

Thrivecast Episode 73: Power, Belonging, and the Art of Educational Scholarship

Giana Davidson: [00:00:00] And welcome to another episode of the University of Washington Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Giana Davidson, and today we're joined by Dr. Justin Bullock. Dr. Justin Bullock is an assistant professor of medicine. He's also our associate director for education scholarship in CLIME, which is the Center for Learning and Innovation in Medical Education in the Office of Faculty Affairs.

He's a nephrologist who sits at the intersection of medical education, scholarship, identity, safety, belonging, and career development. And I'd invited him here for a few reasons today. First, I genuinely enjoy every time I get to collaborate with him. And second, one of the things I've come to appreciate in academic medicine is that many of us become teachers simply because we care for patients or we run a lab or we're experts in our area of expertise, and we supervise learners, and so we share what we've learned along the way.

But we have a [00:01:00] whole group of colleagues who approach education as a scholarly discipline itself, and people who are not just outstanding teachers, but really true educators, as I like to call it, with a capital E. They develop curricula, they study how people learn, they mentor future educators, and they create innovations that shape learners, programs, and institutions.

And their influence often extends beyond just the classroom, but it creates a ripple effect that improves how we teach, how we lead, how we mentor in a lab, or how we care for our patients. And Justin's really one of those people. He encourages us to ask meaningful questions about how people learn, how to ground those questions in education theory, how to study them, and ultimately improve the way we educate the next generation.

And so I really appreciate you being here today, Justin.

Justin Bullock: Thanks so much for having me, Giana.

Giana Davidson: Absolutely. So many faculty really struggle with distinguishing, like, what's excellent teaching from an educational scholarship perspective, and how do you-- how did you shift from, like, I enjoy teaching to how you wanted to study how people learn?

Justin Bullock: I think [00:02:00] like many people, when I entered in med school, I knew that I enjoyed teaching. I'd had some chances to, like, tutor high schoolers when I was in college. Um, I always kind of gravitated toward teaching efforts. And I was very lucky to go to a medical school that really promoted education science, which was how

do we move past just good teaching and actually think about the science behind good teaching around, like, educational principles and curriculum development, et cetera.

And so I think the way that one knows whether or not they enjoy that, I think, is by doing it. And I would say, you know, I was very lucky to have a cool project that was around assessment for third-year medical students, which is a very kind of hot topic, and I think it has been throughout time. And so, yeah, a lot of it's by really doing sort of the hands-on and seeing the other side that goes beyond just teaching.

Giana Davidson: Yeah, I appreciate that. And it sounds like a lot of us, as you learn to teach, you think about the things that were taught really well to you. That was the light bulb moment. And then you think about the things that you're like, [00:03:00] "Wow, I will never do that. That was a horrible experience."

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm.

Giana Davidson: It sounds like you had a lot of mentors that really was able to consolidate that within a scientific framework.

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Giana Davidson: That's awesome.

Justin Bullock: And, and I will say also, of course, there is absolutely a skill too, and I say it goes both ways. You know, sometimes you can know the educational principle, but then there, there is absolutely the art to teaching as well. And so I don't think it's necessarily valuing one more than the other, but really relying on both.

Giana Davidson: Yeah. That's helpful to think about. And how did you shift from, "I enjoy teaching" to, like, "I want to study how people learn"?

Justin Bullock: I think one of the biggest things is that I got very involved with sort of education scholarship as a medical student and a resident. And for me, doing research helped give meaning to, like, my days.

I think sometimes, especially as an intern, you know, you're so into doing. You do tasks, and your whole thing is, like, doing checklists, and really things that feel kind of rote and not that dynamic. And for me, digging into [00:04:00] particularly the sides around thinking about identity and thinking about safety, they were very grounding to me.

And I loved that, you know, if I talked to 18 of my friends who told me about their, like, very challenging experiences in medical school or in residency, if I just did that for fun, then I would hear their stories and nothing would happen with it. But if I do it in a sort of scholarly way where I'm being thoughtful about the methods and, uh, in trying to

incorporate theory and all these things, I can take those exact same stories and actually make change.

And for me, that was just such a, like, exciting, seductive thing to, to get to do.

Giana Davidson: Yeah, absolutely, and so powerful about when we talk about how hard culture change is and how impactful that can be too, especially in the learning environment.

Justin Bullock: Agreed.

Giana Davidson: So if faculty members came to you-- It sounds like you started this actually really early in your journey in academics.

So if a faculty member comes to you and says like, "I have no idea where to start, have some good ideas. I hear some really important stories from people around," how would you help them, you know, [00:05:00] transition from hearing folks' stories to like really studying them?

Justin Bullock: Yeah, it's a great question. It depends a lot on where the person is starting from.

So there are some people who say, "I have an idea, and I just don't know how to, like, do it or how to study it." There are some people who say, "I'm really interested in medical education, and I like teaching, and I think I might be interested in research, but I don't really know where to start." And I would say I think those are kind of the two biggest buckets that people fall into.

And I would say I think about them very differently. So for someone who has, like, an idea and excitement and is very, you know... For instance, there's a fellow in the nephrology division who really loved hyponatremia and wanted to study, like, teaching hyponatremia. And we're like, "All right, here we go. Like, sodium, we can get on board."

And I think where a lot of people who haven't done research before, what they haven't done yet is they haven't yet- Dived, dove, divven, the past tense of dive. They have not jumped [00:06:00] into the literature. And sometimes people have a really good idea, and as you dig into the literature, you see, oh, actually other people have studied this.

And so maybe the specific question that I have is not the right question, but like, you know, with some guidance of the literature, then you can sort of reform a different question. I think that that's sort of a first early place where people who have ideas, where they, they yet often haven't gone. And there's this person who does a lot of sort of writing about writing in medical education literature, Dr.

Lorelei Lingard, and she uses this framework problem, gap, hook. And she basically says, like joining a conversation using the problem, gap, hook heuristic. And basically, that's one way of framing of what is the problem? You know, like what do we know about that problem? What is left to not be known, you know?

And then, yeah, where's the gap in the literature? And then like why do we care about this particular gap in the literature, which is the hook. And she, and she really says like when you're writing both an introduction and a [00:07:00] discussion, what you're doing is that you're showing that you're joining the conversation.

So you're, you're showing, oh, I know these other sort of seminal like pieces of research in the field that are very relevant to this topic. I'm showing that I'm aware of those things, and then I'm showing where I think my little space in this field could be. And then the discussion, you're sort of returning to what you initially talked about, you know, the things that you found, and then how will this move the field forward.

And so I really love this like thinking about joining... Like if you, if you saw some friends in the hallway and you walked up, you usually wouldn't just like jump in and say something before you're like listened for at least a couple seconds to kind of hear what they're talking about. Mm-hmm. And so that's sort of what that framework-- To me, that's one of the things that it gives.

So those are kind of one group of people. The other group of people who are interested in education more broadly and don't necessarily know where they want to go, I really try to push people to think about like what do you enjoy or what makes you upset or what things are you passionate about. And sometimes that's related to the specialty or the field that they're in, and sometimes absolutely not.

[00:08:00] And I am someone-- So for, you know, Jenna, I've seen the way that you've mentored people and how much you care about mentoring and how much effort you give, and I really, really believe that having an effective mentor like team can really make or break the research experience. And so it's kind of like if you don't necessarily feel particularly like anchored in a one specific research topic, then sometimes finding a great mentor who has a project that you could be excited about can actually be a really productive path.

Giana Davidson: I love how you've broken it down like that, and I think- One of the things that's beautiful about that is the simplicity of it. We, by the time we're done with all of our schooling and all of our residency or all of our postdoc work, you come to a space where you kind of forget to be a learner again or forget what it's like.

And I appreciate the analogy of the problem gap hook. It's exactly what I do when I write in clinical trials, yet when I think about writing in education, it feels so foreign. Like I don't even know where to start. And so I appreciate you, you speaking to it in that terms, because I think there's a [00:09:00] lot of people that have great ideas and aspirations

to be an educator who can really change how we, how we teach things that we've taught the same way for 40 years.

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm.

Giana Davidson: So that's great, and we can link that, you know, potential work as well in the podcast. So, you focus a lot of your work in the environment and how the environment can be more inclusive and allow people to learn and, and grow and really thrive in this space. And what are some things that educators could do just tomorrow to make their learners feel more like they belong or that they can succeed and thrive in this space?

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so I very much believe in the importance of attending to power. As we walk through the hospital, there are so many complex power dynamics that are happening. You know, there's like provider-patient power dynamics. There are provider-provider dy-power dynamics. There's like interprofessional power dynamics, et cetera.

And I think just spending a little time like acknowledging [00:10:00] that can actually be incredibly impactful. Some colleagues and I, a few years ago, we worked on this project where microaggressions, you know, these brief, subtle, sometimes unintended interactions that can kind of suggest hostility or other, othering to people, them-- they're very common in, in interpersonal interactions.

And even if you have a great team where everyone feels safe, as you walk around the hospital, you might have interactions that can be disruptive or harmful. And one of the things that one project yielded was talking about something that we call a pre-brief, which is basically an anticipatory conversation at the onset of working together.

It can be very brief, but, you know, something that says like, "We're all moving through the hospital. Sometimes there are uncomfortable interactions. How would you feel most supported in the event that like I saw something happen to you?" And like, you know, I would say, "For me, usually I feel comfortable addressing it myself."

I've very rarely had moments where a patient has said something very offensive to me, and I'd appreciate it if my team said something." And then I sort of-- usually, I go down, you [00:11:00] know, if, if-- because oftentimes in academic settings, there's many different trainees, and usually I would go to, you know, whoever the team leader is, and then the second most senior person and, et cetera.

And in that way, there's modeling that happens. And what I've found is by implementing this very-- and it really can happen in like two minutes, this very brief sort of interaction. It, one, just signal-- And one of the things I also, also say was that sometimes I might be the person who is doing that harmful thing.

And I just found that I've had so many more meaningful interactions with learners. I feel like I've gotten better feedback from learners because they feel more comfortable because, you know, I've basically said I am very fallible and imperfect, and I'm, and I very well might mess up. And yeah, so to me, if there was one thing that someone could implement, it would be the pre-brief.

Giana Davidson: That's really powerful, and something I appreciate that you can sort of do with any group of learners, whether it's, you know, in a lab or whether it's like at bedside rounds or in the operating room. How often do, how often do you do that? Do you do it every time you have a new team [00:12:00] or...?

Justin Bullock: Yeah, so, so in nephrology we're lucky because we have...

Usually we're stable within, like, for a week more or less. Mm-hmm. And so anytime I have a new team, I do it. One of the things actually in this work, some of the people -- we, we talk to faculty of different specialties, and surgeons for instance said, like, "I'm" like, "I might be with someone for just one case," you know?

Mm. "And that's it for the day." What I would say then is, like, you can think about your relationship with these people over the course of a year. And so maybe you haven't pre-briefed with this particular trainee yet. And so while maybe in this one day you might work with three different teams, you know, over the arc of the year, you know, maybe it's a, a kind of a more stable set.

And I found also whenever I don't pre-brief, something happens inevitably within like 30 seconds. And then I will take that as the opportunity to say, "I should have done this earlier and I didn't, and so now I'm going to."

Giana Davidson: Mm-hmm. I appreciate how that could not only build deeper relationships with people, but also allow you...

I mean, I think all of us want to do the right thing, [00:13:00] and then you don't do anything in the moment because you don't want to do the wrong thing. And wow, how powerful to actually know, gosh, if something happened, this is what this person w- this was what would feel supportive to them.

Justin Bullock: Exactly. And part of the power shift is that, one, you're empowering the person who is, who's being harmed with them saying, "This is what I want to..."

This is how I would feel most protected." But it's also a power transfer backwards where sometimes you don't know what to say, and, like, if you were empowered with that information, you actually might, might be better at responding.

Giana Davidson: Yeah, that's, that's really wonderful. And it's notable to me too that when you started off you were talking about, you know, how you got interested and

passionate about this, and then we've jumped to this intervention that you can do sort of tomorrow.

Mm-hmm. I'm just curious, how do you find the things that you're passionate about to study to move into action?

Justin Bullock: Yeah. This is a great question. Research can often be slow, and there [00:14:00] is power in the slowness of research, and there is challenge in the slowness of research. And I'm kind of someone who, like, I can love a lot of things.

I won't say I can love everything. Mm-hmm. But there's a lot of things that I could fall in love with. I've been very lucky over time. As I've done more research, I've gotten to sort of pick my own path more and more. As I've gained more skills, then I can design a project on my own, ways that I... It's never on my own.

It's always in a team, but take more of a leadership role. So I guess I would say part of it is over time, having more opportunities to try different things and sort of guiding my path. There's never really been a very strong, huge shift. It's kind of a lot of small changes that happened over time. Mm-hmm.

Comparatively, you know, I, in my role with CLIME, I'm very lucky to get to talk with people of all sorts of different, like, all along the professional pipeline. And there, there are professors who are like, "I now want to do education research, and I used to study this [00:15:00] other thing, but now this is what I want to do."

And so there are absolutely people who do make these big shifts.

Giana Davidson: The thing that I love so much about academic medicine is that you do get to reinvent yourself. I think we get to do a phenomenal amount of exploring in how to make, you know, the, the world and the climate better, people more healthy, you know, and make impactful research questions.

And somebody who's sort of starting out, w- what do you suggest for the quick wins for them, for, like, building a research portfolio?

Justin Bullock: Yeah, great. You, you gave me the first thing, which is the quick wins, which is, I think, as I mentioned, I had a mentor. I've had a lot of really great mentors. And I do think it's very important to have a good first research experience if you can, recognizing that not everyone will.

So for instance, there's someone who recently came to me who had an idea, and they had a topic that they're, like, really excited about. And they've been thinking about it for years, and, like, they had applied. We have these small grants, which you should apply for, anyone listening. Mm-hmm. That we have a call once a year, and [00:16:00] had, had applied for one previously but hadn't gotten a s- gotten a small grant.

And we were thinking about, you know, what a project might look like. And what I actually recommended to this person was that they write ... The Journal of Medical Education has a series called When I Say, dot dot dot. And so they're thinking about a particular topic. I'm just going to become ... It's not this topic.

I'm just say ... Let's say they were thinking about shame. And the, the, let's say the journal hasn't had a when I say shame paper. Well, it's really like, it's like an thou- it's like 1,000 to 15-word piece that basically you're only allowed to have five citations. And in this way, basically I said, "Oh, why don't we do this when I say piece, and then set ourselves up to, to do a research piece after.

And sort of like create the hole that we want to fill." And- Mm-hmm ... so sometimes pick- instead of going for these big, the big huge project and, you know, uh, just starting with something that's like a small win that lets you take a dive into the literature will help build your [00:17:00] expertise. It's a smaller writing piece so that it's, it feels more accomplishable.

You know, something that a person could reasonably do within three to six months, even a person who's pretty busy. And just, like, create these small wins that are empowering and exciting and hopefully will get published, and then use that as a stair to continue to step forward. I think sometimes people just bite off these really huge projects that are really time-intensive.

And you know, one of the things about education research is there's not a, in the United States, there's not a ton of money to do education research. And so there's very finite number of ... There absolutely are funding opportunities, but there're, but they're not a ton. And so a lot of times people are doing this in their spare time, on top of all the things they're already doing.

And so to me that, that makes it even more important to try to get a high yield win. Mm-hmm. So yeah, I think that's one way that you can do that. I

Giana Davidson: love that. It's a great way to pressure test too how interested you are in it. Yeah. You know, is like the sit down and, and write it out and see if you are interested.

I- is it the [00:18:00] things that keep you up at night, or is it the things that you do sort of at nights and weekends? Just, not that that's when the work should be done, but just to say are you engaged enough to get it across the finish line.

Justin Bullock: Exactly.

Giana Davidson: I can't think of the graveyard of papers that I have of things that were just actually crappy ideas-

that I got bored with eventually.

Justin Bullock: Yeah.

Giana Davidson: Awesome. Well, I'd love to play a little game with you that's some rapid fire, I think, statements in education that I would like to call accept, revise, or reject in the spirit of the graveyard of, of projects that are unfunded. All right. Number one, would you accept, revise, or reject this statement?

Good teaching naturally becomes scholarship.

Justin Bullock: So I would reject, mostly because of the word naturally.

Giana Davidson: Mm.

Justin Bullock: I have a, a little sib. I do Big Brothers Big Sisters and, and we went to the soccer field recently, and he was getting frustrated because he was trying to kick the ball a certain way and he couldn't.

And I was like, "Remember, practice makes..." And he said, "Perfect." And I [00:19:00] said, "No, permanent." And that is, and I think this like good teaching is absolutely very important, and it's something that you can build skills in, but it's not, it's not inherently by itself. Like, scholarship basically refers to sort of critiquing and interrogating the ways that we do things.

And so to say like, you know, because a lot of times what we'll say with good teaching is like, "Well, this is how this person's always taught it, and so let's just keep teaching it that way." I would say that's not a scholarly approach to thinking about teaching. Mm-hmm. And so, yes, I would reject.

Giana Davidson: I love it. And I like the, the two points I hear you making in there too is like, number one, the good teaching is critically important even without the scholarship piece.

And number two, it's that it can develop into that with these really specific approaches that you take. All right, number two, accept, revise, or reject: Every educational innovation deserves publication.

Justin Bullock: I'm also a reject on this one. Yeah, I think as a person who thinks a lot about power, a lot of people feel [00:20:00] pressured because of academic promotion to publish the things that they've been working on.

And sometimes those are things that, like, people really enjoy the implementation of the curriculum development, and they don't really feel particularly that excited about

publishing. I am personally a believer that I think we- sometimes you can get high yield out of things with making not that much of a difference in effort.

So for instance, if you're like, if you have a curriculum and you are collecting data on the effectiveness of that curriculum, and, you know, each year you make new innovations to respond to the feedback that you get, you are doing a very rigorous program evaluation. And so sometimes just without doing much more work, you can just write up the things that you've been doing and the, the findings that you've had and the emergent theory and all these things.

But I guess, but I would not say that you have to do that. And there are some times where you have an, an education... Right now, for instance, one of the things that I feel like I'm seeing a lot of are, like, there are a lot of POCUS [00:21:00] curriculum that are coming through. And, like, point-of-care ultrasound in emergency medicine maybe is where it started.

Internal medicine really adopted it. Like, nephrology now is adopting it and, you know, spreading to family medicine, et cetera, all these things. And sometimes you're not really doing anything that much different. You're just doing something that works and has worked, even though I just critiqued this before.

Yeah, and so it can be a good, it can be an effective intervention, and maybe you're not sort of adding anything new to the conversation.

Giana Davidson: Yep, yep, that makes a lot of sense. All right, so next one, accept, revise, or reject. Educational theory is optional.

Justin Bullock: So I'm accept with an asterisk. And- Accept-ish. Exactly, exact- accept-ish.

I think that education theory can sometimes be weaponized, and basically we use education theory as a way to keep people out of sort of this scholarly area. I think sometimes you can have, you can, for a study or, you know, a project, you can have a conceptual framework that maybe you're not naming [00:22:00] specific education theories, but you do have sort of a logical way with which you are...

Like, you do have logic that's present within, you know, the introduction of your paper, let's say. You know, there are papers that are, that talk about the different types of frameworks. So there's, like, theory, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and it's not necessarily that one is better than the other, but that you should just be kind of clear on which type you're using.

Giana Davidson: Yeah. I think I'm hearing you say, like, re- really linking it back to that, like, as you walk up to people in the hall you're hearing what they're talking about before you're jumping right in, so having some understanding of all of

Justin Bullock: that. Exactly.

Giana Davidson: Excellent. All right, last one. Accept, revise, or reject: You should wait until your curriculum is perfect before studying it.

Justin Bullock: I will reject-ish this one also. The reason why is because, it's not because I believe you need to wait till your curriculum is perfect, but I do believe that there is timing that exists in terms of studying things. And so For instance, a frequent challenge that people who I work with face [00:23:00] is that they have four or five trainees each year who are seeing their curriculum, and that may make it hard to publish because they don't have enough people to show effect size or impact or whatever thing they think.

Sometimes you have to wait through time to, like, collect more data. And so, like, maybe the first iteration is not the perfect time. Mm-hmm. Yeah, I don't like what... I don't know if I'm accepting or rejecting this, but I'll just keep going. Yeah. But go ahead. You were going to say something.

Giana Davidson: No, I hear what you're saying.

You're like the timing has to be sort of right. Yeah. It's not at the beginning, but it's not when it's perfect.

Justin Bullock: Right. Yes. Yes. Thank you for re-saying it so quick. No, I agree. No, that, that is absolutely what I feel is like... And I guess considering timing actually does matter.

Giana Davidson: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense, because I do think sometimes you feel like, "Gosh, I've missed my window to study it," or, "Yeah, we've already done it, like we can't study it anymore."

People feel like there's... It, it must be done immediately or not at all. Yeah. I think sometimes, or certainly I can be a little binary about that.

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm.

Giana Davidson: And I appreciate if you could just say for folks a little bit about what you do. You, you mentioned [00:24:00] connecting with folks in your role in CLIME.

Justin Bullock: Yeah. So yes, through my role in CLIME, the role was created out of an awareness that within the UW community, there are a lot of people who are doing really cool education, like interventions, and one of the things that people struggled with is getting it from, like, cool implementation to publication or a conference presentation or a talk, et cetera.

And sort of what I help people do is, like, to try and get it across that finish line. And I really believe that oftentimes with a few sort of not that significant adjustments, you can take really cool X into, like, a cool, other cool product Y. And I'm very much of the belief that, like, in academic medicine, we're all doing way too many things already.

And so if we can find efficient ways to check multiple boxes, I am very much in support of that. So some of the things specifically that I do with people are we have these education consults, so [00:25:00] you can have an idea, and we have a little intake form that's supposed to help you think through whatever your idea is.

And you can meet with me for one hour, we talk, and some people, I talk once, and we never talk again. And other people who I meet, and, you know, every couple months they'll schedule a meeting with me. There are some folks who I take a deeper dive on their projects with, and yeah, we meet more frequently, and I help them out with methods.

That's one of the things that I'm really passionate about are methods in medical education, both quantitative and qualitative methods. And for the CLIME small grants, which are a \$5,000 grants, usually we give five-ish a year. We also have a pre-proposal where you can submit a very short few hundred words sort of summary of what you are working on, and basically I can work with you on whatever aspect of getting the proposal ready that would be helpful.

Giana Davidson: That's great. Well, Justin, thank you so much for joining me today. It has been really a pleasure to talk with you. I feel like I have 100 more questions, and actually, as we're sitting here [00:26:00] talking, I'm like, "Oh, I should ask him about how I could publish this or how I could think about this in a more scholarly way."

Justin Bullock: Thank you for having me again. It was great to talk to you.

Giana Davidson: And for our listeners, if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you enjoy listening to podcasts. You can also find them at the School of Medicine faculty website, which is faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks so much for listening today. Have a great day, and please don't hesitate to shoot me a message if you have any ideas for upcoming episodes.