



Live with Tanya Boucicaut: Giving Grace to Yourself and Students While Creating a Safe Space

SPEAKERS

Tierney King, Tanya Boucicaut

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, and I'm your host Tierney King. I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your every day teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by The Wellbeing Elixir, Magna's brand-new wellness course for educators, where experts will help guide you through wellbeing and resilience. Today, we're going to be talking to Tanya Boucicaut, who's a writer and assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her areas of interest are writing and community studies, hip hop, and the black church. And you're also interested in the topic of mindfulness and wellness, which you bring into all these other passions and hobbies. And we're gonna hone in on that today. So kind of take us through how you became interested in you know, this topic of mindfulness and wellbeing and mental health.

Tanya Boucicaut 00:53

Sure, absolutely. First of all, thank you so much for this opportunity. As I was saying before we started recording, I could talk about this all day, every day. It is definitely a major part of my life. So I would say I actually got started probably pretty young as a child doing journaling. I wanted to be a writer as a child, and I was very vocal with my feelings. I'm a millennial, and some people describe millennials as the feelings generation. And so we are the generation where parents would ask, "How are you feeling? How do you feel? What do you think?" I'm definitely a part of that generation. And so for me, the concept of mental health and wellness was something that was a part of my life, if I had a bad day, I was able to share as well as journaling and really getting lost in creating stories. And so as I got older, I would say, I really entered more meditation mindfulness. As an undergrad student, I went to a small liberal arts university in Williamsburg, Virginia, the College of William and Mary, and it was pretty tough. It is a pretty tough university for many people. And there, I actually developed anxiety. And so because of my anxiety, one of my roommates at the time, shout out to Roberta, she actually suggested that we start going to yoga. And so as an undergrad student, I started going to our local fitness center to do yoga. That is also where I began to think about the concept of mindfulness. I do want to say too, just backing up a little bit, I also, the black church is one of my areas of interest. And so growing up in the church, we did a lot of - I didn't have the language for it back then - but a lot of contemplative prayer. So a lot of moments of meditation and silence and listening to music. And so that was a part of my experience, even as a child. But again, going back to undergrad, being able to do yoga and being able to move my body, being able to set aside any concerns I had about school was life changing. So also, when I was an undergrad student, I began to go to therapy or counseling services. And that really

helped me to manage my anxiety, to begin to get the techniques that would be helpful so that I could complete my classwork. And as a professor, I share this with my students to remove the stigma so that we are able to have these very open dialogues about what does it mean to go to counseling and how there's no shame. Of course, we don't do therapy. That is a huge disclaimer in my class, this is not group therapy, but really thinking about and sharing different methods that help with mental health, which I will share a little bit later. I will also say that currently, because I again, I'm around a village of people who care about wellness, one of my colleagues and great friends in my department, she introduced me to the concept of thinking about yoga teacher training, and I'm actually currently in a program right now. That's virtual, in Richmond, that is helping me think about yoga teacher training, of course, but also what are the ways that I can bring that into the classroom, which I'm very excited to be able to do so.

Tierney King 04:23

And I talked about this in one of our past episodes, you know, this idea that yoga is for everyone and kind of take me through you know, your thoughts of that because I said it last time too is that it's it's intimidating, you know, so for everyone to even just get started. So take me kind of through through that journey of of yoga for you.

Tanya Boucicaut 04:42

Absolutely. First of all, I will say I'm not flexible. I'm not flexible at all, but the beauty about yoga is it is a practice. And so it is a practice of loving your body the way it is and how it is and being able to accept that perhaps you can't wait move in a certain way as other people, but yoga is very much an individual journey for each person. And so it begins to help you to connect your body to really be embodied. Because a lot of times what happens with those of us who have had or have anxiety is that we disassociate and so we're out of our body. And so yoga is a great way to ground ourselves in the moment in the space to be able to really, I would say, it gives you clarity. And it's also fun. It's also fun trying to try new things, and to see how is my downward dog, or how's my sun salutation. Especially pre-COVID, when the classes could be a lot larger, there are always other people who don't know the poses either. And so you all can chuckle at each other, but also celebrate each other as you're able to, I won't say master, but as you're able to move through the different movements,

Tierney King 06:01

And you kind of talked about, you know, how you're getting this training, and you're excited to kind of integrate little pieces of this into the classroom. So explain what you do to integrate different wellness techniques into your own class for your students.

Tanya Boucicaut 06:17

Absolutely. So my students already know, particularly pre-COVID, and I say that a lot, because right now, I'm teaching asynchronous online. But I'm actually planning to go back into the classroom face-to-face soon. But I will say that mindfulness and wellness is talked about from the first day from the beginning. We talk about mindfulness, and a way that I introduce that to my students is through short YouTube videos. One video that I love is called Why Mindfulness is a Superpower in animation. And it's on the YouTube channel Happify. And what's great about that, is, it's an animation a cartoon. And it gives you a very broad sort of overview of the benefits of mindfulness, so that students will already

know number one, we're doing this in the class, you can participate or not. But also, it gives students a chance to see this as a benefit from the beginning. And so we do that in the very beginning. And then I slowly introduce mindfulness prompts. So we'll do things that are two to three minutes at first. And I always do mindfulness with students, and even the way that I position myself in the classroom. So if we're all there in the classroom, generally the lights are down, I always tell them to get comfortable, take your jackets off, all of that. And I always face them on the side, not head on, so that they're able to see me as I'm deep breathing, and going through that as well. Because I let them know, it's just as important to me as it is to you. So that I can be fully present and so that you can be fully present. So we do that. And then we transition to longer prompts where we will do up to five, sometimes if they're really into it we'll do 10 minutes, which is really exciting. And we do different things. We do deep breathing exercises, we may do body scans, which talks about like pay attention to your breath, pay attention to your feet, pay attention to different parts of your body. We also may do some mindfulness prompts that have us in different sceneries, which students really love. And that has worked really well. And I will say that when I first started, and I'm going to talk about that a little bit later, I actually started mindfulness the first day I started teaching full time. So my entire career, as an assistant professor has always wedded mindfulness from the very beginning. And I'm very appreciative that students were open to it. I've never really had a lot of students who didn't participate. And even if they did, I couldn't tell because my eyes were closed as well. But I will say the greatest benefit of starting mindfulness together was it helped us build community to be able to breathe together, to be able to really be conscious of being fully present. That helps a lot. And I will say another technique that I found very exciting. And it was actually a fluke, because one day we didn't have time for a full mindfulness prompt, we had a lot to do. And so I said, okay, well, I'll just lead the exercise and where I counted to five and there were other little things kind of peppered into it like, you know, saying things such as we're present in this moment, we're leaving whatever's going on outside the classroom outside the classroom, we're going to be here to be in community and to learn together. And that worked really well. As a matter of fact, I had a student maybe two years ago, when we were leaving class one day, he shared that he gave this information to his roommate. He said, Professor B, one of my roommates is having a hard time sleeping, and I just shared the mindfulness prompts that we use. And that made me feel so great that students were sharing the mindfulness movement, if you will, to their friends, as well as using it for themselves.

Tierney King 10:25

You know, that's so cool is that even just these five to 10 minutes, you know, it doesn't have to take over your entire class, it just little things that you pepper in, and then they take that back to what they use in their daily life. And a lot of college students don't know these techniques. So it's what you introduce in your class that they're taking back and that they could use for the rest of their lives. And that's pretty awesome. And then what else do you think, you know, students can gain from these techniques, just from all instructors peppering in these little techniques,

Tanya Boucicaut 10:56

I'll say this, the benefit for doing that, once I became conscious, was I was able to then transition to my own voice during the toughest times of the semester. And so we're thinking about midterm times, and we're thinking about, because I'm very interested in what my students have going on, so we would know, oh, my gosh, everyone has a big bio test or big psych tests. And so being conscious of that, to do that, in that moment, to be able to support them, they gain number one, a sense of security in the

classroom, a sense of trust, they also gain a sense of confidence, because so often, students are moving so fast, they have something to do every, you know, everything is due all at once, or it feels like that. And so mindfulness gives students a chance to just breathe in this moment, to be human in this moment, to take care of themselves in this moment. And the thing that I found with students too, is some things come up. Like sometimes students have cried in the space, sometimes just out of pure frustration. Students have just shared some things. We've also done mindfulness, like with journaling, after mindfulness, we do that as part of a teacher writing class. And we teach other things, but we do a lot of writing in the class. And that's a great way for ideas to come about, as our minds are at ease. I will also say that mindfulness helps students give themselves grace, to say, I can't do it all right now, and so I can only do what I can do what's in front of me right now with my capacity. And so those are some amazing things. The other benefit, even outside of the classroom, when we're thinking about wellness, mental health, and well being we also think about other people. And so one assignment that I thought about maybe like two years ago, it was called the empathy experiment. And this is where, because I was noticing in class discussion, that sometimes students would talk over each other. And I was like, Okay, we can't really do this, let's figure out how to do that in such a constructive way. And so the project was, I ask students to think about the impact of the pandemic on someone outside of themselves. And it could be their professor, it could be a custodian, it could be someone that's in food service, and I was very particular about those different roles. It could be a family member, but to really put themselves in someone else's shoes. And realize when we're thinking about wellness, yes, it is so important to think about ourselves, it is so important to be embodied in our experiences, but also realize that we don't live in this world by ourselves, and that other people are also going through things as well. And so the same grace that you extend for yourself, you also want to do that for other people. And so that went pretty well. I had a few students respond to that. Another thing that we did probably about, yeah, before the pandemic about three years ago, I called it the Post-it project. And the last day of class, we all wrote really encouraging messages on Post-it notes. And the prompt was, "Think about what you would want to hear in this moment." "Think about how everyone is stressed. And so all the students got a Post-it note, wrote it and I said, put it wherever you think someone needs it. It was the last day of class. They didn't get credit for it. They didn't know where it was, but to then hear later, where they put it on, you know, their roommates door, or they put it in the bathroom of their shared suite with their roommates. That was just so powerful. Because at that point, and in therapy, we use this word called resourced and at that point students were resourced to then be able to have the capacity to then pass on kind words to other people. And that was just, oh, I can't wait to get back in the classroom to do that, because that is so fun.

Tierney King 15:11

That's so, you know, humbling. And it's, I feel like that's just something that everyone can use right now, especially during the pandemic. And everyone just needs you know, is you just like, look up, and you're walking down the hall and you see a few words of encouragement. And that's just what you need during that time sometimes. So that's a really awesome project. And then you're also, or you were also, part of a pilot program at VCU called COBE. And so that promotes wellness through meditation and other techniques, and so kind of take us through what that program entailed, and then how it kind of impacted yourself and instructors and your campus as a whole.

Tanya Boucicaut 15:48

Absolutely. So COBE is an acronym for College Behavioral and Emotional Health Institute. And I found out about this very early on when I became an assistant professor, there was a call for a pilot program for mindfulness for my department. And something in me just said this is you, this is a part of who you are, and your students deserve this. And so it was so great to be a part of that pilot program and how it ran. And it was for, I believe, a semester, but it could have been a year. And we received training about mindfulness. And so we, as faculty, received PowerPoint information, but also resources for ourselves, the benefit of mindfulness, we also learned about the scientific benefits just in case students may be interested in that. And a lot of the scholarship that supported mindfulness. I mean, I can't recall it by name right now, but at the time, we were well versed in that, because part of what we were thinking about or even anticipating, was, what happens if you get push back? And so being able to present this as a benefit to students really helped. And so we had the training sessions, but then we also had feedback sessions with our facilitators, but also colleagues. We were able to talk about how are students receiving this mindfulness experience. And it was great too, because I was able to connect with colleagues who had been at the university longer, who were already doing mindfulness. And we were able to also share different prompts and techniques that we were able to give out to our students. And that experience with COBE was so powerful for me as an educator, because this was the first time I'd seen in higher ed, to my knowledge, where wellbeing was put at the forefront for students as well as faculty. That's one thing I really appreciated and lean into even now in the pandemic. Yes, she wants to be rigorous. Yes, we have this curriculum that we want to complete. But how do we balance that with so much going on for students, so that they're able to have some reprieve in these moments? And so COBE really helped us do that. The other thing I do want to add, going back to the previous question on what I do now, asynchronous, is every week I send out mindfulness prompts to students. And so at first I had a student, they asked me, they said, Professor B, what does mindfulness have to do with what we're learning, I thought this was a writing class. And having this great conversation with the student to talk about the importance of your wellbeing, even if we never meet together, that doesn't mean I don't care about your wellbeing as a human being even in this asynchronous environment. But I'll say I credit COBE to that. I thought to do it, but I was introduced to it from COBE. And so I'm grateful for that experience.

Tierney King 19:02

And I think that's really great is, you know, sometimes it's a little hard to start implementing it in your class. And so just to have something that kind of pushes and motivates you to try this. And, you know, if it doesn't work out, you don't have to keep doing it. But to be able to experience it and be like, yeah, this worked out - wonderful. I learned so much, and my students learned so much, is a really cool, you know, concept and program that a lot of campuses could probably benefit from. And then lastly, this is really exciting because you started an educational YouTube channel that actually launches this month. You know, take us through the concepts that you'll cover in this YouTube channel and why you decided it was important to start it

Tanya Boucicaut 19:45

Thank you so much for this is the first time publicly I am sharing this outside of the people that I know. So for me, I still credit my students. I wasn't even into YouTube until I started teaching in higher ed. Before I was an assistant professor, I was a graduate teaching assistant in my department. And so when I would ask students about their hobbies, they would tell me about YouTube. And I'm just like, I

mean YouTube's for videos like music videos. And then students introduced me to Vlogs. And changed my whole world. And so the channel really came out of teaching online. So when you teach online, you often create many videos for students to get to know you, to explain work, and sometimes to give them pep talks. And what I realized was, sometimes students don't look at the videos. But also I realized, other students could benefit from tips. Other students can benefit from these, if you will, fireside chats. And so that's where the channel was birthed. It's called the Booce Teaches YouTube channel, and Booce is a play on my last name, Boucicaut - that's my nickname that a lot of my friends call me. So the channel is like a three component channel. So there's a focus for students, where I share all the tips, tricks, and advice I've learned. And this is nothing new that I haven't shared with students face-to-face. But I realized that online students could benefit from it, even if they don't necessarily see the video in that moment, because it will now live on YouTube, it won't just live on our course platform, they will be able to have that. And I talk about different things from how to navigate your courses, to how to make friends. That was one of the number one things that I find that a lot of students struggle with right now in the pandemic. And even before that, is how do you make friends? Where's the space to be able to talk about that? So I talk about those things. I also talk about just navigating your course, in terms of when to ask for help, what resources are important. So that's very exciting. And then I have the educators piece where I share all the things well, most of the things that I do in the classroom. And so thinking about where I've done screenshots of how I create different lessons. I'm very much into technology, and all of all the bells and whistles of apps. If there's a new app, I like to try it. And students know, like, hey, we're trying this, so if it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but we're gonna try it. And so sharing that with educators and also thinking about work-life balance, talking about mental health, sharing things that worked and things that didn't work. So being very transparent. In the last part of the YouTube series, which it's been about over a year, getting it ready, just because I feel like students and fellow educators deserve the best. And I didn't know how to do any of this before. So I've been taking film classes and podcast classes and like all these things, so that it could be right, not perfect, but right in my eyes. And for the last year, I've actually had the opportunity to interview over 20 of my mentors. And we talk about their journey as students in life. And what does mentorship mean, and I will say, out of everything that I've done for the YouTube channel, the podcast is what I am most proud of. My mentors are people who are presidents of colleges who have these big amazing jobs, who not only took the time to be able to have conversations for my students, and that was the impetus, this initial conversation, these are for my students. But just the way that they encourage students, it's just so beautiful. And I'm so excited to share. And I was particular about February because identity matters. And so I wanted to launch it during Black History month in February. But I also wanted it to be a space for students at whatever leg of the journey they're in, because some students will watch this channel who maybe are in high school, or maybe have fallen away from college. And so it's just that space to say, you're welcome here. So I have a trailer out and it's very much fireside chat, where I'm leaning in just inviting students into this very safe space or safe enough space to be able to think about what does it mean to be a learner in this time.

Tierney King 24:24

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