

## Democracy's College Podcast

### Episode 35: Intergroup Dialogues About Race, Civility on College Campuses, and Student Support

**Announcer:** Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P through 20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Jason Keist of OCCRL talks with Dr. Stephen John Quaye about what prompted his journey into higher education. Keist and Quaye will also discuss issues pertaining to student support, issues related to intergroup dialogues about race, and about civility on college campuses. Dr. Quaye is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University.

**Jason Keist:** Welcome. Dr. Stephen John Quaye is with us today for Democracy's College podcast. Dr. Quaye is an associate professor in the higher education student affairs program at The Ohio State University. Dr. Quaye focuses on understanding how students can engage difficult issues civilly and honestly, as well as how storytelling is used as an educational tool to foster reflection and learning across differences. Dr. Quaye has also been a featured speaker at the [Advancing Racial Justice and Equitable Outcomes in Community Colleges Institute series](#), the last of which is taking place today, at San Diego Mesa College. Welcome, Dr. Quaye, and thank you for your time today.

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:** Glad to be here. Thank you.

**Jason Keist:** First question is, how did you begin your journey into higher education teaching and research?

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:** So as an undergraduate student at James Madison University, I was an RA for two years and then a hall director my senior year. And I think part of what motivated me to be an RA in the first place was I was a first-year student, and in October of that year, my mom passed away. And I went home, came back after the funeral and my RA was a no-show, and I had this really traumatic life event happen and my friends didn't know. I mean, I was just formulating my friend group. I'm a new student so I hadn't really acclimated yet, and I needed somebody to process with and my RA was not present, was not available. I decided the next year that I wanted to become an RA because I wanted to not have that happen to other students. I wanted to know that whatever they were going through, whether they were homesick, whether it was a roommate conflict or whether they were struggling academically that they had somebody, at least one person, in their hall who they could go to.

And so I learned about student affairs my senior year. I was a psychology major, and much like many people, what do you do with a psychology bachelor's degree? I applied to graduate programs in psychology and then for three years I've been in the residence life office talking with the director of residence life, the associate director of residence life, and never had it occurred to me that these folks were doing this full time. And so as I was making decisions, they asked me, "What do you want to do when you graduate?" And I said, "I don't know what to do with a psych degree, so I'm applying to programs." They asked me, "Have you thought about a career in student affairs?" and I was like, "Well, what's that?" And they were like, "What do you think we've been doing this whole time you've been an RA?"

So I pulled my psych applications. I applied to a few student-affairs graduate programs and then I ended up going to Miami University was the program, and I went there because when I went and interviewed, I immediately felt at home with my interview. It just felt like a really strong program. I felt like it's a place where I could really talk openly about some of the issues that you read from my bio around facilitating dialogues. It's the first space where I really talked openly about race with faculty who were primarily white. And so, to me, it was, like, intriguing just to watch them facilitate these dialogues about these topics, openly and honestly. And so I wanted to know, like, how faculty did that. So then that led me in my Ph.D. program to look for my dissertation on how folks facilitate dialogues about racial issues in their classes.

**Jason Keist:**

Now was that work, that comment of racial dialogues—were people talking about that in particular or is that something that popped out to *you* and you kind of grasped on and started to articulate that?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:**

Yeah. So that was something that popped up to me. At the time, I had started to become familiar with the work of intergroup dialogues via the folks at the University of Michigan. And so as I was doing my literature review, that's how I learned of that work. And so, to me, the dialogue term I took from that, but as I thought about what was happening in my graduate program, in my master's program, *that's* the language that I could see because dialogue is very different than, like, discussion. And it's very different from, like, debate. Debate is you're arguing, two sides have an issue and they're trying to figure out who has the strongest argument. Discussion is you're just talking about a topic, but dialogue is very different in the sense that there are no winners or losers. The goal isn't to win somebody over to your side, but the goal is really to build understanding and build alliances across differences. And so when I heard of the dialogue language, I was like, "Oh, that's what we were doing in my master's program." So I wanted to understand specifically how were faculty across various disciplines using dialogue to engage students in issues of race and racism.

And as a master's student, I was different from my peers in the sense that I was a nerd. I really liked reading. I was the one talking to my faculty outside of class about what we read in the classroom. And so my thing was I really liked the

research. I liked digging into topics, and so that's really what pulled me into the faculty domain. I also really liked teaching, and so for me it gave me an opportunity to do both of those things and then help support graduate students who would become practitioners. But that's where I saw my strength was in the classroom setting, in one-on-one meetings with students, supporting them to develop the skills to then be able to facilitate those dialogues with their students who they were working with on college campuses.

**Jason Keist:**

And just really quick, if you could comment on the role of power in discussion because this is pretty, I think, differentiating between these levels of interactions is kind of new to many people.

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:**

Yeah, so power is basically, on its face value, it's who has the ability to control, to decide how stuff happens. Who creates laws, who creates norms for our society. And I think often there are two different kinds of power. So there's more informal power. So informal power is tied to one's different identities. We all have these things called dominant as well as subordinated identities. Dominant identities are those identities in which we experience privilege or power. Subordinated are those identities in which we're oppressed. And so given the way dominance and subordinates works in our society, some folks have more power because they hold more dominant identities. Some folks have less power because they hold more minoritized or subordinated identities. To me, that's what informal power is.

But then there's also formal power. Formal power is tied to one's position or role. So as a professor in a classroom space, I hold more formal power than students because I'm the one who ultimately decides how the classroom functions. I'm the one who has created the syllabus. I'm the one who is in a position of authority in the space, and so I get to create the norms of the classroom space, I get to create the rules. And so, as a result of that I hold more formal power in that space than students might. So that's based on your title.

And so, to me, I think power is manifesting in dialogues in the sense that we're all differently positioned in this society. White, cisgender men who are heterosexual are positioned very differently than a black woman of color from a low-income background. And so even if we don't acknowledge power explicitly, it's always present, it's always happening, whether or not we actually are able to talk about it. It doesn't mean that it goes away. If I don't acknowledge my heterosexual privilege, it doesn't mean that it's not there; it's still present. And so I think part of what we do in dialogue is we put language or we name things that remain often hidden because you can't solve an issue if you don't talk about it. And so if we don't talk about how power is playing out in this space, we're not able to address power differences. So I think part of the role of dialogue is to be able to give language and terms to the things that often remain in the background or remain hidden.

**Jason Keist:**

And you spoke in the presentation today, some of the barriers that kind of come up with students or participants who their most salient identity at the time is a privileged identity, was a dominant identity and they had this pushback of “not every one of us.” If you could just briefly touch on how do you kind of navigate so you're also trying to build that person at the same time and not push them to the side.

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:**

Yeah, so I think in order to talk about that, we have to talk about the difference between individual oppression and systemic oppressions. Individual oppressions are the individual behaviors that we do as individual people that contribute to oppressing other people. So, for example, transgender, gender-nonconforming people, they often use pronouns that are different from the traditional pronouns that I might use. So, we have traditional pronouns: he, him his. That means the sex male that you're assigned at birth matches your gender expression as a man. She, her, hers, same as around cisgender women. But there are other pronouns. There's ze, zim, zir, or they, them, theirs to talk about folks who don't identify either as male or female, and that their gender doesn't match the sex that they were assigned at birth. And so when we don't use the right pronouns to identify somebody, we contribute to mis-gendering them, which is a way that we individually harm them. We individually oppress them. So that, to me, is an example of individual oppression.

Systemically, however ... systemic means it's rooted in our laws or policies. Systemic issues are more nebulous. They're harder to sort of, like, put a finger on because they're, like, “Y'all can't see me right now, but I'm, like, pointing up to sort of the sky.” They're rooted in these larger, sort of nebulous systems. But that's what systemic oppression is. So, like, racism is a system of oppression that's based on treating people of color differently because of the color of their skin. So it's a systemic issue that is then carried out on an individual level based on the systemic policies and laws that we create. And so this is where the concept of intersectionality comes in, and Kimberlé Crenshaw does a beautiful job of talking about how our legal system often can't account for the intersections of identity that, for example, black women have. And so our legal system wants people to bring lawsuits based on singular identity, so based on the fact that they're experiencing sexism or racism. So white women can bring charges around sexism, but black women are *also* experiencing sexism, but then they're also experiencing racism. And so, this is talking about how we can't treat identities as singular because these intersections are happening simultaneously because of the ways in which black women are experiencing both systemic racism as well as systemic sexism.

And so it's important to know the difference between individual oppression and systemic oppression because it manifests in how we're able to engage in dialogues about these issues. We as human beings, we often want to see ourselves as good people, especially when we're engaging around equity and inclusion issues. Like, I want you to see me as an individual good person, and so this is why for white folks, for example, in an era of Donald Trump, I see a lot of

white folks distancing themselves from Donald Trump: “Well, I'm *not* that bad white person, I'm one of the good ones.” And the reality is when we distance ourselves, we actually contribute to the problem because it's not about whether or not Donald Trump is a bad white person; it's really more about what are the policies and laws that are put in place that create disproportionate experiences for people with minoritized identities. And one can do that as a good white person, one can also support those policies as a bad white person. If we only think about these issues on an individual level, we miss the opportunities and ways to see how we're all complicit, at times, in perpetuating systemic oppression because of the policies that we support or the ways that we don't challenge problematic, systemic policies.

**Jason Keist:** Right. And I guess it makes me think of that these differences between being an ally and being an accomplice, right?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** Yes.

**Jason Keist:** You know, are you showing up or are you just being present and nodding heads and being quiet when you're told to? Are you showing up when it's uncomfortable and challenging-

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** Yes.

**Jason Keist:** ... unfortunately, relationships that matter sometimes in people's lives, which, that's a really good segue way in terms of, we talk about civility. So I just want to ask you, why civility and what is the significance of civility on college campuses today?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** My position, I think, has grown over this notion of civility. It's a good thing I'm not a political candidate or running for office right now because one of the problems with political office is we don't allow people the permission to change their position, right? So whatever somebody said 20 years ago, that is what they need to say, like, in the present day, right?

**Jason Keist:** Right.

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** So, my position as a non-political person who's not running for office is that my position has changed on this term. So I often saw civility as, like, I want folks to be kind to one another in the midst of engaging in these dialogues. And I still *believe* in kindness. But I think civil can sometimes mean polite or that you have to talk in a way where it's palatable to folks in positions of power. So if you're yelling, if you're angry, then people back away because you're not engaging in a way that feels good for them.

And so often when a person of color yells is very different than when a white man yells. So our current president yells all the time on the television, mistreats reporters, and that is seen as, like, he's tough. But if it's a black woman in that

position, she's seen as angry or emotional or hostile. So I no longer believe that civility is important. Given who I am, I often want my dialogue spaces to be more kind and for us to treat each other with respect. But to me, respect and civility are not synonymous, so you can still respect somebody and not be civil because you're angry. And I think anger is a productive and necessary emotion in the face of pain, trauma, racism, et cetera. So, to me, I think what's important in this space is not necessarily civility, but it's, are we hearing one another in this space? Are we bringing our full selves? And if somebody shows up in a way that is uncommon to you, do we reflect on why that makes us uncomfortable as opposed to blaming the person for not showing up in the way that we want them to? So what is it about *us* that makes us uncomfortable when somebody shows anger as a person of color—what does that mean about us? Not necessarily denigrating that person's emotion, but turning the question onto us and asking, “Why am I uncomfortable right now? Why is this anger making me feel this kind of way?”

**Jason Keist:** Right. What did I expect versus what happened?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** Yes. So I'm more invested, I think, in productive conversations that move forward, and uncivil conversations or dialogues can also be productive because you're allowing space for real, raw emotions.

**Jason Keist:** And that's the tough work, processing those emotions.

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** Right. Because I want the emotions to show up in their purest form because then we can talk about them.

**Jason Keist:** And it's hard to set because there's going to be parameters, especially in the classroom, right?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** Right.

**Jason Keist:** Obviously name, calling, et cetera. Just really briefly on storytelling: If you wouldn't mind expanding a little bit, specifically, how do you conceptualize storytelling and what role does storytelling play in equitable student outcomes?

**Dr. Stephen Quayle:** One of the articles that I love; it's one of my favorite articles. I think it was written in '94 or '97, 1994 or 1997 at this point, but it's called “Behind Every Face is a Story.” And the premise of the article is that when we're on college campuses and we engage students, we often don't know what they're bringing with them to that space. So a student might show up in a certain way and we make all sorts of assumptions about them. So, for example, you might have a black man in your class who's perpetually late to class, and you have a policy that students need to arrive to class on time. And so, the fourth time this happens, you've written off this black student, when the reality is we don't know what's going on. So this black student might have to take care of their younger sibling because their mom is working two jobs, and so they're

responsible for dropping their sibling off at day care in the morning, but we don't know that. And so, we often make all of these assumptions about why people are doing X, Y, and Z without actually engaging them in asking what's going on.

And so, to me, the storytelling piece is that our job as educators is to understand what's behind every student's face. So what is underneath that student? To what extent am I providing time for students to share their stories? To what extent do I also model storytelling in my classes with students so I share more of who I am so that they can also understand what's behind my face. That's why storytelling is important, is that our job, I think, as educators is to provide space for emotions, for stories to be present. And that means asking good questions to students to help us understand who they are so we can better connect with them and resisting the urge, I think, to make assumptions about why people are doing something, but to instead ask inquisitive questions that allow us to understand what's happening.

**Jason Keist:**

Kind of popped in my head about as these educator spaces, how oftentimes, at least in my experience, I've heard some of the really harsh things towards students, right? As educators we're supposed to be the loving, the nurturing professionals, and oftentimes the *least* amount of benefit of the doubt is given to students within these spaces, so I'm glad you brought that up.

So what teacher, instructor, professor did you need during your college career? And you actually touched on this already. Did you find that person eventually? Maybe we can touch there. And do you feel you are that person now for other students?

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:**

So I'm an immigrant. I was born in Ghana, West Africa. I was about three years old when my family immigrated to the United States, and like the son of many immigrants, my parents came to the United States because they wanted better opportunities for my siblings and I. And so, for them that meant putting us in predominantly white, private schools. And so, it was not until my junior year of college that I had a teacher for the first time who was a person of color. So I was 19, 20 at that point, and so twenty years before I had somebody in front of a room who looked like me. And it was this black man, his name was Dr. Charles Lockett. He taught my developmental psychology class and I just remember him walking into the room, and sometimes you don't even know what's missing until you see what's present. And so, growing up I always did well in school, but I really didn't like it. And so, it wasn't until I was able to have that experience that I could find the language. And so, he walked into the room—my whole body just felt a sense of, like, *calm*, in a way that I hadn't felt previously. And then I realized, I've been, like, feeling this stress in my body from being a black person in mostly white spaces without having a person of color, an authority figure in that space, and so I just felt, like, I don't have hair, but I felt like if I had hair, I could finally let my hair down.

Charles Lockett was there and it was this black man, and he introduced me to terms that I had been struggling with around, like, racism. And the way he taught my class from a very Afrocentric perspective really changed my worldview, and I'm like, "That's the kind of person that I want to be." I didn't know at the time that I wanted to be a professor, but having him in that space meant the world to me. And so, for me, that's the kind of professor now that I try to be for students, and especially black students, because many of them have also said to me—they get to grad school at this point—that "You're the first black professor I've ever had." And so, to me, that's a big deal. And so, I didn't know that that's what I needed at that time in my life, but looking back on it, I needed somebody who represented me because, again, representation matters. And this is not to say that black people are monolithic and that every black person is going to be pro-black and helpful, et cetera. But seeing yourself represented makes a difference, and so, I think that's what I try to embody for students of color in the space as well, too, is knowing that I'm there, I'm a representation of maybe what they might think is not possible, that they may not have thought was possible previously.

**Jason Keist:** Where's your research maybe taking you now? Are there things that you're uncovering that you want to explore in more detail?

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:** So right now my research is around [racial battle fatigue](#). And racial battle fatigue describes the exhaustion that people of color feel from daily exposure to racism, but it's not just the exhaustion that's important is that it has negative consequences on our health and wellbeing. So I'm really invested right now in understanding how black people in particular can work to heal from racial battle fatigue. And so, what are the strategies that we use to practice self-care? What are the methods that we use to try to heal ourselves in more sustainable and long-term ways? That's really, I think, where my investment is right now.

**Jason Keist:** Thank you for taking time to speak with me.

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:** Yeah, you're welcome.

**Jason Keist:** As always.

**Dr. Stephen Quaye:** Thank you.

**Announcer:** Tune in next month when Krystal Andrews of OCCRL interviews Dr. Penny Pasque about implicit bias and policy practices in higher education. Dr. Pasque is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University.

Background music for this podcast was provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice and excellence in education for all students.