

Moving the Needle: The Power of Relational Pedagogy in Promoting Belonging and Equity in Higher Education

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***“Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen.” –
Brené Brown***

Agenda

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- ❖ Learning Objectives
- ❖ Framing the Challenge
- ❖ Individual Reflection
- ❖ Classroom Case Scenario and Discussion
- ❖ Strategies for Cultivating Vulnerability
- ❖ Closing

Learning Objectives

1. Describe how relational pedagogy supports equity and belonging in higher education.
2. Identify classroom practices that amplify diverse voices and student agency.
3. Apply human-centered teaching strategies to emotionally complex classroom moments.

Individual Reflection

Have you ever experienced a moment as an educator and/or student when you felt you didn't belong and could not say anything about it?

Classroom Scenario: Navigating Emotion and Conflict

During a class discussion on immigration policy, two students begin a heated exchange about government responsibility and social justice. The tone escalates, and several classmates appear visibly tense or silent. The instructor senses the room dividing but is unsure how to intervene.

Questions for reflection:

- What emotions might arise for you as the instructor in this situation?
- In what ways, if any, might you feel vulnerable?
- How might you keep the dialogue open while maintaining emotional safety?
- How can you ensure that students' experiences are recognized in the room?

Cultivating Vulnerability in the Classroom: Strategies and Insights

Education invites both instructors and students to engage with discomfort, emotion, and uncertainty.

Cultivating vulnerability means creating learning spaces where:

- Emotional responses are acknowledged rather than suppressed.
- Boundaries and safety are maintained while exploring real human experiences.
- Educators model authenticity and ethical transparency.
- Students learn that vulnerability can strengthen empathy, trust, and professional integrity.

When managed ethically and relationally, vulnerability becomes a tool for growth—not a threat to authority or competence.

Strategies for Cultivating Safe Vulnerability in the Classroom

- Name the moment: Acknowledge emotion when it arises ('I notice this feels heavy for some of us').
- Pause and breathe: Model regulation before responding.
- Normalize emotions: Reframe vulnerability as professional growth.
- Contain and redirect: Offer options ('Would you like a moment or to stay present?').
- Set boundaries: Keep learning goals central; avoid therapy-like processing.
- Reflect later: Debrief privately or in supervision.
- Cultural attunement: Recognize diverse expressions of vulnerability.

Which of these strategies feels most natural to you, and which feels most challenging?

Holding Vulnerability with Courage and Care

- Vulnerability is not weakness — it is a pathway to empathy, trust, and transformation.
- Our presence and attunement as educators model how students can interact with others
- Balancing openness with ethical boundaries protects both students and ourselves.
- When we honor our own humanity, we invite our students to do the same.

Thank You

We appreciate your presence and engagement.

Let's continue cultivating educational spaces where vulnerability becomes strength and connection.

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