

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] A prior guest has me thinking about vulnerability on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed.

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**Bonni:** [00:00:18] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space for we explore the art and science of being more effective. At facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:43] I'm happy today to be welcoming back to the show Sandie Morgan. Sandie works with me and she is the director of the Center for Women and Justice and also teaches courses in our Women's studies minor and is also a dear friend. She decided to join me in this reflection. We're both going to be doing about what it's like to be vulnerable in our teaching. Before I get to that though I have to talk about the vulnerability of being a little tiny precious egg.

**Bonni:** [00:01:11] The other day I was in the backyard. My son who is 3 and just shy of three and a half comes and says Here mommy look what I found. It turned out to be an egg. We don't know what kind of egg it was and there wasn't anything and he started asking all these questions about what was inside of the egg and where is that chick now.

**Bonni:** [00:01:31] And that little bird now and I thought oh no I'm not ready to have the death conversation of course maybe the bird is still just perfectly alive and it flew off I don't know how these things work. But it was funny because I had been.

**Bonni:** [00:01:43] We got some new balcony furniture out of our master bedroom balcony there. And I had been just like completely dive bombed by a bird a

few times and I put two and two together. Aha. There's got to be a nest somewhere here.

**Bonni:** [00:02:00] And I kept looking in the attached to our rain gutter is this this section of piping covered and bird poo and where there's bird poo with the birds.

**Bonni:** [00:02:11] But it was funny it was one of those funny things where because my eyes were so focused on the pole I missed if I just looked a little closer to me. There was actually a nest there but Dave's the one that saw it when he came outside.

**Bonni:** [00:02:23] I decided when were vulnerable part of the problem it's vulnerability can attract sort of scenes of poo. That's my theme for a very professional theme for it.

**Sandie:** [00:02:35] It gets a little messy.

**Bonni:** [00:02:37] Yes yes it does. Actually today's episode really was prompted by a past guest Josh Eyler who joined us and on the show when he joined us he actually shared about how we need to honor our students and recognize the vulnerability they have to go through to enter into the learning process and how we need to really have such a high regard for what they need to do and just in the last week he posted the most powerful blog.

**Bonni:** [00:03:06] I will be posting a link to this on the show notes about his family's journey. His wife was recently diagnosed with some sort of neurological disorder I'm not sure they've actually firmed up the diagnoses but that's the path that they're traveling down.

**Bonni:** [00:03:20] She's essentially just in constant pain now and he wrote about what that was like teaching over the course of the semester and trying to support his wife and I I won't I can't do his words justice but I encourage everyone to go to [teachinginhighered.com/51](http://teachinginhighered.com/51). This is the fifty first episode and read his post it's very powerful.

**Bonni:** [00:03:42] But boy that kind of vulnerability he had to share with the community of people that are all working at teaching and being more effective what we do. I thought it was so powerful because this is stuff that happens to us all the time in our lives on and our teaching. So that's what we're here to talk about a little bit today.

**Bonni:** [00:04:00] And Sandie tell me when what do you think of what do you reflect on in your teaching experience as times when you've had to be really vulnerable or even times when you've held back from maybe what might have naturally been an urge to be vulnerable.

**Sandie:** [00:04:16] I bring into the classroom my own life experiences and so if I choose to share those experiences I need to be prepared for whatever the responses from the students.

**Sandie:** [00:04:29] But I also feel a great deal of responsibility to the people in my life that I am doing life with. If I praying a very vulnerable moment from my life into that classroom I want to make sure that the person who shared that moment with me is okay with me sharing it.

**Sandie:** [00:04:49] I want to be careful about that vulnerability and I think for me I'm thinking about telling stories about my own life as being vulnerable. That's my what what I'm imagining. It really has to contribute to their understanding of whatever the course content is. It's not just to get them to like me or to feel sorry for me or to pay attention to me.

**Bonni:** [00:05:15] We've certainly - both you and I - know a lot of examples of faculty that in our estimation would have gone too far too too vulnerable to where it isn't related to the course.

**Bonni:** [00:05:28] And it is in fact I've shared on prior episodes about students I don't even know who the person was they were talking about students who were sharing that they felt sorry for their professor and it was coming time to fill out the evaluations and they thought oh his life is already so hard and I don't want to make it worse but he's a whore.

**Bonni:** [00:05:46] These are from the out of the mouths of our students. We know what that looks like on that end of things. But is it possible to be too guarded to be too protective of one's self and not crack open that shell.

**Sandie:** [00:06:03] Yeah would be a little artificial that you never had any issues. And so and that they wouldn't become part of your dialogue especially in this this generation where an interactive classroom environment is expected by our students.

**Bonni:** [00:06:18] We have the spectrum of too much vulnerability and we kind of have an idea of what that looks like and then we have the two little vulnerability where it may be difficult for our students to feel like they could connect with us when the whole thing about come into office hours.

**Sandie:** [00:06:35] I think that part of the benefit of some level of vulnerability is it contributes to approachability. When I start I teach an upper division 300 level soci course on family violence and so many times I will.

**Sandie:** [00:06:52] And it's the only soci course that I teach so many times have students in that class who I've never had before. And I began to realize somehow I need to connect with them that I'm not just oh she's the human trafficking lady and she's this advocate and all of those things.

**Sandie:** [00:07:12] I want to somehow demonstrate I've got a family. The very first week. And so. But I don't want to tell them you know heartbreaking stories. So I found that showing a less than a minute video clip of my grandson doing a 360 flip on his scooter at a professional competition at 14. They loved that. All of a sudden I was a cool grandma.

**Sandie:** [00:07:42] And so now I was approachable and we got into the material and we kind of got through the quick icebreaker part because in a course at that level you don't you can't use a whole month to get to know your students. Yeah or for them to get to know you.

**Bonni:** [00:07:57] Yeah I absolutely see that. What kind of vulnerability do you see being required when you're asking your students for feedback or you're processing feedback that you've maybe received further from them.

**Sandie:** [00:08:09] I think being transparent about what you're going to do with that feedback and that you honestly want the feedback I have practice at the end of a particularly my upper division courses on that last class. I draw a chart up on the board and say this is where I'm gonna keep things.

**Sandie:** [00:08:27] This is where things need to change and here's things that we're missing and you're the ones who are going to tell me what to put in those columns.

**Sandie:** [00:08:37] And the first time that I do that they're like really because they already do that little feedback thing and that they have to evaluate that sort of thing.

**Sandie:** [00:08:47] But when they're telling me directly I watch the class begin to trust me that I'm really going to take their feedback and be vulnerable to listen to them.

**Sandie:** [00:09:01] So I don't think vulnerability is just about talking and telling your story but I think it's about being an active listener that values what they're saying and then all of a sudden I can't shut them up everybody's hand is up.

**Sandie:** [00:09:14] Oh we love this. No don't take that out and somebody else says No get rid of that. Like writing a paper and then seven other people say. But I learned a lot from that.

**Sandie:** [00:09:23] So they become much more involved in the conversation with that kind of vulnerability.

**Bonni:** [00:09:28] That's part of the challenge with the written traditional surveys are that there's such a delay. There's that time delay and the gap between when we receive that feedback and it's not this way at all institutions but at least at ours and then those same students they don't even get to see it because of course they're not going to take the class the next time.

**Sandie:** [00:09:46] Right.

**Bonni:** [00:09:47] That's helpful for them to get to see and you respond to the feedback and I'm sure there's been times where you've thought I don't know if you verbalize what you thought OK.

**Bonni:** [00:09:55] That's interesting feedback about for example not writing a paper but you know what we're still going do that next time. But both parties I guess have to be vulnerable for that.

**Sandie:** [00:10:04] And in that when they do their fill in the bubble. It's all so low and quiet. And you have to leave the room and all those things.

**Sandie:** [00:10:13] But when we engage in this discussion as a group when one kid says one student says Yeah get rid of the paper or cut it to six pages or whatever when seven others say no Really. I know it was hard but I learned a lot from that.

**Sandie:** [00:10:28] That group interaction really brings a lot more of what their real world is because they make decisions as groups on social media. But this generation so this would be more reflective of how they make choices anyway.

**Bonni:** [00:10:44] Absolutely and they get they have to be accountable to the feedback they're given and what other people's responses might be. For sure there were a few things I thought of.

**Bonni:** [00:10:52] And I'm sure Sandie you might have some of your own to add in that when I'm thinking through should I take this risk to be vulnerable. There were a few things that I thought of.

**Bonni:** [00:11:03] These are not hard and fast rules for me but this is just some of the filters that I might use to help clean me toward. Is this the opportunity for me to show some vulnerability and build that trust or is this one of those times that would be less appropriate for me to be sharing this and the first one you already mentioned a bit. But for me is it related to the course.

**Sandie:** [00:11:23] Because I teach intro to Women's studies and I challenge some of the more traditional male female roles that some some of us kind of grow up with. This is the only thing women do. This is the only thing men do so we do little exercises about.

**Sandie:** [00:11:40] Did your mom take out the trash or was that only your dad's job. Well in our in our own personal story between my husband and I we've had a major shift in our lives when we came back to the states and for the beginning of our marriage I followed him with each of his assignments.

**Sandie:** [00:12:01] And then when I decided to become a professor we stayed and he didn't take a job opportunity that would have moved us in order to stay basically if you will follow me that was upside down and my students always loved to talk about well you know.

**Sandie:** [00:12:22] Was he okay with that. Yeah. How how did you and then some some of the female students it's like how many times did you move for him.

**Sandie:** [00:12:31] And so you get a lot of the contrariness and the complimentaryness in the classroom by using a personal example because now it's not about looking at the situation but then they can engage and ask you how did you feel about that.

**Bonni:** [00:12:49] That example reminds me a bit though that I suspect I mean maybe not as much as if you were speaking to the broader campus student body because by very nature that they took that course they're self-selecting to be a particular sort of person.

**Bonni:** [00:13:07] I don't want to classify people too much but there has to be times when you share things and then they start to get very free and open with their dialogue that they say something that could potentially offend you.

**Sandie:** [00:13:21] Yes that's right.

**Bonni:** [00:13:24] I mean I'm thinking about how I've tried to think of an example for myself I just know some of them as you said have grown up entirely in different cultures really then than I grew up.

**Bonni:** [00:13:35] And that would be like well no women should just be at home. Well they should just be with him. I suspect you must have gotten some comments like that and then that vulnerability that you were showing in the first place. How do you work that out.

**Sandie:** [00:13:50] Well it is very confusing for students when they ask me about well isn't your husband isn't it your responsibility to go with him where ever he goes. Isn't that what it says.

**Sandie:** [00:14:06] And so discussing this from the perspective that this was a joint decision it was mutually agreed upon. It wasn't me becoming suddenly I'm going to claim my rights. And I think I think that's a really important lesson that they wouldn't learn just from reading theory.

**Bonni:** [00:14:26] Yeah.

**Sandie:** [00:14:26] But of actually engaging in a conversation and because I'm vulnerable it's OK for them to ask those questions.

**Bonni:** [00:14:33] You've been around the block and you know there's different paradigms about what roles might be like your gender roles might be like in a family.

**Bonni:** [00:14:42] So it doesn't have to be about you. It could just be about an opportunity for someone to see a different paradigm. I did think of an example by the way I had some students over to the home for some kind of a review.

**Bonni:** [00:14:55] And this is so funny I'm in the kitchen which you know me that's not where you would normally find me but we were all like a number of students were helping out with the cooking. And one of the young men came over and said oh I can't. And he says oh this home is amazing.

**Bonni:** [00:15:16] I cannot wait to talk to your husband even more to find out how you guys were able to be successful or how he was able to be as successful as it's just making the complete assumption that the only reason that we live here is because of my husband because he just Mr. Moneybags.

**Sandie:** [00:15:35] There you go.

**Bonni:** [00:15:36] Which is not an accurate reflection but one that just based on someone's paradigm from how they grew up and then his world it didn't affect it amused me to no end because I knew Dave was going to be coming out. And then to watch Dave's face as this young man's "Oh I really couldn't wait to meet you and have you told me how you're how you've been able to do all this." It's his first thing was: "Well, Bonni and I - we did this together."

**Sandie:** [00:16:03] And you knew he was going to respond.

**Bonni:** [00:16:05] Yes, yes.

**Sandie:** [00:16:06] I think I think another. Another benefit of having some vulnerability in the right context in the right class is that it frees up students to also be vulnerable. And I mentioned already that I teach the family violence class.

**Sandie:** [00:16:24] And so I'm very open at the very beginning of the course that we've had situation in our own family with our own daughter. And so walking through that makes all of the content of this course very personal.

**Sandie:** [00:16:42] And so I want I want you to know that. Well then that always result. And I use the word always rarely. But in this particular case always that opens the door for students to also be very transparent and very vulnerable.

**Sandie:** [00:17:00] And it makes it easy for them to self disclose their own situations that may require some help and then we're able to provide those resources.

**Bonni:** [00:17:11] I don't want to get too clinical about it but I am interested now because of these two pieces that you shared you shared earlier about showing the video of your grandson and his fancy moves.

**Sandie:** [00:17:23] Because I want to be approachable.

**Bonni:** [00:17:25] Yeah. And then now you've shared the context of the story. What order do those things happen in?

**Sandie:** [00:17:31] Well for me it's the video first because we're just getting to know each other now and we don't start out in the deep end. So we don't go into personal until probably the second week in class.

**Bonni:** [00:17:44] So the first week I'm like you're some calculating its a little bit calculated in the sense of a proper context you're modeling for them because the other thing is I guess that's another thing that's coming to mind that for me has been sort of had this visceral reaction to some faculty members.

**Bonni:** [00:18:02] The difference between the role of a professor and the role of a therapist. And that as far as artfulness students are not our therapists. So when we're vulnerable with them we're not doing it because they're supposed to help or fix us.

**Sandie:** [00:18:18] Right.

**Bonni:** [00:18:18] That's not inappropriate. As far as I come down the line that's not a place to do it. And then when they're vulnerable with us I know that I'm a good listener.

**Bonni:** [00:18:29] I know that I have a background to understand some of the basics as far as if somebody threatens them to hurt themselves or someone else. This is a reportable thing where responsible legally and ethically around that.

**Bonni:** [00:18:39] But I'm not a therapist and even if I was a licensed therapist someone's not going to be my student. At the same time as I am their therapist these are two separate roles for separate seasons so I don't know how you because you certainly run into that far more than I do but I certainly do.

**Bonni:** [00:18:55] When students come in right.

**Sandie:** [00:18:58] In that that back and forth about vulnerability might follow the same practice all the time. So I am so glad that you came and talked to me about this and here are some resources that we have available for you so I don't take responsibility. I just create an opportunity for them to get the kind of resources that they might need.

**Bonni:** [00:19:25] I don't know about you but some of them have some real baggage that I've worked with where therapy was not something I embraced in their family and my family was all I can remember at a young age.

**Bonni:** [00:19:34] My mom telling me that she and my dad were going to see a counselor and that I didn't really know a lot about this at the time but I remember being slightly fearful about oh is there something wrong is it something bad.

**Bonni:** [00:19:46] And she said no there's nothing. This is something that couples do to be healthy in their relationships.

**Sandie:** [00:19:53] Yeah like taking your vitamins.

**Bonni:** [00:19:54] Yeah we got a wonderful thing for her to model that for me at such a young age. So we never had any kind of hang ups about going to see a professional like that. At different seasons.

**Bonni:** [00:20:04] Another question that I ask myself when I'm trying to determine whether to take the risk is Can I share this and still model resilience in my professional role kind of as you've already described with your story.

**Bonni:** [00:20:16] It's I've got a story because it's important for you to know this about me so we can walk through this together about learning this together but there's still a sense of that I'm resilient I have this role I was thinking about the hardest time that I ever had with vulnerability and teaching.

**Bonni:** [00:20:33] I had as you know Sandie we had a lovely seven and a half year journey before we had our first son. And there were many many disappointments and losses along those seven and a half years.

**Bonni:** [00:20:46] And one Monday morning I had been to visit the doctor early they would do 6:00 a.m. appointments sometimes even earlier and then I had for some reason I had a bunch of stuff to carry into campus and I had just found out that I wasn't pregnant. Once again another loss another sense of grieving.

**Bonni:** [00:21:08] And I think I'm having one of those days where I just think I can do this. I cannot do. How am I going to do this. So I'm carrying these boxes and bags and everything. I don't know why my personality I'll just do everything I can to not have to take more than one trip from the cars I'm carrying all the stuff.

**Bonni:** [00:21:26] But I don't realize that I'm carrying the stuff. And a man who I did not know I sort of knew who he was but did not know him well stopped and said, Are you OK.

[00:21:39] I thought he knows it shows I mean it must just show and he meant my OK.

**Sandie:** [00:21:46] Carrying all that stuff.

**Bonni:** [00:21:49] Can i help you carry these boxes that were right here they got the boxes and then I went into my classroom and I mean and just physically had all these hormones and all these shots and all this stuff and then so there's the physiological piece and then the emotional piece and I went in and it's just this was the weakest point.

**Bonni:** [00:22:07] And I'm setting up my computer and I'm just one of those I just have to do this 50 minutes. That's all I have to do is this 50 minutes and a student came up to me as sort of. Just probably three or four minutes before class was about to start. And he said something and I responded to him and then he looked at me and said. Are you OK.

**Bonni:** [00:22:29] I don't know about you. I have this thing like if the tears don't fall out of my eyes and not really cry if they just get watery the maraca Am I too. I kind of kept my eyes really big and I said I'm OK. And he gave me a big hug and I did have one tear fell out.

**Bonni:** [00:22:45] And then he sat down and I said I just got some bad news at the doctors and some of the students knew at the time that we were trying so they kind of he put two and two together and had figured out what had happened.

**Bonni:** [00:22:56] But I thought it was so funny because I'm not proud of that. Do students really need to see us a lot like that. No. Ten years of teaching I think I'm doing pretty good. If I've only had that happen once. I wouldn't recommend that. But I also don't apologize for it. Does that make any sense.

**Sandie:** [00:23:11] It does it. You know we need to just be human. We're not machines.

**Bonni:** [00:23:15] Yeah. Yeah. Other things that we think about in terms of whether or not we should share it.

**Sandie:** [00:23:22] Oh.

**Bonni:** [00:23:23] What do you imagine the students response to it might be. And then we talked about that a little bit with you sharing about the gender differences and how that evolved with your family over time and that some of the times the students responses when we shared these things may not fit our paradigms or may even.

**Bonni:** [00:23:41] I've shared some things about the business world and when we've talked about different ways of setting things up to protect people for liability and I once told a story about a neighbor and how he had hurt his shoulder and the whole thing.

**Bonni:** [00:23:54] And one of the students ends up saying the remark that I found to be really offensive borderline racist actually not bored let me subtract the word borderline and say what it was it was a racist statement. And I mean these are.

**Bonni:** [00:24:07] But again I think at least this is a subject for another day talking about race in the classroom but if I allow myself to become personally offended that is my most dangerous. That's not the vulnerability I want to have.

**Sandie:** [00:24:23] Right.

**Bonni:** [00:24:23] And my teaching.

**Sandie:** [00:24:24] I agree. I agree.

**Bonni:** [00:24:25] And it's been a weakness. Nice. I know I have room I can grow but boy that's sign of if you're personally affronted. I think we're losing maybe our effectiveness to remain objective and how we might best educate and change minds.

**Sandie:** [00:24:42] Well and when you're talking about resilience when you have differing opinions that are deeply rooted in life experiences the home you grew up in the culture you grew up in.

**Sandie:** [00:24:54] When that is challenged and you respond in a resilient manner that actually is really important for the other students that are watching that interaction.

**Bonni:** [00:25:06] To be able to see that it is good modeling. We're going to go into the point of the show where we do recommendations but before I do Sandie is there anything else that you want to say about vulnerability and our teaching.

**Sandie:** [00:25:18] Our students they value being real and sometimes we may overextend ourselves to be real to meet that expectation. And so I think we still have to remember that there are some boundaries and be careful to weigh why we're doing it. What of our objectives in the courses is going to meet and how will it contribute to strengthening the whole class.

**Bonni:** [00:25:49] Those are really good guidelines.

**Bonni:** [00:25:51] This is the point in the show where we give our recommendations. And one of the things Sandie and I were talking about is as a follow up to Episode 48 with Scott Self about some of these new Evernote tricks and this is strange that I have not used the Evernote chat feature that much until that episode he and I were chatting back and forth a little bit afterward.

**Bonni:** [00:26:14] And then Sandie you and I worked on the notes for this show over the Evernote chat so I know we were finding that to be something useful for us that people might want to have another look at.

**Bonni:** [00:26:24] It's really easy and a fun way to communicate and collaborate on individual notes. It used to be you'd have to share an entire notebook. But now we can just collaborate and chat on individual notes.

**Bonni:** [00:26:35] And now if I look at my work chat inside of my Evernote app on my iPhone I see three chats I see that chat with Scott Self the two of them that he and I did he sent me a sample of one of his Evernote notes that he had used presentation view on.

**Bonni:** [00:26:52] And I got to learn a little bit about that after we recorded the show and then the note that Sandie and I were working on for this episode. So I just Evernote just keeps getting better and better.

**Sandie:** [00:27:01] It's wonderful. It's wonderful. I mean I also have an app that I just got this week that for those of you who are teaching and political science or something in my area of expertise advocacy is a big deal and I try hard to keep up to date on any legislation that's going to impact human trafficking women's rights children's rights. And I found a new app called Countable.

**Sandie:** [00:27:31] And it allows me to follow particular legislation so that I can send direct comments to that particular political office I can find out when it's going to be on the floor to vote. I can send out notes to my students if this is an issue that you're interested in. This is a good time to send a letter or a postcard to your representative.

**Bonni:** [00:27:57] Sounds like a wonderful app. I will definitely put that in the show notes. And Sandie thank you so much for being here for inviting me. You've had a long afternoon of recording and I told you you'd be out here at 4:30 and is now 4:37.

**Bonni:** [00:28:09] So we're going to end the episode. And I just wanted to thank you once again for your contribution to this discussion about vulnerability in our teaching.

**Sandie:** [00:28:17] All right thank you for having me.

[00:28:20] Thanks once again Sandie Morgan for being my guest on Episode 51 of Teaching in Higher Ed. If you have any comments about vulnerability in our teaching. Please join the conversation at [teachinginhighered.com/51](https://teachinginhighered.com/51).

[00:28:37] And as always if you'd like to subscribe to the weekly update that gets you the notes to the podcasts as well as a weekly article about teaching or productivity that's at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](https://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe). Hope you're having a great week. And I'll see you next time.

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