

**“I Hate Zoom, but it’s Still Good to See You”: The Renewed Importance of Belonging and Connection for Learning. (Kernahan & Gannon, 2020)**

**TRANSCRIPT**

**(0:07) Kernahan:** Hello. Welcome to our podcast I hate Zoom but it's still good to see you, the renewed importance of belonging and connection for learning. My name is Cindy Kernahan and I am with the University of Wisconsin River Falls.

**(0:20) Gannon:** And my name is Kevin Gannon and I am at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. And in this mini podcast what we hope to convey is that our relationships with our students matters just as much, if not more even, than the specific content of our course. So what we'd like to talk about today are some thoughts on how we are able to convey that with our students, even in a more uncertain teaching and learning environment.

**(0:45) Gannon:** So Cindy in your book, Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom, Notes from a White Professor, you’ve got a thought in your book where you say in the introduction, accept students, even as they resist learning. In many ways the relationship we have with our students is just as important as the content that we’re trying to teach. And so, when you are thinking about classrooms with topics devoted to things like race and racism, the assumption is that there’s going to be a lot of conflict that goes with this territory. Is that the case? And how do you work with it in a way that you are able to maintain a good relationship with your students?

**(1:27) Kernahan:** Yeah, I think there is less conflict than people assume. So a lot of the conflict really has more to do with resistance to the material, rather than conflict between instructor and student or student and student. At least that’s been my experience. There’s much less of that than you might expect. And one of the ways, there are many ways, but one of the ways I’ve found that’s helpful is to work with that conflict and make it more about the content. So it’s less interpersonal conflict and more about this is what the content says, let’s think about it from that perspective. So that that way you’re not making it about the student or about yourself as the instructor and your political beliefs or something like that, it’s more about what does the content tell us and how can we work with that and think about that. It’s a much less interpersonal way to go about it, much more focused on the information. So it helps to decrease the emotion around that.

**(2:26) Gannon:** One of the things that really struck me about your book is that, you know, even in classrooms that maybe aren’t dealing with controversial or fraught or sensitive topics, that one of the most important things we can foster is a sense of belonging. And that’s a recurring theme throughout your book. What are some of the teaching techniques or strategies that you have found helpful in building this sense of belonging that you talk about?

**(2:50) Kernahan:** Yeah, there's a few. I think in terms of, just a couple of broad ideas, one is that I try to focus a lot on affirming students in thinking about them as people. So asking them early on in the semester to comment on who they are as people so that I make sure that I know something about them. There's a lot of psychological research that shows that when you do that, when you allow an affirmation of a person, that then allows difficult things to be discussed without it being interpersonally threatening. So I detail that more specifically in the book. Like how to do that, particularly in the first part of class. But that's one way. Another really important thing, I think, is discussion. And especially structuring discussion. We know from the inclusive pedagogy work that structure is a super key part of a good discussion. There's a lot of research on that. One important thing discussion does is that it really normalizes peoples' reactions. So a lot of times when you talk about race and racism there's a lot that students, especially white students, don't know. And they're often surprised and a little embarrassed that there's so much that they don't know. But when you have good discussion what you find is that people realize that they are not the only ones who feel that way, who are experiencing that way. And we also know too, just on discussion, that, from the psychological literature, that just having interactions with other people is very motivating. So there's a lot of work that show that the more interactions that students have with each other, the better they feel, and the more motivated they are, and the better they perform. So those are a couple of things that I do.

**(4:29) Gannon:** And so in those discussions where you mention that some of our students, in particular white students, may be grappling with just how much they aren't aware of or haven't had the opportunity to learn or discern. I think that ties into my next question rather nicely. We often think of people as being either racist or not racist, like a binary. On social media we see people being called out for behavior, shamed for it even. But in a classroom this isn't necessarily the best teaching technique, right? And so how do you in a classroom setting, in these discussions that you are talking about, deal with that, those occasions where there is this obvious racist behavior or statements.

**(8:50) Kernahan:** Yeah, I think what's most important is try as hard as you can to assume good intent. Or not even good intent, but just like not to assume ill-intent, right? And so I've found that in a lot of my experiences with students, they just really don't know. And so part of what can be useful is to, first of all if you have that structured discussion you can see a lot of that stuff coming. So you can see those comments ahead of time before you actually get into any sort of discussion where people are talking in real-time together. So seeing that ahead of time is usually helpful. And being able to ask questions around it rather than calling it out, obviously, is a much I think stronger way to go. If you can do that, especially if you can do that ahead of time a little bit too, that can be useful. Another thing too is just normalizing mistakes and modeling your own failures. So I often talk about the ways in which I make stereotyped assumptions and how it's not a binary thing. You're not racist or not racist, but you are likely to learn and change and grow over time. So if you've been in education at all you know about the growth mindset idea. Trying to push that into class in as many spaces as possible and making it the expectation that people will learn over time, that they'll get better over time at understanding these things. And not really penalizing people for what they don't know. Right?

**(6:39) Gannon:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense and I think even more so in an online class environment like we've been wrestling with lately, right? That some of these really difficult topics, when we're all disembodied on a computer screen, you know in the Hollywood Squares lineup on a Zoom meeting for example. Careful as instructors to be mindful of student intent and the nature of communication in classes is even more important than it is in the face to face class.

**(7:10) Kernahan:** Definitely.

**(7:10) Gannon:** Those are really interesting thoughts.

**(7:12) Kernahan:** Yeah, yeah. And it ties in nicely to a lot of the main points of what you wrote about in Radical Hope. You talk about how, in the inclusive chapter, in the inclusive teaching chapter rather, you talk about how instructors often have one of two approaches. One is to sort of shut out the noise. Course content is what matters, the rest is meaningless. So, just sort of focusing on that. But the other response, and the one you champion a lot, is to acknowledge this increasingly difficult terrain for our students. Design our learning spaces with that in mind. Spaces where the course content is important, but the learners are more so. So some of the questions I had about what you wrote, the overarching theme of the book is this great line allies not adversaries. And I'm wondering if you could just say more about what that means to you and why that matters so much.

**(8:09) Gannon:** Yeah, I think that one of the traps that it's easiest to fall into in higher ed, and certainly in times where there's a lot of anxiety and stress like say our current moment, is that it's easy for all these things to sort of latch on to the target of convenience. You know, the people that we're with on the most regular basis. And that's our students. I think it becomes very easy to fall into this trap of telling stories about our students that fit an easy narrative, but an inaccurate one as well. And one that needlessly, or places students needlessly in opposition. So for example, you know when someone makes the Facebook post about oh you won't believe all the dumb things my students wrote on their essays. And it's like, you know, that may make you feel better but what is it saying to and about students, right? The deficit approach with which we often approach students, right? What can't they do. So we talk, you know, students can't read, they can't write, they can't do this, they haven't done that. Well why don't we talk about what they can do? And what the potential is for them to accomplish, right? Just, you know, some subtle shifts, reframing of the typical narrative that we hear all around us, is I think important. Students are our allies in this. They want the same things we do in higher education and to not take advantage of that and to not acknowledge that I think makes everybody's role in this needlessly difficult.

**(9:35) Kernahan:** Yeah, yeah definitely. To that end, I know that as a psychologist a lot of times it helps to change behavior which can then shift your mindset. So what concrete changes can instructors make that will help them to shift in their relationship and

orientation to students? What can help them be more trusting and more positive? Move toward that ally rather than adversary framework?

**(9:59) Gannon:** There's a lot of ways that one could go about doing this. I think, two things that immediately come to mind. The first is that we should be more intentionally reflective about our daily practice, right? You know a lot of us think kind of in broad terms about our teaching philosophy or our teaching approach, but not necessarily what we're doing on the day to day level. And so looking at, you know, how are we interacting with students? What are we saying to our students? [lost audio] But when they get written documents from us saying like a course syllabus for example, is it really saying to them the things we either hope or intend for it to say? Or is it telling them another story about what we think of them. So think about an excused absence policy for example, where the professor who prides themselves on being, you know, rigorous and holding educational standards high. And that professor asks a student, you know, in order to have the absence excused I need to see the program from the funeral for your dead relative. What is that saying to a student? We tell students, we don't trust you. A lot of our policies basically tell students that we believe that given any opportunity, you will try to game the system. I don't think that's true, and I certainly don't think is something that we should be telling our students. So I think the first thing we need to do is be much more reflective about the ways that we're talking with, in the broader sense of the term, our students. And the second concrete change that I would make or suggest is that we think a lot harder about our own educational journeys and try to come to our students with a place of empathy. You know maybe there are those of us who when through their collegiate experience and were academic stars and never really encountered any adversity. That wasn't my experience, to be sure. But if we think about, when I was in college, my own educational journey, either me or the people around me, when they struggled, why was that? How did they get help? Was it available to them? What were the consequences of it not being available? You know these are personal stories for us just as they are for our students, and I think we need to be more mindful of that kind of connection. It's easy to lose sight of, but I think the conscious effort to maintain that empathetic connection is really important.

**(12:23) Kernahan:** Yeah absolutely. It feels like a lot of this has been magnified too as the pandemic has upended higher education and there's been a lot of worry, I know this has been the case on my campus as well, about the possible loss of rigor. So the real concern over online cheating, the fights over whether or not to allow for pass/fail grading, what would you say to faculty who are very concerned about that loss of rigor?

**(12:47) Gannon:** I would, I would say we need to think hard about what we mean by rigor. Too often rigor becomes sort of weaponized against students. And it becomes sort of a hazing rather than a teaching and learning experience. I mean there is this sense that sometimes the answer to students not being successful at a certain task is to ask them to do that task again, but make it harder and have them do it twice as fast, right? There's no way for students to learn from the setbacks or the adversity. And in the times that we're in right now, there are no great options in emergency remote teaching. And our students didn't sign up for this, we didn't sign up [lost audio]... ourselves and our students

permission to be able to navigate that. We also know from the research that there's not as much, there's no real statistically significant difference in terms of the occurrence of cheating in online verses face to face learning. Now, some of those findings are pretty preliminary, but to me it suggests that it's not the medium of the class so much as it is the structure of the class. So if we're worried about cheating, I think the first thing that we need to do is ask ourselves, why would students be motivated to cheat on this? Is this an assessment with high stakes where the motivation is completely extrinsic rather than intrinsic? You know, all of the things Jim Lang writes about in his book Cheating Lessons. You know these designed [lost audio] actually push students into a place where they are making poor decisions about academic honesty. So thinking about how we are designing assessments and then asking ourselves, is this exam, or is this particular thing, the only way for me to get my students to demonstrate learning outcomes? Or are there other ways that we can do that? I think [lost audio] exams, alternative assessments, assignments where students are a little more collaborative, maybe you and your students collaborate on a rubric, for example. Maybe it's a research project, or a public facing website or something of that nature that demonstrates the outcomes for the course. I would suggest that we think creatively about our assessments, since we're in a mode of learning where for many of us, both faculty and students, is you know new and largely unfamiliar.

**(15:27) Kernahan:** Yeah absolutely.

**(15:34) Gannon:** So a couple of thoughts that both of us have had here about seeing our students as the complex people that they are, and approaching them with an empathetic and caring sense, especially in times that are fairly uncertain and anxiety-ridden for higher education. Again it's the relationship to students that's going to help with teaching and learning during these times. Course content is of course important, but all the content in the world doesn't mean much for us if the students don't feel like they are in a place where they can connect with that content, or with us, or one another.

**(16:07) Kernahan:** Yeah absolutely, and it will make us feel better too. Because this is hard on us, too.

**(16:13) Gannon:** Absolutely.

**(16:13) Kernahan:** So that relationship is a nice thing to have.

**(16:17) Gannon:** Well, thanks for joining us. And we hope that there's some questions or points in the conversation that were raised that will help you think about ways to create a community of belonging, strengthening relationship to students, and creating better teaching and learning spaces for everyone.

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