

## **Transcript for Season One, Episode Three: Social Justice in the Online Environment**

**Nana Osei-Kofi 00:007**

Welcome to Transforming the College Classroom. This is a podcast for anyone who is interested in taking up teaching and learning in higher education from a social justice informed perspective in ways that are centered on a deep commitment to teaching all students. My name is Nana Osei-Kofi. I'm Director of the Difference, Power, and Discrimination program at Oregon State University. And I'm also Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies.

**Kali Furman 00:34**

I'm Kali Furman, I'm a postdoctoral scholar with the Difference, Power, and Discrimination program.

**Bradley Boovy 00:39**

And I'm Bradley Boovy, associate professor in the School of Language, Culture, and Society at Oregon State. And co-facilitator with Nana of the DPD Summer Academy, where we work with faculty who are developing and teaching DPD courses.

We're recording this at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, located within the traditional homelands of the Mary's River or Amphinefu Band of Kalapuya. Following the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855 Kalapuya people were forcibly removed to reservations in Western Oregon. Today living descendants of these people are a part of the Confederated tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated tribes of the Siletz Indians.

**Kali Furman 01:17**

Welcome. Today Nana and I are here with our guest Jenny Myers, whose chapter, "Critical Pedagogies Online: Opportunities and Challenges in Social Justice Education," reflects on just that, the opportunities and challenges in teaching social justice online. So welcome, Jenny, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Jenny Myers 01:36**

Thank you so much for having me. Happy to see you all.

**Kali Furman 01:39**

Absolutely. Would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Jenny Myers 01:44**

Sure. So I am an instructor at Oregon State University and I've been teaching in the Sustainability program for a number of years, just recently transitioned to the Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation Sciences Department and am preparing for a move to Wells College.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 2:02**

Woo!!!

**Kali Furman 02:03**

Exciting!! Awesome!

**Nana Osei-Kofi 02:07**

Yes. I think we're just going to dive right in and start off with hearing a little bit about your chapter. So tell us, what is it about, what do you want us to know about it? What do you want our listeners to know as we start this conversation?

**Jenny Myers 02:22**

Excellent, thanks. My chapter takes a look at the various ways online education advocates are recommending that we build a sense of community in our online classrooms. And I think that's really foundational for conversations about social justice themes in particular like those that we teach in the Difference, Power and Discrimination Program at OSU. So in the chapter, I kind of explore my reservations about adapting to online education as a sustainability educator. I have strong commitments to experiential learning and particularly relationship building with my students and I was really concerned about how that would translate into an online environment. I talk about that and then I also share some of the strategies that I experimented with in a social sustainability class that I redesigned to address DPD learning outcomes for the program here.

**Kali Furman 03:19**

Wonderful. So kind of building on that awesome introduction to your chapter. It seems that one of the key things that stands out about thinking about online education is instructor presence. And so we have some ideas about how this plays out in a physical space, but our roles as educators are kind of different in an online space and how our presence is sort of taken up differently by students. And so could you talk a little bit about that in your own experiences and sort of thinking through how you handle that?

**Jenny Myers 03:47**

Sure. It's an important question. And I think the online environment really allows us to think differently about our roles as facilitators of student learning. And so we can kind of think critically about, rather than the purveyors of knowledge at the front of the classroom, a lot of that is deconstructed in an online environment, or the possibility I should say, the possibility to deconstruct that is there. I mean, for one thing we can think about the physicality and those indicators of power dynamics that show up in a physical classroom.

We're not standing at the podium in the center of the room and that alone sort of disrupts the visual clues that perpetuate power in a classroom. And so I think it creates a lot of opportunity for us to think intentionally about our roles and how that applies both to the course design, the content of the course, and the ways that we facilitate dynamics in an online classroom.

So in the chapter I advocate for curating content by scholars and people outside of the academy whose work's been excluded from academic knowledge production systems. I think that's a really valuable opportunity that we have in online classrooms. I mean, in any classroom really, but I think that that's without that sort of focus on you as the person in the center of the room explicating, you can focus on the content of the courses in a different way. And I also advocate for strategies that really facilitate community building in the online classroom. As I mentioned, I think that's such a fear of what's potentially lost in an online environment. And so thinking about the ways that we can be members of a community of online learners and sharing all the knowledge that's in the classroom is really valuable.

**Kali Furman 05:48**

Excellent.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 05:50**

Mm-hmm (affirmative) Yeah. I really like that. What's coming to mind, is this de centering of this sage on the stage.

**Jenny Myers 05:58**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 05:58**

And it allows for that in a really powerful way. So I appreciate that. I want to pick up on something you said when you were first speaking, which you talked a little bit about having some reservations around online education. And I think in your chapter, it's clear this reservation is tied to a tension in some ways that is often present, when we think about online education and social justice because – I don't know if it's fair to say that online education comes

out of neoliberalism – maybe that's something that you can speak to, but certainly it has been a driver. I think we can easily say that, that's what we've seen in higher education. It just speaks to that tension that you mentioned, that reservation. Could you just elaborate on that and give us maybe some tools or some ways to help us think about online education, neoliberalism and social justice?

**Jenny Myers 06:53**

Definitely. Thanks for that question. I think it's a really important one and it's kind of the heart of what I was grappling with both in constructing this chapter and as an educator moving into the online arena. My commitments to sustainability and social justice education, have allowed me to explore themes of the ways that... I guess the question really is, what's the purpose of education, right?

**Nana Osei-Kofi 07:15**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Jenny Myers 07:16**

And I've looked a lot at the role of the spread of sort of homogenizing Western models of education across the globe and the impacts that have both in terms of language and cultural erasure and traditional ecological knowledge and just the psychological impacts that it's having on communities around the globe. And so, there's so much conversation about online education as this equalizing force, right? It creates access and opens up opportunities for folks to access education in really important and valid ways.

But I just think we need to be mindful and critical about what types of education we're exporting, who's benefit from that and what are the costs, right? I think there's some really very real costs. So we can look at that in the United States alone. We've seen this so transparently during the pandemic when everybody shifted to online education and the digital divide became real in households across the country, right?

**Nana Osei-Kofi 8:18**

Yeah, so true.

**Jenny Meyers 8:19**

Right, an so, both in terms of how that plays out in the US, K-12 and higher education, and then what it looks like globally. I think it's really important to be thinking about the decisions we make in regards to how we choose to educate and participate in these systems.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 08:37**

Yeah. I'm just thinking about, as you said, mentioned the digital divide. I feel it was a term that was so present what, 20 years ago. But I don't hear it that often, I mean, I'm just curious, do you find that it's still being used in the literature or have we moved to framing these things differently? Just a question out of curiosity.

**Jenny Myers 09:00**

Yeah. I'm not steeped in the online education literature beyond sort of what I've grappled with in doing a little bit of research about how it coincides with online social justice pedagogy. And that was a one-time kind of dive into it. But, I do think that the conversations that are emerging because of the access during the pandemic is crucial. And I see it here all the time. I mean, the way students don't have access to the equipment they need, don't have access to Internet outages, that sort of thing.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 09:39**

Yeah, yeah. And I think something that is so... For those who are not aware of that, it seems like it's something so basic, they're probably not even thinking about that. What do you mean you don't have access to a computer, right?

**Jenny Myers 09:53**

We make a lot of assumptions in our classrooms and I think that's what I want to warn against. Right?

**Nana Osei-Kofi 10:00**

Yeah.

**Kali Furman 10:01**

Yeah. And thinking about some of those assumptions that we may or may not make about the students in our classes, right, and thinking about the online context, I'm wondering, what are some ways do you think that there are opportunities to think through how online education can meet the needs of different student populations? Are there sort of things to consider, things that are really important in paying attention and being mindful of those things, but also that offer opportunities?

**Jenny Myers 10:28**

Definitely. Yeah. I think that's what's fun about these conversations, is it's really complex. And it's just important to be thinking critically about the pluses and minuses that exist. So it's undeniable that the opportunity and access created, afforded by online education is real. And the data suggests that we're serving a really different population of students than we do in

brick and mortar classrooms. So for instance, at Oregon State University, the average age of our e-Campus students is 31 years old. And a lot of folks are working full time, raising children, serving in the military. And so they're bringing a lot more life experience into the classroom and they're juggling a lot more responsibilities.

And so I think that all of those things are really important to be mindful of as educators and thinking about how we can be more flexible in terms of acknowledging the full scope of people's lives. And that this is one aspect of what they're pursuing and what they have on their plates. And then just also acknowledging that life gets in the way.

Again, that's something that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, I think. As we've all had to adjust to changing circumstances. I also want to mention, particularly to the opportunities afforded for students who have disabilities in one way or another and a lot of students will be attracted to online learning for that reason, whether it's physical or emotional challenges that make physical classroom more difficult. I think that's something to really pay attention to and how we're designing our classes.

**Kali Furman 12:19**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 12:21**

Mm-hmm (affirmative) Yeah. So I want to come back to; you've hinted at what COVID 19 has done around this. And so I want to make sure that we talk about that. But before that, what I want to ask you is you've mentioned a number of things that I think are incredibly useful to thinking about how we do online social justice teaching. So if I were a faculty member instructor starting to do this work, I guess what I'm looking for is, do you have, if we had to narrow it to three things or through three or five, some key things that are critical to how we do this work, what would those things be?

**Jenny Myers 13:02**

Well, I have already mentioned a couple of the key points that I think are so important.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 13:09**

Absolutely.

**Jenny Myers 13:10**

But one is just the community building aspect and really helping to remove that barrier of anonymity because people can get lost in that. Right? And feel really disconnected from the institution, feel disconnected from their instructors and their peers. And that can have all kinds

of consequences, frankly. And I think, we are developing a relationship with what it means to have an online presence in ways that are often at odds with the aims of social justice education.

And so the more that we can show up as real people in a classroom space, I think the more that can facilitate that process. I'm stretching myself because I'm not someone that's very tech savvy and I'm really stretching myself to get comfortable with all of the technologies that are available to facilitate that, whether it's through audio recordings or video recordings or; there's lots of nifty ways to do lectures online these days. And so just really showing up both as the instructor, as a real person, that's really there with them and allowing for students to build those relationships online as well. So that I think is really key.

And then I also mentioned that just the flexibility, I really prioritize that and it's become so much more crucial in the time of COVID, but I've really found that students are sort of reaching out to faculty more and relying on us more. And there's just a lot more emotional labor involved in the work these days. And then just a really practical suggestion. I don't have a lot of experience facilitating these kinds of conversations in the classroom. And I can imagine that there's a dynamic at play there that allows you to course correct in the moment. Right?

**Nana Osei-Kofi 15:10**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Jenny Myers 15:11**

And transitioning that to online education is a really crucial piece to be mindful of. Just in terms of thinking about your time and how you're managing your time, because it's really important. You want to start out the course by establishing expectations for respect and doing your best to create a safe space for students to explore this topics. But despite best intentions, there's often resistant students and I've been surprised at how students have taken liberties with the sort of expectations of respect in the classroom.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 15:48**

Yeah. Interesting.

**Jenny Myers 15:49**

And the online environment. And I alluded to, I think that might be just because of the sort of expectations of anonymity and not necessarily having to be held accountable in the same ways as you would in a classroom environment. So I just think it's really crucial that you're in the discussion boards in any public facing space to ensure that you're responding to anything that comes up that's problematic in a timely manner.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 16:16**

Mm-hmm (affirmative) So as a follow up to that, you're making me think about when we teach sort of being synchronous or asynchronous and whether it informs how we do this work, or if it's different. As you were talking about students in a sort of brick and mortar and being able to course correct immediately just got me thinking about, so it's one thing if we're live doing a discussion online, then if they're elements that are asynchronous and are happening in sort of across time does that shift our ability to manage, I guess for lack of a better term, what happens in that space? I think there's a question somewhere in there. [laughter]

**Jenny Myers 17:07**

Well, I think there's advantages in that you can take a moment to pause and think, right? Which you can't necessarily do in the live moment in the classroom. And so you can take deep breath and step away for five minutes and have a drink of water and then compose your response. I think that's a real advantage that allows the interactions to be more thoughtful and thinking about both how you respond to the individual student and what their needs are, but the classroom as a whole, right. So, yeah, I do. I definitely see that as it's an advantage, but it just requires a lot more attention to the dynamics that are going on in those spaces.

**Kali Furman 17:56**

And I just wonder sort of thinking about all these aspects that you're talking about, right? The community building, also the relationships and the facilitation and checking in. How does class size impact navigating those things in the online environment?

**Jenny Myers 18:11**

That's the biggest factor. [laughter] Yeah. I have a lot to say about this. [laughter]. It's tricky, right? Because you want to prioritize that relationship building piece, like you said. And with this kind of course content, I think at least from my vantage point, I'm most comfortable assigning reflective reading assignments and writing assignments, I should say. So students can really take their time to digest material and share their lived experience and their perspectives on the material. That, I think if it's done well and you're creating a space where folks feel enough of a sense of trust to share and be vulnerable, students will share very difficult stuff in their writing. And to me, it's just really essential that I respond to that in a very personal way. And help them process help with their healing and their growth, right.

And there's such a large variety of lived experiences that are coming into these classes. So my responses are very varied across the spectrum. There's a lot of learning edges. And so that just takes a lot of time. And I know that at Oregon State University, we have a writing intensive program and there's a recommended course cap for that at 20 to 25 students. And I think it would be super valuable to have a similar standard for social justice courses. Because it's really an essential part of the relationship building, I think, to be able to provide that one-on-one feedback to students.

**Kali Furman 20:02**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 20:04**

Yeah. So with that, I want to come back to COVID 19 then. Because that obviously created a situation where we're all online, all of a sudden, and so probably presented some challenges around this course numbers and number of people in courses. What I'm curious about generally speaking, is what is it that we've learned about online education and social justice education online as a result of COVID 19? What has it taught us that we can take with us going forward?

**Jenny Myers 20:43**

Well, to begin with, I think it's really important that I acknowledge that I was able to transition fairly easily. Right? Because I had that experience working with Ecampus prior to the pandemic. So I know that a lot of faculty struggled a lot more than I did to make that transition. So you know, it's always an opportunity to reflect on the ways that things that you might not see as valuable tools, like really, you never know, [laughter] when they will come in handy in really novel ways, right? And so yeah, I do feel I was able to facilitate remote classes in a way that was rich and engaging and just kind of adapted a lot of the tools that I use in my online classes for the remote instruction. And I was able to focus on that relationship building piece.

I think that was so essential, particularly when we were locked down and we were in quarantine at the beginning and no one knew how long we would be socially isolated and students were really missing that part of their college experience. I was able to experiment with some strategies to have students in small group discussions that were live on Zoom, not as part of our synchronous classroom time, but outside of that space. I asked them some questions and gave them a space to meet and just talk. Some of the groups, it was wonderful, they really rolled with it.

And I think it created this opportunity that was really missing in a lot of our online education during the pandemic. It's funny because I would be watching them just to make sure that they answered the questions, but it felt a little weird to be snooping in on people's conversations, [laughter] but it was great. I had a 20 minutes sort of suggested timeframe and often they would go for an hour and it was just great to see them having some authentic conversations and building relationships when we're stuck at home.

I don't know how to translate that to asynchronous classes because, I want to be mindful of the fact that we have people in all time zones and we have people with, like I said, so many other responsibilities, so I've thought about it offering it as extra credit. But even that just doesn't seem like it's equitable enough. So yeah, that's one of the things that I think was a good lesson learned from that experience, but how to keep it going. I'm not quite sure.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 23:37**

Yeah. Well, what I'm hearing in this response and just throughout at the risk of stating the obvious is I feel so much of this reinforces the idea that education is about so much more than just knowledge transfer.

**Jenny Myers 23:54**

Oh, for sure.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 23:55**

I mean, there's so many, for just qualitative human pieces that you're talking about and the importance of them as part of learning. I really appreciate that.

**Jenny Myers 24:07**

Thank you.

**Kali Furman 24:08**

Yeah, absolutely. I'm wondering, sort of thinking about what you want folks to take from your chapter and to take from thinking about sort of doing social justice learning in an online environment. If you were giving a talk or advice as a consultant to institutions of higher ed and were asked to sort of think about the future of online education and how to optimally sort of do that work going forward. What are some suggestions that you have for folks?

**Jenny Myers 24:34**

That's a big question. [laughter]

**Kali Furman 24:37**

Just the little things that we're dealing with in our conversation today.

**Jenny Myers 24:41**

Yeah. I think the take home message is that I want folks to be mindful and be intentional in how you approach this and to not take it as sort of an unquestioned good. And so that's really how I'm approaching the work and trying to balance my concerns, right. And it's been really interesting to see the return to campus after the pandemic, not that we're post pandemic, but that a lot of institutions have resumed in-person courses. And I think there was so much conversation at the beginning of the pandemic that this was going to be our new reality. We would all be online for so much more and we've seen a real quick turnaround from that I think,

and that students have really expressed their desires for that in-person element and how important, sort of what you were speaking to Nana, all the stuff that happens beyond the classroom, right, on college campuses. But that said, I don't think online education is going away anytime soon. Right. And so I think it's, we're in a moment where we can really evaluate what were the benefits of this experience? You know, thinking about access, thinking about health and safety issues, that doesn't go away when we've kind of reached the other end of the pandemic, especially for students that are grappling with disabilities on campuses.

I think it just really being thoughtful and mindful about, how can we build experiential education opportunities into online learning? How can we get students out and engaged in their communities where they are, while still feeling a part of a campus community from afar, to really help them get engaged and get that sort of hands on learning opportunities. And yeah, I think any way that you can, as a faculty member really show up so students know that you care and know that you're a resource, know that you're available to write recommended letters, providing that bridge to the institution on the individual, one on one level I think is really key. Yeah.

**Kali Furman 27:09**

So many good takeaways for folks. It's wonderful, thank you Jenny

**Jenny Myers 27:12**

Thank you guys.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 27:14**

Yeah. And you talked about, you said something about not taking things for granted or not taking online education as a public good, I guess for granted. I know that you are involved with some current research that in a way is doing exactly that. And it's a research project where you're looking at faculty identified barriers to inclusive online pedagogy. Would you just say a little bit about that? It seems it's fitting for this conversation.

**Jenny Myers 27:43**

Sure. Thanks. It was an outgrowth of investing in this chapter and doing some initial research about online pedagogy. And I came across a statistic from some research that was coming out of Stanford that suggested that faculty members are 94% more likely to respond in discussion boards, you know posts, to posts by white male students. And I was kind of blown away by that, and just the ways that implicit bias shows up even when there's this perception of anonymity or there might not be a lot of identity markers present in the classroom space beyond a name. Right. And so I started having conversations with folks at Oregon State's Ecampus program about the need for training for faculty to really raise awareness about the ways our biases are

showing up in our classrooms in the online environment as well, and was able to connect with folks who were already engaged in that work.

So, yeah. I've been working with a team at Ecampus that's hosting a training for faculty members about inclusive online education facilitation. And I've been doing some in-depth narrative interviews with DPD faculty about their facilitation processes and what their takeaways from the training and what they perceive as the barriers to doing it well. And so it's been really rewarding to have these conversations and to see the diversity and experiences that folks are talking about. I think class size has been a major thing that lots of us also brought up. [laughter] Right. But our campus is so, decentralized I guess is the way to say it. And so it looks really different in all the departments from folks that we've talked about. It's going to be a fun process to unpack.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 29:45**

Great.

**Kali Furman 29:47**

Yeah. Excellent. Well, is there anything that we haven't had the chance to sort of talk about or touch on that you wanted to share in thinking about doing social justice education online?

**Jenny Myers 29:59**

There is actually, I wanted to; in talking about this idea of instructor presence and humanizing the classroom, I think it's really important that we also recognize that there are risks in that. And that's really, the recommendations that are coming out in terms of how to engage students are often around ideas of posting casual videos and really showing up as a real person in your classroom. We've seen decades of research on how student bias impacts instructor evaluations, right? And so just as it is in a regular classroom, I think there are risks inherent and there is privilege and who can implement these strategies, right. And so being mindful of that as well, I think is really key.

**Kali Furman 30:48**

That's such an important point in thinking about instructor identity as well. Right? So it's not just about student identity in the classroom. It's also about instructor identity and how those things are in relationship to each other and sort of implicit biases on both sides and those relationships.

**Jenny Myers 31:04**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Kali Furman 31:05**

Yeah.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 31:06**

Yeah. Thank you. This has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you Jenny, for being here with us.

**Jenny Meyers 31:11**

Of course

**Kali Furman 31:12**

Next episode, we will be joined by Dr. Natchee Barnd, who will be talking with us about his chapter titled, "Scripting Change: The Social Justice tour of Corvallis."

**Bradley Boovy 31:21**

We'd like to thank Orange Media Network and their podcast director, Jen Dirstine.

**Kali Furman 31:25**

This podcast is sponsored by the Difference Power and Discrimination program. More information on the DPD program, our book and the transcripts for this podcast are available at <https://dpd.oregonstate.edu>.

**Nana Osei-Kofi 31:38**

Listen to us on any of your preferred podcast platforms. Continuous learning and growth is critical to educators with deep commitments to fostering critical consciousness through their teaching. Join the conversation.