

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] Today on episode number 193 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Amer Ahmed shares about how higher ed rates in diversity and inclusion.

**Production Credit:** [00:00:13] Produced by Innovate Learning, maximizing human potential.

**Bonni:** [00:00:23] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating and learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:50] As a part of my partnership with ACUE, once a month they send me over a wonderful guest and today is no different. Today I get to welcome a frequently requested keynote speaker, facilitator and consultant, Amer Ahmed. He's skillfully interweaves social justice, diversity and inclusion, and intercultural frameworks to cultivate rich and meaningful dialogue with his audiences.

**Bonni:** [00:01:16] Amer was born in Ohio to Indian Muslim immigrants and draws on lived experience, deep theoretical analysis and practical application to guide institutions, leadership and workplaces on a path to transformative change. Amer, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**Amer:** [00:01:39] Thank you for having me.

**Bonni:** [00:01:40] I will tell you that I do read my share of bio's, as you can imagine, and something really struck me when I was reading yours because when I think of Ohio, I don't instantly think of Indian Muslim immigrant families. Am I right to have that not be my first thing that comes to mind? I'm thinking like corn on the cob and country fairs but I've never been to Ohio. So can you tell me, what was it like growing up in Ohio as part of an Indian Muslim immigrant family?

**Amer:** [00:02:10] Yeah. Well we were a small community in my town. And I would say in a lot of the cities in Ohio there were small communities and they've grown. Definitely. Well, yeah the majority of people in the environment that I grew up with were either white or black. And then there was me and a couple other kids and so it was about navigating who I was in relationship to those other groups of people. So the moment I stepped out of my home, I was stepping into a different culture, a different world in relationship to the small immigrant community that I grew up in.

**Bonni:** [00:02:46] What's an early memory that you have of just noticing even that difference?

**Amer:** [00:02:52] One of the things that I remember earliest was just having friends over when I was a kid and them making comments about how they thought that my house smelled really weird because of the food that my mom was cooking. I remember people saying that when I spoke to my mom, that they would notice that I would speak with kind of an accent. And they would ask me "do you have an accent?" And I'm like, "I don't know what you're talking about." Because I wasn't even really aware of the fact that I spoke English different with my family.

**Amer:** [00:03:28] I mean obviously we spoke our mother tongue as well in the home. But even when I spoke English with my family, I spoke with an accent in a way that I didn't when I was outside. So that was kind of the first time I started to realize like "oh wow like I do things different. We're really different from what other people are familiar with." And that's viewed as strange. It oftentimes is framed as weird.

**Bonni:** [00:03:53] What was it like for you then as you went to college? And how did those differences either enhance that experience or really detract from that experience for you?

**Amer:** [00:04:04] So for me, going to college, the big change was transitioning from an environment of mostly blue collar and working class people in my high school where a lot of people weren't going to college and going into an environment of mostly upper middle class white suburban people at my University in Ohio and meeting people who had never known people that didn't go to college, had never known people with the kind of struggles of the kind of friends that I had, let alone being unfamiliar with my own background.

**Amer:** [00:04:39] And just kind of being exoticized. And kind of, again, just continuing to experience being bornized and otherized on a regular basis. So it was this combination of people not knowing much about who I was, but also not knowing about the kind of people that I knew in the community that I grew up in.

**Bonni:** [00:04:59] We talked before on this show, quite a bit actually, about micro aggressions. How do you define that term? Do you recall any micro aggressions from that experience?

**Amer:** [00:05:10] Yeah. So I think the micro aggressions involved partially always having to represent my group and people asking questions based on stereotypes they had of South Asian people as being people who work in convenience stores or sometimes being asked questions about things that people have exoticized about India. So I would get asked questions about if I had met with a guru when I was in India. Or things like that.

**Amer:** [00:05:41] And so it's just always like I'm always kind of boxed in by that identity. And that was kind of the experience for me going to college before 9/11 which was very different from my experience after 9/11. But I'll get to that later.

**Amer:** [00:05:54] The other piece was being in an environment where most people were either white or black in Ohio and being neither but not being white also involved for me getting questions about black people that white people wouldn't ask black people or wouldn't feel comfortable asking.

**Amer:** [00:06:12] So I would get questions like "why is Chris Rock allowed to make jokes about white people, but why people are allowed to make jokes about black people?" The questions that to me, that first of all that I thought were crazy, but then also I'm like why are you asking me these questions? Why would you think that I would want to answer these questions? And why do you feel the need to use me as a go between to try to understand black people? And so I always found that to be a fascinating aspect of my experience of not being white or black in Ohio.

**Bonni:** [00:06:46] Well I'm not sure on the dates, because I did read your bio but I didn't go through all of the dates on your CV. So you talked about before 9/11 and after 9/11. So why don't you bring us to your timeline in your life and then talk a little bit about that dramatic, I'm guessing, change.

**Amer:** [00:07:02] Yeah. I graduated from college in 2000 and then I went directly into a master's program at Indiana University. And so I was in Indiana in Bloomington in 2001 when 9/11 happened. And that really fundamentally altered the experience of people from my community ever since. I mean the experience of racism has been a lot more of a queue. There's a lot more suspicion around us a lot more targeted aggressions, not just microaggressions, so hate crimes, violence, discrimination, targeted against us, racial profiling. And so this has become a significant aspect of the experience of being American and Muslim. In particular, being brown and an American Muslim Post 9/11.

**Bonni:** [00:07:49] And what would you say that that experience of just that kind of hatred, that kind of ignorance, bigotry. What did that do to you?

**Amer:** [00:08:02] Well I think that because I had already been a person who was curious and interested about race and racism before that, I think it had maybe a different impact on me than maybe other people from my community.

**Amer:** [00:08:14] I knew a lot of people that were very surprised at how intense the racism that we were experiencing became and was, where I was less surprised, I more felt like I was now experiencing something more similar to what black people experience. Because I think before, I felt like there was this in-between like I'm not white and I do experience America as a person of color, but I don't experience certain things that are very specific to what is directed to black people.

**Amer:** [00:08:43] In some ways, white people will use relationships with people like me as a way to justify that they're not racist. But that really fundamentally changed after 9/11 where it was just much more of a targeting and a much more aggressive and suspicious kind of behaviors directed towards me and other people in my community.

**Bonni:** [00:09:05] You mentioned your curiosity that you had about race and ethnicity. Can you talk a little bit about how that then transitioned from a curiosity into really studying this area?

**Amer:** [00:09:17] Yeah. So my curiosity started from particularly I would say before high school, but definitely in high school and just navigating and moving between black and white people. But then also the differences and the experiences that I had with black and white people. So I mentioned earlier that I felt kind of like foreignized and otherized by white people. And I felt differently about the experiences I had with black people and especially because I was

Muslim and a lot of black people that I had met were Muslim or had relatives that were Muslim.

**Amer:** [00:09:49] And so I didn't feel like I was treated as foreign. There was also kind of like "yeah we're not like white people either so we kind of semi include you." And so now that was always interesting for me and I got included in spaces and with people in ways that I knew a lot of white people I knew weren't. And then in that process I started learning more about the more specific things about what black people experience, in terms of racial profiling and discrimination and racism in general.

**Amer:** [00:10:20] And I went through a process of trying to learn and understand what those things were. And so when I was in college I wanted to study, when I learned that there were classes where I could take to learn about the black American experience, I wanted to take those classes. And then the other big piece for me is that I went to South Africa in 1998 when Mandela was president and during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and I learned about how racism worked in South Africa. It was interesting for me to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between what was happening in South Africa and what was happening in the United States.

**Amer:** [00:10:57] And thinking about the experiences of some of my friends that I knew in high school compared to some of the things I saw in South Africa. So it just became infinitely curious for me. And the thing is that in South Africa, Indian people were part of the experience of racial segregation. And so it was like having a racial place, it was almost like answering what would it be like if our group of people were being racialized in such a specific way as well in America.

**Amer:** [00:11:29] And so all of those things were quite fascinating for me. And it also helped me understand a lot more about colonialism and just the similarities between what various colonised people have experienced throughout the world, including Indian people.

**Bonni:** [00:11:43] When you think about higher education, and specifically in the United States, could you give us a grade, how are we doing in terms of our discussions about race and ethnicity and making safe spaces for students to learn?

**Amer:** [00:11:58] Well I think this connects to my experience in South Africa being there during a process known as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which

they were bringing out all the atrocities and issues that occurred under racial segregation and trying to deal with it.

**Amer:** [00:12:12] At that time, I viewed us as an F back then because I was like they're having conversations here that we're not having. I would say we're now having more of that conversation right now. And I think partly the reason why we're having such an intense conversation right now is because of how overt and acute - some of the things related to race and racism that are happening in our country are occurring right now.

**Amer:** [00:12:38] So I almost feel like there are some spaces in which we're getting an F and then there's some areas in which we're getting a C. I think that we have a long way to go because I think that even when we are trying to have the conversation, there's a lot of accusational ways in which we're engaged in these conversations. And sometimes it's self-righteousness and moving us away from a place of we all have things to work on and we all have things to learn. And that that might be different for different people, for different reasons, depending on how we show up in the world. But understandably, people get frustrated when somebody else does not understand what their experience of marginality is and especially when they perpetuate it.

**Amer:** [00:13:24] But the question is where is the healing? Are we healing when we're constantly in a state of frustration and anger about what we're experiencing? And how do we move through that and get to a space of learning and growth around the things that we need to work on? And use that as a powerful example for others to really challenge them to do the learning that they need to learn around the things that may be marginalised in you. I think getting people off the defensive is really, really important for us to be able to move, from what I've seen and observed.

**Bonni:** [00:13:58] Yeah. When I think about my own failures, as well as ones I've observed of others, when we attempt in our clumsy ways to express some of the inequities that exist or I have a friend who is involved in the prevention of human trafficking, so those kinds of atrocities. Or even the Me Too movement there is this real defensiveness there where you get back "All guys aren't like that. All Lives matter."

**Bonni:** [00:14:27] And just this real vitriol. And I'll candidly say I don't know what to do when it happens other than I feel like just from my own experience and trying to learn from others, that if it's not quickly followed up with some kind of so now, what do we do about this? It just doesn't seem the way to go.

**Bonni:** [00:14:47] So I would love to know from you, do we have to go through that when it comes to just the cold awareness of these issues? Or is there another approach that we can take that doesn't raise as much of that kind of defensiveness that that you're describing?

**Amer:** [00:15:05] I think there are ways to be able to bring people into the conversations in a way in which they are not likely to feel attacked at the beginning. I do think at some point we need to get to that greater level of risk and intensity and real honest about these conversations.

**Amer:** [00:15:24] But I think that people are oftentimes not ready to have that conversation right away. And that's frustrating when you're marginalized because it's like I don't want to wait for you to be ready. I'm never ready for the experience of being marginalized, but I am regardless of whether I'm ready or not for that.

**Amer:** [00:15:46] And so you have the privilege of being in the right place in yourself to be ready for these conversations. However, for me, the question is what actually creates change over time and not what feels like I'm being simply just true to myself in that particular moment.

**Amer:** [00:16:02] And so for me, as an educator, what I've really come to is that I need to have a place of resolution in myself about my experience, the frustrations, the ways I've been marginalized, the way I feel about marginality in general and how I know that it's wrong and I know it needs to be corrected and changed. And then what's effective over time because one thing I know as educators, people don't just snap their fingers and learn and then just suddenly be a fundamentally different person. For the most part, learning is a process and it's developmental. So as an educator, I need to meet people where they're at and bring them along and know that they might say some really dumb and problematic things along the way. And I need to be in a place where I've worked through those things enough. I've resolved those things enough in myself to not make it about how I feel about that in that moment. And I need to be staying at a place of supporting the learner and what their needs are in that moment. And if I'm not able to do that, then maybe this isn't the right work to be in.

**Amer:** [00:17:05] Maybe the work for a person who is not able to do that needs to be more within their own community and building community from within and not focused on intergroup or intercultural across identities and experiences and

marginality type of work. I think for it to be effective in moving people, it's going to require stepping up to that challenge, which is an internal process of finding some resolution and healing around some of the ways in which we carry trauma so that we can stay centered on learners needs and not cause them to go running for the hills. And knowing that that's important, that we don't want people to go running away from these conversations. We need people to hang in there. So how do we make it more likely for people to be able to hang in there in those conversations?

**Bonni:** [00:17:54] I'm hearing really two themes aind how you're describing this. One would just be hope, this possibility that human beings have to change. And you likely have seen it so you can have greater hope than those who gave up in the struggle.

**Bonni:** [00:18:10] And then secondly is just the respect for the dignity of every human being. And I think I'm hearing those as very closely intertwined. And when I have failed at this. I was laughing as you were describing it because I have failed where I just got so outraged at something that someone said and it wasn't even about the people group that I belong to so I was just like... I Felt like you're speaking to me in some ways like that if I can get into that supporting the learner in the moment and then there is possibility for change. And then this is a human being and who knows where they got this garbage from. But what if we could be to some small part of helping them get something besides garbage in their paradigm of this particular issue or what have you. I don't know if that resonates at all with with you in terms of the hope that you have for that kind of change.

**Bonni:** [00:18:59] Would you share a little bit about a memory that you have where you felt yourself really struggling to support a learner and maybe if you were able to see change over the short or long term?

**Amer:** [00:19:10] First of all, I am with you on a lot of what you said. And one thing I try to hold is that for whatever somebody else was taught that's problematic in this, I was also taught other things that are problematic around me being a man, around being a heterosexual, about being an able bodied individual. You know what I mean and things that I'm working on.

**Amer:** [00:19:32] And so I have to be able to hold that that I'm not perfect and as much as I get frustrated around Islamophobia and racism and so forth that I experience, it doesn't absolve me of of what I need to do.

**Amer:** [00:19:47] But in terms of the experience in which it didn't work out well, I would say the first couple of years of my career were like that. I was just so motivated around racism and just wanting to fight and address racism and being affirmed by a community of anti-racism educators who I would go to and say "look I'm seeing a lot of resistance, I'm seeing a lot of guilt I'm seeing a lot of disengagement." And they would tell me just keep pushing. You got to keep pushing. And I understood what they were saying. But I was like "but I don't know if this is the most effective way." I think that there's got to be another way for these same individuals to actually want to go deeper into these conversations. And I think that the key is what intervention we use to bring them in.

**Amer:** [00:20:38] Is it having them over the head with stuff they're not ready for and getting on the defensive? Or is it meeting them at a place that kind of is a lower risk for them and then slowly turning that up? And, again, I know for a lot of people they feel like "well why should we have to cater to them to somebody in that kind of way?"

**Amer:** [00:20:56] And, for me, it's like well that's what being an educator is about. In my view. I'm not saying that the random person walking down the street has that responsibility, but I think as an educator we do have that responsibility.

**Bonni:** [00:21:09] One of the things you mention in your bio, which really resonated with me, is that yes, you have so much to offer in terms of the theory but also practical application. Could you share a little bit what comes to your mind in terms of some practical ways we can get better at this?

**Amer:** [00:21:26] Yeah, just a little bit more about why that was so important to me is that I was an activist at the same time when I was doing my master's degree. And I really decided that I didn't want to be on the academic track at that time. And so I moved into student affairs and ran multicultural centers. And I was about change agent.

**Amer:** [00:21:46] And so for me, the theories and the concepts I came across as a professional weren't helpful for me if I couldn't apply them to what I was doing, the work that I was doing with students, this work I was doing on campuses and beyond that. And so I was looking at what am I able to use that's effective?

**Amer:** [00:22:07] And, for me, a lot of developmental theory was really helpful in a lot of ways because there were key indicators around development. And so I was able to look at those key indicators and use that guidance in my programs, design my programs in a way where I'm going to be looking for some of these

key indicators in the development of my students, in the development of the learners that I'm engaged with. And in my assessment process, I'm going to assess to see if some of this learning is showing up in these core curricular interventions that we're creating in the units that I was working at. And so I'm not saying that all theory isn't helpful, but the most helpful theory for me is that which is practical and that which can be connected to creating practical change.

**Bonni:** [00:22:55] You shared about the developmental indicators and that is such an important paradigm for me to continue to shape in my own mind because I know my human reaction, just the gut thing is "that's racist!" It is very binary way of thinking about people's behaviors and things that they choose to say. And that is not healing and that is not helpful to the process.

**Bonni:** [00:23:15] And just then just because I have that as my initial thought doesn't mean that needs to be what comes out of my mouth or what I act on, but I can then reflect and remember okay wherever they are and a whole spectrum of development cultural competence how could we- and for me, it's often framing things in terms of questions that might move a little bit further along their developmental path.

**Amer:** [00:23:40] Absolutely. And I think what you were alluding to as the educator is some self flexibility is just taking some time to actually be a little bit self aware about how we show up in the world and who we are in relationship to who are engaging in one's learning and knowing that we're going to be perceived in various ways because of how we show up in the world and we need to be mindful of that.

**Amer:** [00:24:07] For me, as a man, I need to be mindful of you know who's in my classroom and how I may be interpreted especially if I'm a person like I am, I'm pretty talkative. I'm a person who it is hard for me to take up a lot of space, so how do I become a little bit more mindful in terms of creating space for students to be able to bring more of themselves forward and more of who they are forward.

**Amer:** [00:24:33] And so how do I design a learning where there's more room for them to bring who they are as part of the learning process. And for myself, to facilitate and support them in the process of navigating who they are in relationship to one another's learning and identities and experience.

**Bonni:** [00:24:49] This is the point in this show where we get to give our recommendations and I've been thinking so much about this conversation and

really enjoyed looking at your website and so much of the work that you've been doing. And I'm sure it only just skims the surface. And I wanted to really honor the time I had with you and just honor the experiences that you have. And I will say that recently I spent some time with people who aren't as comfortable having the hard conversation.

**Bonni:** [00:25:17] So instead we talk a lot about the weather and about food and where we're going to go eat in the middle of when we're having a meal we talk about where we're going to have the next meal. So I thought it would be humorous if I recommended a weather app for my phone. It's called the Carrot Weather App because I knew that we would not be talking about weather today. But it's funny my husband was teasing me because he said Man if you're going to recommend a weather app, that has got to be one really cool weather app.

**Bonni:** [00:25:45] First of all, it is very accurate. And it has a couple of different ways of connecting to different very accurate weather systems including people that have them very local in your community, actually have those specialized antennas sitting in the backyard. Or you can just tap into them more macro winds that are larger systems. And it also has quite a bit of snarkiness in it.

**Bonni:** [00:26:07] So you can set it for your political beliefs and then you can decide the level of snarkiness that you like the app to have for you. It's totally funny when you check it out just what it decides to say and if you don't quite like how it's communicating with you about the weather, you can sort of make those adjustments. So it's the Carrot Weather App, it's available on iOS and Android and they've even got it for the Apple Watch. And it's just a great fun tool great way of checking the weather. And this will probably be the first and only time I ever recommend anything related to the weather. I'm going to pass it over to you now for your recommendations.

**Amer:** [00:26:42] This isn't a recommendation rooted on direct experience yet because I haven't seen it yet. But the movie Black Panther is about to come out. And by the time this is out, I guess it will already be out. But I guess it's a low risk entertainment based way of just engaging something that for some people might not seem as profoundly important as it is it really is in terms of having a centered black superhero for, not just people in general, but young people in particular, to see a black superhero as great and as wonderful and as amazing and someone and something to look up to.

**Amer:** [00:27:24] And so I think that there's something deeply psychologically profound about that. And I guess maybe it doesn't seem so after having a black president of the United States, but the fact that this is really the first time that something on this scale has been done. I think it's a big deal. And so even if it's just as simple as going to see a movie like that and then enjoying it for the entertainment but then reflecting back about like wow what does it really mean about the fact that this movie has been put out there? And what is the impact?

**Bonni:** [00:27:57] It's so fun to see so many movies, although not enough arguably, but just coming out where people can really celebrate seeing themselves in the movies and that's it. I didn't even know what Black Panther was until I kept seeing on Twitter references to it. And I thought this in reference to the Black Panthers? Did something happen that reminded us of history or something like that? It took me forever to figure out oh it's a movie. But yeah that is wonderful that we are having more representation but again we have still so much work to do in that area.

**Amer:** [00:28:28] Yeah absolutely, there's no question about that.

**Bonni:** [00:28:31] Well it has been such a pleasure to be connected with you through ACUE and I'm just grateful for our partnership where they send me amazing guests every time they send me someone, I always know this is going to be a fantastic person to talk to. They didn't let me down. I'm just so honored to have had you on the show and have you share such important stories and also your expertise in this area. Thank you so much for being here.

**Amer:** [00:28:53] Absolutely. Thank you.

**Bonni:** [00:28:58] Thanks to ACUE for introducing me to Amer Ahmed and for getting me in touch so I could have him on the show. Thanks to all of you for listening. If this is your first time listening, you are welcome to sign up for the weekly e-mail that comes out and that's where you can get an e-mail with the show notes, links to things that we've talked about, links to Amer's website and also an article that's written by me on either productivity or teaching.

**Bonni:** [00:29:26] You can subscribe at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](https://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe). And once a month we have on guests that are part of my partnership with ACUE and I'm grateful to them for sending me such great guests and we do some crossposting with a deeper dive blog and a link to that in the show notes as well. Thanks again for listening and I'll see you next time.

*Teaching in Higher Ed transcripts are created using a combination of an automated transcription service and human beings. This text likely will not represent the precise, word-for-word conversation that was had. The accuracy of the transcripts will vary. The authoritative record of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcasts is contained in the audio file.*