

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 241 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Sylvia Kane shares about inclusive pedagogy.

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Bonni: [00:00:20] 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 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: [00:00:47] Today I am welcoming to the show a wonderful educator and also a friend and colleague, someone I enjoy collaborating with so much, Dr. Sylvia Kane. Sylvia Kane is the Director of Graduate Education and the Education Division Chair for Vanguard University. Sylvia taught in California's K-12 public schools for 17 years as an elementary school bilingual teacher, a middle school reading specialist, and a secondary instructional coach before moving into higher education. She enjoys preparing and supporting teacher candidates on their journey towards becoming California credentialed teachers. Sylvia is a proud grandmother of six and a mother of four. Sylvia, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Sylvia: [00:01:34] Thank you, Bonni.

Bonni: [00:01:35] It is great having you on the podcast. I know you've listened to many of them and I know you and I have had many conversations like the one we're about to have today. I feel so grateful for you, for your friendship, for your collaboration, and just for your heart. I feel like we work in solidarity to serving our students. So thank you for coming.

Sylvia: [00:01:55] Oh it's my pleasure. I really enjoy your podcasts so it's exciting that I can be a part of it.

Bonni: [00:02:00] The first thing I think would be helpful for us to explore is actually a topic I'm obsessed with. It helps. And we've talked about it on the show but I still can't get enough. I know you have so many stories having to do with context. But I wonder if you could start out an early memory for us in your own teaching that helped you discover about your students context.

Sylvia: [00:02:23] Oh certainly. My experience with teaching was 17 years in K12 schools. And then of course eight years in higher ed. But I think those first 17 years in K12 have really influenced who I am and how I teach. Just to give you one incident, I remember teaching in a very high poverty school and one of my students needed me to go in for a home visit, she was ill and I needed to take some things. I contacted her mom and I had the address. And I remember driving down the street and there were only industrial buildings around there and I thought "oh this is strange that there would be a house here amongst all these industrial buildings." So I parked the car, I got out and walked and I saw that there was this long dirt driveway between two factories. And I thought "I wonder. I must have the wrong address." So I walked down there anyway and I saw what I thought was a junkyard with trailers, all these dilapidated trailers surrounding this open space of dirt. And as I'm walking down, I turned around and I heard all these little children "Mrs. Kane! Mrs. Kane!" and I saw all my little students come running out from these what I thought were junkyard trailers and that was their home.

Sylvia: [00:03:41] And they each wanted to invite me over so I could see where they lived. It really changed my thinking. I can remember getting homework from them and had stains on them and maybe grease stains and they were crumpled and I thought well I need to teach my students how to turn in proper work. But then I realized, the only place they had to do their homework was on this little tiny table that everyone used in the trailer to eat. And this was their homework place. So I became a little more lenient about what I required concerning homework. And I realized why so many of my children were ill so much because they didn't have heating. And I remember walking into this old tiny trailer and it was so cold in there and the windows didn't close and they gave me a different perspective of what my children were going through what they were living in. This was something I had never experienced but it gave me a different perspective on my teaching.

Bonni: [00:04:40] And now you have more to share about context. But before we get there, would you share about the lesson that you learned about how much our students bring their own learning into our classrooms?

Sylvia: [00:04:55] Most certainly. I think first of all it's important that we know our students. We need to know their backgrounds, we need to know where they're coming from, but we need to know what they know. When I taught in middle school, I was a reading specialist. And so I had the reading intervention students in my classroom. These were students who were struggling in reading. And for most it was because maybe they were speaking a different language than their teacher when they were first learning those early literacy skills. So they didn't even understand the language to learn those early literacy skills that they needed to be good readers. And so now they're in middle school and their reading is behind and all their grades are low because they can't even read the textbooks.

Sylvia: [00:05:35] So my job as a reading specialist was to find those gaps in their reading skills. We did that and I was so amazed at how much those students excelled. We just found those gaps, provided them with those skills, and they just took off. I remember there were so many students who exited my class, they didn't have to take the reading intervention class anymore and they were so concerned I remember they'd say "Oh Mrs. Kane, now you're not going to have a job because I'm leaving the class."

Sylvia: [00:06:02] And I would let them know that there are plenty of students that were on the waiting list that would be coming in. But I think it's important that we look at their strengths. And so that's what we did in this reading class. We looked at what strengths did they have and what could we do to build upon those strengths? And I think it's important with our students that we realize that every student has what we call funds of knowledge, maybe some knowledge that's different, background that's different from ours, but we can use that knowledge that they bring to make connections with them. I remember a colleague used the term "we need to provide cognitive velcrow."

Bonni: [00:06:36] I love that Sylvia.

Sylvia: [00:06:40] What she said was we need to have something that they can hang their hat on, hang that new teaching onto, that new learning there needed to be something there. We needed to make a connection. And so I think we were able to do that with these struggling readers. We made those connections with them, brought in a literature that they wanted to read, that was exciting for them. I remember bringing in Tupac Shakur's book and that one just flew off the shelf. Everyone wanted to read that book. You can tell how long ago that was. But just making the connections with those students and building

on the funds of knowledge, making learning fun I think is just so important with our students.

Bonni: [00:07:16] Anyone who has been listening to the show for awhile knows how much I love music too and I think about it as a real way to connect with our students and so many times I'll have music that I like that is more current. Although I laugh because I have shared on the show before about doing something called Jazzercise and my feet aren't up to doing Jazzercise, that used to be like my primary way of getting the current tunes in. And sometimes it's students now.

Bonni: [00:07:41] But anyway back when it was the holidays I took the kids to see the most current of the Grinch movies. And they had lots of songs but were groups that were rap music when I was a teenager like Run DMC is one of them. And Sierra who does a lot of work on the podcast graphics and she's been on the podcast before, Episode 199, but she was saying that for her generation it was Jim Carey's Grinch that was the best because that really represented for them their own childhood. And of course for us it was when it was a cartoon way back when.

Bonni: [00:08:17] But in terms of the music, I just this last semester teaching, I love it when the students go full retro because some of them are saying how much they like Sinatra and jazz music and standards. And I thought yes! Because we did an exercise where you celebrate your 85th birthday will be like, that's a way of developing a personal vision. And so what kind of food will be served? Who will be there? And then what kind of music will be playing? And I thought "Oh my goodness it's come full circle." We can go to music that spans the generations.

Sylvia: [00:08:48] Yes.

Bonni: [00:08:49] So tell us about the real challenge that we can have as educators when we try to keep ourselves apart from our students. It certainly can be uncomfortable to enter into a new and different context, you shared the story of the trailers. That can be a challenge, but talk a little bit about the dangers of trying to maintain that distance.

Sylvia: [00:09:13] After I was a middle school teacher, I was an instructional coach and I worked with many teachers and I saw something in some of the teachers or that they described the schools that they taught in as being in a very dangerous neighborhood. And I remember one particular teacher she

spoke to her mom and told her mom how it was so dangerous and how she had to run out of her car and run to the classroom and lock the door and at the end of the day run back to her her car, lock the doors and get back on the freeway. And I thought how sad that she really doesn't know the community.

Sylvia: [00:09:48] When I began teaching in graduate education with credentialed teachers, the candidates, I saw some of those similar ideologies and those same mindsets where they would talk about the schools that they were doing their student teaching in and how dangerous the communities were. And I didn't want them to distance themselves from the students as I saw these other teachers who had been teaching for quite a while.

Sylvia: [00:10:14] So I spoke to one of our professors who was an anthropology professor and he talked to me about an assignment that he did which was an ethnography paper. And so I took his ideas and created my own assignment and I had my student teachers go into the communities of the schools in which they taught. I had them go to particular areas, I had them visit parks and churches and grocery stores. And it was so amazing, the responses when they wrote their ethnography papers because I remember they wrote about there are really families who walk through these communities, they are really nice communities, and these are places where people care for their homes and the lawns are trimmed and it's not what I thought. I thought it was such a bad neighborhood, that there would be gang members on the street corners shooting at one another and I didn't see that. And it was kind of an eye opener for them. I realize though that this was just the beginning, it was just opening the door for them. I would very much like my students to go out into the communities and get really involved so that they can know their students.

Sylvia: [00:11:20] I remember one particular student spoke of how she went to the grocery store and picked up a bag of chips that she saw her students eating and so she tried it and then the next week she went and talked to her students about how she had tried these particular chips and they were so impressed that this teacher had tried something that they ate on a usual basis. But it was just I think that connection because she showed you're valued. And I want to learn about you and I want to learn about your neighborhood. I want to learn about what your customs are. And she did. And there was a strong connection then between she and her students after that.

Bonni: [00:11:57] I know that you and I think very deeply about teaching and we care a lot about it too. And both you and I are in different parts of our career, you have a lot more experience at it than I do but teaching teachers.

Sylvia: [00:12:08] Yes.

Bonni: [00:12:09] And so one of the things that I've found invigorating about this podcast but I didn't have as much of an opportunity as I do today at our institution is just to talk about that deep, deep emotional and cognitive but real emotional work of doing the work of teaching. And to me, a lot of that comes from a place of vulnerability and I wonder if you might speak a little bit of how that has struck you in your own teaching profession. And also as you guide so many others into it.

Sylvia: [00:12:42] I think because of my background, I am Latina. I grew up in East L.A. I didn't grow up with a lot. I think I might see things from a different perspective. When I first arrived at our university, which is a faith based university. I remember being very surprised that it was a predominantly white institution. And there were very few faculty of color there. And I remember kind of the looks that I received and I thought they're wondering who I am and what I'm doing here. Things have changed at our universities since then, in the past seven years we've seen a real dramatic change. And I think what we need to consider is that in the past, only particular populations, most likely the the wealthy, are the ones who entered college. But now doors are opening. And for our institution, it's now an Hispanic serving institution. And so we now have students coming in who are not our usual students. And so I think that's what brings us back to the inclusive pedagogy where we now need to do things differently. So we now need to start examining our own unconscious biases, which is difficult for some people because unconscious bias means we're not conscious of it, we don't even realize we have biases. So just really reflecting on that, what kind of biases do I have? And what do I think. Is that ideal student? And sometimes those perceptions need to change.

Sylvia: [00:14:06] So I think we need to put on the asset lens rather than the deficit lens. As I'm reading the literature, I'm seen so much on underprepared students and I'm thinking I don't believe they're underprepared, they're differently prepared. But the asset lens is going to help us to look at who they are and how we're going to build on their strengths. And I've even seen this with a cognitive science, it confirms that during a lecture the working memory overloads quickly. And since that has been the traditional way of teaching in higher ed through lecture, we're overloading our students quickly.

Sylvia: [00:14:46] Schmoker, who is an education specialist, writes about interactive lecture. And so he talks to us about taking these brain breaks where

we need to after maybe 10, 15 minutes, have the students talked to one another or have the students look at each other's notes so that we're breaking up and allowing that time for the students to really start to process that information that they're receiving.

Sylvia: [00:15:10] And again, as I'm continuing to read the research, I'm realizing that for students of color, they need those relationships. And the research shows that if they don't have those relationships, that they disengage. And I thought that was really important that it's the biggest correlation in student engagement is again those relationships.

Sylvia: [00:15:30] So we need to understand the novice learner, students who are first generation who don't have a lot of background, don't have a lot of encouragement from home. And again we need to realize that those relationships are really important. But I think at our university and the fact that it's a faith based university I see our faculty as wanting to relate with those students, wanting to communicate, wanting to have that communion with with the students. And so I'm really excited about what I see in the future for our university.

Bonni: [00:16:03] I really am too. And it's one of those things we constantly talk about in terms of what makes us different.

Sylvia: [00:16:09] Yes.

Bonni: [00:16:10] And what comes up time and time and time and time again are those relationships but that's really hard to seem authentic, you know putting that on a brochure. You know it's hard to quantify that or to articulate it. There's a tag line that we use, "your story matters." And I'll tell you what, if there's anything that I really believe about that place is that we all in so many different ways really live up to that tagline of having our students stories really them knowing that they matter.

Bonni: [00:16:38] And yet just like any institution, any one I've ever set foot on, it can be a really hard battle with one's identity to go from what Freire - you talked about the banking model of education, I will pour my decades and decades and decades of knowledge into your head yes and at prescribed times he will come back and share that out. And I see so many of our faculty and so many of the other ones I work with at other institutions wanting to change. But it really to me circles back to that sense of vulnerability. And you want to have relationships with people, but if you're not really well ready to confront your own

biases as you said, Sylvia, they see right through that. To be able to that have the connection. I really do believe all of our faculty want to have.

Sylvia: [00:17:29] I agree.

Bonni: [00:17:31] So talk a little bit more how do we help both ourselves be more comfortable with that vulnerability. You told the story of the students bringing their own knowledge in that you were not familiar with in your teaching early on that really taught you that lesson. And then that it can't be that my identity is that expert. I mean, yes, I'm an expert but that can't be what it solely rests on. I have to release some things which you talk a bit about how we do that?

Sylvia: [00:17:59] Yes. Change is hard for many of us, for most of us. And I think when it comes to changing the things that we've done for so many years when you think of faculty who have taught this way, lecture form, for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, and now we're asking them to make some changes. That can be difficult. You have to start taking risks. And I think that's where I can see the coaching process come in, where you could have a colleague where you speak with and say "I want to try these active learning strategies that I'm hearing so much about. I think I want to try something new." And then working with another faculty member or working with an education expert, we could start trying some new strategies in our classroom.

Sylvia: [00:18:43] But again, it's having to come to that recognized understanding within myself that I need to make changes. I think when we have the idea "I know what I'm doing. I'm the expert. I am the content expert." Yes, yes you are. You are the content expert. You know your stuff. But I think what we need to realize is we are not teaching content, we are teaching students. I tell that to my my student teachers all the time. These are students that you're teaching. Yes, you're teaching the content but you're teaching it to students. And so we need to be really aware of our students and are they learning. How do I know if they're learning? What am I doing to assess their learning? What is going to give me the feedback so that I know that I am being effective?

Sylvia: [00:19:27] And again it takes that vulnerability of reflecting on our own practices. I journal every day. That's just something I do. Everyone doesn't do that. That's just one strategy to use. But another strategy that we've been talking about the university is videotaping ourselves in lessons and looking at our practice and saying OK so what are the students doing? What am I doing? Are the students learning? Are they actively engaged or are they just sitting passively listening to me lecture? So these are just all things that we can do to to change

our teaching but we have to be willing to change and we have to be learning to try some new things.

Bonni: [00:20:05] One thing that I think is really helpful. It's still hard. I mean that's still hard, but it's just to recognize that feeling that we have. It's so uncomfortable.

Sylvia: [00:20:16] Yes.

Bonni: [00:20:17] That's what our students are feeling too. We can have greater empathy for our students if we allow ourselves to feel that "this is really uncomfortable" feeling. That's what they go through. And you told so many beautiful stories about context, Sylvia, too. And just to recognize when we put ourselves in context that we're unfamiliar with, when we experiment with our teaching and risk that failure, sense of embarrassment- and I think some of that comes from really wanting to meet the needs, but thinking I'm not up for that. But these are skills that can be taught. These are things that are not inaccessible to any of us, but they are going to be inaccessible if we are not willing to have those failures and then recognize that you know that's what our students were asking them to do the same thing.

Sylvia: [00:21:04] Right. And when we look at growth mindset, we look at the not yet. We're not there yet. It's a process we're always learning. We should always be learning. I think once we think that we are the sage on the stage and I know everything there is to know. That's when our learning stops and that's a detriment to our students. So I think we need to always be willing. I'm gonna make mistakes and to take some risks and I'm probably going to mess up and that's OK because I'm going to learn from this. Again, that vulnerability.

Bonni: [00:21:34] That actually brings me perfectly to today's recommendations segment because when we were both noodling about what we were going to share about today I thought well when I think about something that's really been helpful to me in making these kinds of changes, both for myself but also organizationally, it was by us participating in a training put on by an organization called ESCALA. And our training with ESCALA was facilitated by Melissa Salazar. And as I was sharing with Sylvia, I'm such a snob when it comes to these things. She's phenomenal.

Sylvia: [00:22:09] Yes.

Bonni: [00:22:09] And the whole organization is absolutely phenomenal. So I was just reading an article this morning, we are not alone in our last seven years that big demographic shift. And the article was specifically about the gauge that was being used in this instance was the number of Pell Grant students being served. One method of identifying the socio economic status of one's students and sadly that goes also with ethnicity, wish it didn't but it does many times. And so just having an organization that's done this before.

Sylvia: [00:22:44] Yes.

Bonni: [00:22:45] That understands the magnificent kinds of cultural change that needs to take place for us to be able to adapt and really do right by these students. I was just so impressed from beginning to end. And she has said that she'll come on the podcast although we haven't scheduled anything as of this moment in time. So you'll be hearing me recommend her organization. But if it sounds intriguing, please know that she has agreed to come on the show. And I just thought she was phenomenal.

Sylvia: [00:23:10] Wonderful. I'm so happy to hear that.

Bonni: [00:23:12] Yeah. And so we're hoping to be able to join them in other learning opportunities down the road too. But I suggest people check that out. I think you said that you knew of another one today that was another good provider too.

Sylvia: [00:23:23] Excellencé is another organization that is promoted by AHSIE which is the Association for Hispanic Serving Institue Educators.

Bonni: [00:23:33] So that's my recommendation for today. And what do you have to share with us for recommendations?

Sylvia: [00:23:38] I think that there's anything that I like to share would just be something that those of us in education and frequently teachers have this kind of mantra that we repeat frequently, "they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." So that caring is just so important. We need to show our students that we care. Yes we are knowledgeable in our content, but we can't really share that with them, they're not empty heads that we pour into like you spoke of earlier, until they know how much we care.

Bonni: [00:24:06] I love that quote too Sylvia thank you for bringing it to our attention. And if I ever try to say they always get it wrong because they all start

with they don't care. [laughing] Oh wait no we don't care. No I can't. It never comes right the first time.

Bonni: [00:24:20] Yes. So thank you for bringing it and actually being able to say it like I would have been able to. It's so fun to have you here.

Sylvia: [00:24:27] Thank you. It's been it's been a pleasure being here today.

Bonni: [00:24:30] Yeah. And yesterday we got to do some videoing at our institution and I just love how much you're willing to pour into us doing this. Well and we're never going to be there so we're always working.

Sylvia: [00:24:42] I love being working at it with you. Oh I love the fact that you are now the director of the Institute for Faculty Development. Able to work more closely together. I'm really excited to see what's going to happen in our university. It's an absolute joy.

Bonni: [00:24:54] Thank you so much Sylvia.

Sylvia: [00:24:55] Thank you.

Bonni: [00:24:59] Sylvia Kane, it was wonderful having you on today's episode and just for all of the ways in which you model and build up inclusive pedagogy. Thanks to all of you for listening too, this is such important work to be doing and we need to all be doing it together in solidarity. So thank you for all that you're doing to make your teaching, to make your classes more inclusive and better serve our students.

Bonni: [00:25:24] If you've been listening for a while and are enjoying the show and haven't recommended it to a colleague, I suggest you do so. These shows go a lot better when we can have conversations with them about how we want to continue to better our teaching and better serve our students. So find a colleague you can recommend it to today, send out an email, or sit down and maybe listen to a show together, go for a walk. It works great walking. Thanks so much for listening. I'll see you next time.

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