

## **An interview with Gerald Cupchik: Equity, diversity and inclusion**

Gerald C. Cupchik and Michael F. Shaughnessy

### **Abstract**

*How should we address equity, diversity, and inclusion issues in the 'Post-COVID era'? Some students just want the degree, whereas others miss the social intimacy of classroom experiences. In this interview, we address a dissociation between university administrations with top-down, ideologically driven agendas, and the lived experiences of students. Students become immersed in diversity by participating in classes based on shared interests that cut across backgrounds and reflect experiential learning; moving from 'cliques to networks.' Inclusion cannot be mandated by the university and formally required of lecturers. Rather, it reflects a student's feeling of belonging based on acceptance by others in the classroom setting and this is something that lecturers can foster. Equity is a more delicate theme tied to past exclusions that touch many communities. Gatekeepers have historically excluded students based on race or cultural affiliation. Attempts to redress this imbalance for specific communities can forget the historical exclusion of others. My approach favors 'inclusive authenticity,' whereby students are in touch with their heritage, and 'reflective awareness,' a sensitivity to the political dynamics that surround them. We can move from 'surface to depth,' both as institutions and individuals by fostering critical thinking and listening to the voices of students.*

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**Michael:** When a student enters a college or university, what are their typical expectations about their university experiences?

**Gerald:** We can ask whether you are going to school to share an experience with other students and, therefore, to learn and grow, or are you going to university to gain skills to permit you to get a job—or perhaps that is what your parents wanted and you are fulfilling their wishes?

**Michael:** From a big picture or an administrative point of view, we know there are mission statements or a mission statement. Are these really followed and disseminated to the faculty?

**Gerald:** That is a very big issue because administrations at universities are getting more and more top-heavy. At the University of Toronto, Scarborough, we have a Strategic Plan committed to ‘inspiring inclusive excellence.’ This is supported by layers of bureaucracy: Assistant Deans, Associate Deans, Dean of Diversity and various other administrative positions. When it comes to issues like EDI—equity, diversity and inclusion—the concern comes top-down from administration to the professors and then to the students. In essence, the administration comes in with what might be called, a certain kind of ‘principled’ or ‘ideological’ position. In fact, the research boards in Canada want statements about EDI in research grant applications.

The administration has instructed professors to include EDI statements in their syllabi at the beginning of each term and professors will be evaluated on their implementation of this in their annual evaluations that impact salary increases. It is one thing for me to be a professor at the University of Toronto for 50 years. However, think of someone who is just arriving at a new job and told to do this. They do not even know what it [EDI] means. What does it mean when the administration instructs that you *have to* do this and where are they coming from? This seems to have a performative quality. How much attention is given to students’ actual experiences related to these issues? I turned to my undergraduate student research team and asked them to talk to fellow students about what EDI means to them. In a preliminary investigation, for the most part, students do not know and do not appear to care. In the post-pandemic period, these students at my campus are now going back to face-to-face classes since January and February, 2022, and they are just trying to survive. So, these kinds of concerns with big words don’t necessarily mean a lot to them.

**Michael:** Okay let us start with freshman year. What kind of experiences are the upper-class, the middle, and the lower-class students exposed to that really fosters equity, diversity, and inclusion?

**Gerald:** I will answer this in two parts. Let me read to you the definitions that the university has so we have some building blocks to work with. *Equity* is defined at the University of Toronto as the process of treating all people fairly, and ensuring that policies, procedures, and decisions do not disadvantage some groups or individuals based on their identities or lived experiences. A commitment to equity

acknowledges that disparities and opportunities are rooted in historical and contemporary injustice and systemic barriers. Redressing matters of equity can be understood as a kind of ‘affirmative action’ that we saw in the 1960s, particularly as it pertains to hiring practices. *Diversity* is the democratic demographic mix of the community and involves a wide range of expressions and experiences, including different gender identities, ethnic or racial identities, sexual orientations, abilities and other factors. *Inclusion* is the creation of an environment where everyone is treated equitably and feels welcome and respected. Inclusion means actively fostering the conditions in which everyone can access opportunities, fully participate and maximize their creativity and contributions. An inclusive university works to remove systemic barriers while respecting values and celebrating differences.

We have a commitment by universities in Canada to redress the marginalization of Indigenous communities. This is very important, given the history of residential schools, the goals of which were to ‘civilize’ native community children. The shocking history of abuse and death has awakened the nation.

**Michael:** When a student may choose a major or minor, they are affiliating with other students who have similar interests. How does this impact their worldview toward equity, diversity, and inclusion?

**Gerald:** This relates to the theme of diversity. We can speak of a shift from ‘cliques to networks.’ When students come to university knowing kids from their high school or community, they tend to associate with people from the same background. In essence, this can be seen as a kind of insular safe space. One can use the term *cliques* to describe the tendency to socialize in these narrowly defined groups. But when students select courses in different areas of study, diversity is foisted upon them, so to speak, because their new classmates may come from different backgrounds. The opportunity is then presented to build friendships and ‘networks’ based on shared interests rather than common background. The shift from ‘cliques’ to ‘networks’ characterizes personal and professional growth over the four years of college or university and reflects the impact of experiential learning. Diversity is something that students come to acknowledge or appreciate, as they progress through school. This reminds me of the Bennington College study conducted by Theodor Newcomb (1943), which examined changing attitudes of women students who came from conservative well-to-do families as they passed through four years at a liberal arts college from 1935-39. Their attitudes shifted from ‘social adjustment’ to ‘authentic value expression’ as they progressed through their

educational experiences. They became, in a certain sense, more diverse in their viewpoints. I am arguing that, over time, students can participate in networks based on shared interests that cut across backgrounds and this reflects the impact of experiential learning. No one is forcing diversity on students. Rather, they become immersed in diversity because it is happening all around them.

Another challenge that we are facing has to do with the theme of *inclusion*. As I mentioned at the outset, inclusion involves the creation of an environment where everyone feels welcomed. The university acts as if it is the responsibility of the instructor to intentionally create a receptive atmosphere. This is too narrow an interpretation. Inclusion has to do with a feeling of presence in a setting and both lecturers as well as students have a role to play. Consider an online synchronous class, for example. According to university policy, we cannot instruct students to turn on their cameras. If no one turns on a camera, how are we to know whether the lecture is being successfully communicated? The feeling of inclusion is a two-way street.

There are many issues that come under the *inclusion* topic. We need to address the topic of gatekeepers who have power over inclusion. Ideally, the gatekeeper maintains standards to let people into professions who have met appropriate standards. However, gatekeepers can also keep people out because of extraneous qualities, such as race, religion, or culture, that have nothing to do with the task at hand. This is why equity and inclusion are shared themes.

Equity represents an attempt to redress situations wherein people are excluded for arbitrary or prejudicial reasons. Accordingly, in these situations, the excluded person is treated as an object because they represent a threat. An understanding of politicized environments and power dynamics is central to the survival of students and professors alike. The topic of inclusion goes to the heart of the matter in terms of whether people are treated as subjects or objects. To appreciate people as subjects with real histories, we need to help students—and ourselves—move from ‘surface to depth.’ Successful pedagogy implies that students do not see themselves or others in a superficial way. The goal is to see themselves and others as subjects in the process of being and becoming, with histories and cultural attributes that extend to families and beyond. This appreciation of subjective agency is based on the realization that the families of seemingly different ‘others’ may have traveled common paths. The more reflective and reflexive we are about ourselves and others, the richer the educational environment, and this provides an ideal setting for experiential learning. Defining people by their individuality, rather than surface categories, is a foundation of a successful university experience.

**Michael:** Are there situations in which this kind of inclusion breaks down?

**Gerald:** We need to be aware of highly politicized atmospheres that can exist in some universities and courses. I am referring to courses where each word that comes from an instructor's mouth is subject to 'language and thought police' who look for errors of discourse that result in labelling the instructor as 'other.' I refer to the ill-chosen word or perhaps even the right word that is not accompanied by a complete contextual unpacking. These kinds of ideologically driven situations can turn a classroom into a theatre of confession requiring virtue signaling to demonstrate that the 'right' values are being expressed. Students motivated by anger and moral indignation can unite to destroy an instructor's career. Exposing racists is something that can be readily appreciated. But conflict based on ideological leaning is a different matter. This can happen both on the left and the right. It is important to have an appreciation of power dynamics and related discourses whether on the left or the right.

**Michael:** Let's talk diversity and a typical college university. How much diversity is the average, for example, math major exposed to?

**Gerald:** This a very interesting kind of question because it depends on whether you live in an urban or rural setting, suburbs or downtown, and whether immigrant communities abound in your world. My campus of the University of Toronto is in the most diversified setting one can imagine and our campus is, therefore, ideal for cross-cultural research and reflecting on the issues being raised here. There can be a high representation of students from Asian and South Asian immigrant communities where the families might emphasize developing business-oriented skills to ensure independence in a prejudicial world. This can, in fact, create a problem when students who come from an immigrant community that emphasizes hard work are present with local students from the 'established' white community and the children are less driven. If the successful students have a racially significant profile, this provides an opportunity for jealousy and micro-conflicts.

**Michael:** What things do administrators try to do to foster inclusion?

**Gerald:** We have a profoundly serious issue here, which is why I am talking to you about this in the first place. I have a concern about the top-down approach, forcing some kind of idealization about equity, diversity, and inclusion on the faculty when the students don't know what you're talking about. Not only does the administration want us to insert EDI principles in our syllabi, but they are also talking about

evaluating the extent to which you implement them. Administrators want to know whether students can approach instructors with EDI questions. Do instructors explicitly integrate EDI practices throughout their courses (whatever that means)? Do students perceive intentionality behind instructors' choices as supporting EDI? These are questions put to me by administrators for a proposed study on student experiences of EDI. It does not appear to cross the minds of these administrators that this is a top-down process and students (1) do not even know to what EDI refers and (2) they do not really care because they are just trying to survive in the post-pandemic period! At the same time, the university can engage in productive outreach to the surrounding immigrant and marginalized communities so that their children can be better prepared for entrance into and survival in a challenging university setting such as ours.

**Michael:** How do creativity and critical thinking fit into all this?

**Gerald:** The university wants us to make sure we help students achieve 'inclusive excellence.' What is this really about? To what does the word 'excellence' refer? Does this reflect the desire of a research-oriented university to maintain its international stature and ensure that students get jobs? Should my focus, therefore, be on picking the brightest students to train and leave out the rest? The university also seems to be committed to a narrow view of immigrant families because all my research students come from there. They seek me out and I invite them to bring their cultural diversity to the table. This is where our ideas come from. I do not need them to do my experiments. I show them how to examine their own insights and ideas. This is 'inclusive excellence' to me; students include me in their worlds.

**Michael:** You have been around higher education for decades. Is this emphasis on EDI the latest fad or bandwagon that people must jump on or is there sincerity behind this?

**Gerald:** In the 1960s, there was a strong emphasis on 'affirmative action' to redress past imbalances and the exclusion of members of the non-white communities. Today's EDI focus can be understood as an extension of that. What worries me is that this appears to be a top-down process in a highly politicized era. No one is involving the students or even the instructors in the decision-making process about what these concepts mean. This appears to be ideologically driven. Who would disagree with the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion? All the instructors I know have a sense for social responsibility and cultural values. Are we put in a position to be judging each other as having the 'right' views or the 'wrong' views?

In that case, we are doing the opposite of our goals because we are treating each other as objects to be judged. One more point on this matter. If we talk about some groups as being ‘equity deserving,’ and so they are favored in job searches or treatment as students, does this imply that other groups are ‘not equity deserving’? So, which student groups in my classes or research environment deserve special treatment? Go tell that to the parents of international students who are considered ‘white adjacent’ and see how long they send their students to the university.

**Michael:** Some universities are truly melting pots, whereas others are totally W.A.S.P. (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Am I overgeneralizing here and what happens in each realm?

**Gerald:** The campus I teach at the University of Toronto has more people with more colors and from more places than anyone could imagine. It is just because the geographical location of this campus on the east end of Toronto. We can have, by natural happenstance, students coming to our campus from very diverse backgrounds. Just a point about ‘melting pots,’ which is an American concept implying that a goal of immigrants is to fit in, thereby by losing their cultural uniqueness. In Canada, the emphasis is on maintaining that cultural diversity rather than just fitting in, so the uniqueness is preserved. Sports offers one place where people from different background countries can find commonality. While cricket is not important in Canada, people from the West Indies, India, Pakistan, or England are following it closely. We all seem to share soccer in common; a sport that does not require fancy equipment or specialized playing areas.

**Michael:** What challenges do you face with EDI?

**Gerald:** I would say that the real goal should be ‘inclusive authenticity.’ Rather than performing EDI by using all the right words and engaging in ‘virtue signaling,’ I want my students to bring their real selves to the classroom and explore their own uniqueness. Depth and authenticity imply that you explore yourself and learn to do things in a critical way. This has implications for how we teach psychology and perhaps even conduct research. Psychology has become more and more siloed and separated, so professors of cognitive psychology may not really talk to those in social psychology, or you can be a social hybrid or a social cognitive social with a leaning to neural science. But, the ideas are more and more laboratory based so that students and professors are progressively separated from the real world. Diversity and inclusion should extend to how we view our disciplines and the importance of learning to talk to each other and listen to each other. We need to get past technical

language and make reference to real-world, everyday experiences and related phenomena.

**Michael:** I understand that you are about to undertake some research on EDI, can you tell us about it?

**Gerald:** We have just concluded a study in which 505 students responded to our survey on whether they keep their camera on or off during online synchronous lectures. An underlying theme of this work has to do with creating an inclusive classroom environment even in remote digital space. The EDI work is a combination of the camera on/off study and my experience during faculty meetings discussing the implementation of the administration's EDI goals. I invited my undergraduate research team to extend their interest from camera on/off to EDI research. As part of their exploratory work, they talked with other undergraduates and discovered that few knew or cared about EDI. This is the basis for our forthcoming work. How much do students know about EDI matters and how much do they care? Also, we are looking to address the shift from 'cliques to networks,' understanding ourselves, families, and cultures more deeply, along with critical awareness of the politicized environment in which we live. We are interested in studying the role that 'street smarts' plays in helping students survive school. This extends to professors as well. We have to convince the university to permit us to conduct this study but there may be powerful voices against doing this work.

**Michael:** You are also proposing a working group. What is that about?

**Gerald:** We are assembling a diverse group of members, including faculty, staff, and students, as well as professionals from outside the university. Our goal is to step back and interrogate the meaning of the three words, equity, diversity, and inclusion, from as many perspectives as possible. Let us bring someone from the world of human resources in business to see how they handle DE&I matters when, for example, selecting the boards of major companies. I have the contributions from my most successful students in terms of achieving academic positions, women from the Caribbean, the director of African studies who is from Senegal, and a strong representation of undergraduates, as well as colleagues in experiential learning. It remains to be seen whether a university committed to 'inclusive excellence' sees value in the complementary notion of 'inclusive authenticity.'

**Michael:** To wrap up: Is there anything I have neglected to ask?



**Gerald:** I think we have covered it, and it is an opportunity for me to realize that diversity it is not just the diversity of the colors and orientations of students in the class, but the diversification of ideas and experiences that they represent and that enrich the classroom. One might also think about the extent to which professors only accept certain kinds of ideas and may not be receptive to different ways that students think. This also relates to diversity but of the intellectual kind. Creativity happens as a function of dialogue.

By way of summation, it is important to appreciate that students move from ‘cliques to networks’ when they take classes based on interests. This diversity of educational experiences can foster inclusion, as new friendships are formed. Further, it is important to go beyond identifying students on surface qualities such as skin color. The more deeply students explore the layers of their own family histories, and share them with others in our classes, the more they discover common family trajectories. And this fosters a sense of inclusion in that we are all in the same ark. Finally, we want students to develop ‘street smarts,’ basic critical skills that help them determine whether discourse is authentic or represents a masked attempt to garner power. This can help them wisely negotiate within the university and the work world where they are heading.

**Michael:** Right! In a back-and-forth manner.

**Gerald:** That is the beauty of all our conversation, Mike. We keep uncovering what has been missed. So, in the end, successful pedagogy for equity, diversity, and inclusion results in a sense of grace, because you realize how lucky you are to have arrived where you are and, therefore, our goal is to support and nurture the new generations of students.

## **Author biographies**

*Michael F. Shaughnessy* is currently Professor of Education at Eastern New Mexico University, where he teaches a wide variety of courses in education, special education and counseling. He has served as Editor in Chief of several journals and serves on the Editorial Boards of several others. He has presented nationally and internationally on relevant issues in this area. He is the author, co-author, editor or co-editor of more than 40 books and several hundred journal articles, book and test reviews and interviews.

*Gerald Cupchik* has been a lecturer and professor of psychology at the University of Toronto for more than 50 years. He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan (1967), received his Masters (1970) and PhD (1972) from the University of Wisconsin, and did postdoctoral research at the University of Toronto (1972-74). He was president of the International Association for Empirical Aesthetics (1990-94), the American Psychological Association Division on Psychology and the Arts (1996-97), and the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (1998-2000). He received the Rudolf Arnheim Award in 2010 from the APA and the Gustav Fechner Award in August 2018 from the International Association for Empirical Aesthetics. He published *The aesthetics of emotion: Up the down staircase of the mind-body* (2016, Cambridge University Press). His research interests cover aesthetics, design and imagination processes, emotional experience, pedagogy, and social communication.

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