

Ep. 080: Queer Allyship

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We often talk about respecting our diverse student population and creating a welcoming, inclusive learning environment. But sometimes, as instructors, our own fear of looking stupid or out-of-touch can cause us to stumble upon the path.

In this episode, Jim is joined by [David Giovagnoli](#), the Center's new Coordinator for Scholarly Teaching and Learning, to talk about two opportunities for faculty and staff to become versed in LGBTQ+ terminology and perspectives. In fact, they start with a frank discussion about how the very term "LGBTQ+" and its many variations can pose a challenge. They also talk about the best ways to invite students to share their pronouns without making them feel like they have to come out unwillingly. They then explore the new Safe Zone workshop developed by David, based in part on the national program but customized for university faculty and staff. And for those who wish a deeper dive into the topic, they preview the newly developed Queer Allyship learning community, which launches this fall.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

DAVID: And I'm David.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Integrated Professional Development here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee, joining me today is David Giovagnoli. He's our Coordinator for Scholarly Teaching and Learning one of the newer members of our staff. How ya doin, David?

DAVID: I'm good. How are you, Jim?

JIM: Good. I paused here, because I said newer members of our staff, but you were a graduate assistant with us for some time,

DAVID: January 2020. So I started here, right before we had to, I think, pivot a little bit or, um, for some global events,

JIM: Right, right. Yeah. Yes, indeed. And yeah, you were here for all that and did a lot of support online for faculty and for graduate assistants, and helped us with all of the scrambling that we did. That's grown into a full-time position here. And you have a couple of specialty areas that you're concentrating on right now. What are those?

DAVID: So basically, the two things that I focus on is handling instructional support for graduate instructors and their development through two certificate programs in our preparing future faculty program, and I also do work related to LGBTQ allyship. And so we have Safe Zone, which is a workshop focused on vocabulary and just sort of the basics of allyship. And we're also starting in the fall a Learning Community, which is Queer Allyship, which is for faculty, staff, grad students. And it's gonna be really, I think, a good experience to get a deeper dive. If you're not familiar with learning communities, that's what they're for, is to really spend time digging into topics.

JIM: So I think we're going to talk about your work with graduate students in another episode. We're focusing on the latter of those two topics that you talked about. And we'll get into a little bit more depth here about the specific opportunities that are being offered for faculty and staff on our campus this coming fall semester. And of course, we'll link to the registration for all that on our show page at Pro Dev dot Illinois state.edu. But we were talking a little bit before we were recording about why this is necessary. So I want to touch on that. But also you talked about Safe Zone and the terminology. So LGBTQ,

DAVID: Right? So that's actually one of the things we spend several moments on in Safe Zone, but the most common acronym that ISU uses is LGBTQ plus and so lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus, and so pluses and etc. Yeah. And so the version, the queer coalition uses, which is the affinity group is LGBTQIA2S plus. So Q starting at Q, queer, intersex, asexual, and then S is two-spirit, which is a term for basically a third gender that some Native American tribes have used historically, this is actually a term that only goes back to the 90s to describe several distinct but sort of thematically connected things we observe in and referring specifically to North American, Native, Native American cultures. And so the issue we talk about in Safe Zone is that adding more letters to the acronym does not necessarily make it more inclusive, because you have to continue to add letters. And so you get to sort of this conceptual point, it's like,

JIM: Right

DAVID: Who wants to be in that plus sign who wants to be the et cetera. And so that's why I prefer the term queer, which is an umbrella term that refers to both queer genders and sexualities. So gender and sex and sexuality are all distinct, but they're wrapped up together in this umbrella. And so that's why it's the queer advocacy learning community that queer itself is a term that's not always universally liked by everyone. And so it's a generational thing.

JIM: Sure

DAVID: It often comes down to when slurs came in and out of vogue, especially people who were older. Queer was used more often and it's used, it's reclaimed more especially by millennials and xennials as a preferred term. And so the fact that the terminology shifts so much and so often is one of the reasons we do workshops like this because

JIM: Right

DAVID: As I remember looking through the glossary that I found from the Safe Zone project and some of the terms I had never encountered before, even though I consider myself to be relatively in the know with things like that.

JIM: Sure

DAVID: So that's why you'll see lots of different combinations of the letters, even different permutations, they come in different orders.

JIM: Right?

DAVID: I affectionately call it the alphabet soup. But there are as many combinations as you can think of.

JIM: So for a lot of instructors who are approaching this for the first time, and we'll get into, again, why it's important that they do. But for instructors who are approaching it for first time, that that seems a little daunting, all of the terminology. I mean, this is a new literacy that you have to

DAVID: Right

JIM: Become familiar with.

DAVID: Yeah, I think that one of my anxieties, doing programming like this is to make sure that everyone in my audience is feeling included and comfortable, not always in the sense of, we're not going to challenge your preconceptions, your beliefs, like that kind of comfortable, but I want, I want everyone to feel like I see them, and I am trying to do my best to use the terms they feel represent them. And I think the advice that I've said in all of these workshops is that you can never go wrong if you call somebody the way they asked to be called versus making assumptions. Or even if you do trip up, and let's say use the wrong pronouns, or use a term that's outdated, being open to being corrected, but also not expecting the person to educate you. You go do your own learning, and not put the onus on the already potentially marginalized person to educate you. And I think that's

JIM: Yeah

DAVID: That's something we see across different diversity advocacy programs is trying to make it possible for participants to be self-actualized. And, you know, actively go out in search of education for themselves.

JIM: And from an instructor standpoint, I think it's just we've just hopefully gotten to the point at least, where it's, it's not okay to be ignorant of these things so long as you're ignoring all peoples equally,

DAVID: Right. There is that, that threshold that I've never been exposed to this concept before, and so I'm gonna start tripping up. But I think in 2022, if you're unaware of the pronoun debate, for instance,

JIM: Correct

DAVID: There's, there's a lot less room

JIM: Right

DAVID: To stay uninformed.

JIM: Right. And I know a lot of our colleagues now when they may survey students before the beginning of a class or something like, you know, they're asking them for their pronouns,

DAVID: Right

JIM: Or they're encouraging them to put them in their email signatures and stuff. So you can start

DAVID: Yes

JIM: You know

DAVID: I think that it's a matter of balancing between giving space for students to tell you what they feel comfortable telling you. I get questions about how to do the pronoun disclosure thing frequently. And I think one of the unsatisfying things about this is there's no there's no universal right answer all the time. It's really situationally dependent. For instance, if you go around in a circle, and ask everyone to say their pronouns, you could run into a situation where you're making somebody decide if they want to come out to a group of people. And so I often will do a survey which includes a question like, how should I refer to you as, or what is your what is your name, understanding that it might differ from ISU records, because I've actually seen several places that ISU specifically has gotten better about being able to change names on records,

JIM: Right

DAVID: But legally changing your name, in most states can be quite difficult. In some states, changing your name because of a gender transition is just it's not one of the options or changing your listed sex on your birth certificate is not an option. And so there are lots of situations where somebody even it's not a pronoun thing, it's just a name they'd rather use is not showing up on your records. I think though, that modeling the behavior is very important, like especially if you're the instructor, like just modeling like, when you're doing your normal like, I'd like you to call me Dr. so and so or professor so and so or just call me just call me David. Also disclosing pronouns at that time,

JIM: Okay

DAVID: Because it can be very difficult to as somebody who wants to be called something like if it's not if the if the floor is not open for that, like, do you do you raise your hand and sort of interrupt class and

JIM: Right

DAVID: And interject that? I found that at least with my undergrad students here at ISU, which I think student populations vary across the country across the world. But I've found that they are generally the ones who sort of do the policing in class. And so I've had, you know, students will correct each other. Before I have a chance to and it's often I've had to step in and, you know, okay, I think they get the message. Let's move on from the issue or, rather than, well, I guess what I'm saying is that the feeling I get from dealing with students lately is that they are, they are educated about these issues, often more than instructors and faculty are,

JIM: Oh, I don't doubt that. In fact, I think that that is one reason why instructors may feel a little uncomfortable talking about that it's not, it's not a challenge to their own identity, in terms of their orientation or something like that. It's a challenge to looking stupid, because they don't, because they're not literate in it. And we do that in all sorts of things. I think what you're describing to me is what we've often talked about, and you know, Dana Karakker, our colleague has been on often talking about building a community of learners, and having and we often talk about having not only a transformative learning environment, but also a welcoming one and inclusive one. I think a lot of what you're talking about, you know, yes, the students kind of act as the police, but they feel comfortable enough in the environment you've created to actually speak up,

DAVID: Right

JIM: I had a student once. This was many years ago now. And I might have talked about this in a previous episode, where I use a phrase like someone got the, you know, short end of the stick, or whatever idiom you want to use. I said, Yeah, I think they got gypped. And I had a student raise a hand, and said isn't that doesn't that mean, about like, Roma people? Or Gypsies? Isn't that and I and I stopped. And I said, I don't know, I have to think about that. Thank you.

DAVID: Right.

JIM: And the next class period I had done so and looked it up. And, I but because the environment was such, and again, I'm not trying to toot my own horn, this is just the way it kind of went, you know, he felt comfortable enough saying that. And then I was able to come back the next week and say, Hey, by the way, so and so you were thank you for pointing that out. Again, here's what I learned.

DAVID: Right? I think it takes a lot of intentional energy to be open and willing to take corrections, especially from students, we've got these, you know, performing our teacher persona and our identity, it just

JIM: Yeah

DAVID: The fact that the student felt comfortable speaking up is I think, you know, important. And I think some of the other things instructors run into, the thing that comes to mind is like the singular use of they, I've had several people tell me that this doesn't sound natural to me in English, but it actually, you know, if you go back to the history of the English language, it is a natural feature of English language, we use it all we use it all the time when we're speaking about somebody who we don't know the gender of

JIM: Right

DAVID: And so a little thing we can do in the classroom is when talking about generic, the generic person talking about they and them and that and that helps normalize it. But also, these sort of reflexive things like oh, I don't, I don't know if I understand that term. Or I don't know if I understand what this person like why they want to be called, whatever they want to be called and, if you just sort of take a step back and say, they'd

like to use this pronoun or this name, or they refer to them as themselves as a demisexual aromantic person, like you don't necessarily need to know specifically what that means, like what that combination of terms means. But understanding that, if that's what the person wishes to self-identify as. There's no There's no reason in the classroom for us to, to contradict them on that. I think, I think if you do want to know what a demisexual aromantic person is, that's somebody who doesn't experience sexual desire, except in very specific emotional circumstances, but then doesn't, doesn't have romantic attraction. And so like, if you wanted to get in the nuances of that you can take a program like Safe Zone

JIM: Right

DAVID: But also I think that, you know, I learn a lot from students and I learned to go look up terms when they've said it in class, like, especially like, slang terms.

JIM: Well, here's, yeah, I was gonna say, Here's the secret as you get older, you're gonna do that more.

DAVID: Yeah. I enjoy sometimes, like, students said something was dope. And I said that that's good, right? We want things to be dope. I knew what it meant. But it was it was entertaining.

JIM: The phrase I heard was, we were watching some YouTube videos in my media performance class and the phrase hotboxing came up.

DAVID: Yes

JIM: Yes. And, you know, it's a bit of a cliché that we learn as much from the students as they learn from us, but it's also true. So you've talked about Safe Zone as a program before, can you differentiate a little bit because that that has been a national thing. But you're adapting that here on our campus, right.

DAVID: And so Safe Zone is something that ISU has historically done. When I started here in 2014, I took it. And that was when it was through Student Affairs. And so the Safe Zone Project, you know, all capital, all capital initials, but that is a free resource. They call it an uncopyrighted curriculum. And so they have PowerPoints, they have lots of activities, and they have different workshop plans. And so the first time I did the workshop, it was it was basically their curriculum. And so I've substituted things in now I use a slightly different glossary. And they have something called the gender bread person, which is a metaphor for showing how sex and gender and sexuality connect, I've switched it for the flying gender unicorn, which is a more fun graphic, but also a more complete metaphor. And so we use some of that material. And that's for workshops that are usually two and a half to three hours. And it's sort of combination of, let's spend some time with this glossary and give you some space to ask those questions that you just you never quite got what that term meant. Or you're seeing a new time for the first time we do some different activities with the sheet with that sort of also modeling behavior you can do with students, like you can use different highlighter colors. So one means this seems important. And the other one means this I

don't understand. And so when there's overlap, then that's where you want to ask questions, for instance

JIM: It's a way of kind of visualizing

DAVID: Yeah

JIM: What the structure of what the discussion can or should

DAVID: Yellow plus blue equals green is the name of that activity.

JIM: Interesting. You know, this and this, it sounds like our approach then is very much more towards the instructor in a learning community. When I went through this, the previous version of Safe Zone, probably back in 2013, maybe a little bit before that. It was very much geared towards a student comes into your office and wants to come out. What do you do? It was it was really much more of an individual interaction. You still had to learn terminology. So this sounds much more functional in terms of being an instructor facilitating that that welcoming learning

DAVID: Yes, we actually did a version this summer that had an extra hour after lunch where with some time for syllabus, workshopping with Student Affairs to this it was open to students as well. And so since our focus here at the center is on faculty and staff within academic affairs that's really who it's geared for, we've actually had a university police officer come which I thought was great. We've had people from admissions and people from all of our staff from all across campus, take it. But we are actually thinking about what to call this program, because it doesn't fully use the Safe Zone Projects curriculum anymore. And in academic or in student affairs, they've stopped doing Safe Zone. And you can look up their Safe-ish Lecture Series at the Multicultural Center. But the short version is that no, two and a half hour training or 90 minute training can make somebody into an ally. And so they have chosen Safe-ish, to sort of acknowledge that that's a limitation. And so I appreciate that rhetorical point. And so we're just we're thinking about what to call this. And that's why the Learning Community is the queer allyship learning community. And so that's, that's the deeper dive experience.

JIM: So let's talk a little bit more about that as we ramp up, what will I get out of that deeper dive?

DAVID: Well, the deeper dive is meant to be thinking about our campus from a few different lenses. So the book we're using is written about higher education generally. And so it has, for instance, it has program level chapters, it has chapters about classroom behavior has chapters, for like curriculum. And so, so far, it's a pretty big group from a pretty diverse set of folks across campus. And we're going to likely divide up by what tactic do I want to take. And so if you're interested in thinking about what ISU itself or what the institution itself could do change wise, then you could focus on that. Or if you want to redesign your course, to include more queer inclusive terminology, you could do it that way or if you're more interested in classroom practices. And so that is, I think one of the situations where the content itself is important and interesting. But it's also something I'd recommend if you just want to make those connections across campus. No matter how much we enjoy spending time with our colleagues and our unit. We I'm

sure we've all heard the term siloing before like, it's nice to make those connections across campus and get out of those silos. And I think that's, that's a real strength of learning communities, especially when they're going to be interdisciplinary. Like I think all of all of our learning communities involve faculty from different units rather than there's none that are focused on one unit. And so the way that a STEM faculty member so science technology, engineering, math faculty member might approach queer inclusivity might be different than somebody who in humanities. And I think also that for full disclosure, I'm working on my PhD in English. And I've taught English. That's why I'm

JIM: Right

DAVID: I'm from the humanities. And so I think that in communities, we get a lot of burden to do the heavy lifting, with a lot of diversity things. And so I think the strength of the Learning Community is let's figure out what that looks like. In business. We have a few business faculty joining, or let's figure out what that looks like in chemistry or, or biology, which I think can be a little more difficult sometimes to integrate, but not a reason not to try.

JIM: Exactly, exactly. Well, David, thank you so much.

DAVID: Thank you for having me, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more about all of the programs that we're talking about today and about our pokey little podcast, go to our website, p r o d e v that's ProDev.IllinoisState.edu. For David Giovagnoli and for all my colleagues here at the center until we talk again, happy teaching