that look like? What's most impactful? Where can I start?

09:44

Talk to white people. People of color, we have allies and one you're one of them, obviously, but the conversation about race relations in America. This is a conversation white people need to have because I'm hoping that in the circle of white people that there will be less anxiety, more freedom to speak more freedom to express what they don't know or to be challenged on their. On their assumptions. You know, I, when I came to Chico State in 1999, I had taught at the University where I earned my PhD, I had already taught this course called sex roles. That's what they used to call it in the 90s. Right now call it gender. When I came to Chico State in 99, there was no gender course in sociology. And I'm like, how do you teach a discipline without gender as a component, so I created the gender course. And now it's just a regular class, right? And I find that even though I created the course I have experience, I have scholarly publications in gender. When I invite men in to speak or when I share a documentary, where there are men talking about about masculinity, which is my area of research, the students are like, wow.

And I'm like, you know, I've been saying that for two months, right? So I just learned, I'm not even gonna take that person, I don't care how they get the information. I just want them to get it. The same thing happens around race when white people when I invite in a speaker or a documentary, whether White's talking about whiteness, or white supremacy or racism, the students are like, yeah, and for the rest of the semester, they're saying, Yeah, that's like, you know what, Tim? Why I said, What, Tim, why is that I'm like, you know, I've been saying that, but that's okay. That's fine. I'll, I'll get it. So I think, once we realize that racism is a whiteness problem, for one, it'll be we can shift the conversation. And then I feel like I'm dominating the conversation here. But I'll just make this point. Once upon a time, they research social scientists and other types of scientists use to try to understand race by talking to people of color, what is it like to be you? I started undergrad in 1987. And I attended a college where there were only 35 black people, my freshman year. There's like, 100, and something at that college now. So I remember even being invited to come to classes and speak on a panel with other black students like what is it like to be you? Well, somewhere in the 80s, social scientists shifted the direction of the research. And they started asking white people, what is it like to be you? How do you experience your whiteness? What is your How do you navigate life on a day to day basis around whiteness? And obviously, a lot of white people were like, I, I don't know, I just kind of show up, which is telling in and of itself. But if you go on Amazon, and I do this in class all the time, if you just type in whiteness on Amazon, there's so many books, because people have learned that there's real value and understanding racism by talking to white people. And so I would say, that's a really good place to start Jamie.

13:03

It's, it's hard to be reflective and self critical when you're the default. Because as the default, it's just expected not question there aren't these like external factors that shine a light on your whiteness, but for like, you know, an indigenous brown man Chicano from California, there are external factors that shine a light on my indigeneity, my Latina, my latini, that my color of my skin all the time, right? And so, conversely, like, right notice this, I guess this sort of invisibility of this power dinette power group is with you know, maleness, I present a sis male. And so in all of these spaces that we're in, like, I had this privilege that can be hard to quantify, identify, describe, you know, it's like I hear it is like, you know, the water that the fish are in or the air that we breathe, it's just the default is, Nandi said, I don't know, I just show up. And so it really takes some like hardcore, stepping back and trying to survey a situation for me to understand really, what masculinity means in the spaces that I occupy, and how I interact with that masculinity. So then the same thing applies then to whiteness for white folks.

14:25

Yeah, that's such a great connection. And I think that helps answer the How do I individually take my knowledge and the things that I'm trying to do to arm myself with this new lens, this new perspective and put it into action? But Paul and Nandi too, as well. How, again, like the platform that I have, as an educator, in sparking these discussions in my classroom in making sure that my students have these perspectives are armed with this knowledge. How can I as a faculty member embed these practices in my coursework in my class discussions to ensure that this work this anti racist work is not only done within me as an individual, but is like, coming out of me in my teaching as well.

15:15

I was a K-12 teacher first and my teaching credentials are in mathematics and science. And so in STEM fields, especially math, like a lot of times, folks are like, how do I even do this work, say in a math class, right. And I think part of that is because we get hung up on sort of the concrete because it's easiest for us to like, wrap our

head around. And so when we're talking about what is like anti racist teaching look like, I think the first thing that a lot of us jumped to in our heads is like, what's the explicit curriculum? Like? How do we make that work? So in a math class, that can be more challenging for folks that have been in this traditional system of instructing in STEM fields is like, well, what kind of questions do I ask or what kind of unit do I have? Like, what is the curriculum look like? What are the activities, and if you're like, in a stats class, like there are plenty of statistics out there that we can look at, that are related to race that we can engage in some of these conversations and look at them very analytically. But I, I feel like we're missing sort of one of the less obvious but really important pieces of this as well, which is some of the more the less concrete stuff. So things like the hidden curriculum, or the the dynamics of how our class works. So one of the things that I try to, when I'm talking to folks to hopefully kind of shift this conversation a little bit is to say, hey, let's talk about your students experiences in that math class in that chemistry class in that physics class, whatever it may be. Because if we're centering the students and thinking about their experiences, we're going to be more inclined to start doing this work. And then we can eventually get to this point where we can talk student agency.

16:54

I have two examples. One, I attended an HBCU for my master's degree, I'm also from Baltimore. And so I went to school, my entire K through 12. I never lived around anybody who wasn't black. And I always went to school with only black people for 12 years. So then I went to St. Mary's College in Southern Maryland, you know, where there were very few of us. And then I worked in a prison where everybody was black, the officers, the lieutenants, the inmates. And I went to an HBCU for my masters. And one of the things that really struck me was that not only were all my professors black, but the things that they taught me in women's studies, Women's Studies major, that they used all authors who were black. Now, I didn't know feminist theory. And this was in 1993, when I started, so right at the start of the third wave of the feminist movement, and all of the authors were black. And so one of the things that I learned, it is a long way of saying that one of the things that I learned is, no matter what you're teaching, somebody of a color has said that thing they've written about that thing, there's a TED talk, there's a thing. And so just using the resources is my point using the resources where you can teach an intro to psych class or an intro to social class and use all authors, or videos or other resources by people of color, or by women or by queer folks. So that's one thing it has to do with the curriculum, the second part has to do with the actual assignments themselves. And I only thought of this ball when you were saying that. So when you give students an opportunity to explore, or when you're providing them with examples on the board, or you're pulling it up, there are ways that you can be talking about race or gender or sexuality without actually talking about gender, sexuality. So for example, in a statistics class, I haven't taken a statistics class in 20, some years, but in a statistics class, I wonder if just trying to teach them about just some of the basics about distributions. For example, the information that you're pulling up doesn't have to be about apples, oranges and a train and what time it's going to arrive. Like you can use data, where you're looking at disproportionate numbers of people who are incarcerated. And you can just be talking about, okay, let's talk about distributions and means medians and modes and all that stuff, just based on those experiences. And if you want, you can go in and unpack why things are that way. But just for the simple lesson itself, it doesn't have to be neutral. It can be a lesson that includes examples about race.

19:48

I like the idea of both strategies that you guys share because it kind of seems like that helps kind of build that lens for students. And we can do it in a way that we are like you said, just embedding it into whatever kind of teaching and coursework, it just takes a little bit of, you know, thinking about what things am I choosing to bring to my

students? And is it representative of a diverse population? And if not, how can I go back and be mindful of adding that diversity into the voice?

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Yes, Jamie, I would also caution you that you can be the sweetest peach on the tree, and there going to be people who don't like peaches. And I share that because what you're doing is saying, I'm willing to take some risks, you're already that's what you're saying to us, I'm willing to put myself out on a limb, I just want to know how to do it in a way that is going to affect the least harm, I want to maximize the health and minimize the harm. And it doesn't matter how sweet you are, you have to also arm yourself with a couple of things. That defensiveness, it's a natural response. But you've also got to be mindful that it's there to protect you. But it doesn't help other people to say, Oh, that's not what I meant. And you know, nose, or get mad because you meant well. And it just didn't come out that way. It's a natural response to be defensive that so just know that. But there are going to be people who, no matter. It could be white people who you're talking to, these could be people at your Thanksgiving table, who sick and damn tired of you bringing it up of talking about it. And I know I'm not naming it, whatever it might be, whatever social justice issue, somebody is going to get sick of you talking about it. Somebody is going to say, Why are you talking to me, I'm not like that. And somebody else is going to, you know, just name you as a person who's just not safe just to hang out with and have drinks. Because Good Lord, you're always talking about a thing that makes them uncomfortable. You can navigate every interaction, but just know that none of that is about you. And you can just push forward, you can decide, you know, interpersonal interaction by interaction, but just be prepared, that somebody is going to be like, oh, gosh, Jane, Jesus Christ, and then you're gonna be like, you know what? Well, fine, fine, I won't, I don't want you to go there. I also and this last piece, I also want you to know that there are going to be some people of color, who don't appreciate you having this conversation of picking their brain of being kind to them. And I don't want it to be like, I sometimes hear people saying, Oh, well, you know, there was this, you know, these two people out in the street fighting, and I jumped in to help somebody and then that person turned on me. So you know what, I'll never help anybody else. Again, don't go there. Because everybody doesn't speak to everybody. And so you just decide interaction by interaction, whether it's safe, if you feel safe and comfortable to proceed, move a little out of your comfort zone, and then just be present in a way that that people know that when you're that you mean, well, that you're coming from a good place. It's not gonna always work, but just keep just don't, don't do that. Well, I'll never help anybody ever again.

23:16

I've had to kind of work up the courage to ask, I guess, in this conversation.

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Yes, please do.

23:20

Um, and so is it okay when these conversations come up for me to say like, I don't know, not from a perspective of like, that I haven't done enough research or that or to say that, like, I don't know, because I'm not trying, but because I don't know. And is that okay? Or does that imply that I should be doing more doing better?

23:44

No, say you don't know. That's the preferred response of all the boxes, you can check? I don't know is the preferred one, if you genuinely, authentically and essentially, don't know, say you don't.

23:57

Okay, well, the thing I love about that academic spaces is I don't know, is not the end of a conversation. It's a lot of times for me, it's the beginning of a conversation, right? It's the beginning of learning opportunity. Tell my teacher credential candidates this all the time, because they feel like when they're beginning teachers, I have to know everything, right? And I'm like, well, you don't know. What kind of random question your students gonna ask. You don't know if they took a different, you know, strategy for trying to get a result done than what you had in mind. So you might say, I don't know what you did. I need you to talk to me about it. And so that's a conversation starter in a lot of cases, like, I don't know the answer that let's go look it up or find more information or what do you think do you know more about this than I do?

24:41

So yeah, no, absolutely. Just like broadly, even in educational settings, I think, I don't know. There's a lot of power behind I don't know, right? And particularly when the thing that you don't know, is an existential thing is but may not be as deep as existential, but, you know, I'm not usually in favor of a essentialism. But if you if you've not lived it, then you don't know. Or you can even say, Well, I know this, because I've read it, but I've not lived it. And, yeah, I think it's absolutely okay to say you don't know.

25:17

Okay?

25:19

This helps me so much in just like, first of all, understanding how I might redesign some of my courses in the fall to just make sure I have that diversity in my curriculum, making sure that voice is there. And then also feeling a little bit more comfortable with having these conversations and being able to say, you know, I don't know, but here's what I've learned. And here's what we can explore together to kind of come to a better understanding to continue this anti racist work in our classes. So, Paul and Nandi, this has been such a good conversation for me as an individual. So I'm hopeful that it's impactful for every other faction that listens, but I just want to personally thank you for giving me kind of a broader lens to look through in this work - anti racist work - I'm going to start naming this work.

26:13

And there you have it, folks. Today we discussed the dynamics of teaching and talking about race, and we explored practices that serve to create brave learning spaces representative of all of our learners. For more information, including research practices and resources, check out our FDEV teaching guides entitled culturally responsive teaching practices, and black lives matter in the classroom. And I personally encourage you to explore the impact of your teaching practices by analyzing the equity gaps using the dashboard. I'd like to thank Dr. Nandi as well as Paul Bailey for contributing to this episode. I'd also like to extend a special thank you to Quinn Winchell for a podcast music and to the vocal stylings of Dr. Browning Neddeau for the land acknowledgement. Join us for our next episode where we will engage in conversation centering on student success. Until then, we got this Wildcats