Chapter 11
Leveraging Intersectionality and Positionality in Praxis-Oriented Teacher Learning

Déana Aeolani Scipio

11.1 Introduction

The deaths of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have motivated educators and others to rise up and demand change. Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests swept the nation and the world, in the wake of a series of killings of unarmed Black people in the United States (U.S.) in the spring and summer of 2020. One of the outcomes of the racial reckoning in the U.S. has been a push to explore the foundations of policing, social inequities, and critical race theory in an effort to name and exorcise white supremacy within intuitions. Public monuments to white supremacist leaders have come under necessary scrutiny with many physical monuments being pulled down in acts of social and political protest. This process has extended to the environmental education field and led to an exploration of the monuments within our field to white supremacy and settler colonialism both physical and intellectual. For example, a July 2020 piece by Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune entitled "Pulling Down our Monuments" highlights the conversation happening within their organization to reckon with the white supremacist and settler colonial ideology of the founders, including John Muir. The ideas and biases of John Muir and other founders of western environmental movement serve to erase the contributions of people of color who are contemporary stewards of natural environments and have been in relationship with more than human others since time immemorial (Medin & Bang, 2014). Environmental educators of color created an online community and resource hub to center BIPOC called Intersectional Environmentalist to push back against this narrative and move the field beyond environmentalism to intersectional environmentalism. Intersectional environmentalism (Brown et al., 2020) paves the way for a nuanced conversation about the experiences and contributions of people of color in environmental movements.

D. A. Scipio (✉)
IslandWood, Bainbridge Island, Washington, USA
e-mail: deanas@islandwood.org

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Environmental Education (EE) organizations struggle to define the parameters of their work within increasingly diverse contexts (Romero et al., 2019). Our work as an EE non-profit entails using environmental science, outdoor, and informal education practices to work towards environmental justice. While broadening participation for educators from non-dominant communities historically underrepresented in EE fields is critical to this work, it is also necessary to prepare educators from within the dominant community to engage in the cultural and epistemic shifts that come with broadening participation in environmental justice education and action. I argue that the field of EE needs new kinds of educators who are prepared to embrace this work in the wake of the racial reckoning and the global pandemic.

Preparing educators who can think about environmental justice and the disparate climate impacts on people from non-dominant communities requires a different approach. The temptation to stay comfortably within the realm of environmentalism as a motivational frame aligns with an assimilationist frame that can pervade Western environmental approaches to understanding nature culture relations (Bang et al., 2012). EE is a historically and predominantly white field. Thus, my work towards broadening participation in EE involves multiple strategies. First, I am interested in increasing the numbers of people from non-dominant communities historically underrepresented in EE by changing the numbers of participants. This involves long-term goals for recruitment and retention of people from non-dominant communities whose experiences have and must continue to expand the field. In addition, as a field EE has a long way to go to avoid race-equity detours (Gorski, 2019). Gorski names four detours in his piece and five proposed solutions for educational equity, the approach that I describe in this chapter focused on curating learning experiences for the graduates in our program that are solution-oriented. We strive to "fix injustices, not kids" and take practical steps to help our graduates develop and deepen an "equity ideology" in their coursework. Parallel work could happen in orientation, training, and professional development contexts for educators who facilitate learning in informal learning environments.

Changing the demographics of EE must couple with a change to the existing paradigms within EE organizations that aligns with race-equity. This requires work at the organizational level to develop statements about commitments, trainings for existing and new staff, and organizational systems change to center Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI). There is a unique opportunity in predominantly and historically white EE organizations like mine to develop approaches to work towards these changes within graduate programs that nest within residential EE centers. This chapter is a worked example of ways that leverage what we are learning in our graduate program to support training and development for educators in other informal learning environments.

When working with graduate students who are novice teachers and mostly members of dominant communities, it is important to engage them in conversations about JEDI through the lenses of intersectional identities and positionality. Positionality asks students not only to share about their intersectional identities but also to place themselves within structures of social practice (Bell et al., 2012). This work occurs at the border of intersectional identities and positionality (Bang & Vossoughi,

2016; Crenshaw, 1991, p. 3; Kleinrock, 2021; Kleinsasser, 2000, p. 3; Warf, 2010). When working with graduate students from dominant communities, I try to engage through the lens of positionality because positionality asks students not only to share about their intersectional identities, but also to put themselves into new contexts, challenge themselves to engage with new paradigms and epistemologies, and prepare themselves for the life-long work of un-learning white supremacist ideas. Kendi (2019) challenged his readers to engage in antiracism as an active pursuit. Kendi argues that the racist/not racist dichotomy is not serving our work, we need people to commit to becoming antiracist. This work seeks to move towards an anti-racist imaginary.

My students come to the graduate program, seeking the opportunity to engage in anti-racist and intersectional environmentalism (Brown et al., 2020; Thomas, 2022). Often, they want to begin by learning more about their students and seek out tool kits or sets of pedagogical practices. This is understandable because JEDI work is complex. Graduates recognize the privilege and responsibility they bear for creating learning environments for BIPOC youth and want to know how to start this work. I encourage them to begin by examining themselves, an approach that aligns with anti-racism projects in many critical and practice-based teacher education programs (Thompson et al., 2020).

11.2 Theories

11.2.1 Intersectional Identities

Intersectionality is a term Crenshaw (1991) coined and used in a legal sense to describe the unique ways women of color experienced issues that would not have been ameliorated by programs to support women or programs to support people of color. Intersectional identities are not additive but rather combine differently for each individual. Within our program, my goal is to leverage the fact that each graduate student has unique intersectional identities made up of their personal histories, experiences, and backgrounds. I ask graduates to explore which intersectional identity markers are most important to them—e.g. race, gender, ability, socio-economic status, etc.

11.2.2 Positionality-Positioning Theory

Positioning theory is fundamentally about relationships. I borrowed the term from the field of geography where it is defined as,

> the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world. In this context, gender, race, class, and other aspects of identities are

> indicators of social and spatial positions and are not fixed, given qualities. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces (Warf, 2010, p. 2258)

This definition pushes against the idea that intersectional identities are static and reside within individuals, rather they are not fixed. Positionality allows us to think about how individuals are in relationship to one another, to disciplinary content, and to broader systems of power, privilege, and oppression. It is an ideal theoretical construct to guide the work I do with graduate students in my program. I ask them to examine the ways in which they are in relationships to each other, to the youth with whom they work, to the discipline they teach, and to broader systems of power, privilege, and oppression that shape the knowledge they hold about interactional contexts within our society.

When I speak with graduate students in my program about the connections between intersectional identities and positionality, I use the metaphor of orienteering to describe the impact of the ways that they are each located in different places with respect to systems of power, privilege, and oppression. In EE, orienteering refers to using compasses and maps to navigate through unfamiliar territory. Each graduate's intersectional identities can be imagined as different locations on a shared landscape. The features of the landscape make it more difficult or easier for each individual to navigate their way towards their goal. Some people may find themselves with a clear pathway, while others have to navigate a hill or traverse a stream to reach the goal. An individual's starting location on the map is the interaction between their intersectional identities and positionality or relationship to broader systems of power, privilege, and oppression. This is essential self-work to prepare educators who will facilitate learning experiences for youth and adults in a variety of informal learning environments.

11.3 Framework/Conceptual Links

11.3.1 Persons in Structures of Social Practice

I am invested in my students learning how to toggle between their individual experiences or intersectional identities and recognizing their positionality by seeing the impacts of broader systems of oppression. I want them to hold their personal experiences of the world as sensemaking schema but when it comes to racism, sexism, or ableism personal experience cannot lead to an understanding of the ways these constructs function systematically to confer power, privilege, and oppression. As individuals we have many experiences that shape the ways we perceive the world around us and the opportunities open to us. These personal experiences do not exist within a vacuum but are shaped by systems of social practice (Bell et al., 2012). This can be a difficult concept for students to grasp as these systems are self-protecting

and function in ways that obscure their impacts to people whose lived experiences are unchallenged. For example, a person whose name does not contain an accent would be unlikely to notice that most online systems cannot process accents. As a person whose name has an acute accent over the "e" changing the pronunciation of my name. I encounter a variety of error messages each time I try to write my name in an online form. My name is a big part of my identity and filling out forms on the internet for banking, medical, personal, and professional reasons, makes clear to me every day that my name is not "normal" or expected by persons who have power to design online data entry systems.

This part of my identity makes visible a systemic lack of recognition that people's names are important. It means I cannot bring my whole self to most online spaces and often means I must write my name incorrectly to complete necessary forms. While this may seem a trivial example, it shows the ways in which lack of epistemic heterogeneity can create oppressive systems. If more designers of technological systems were people from non-dominant communities, these systems would include ways to enter accents or other diacritical marks prevalent in other languages and used in English by many people of the global majority.

11.4 Teaching and Learning Context

IslandWood's graduate program in Education for Environment and Community is a praxis-oriented, designed learning environment that brings together theory and practice. Graduate students spend nine months immersed in a living and learning community. They take academic coursework while teaching in IslandWood's practicum—a teaching experience nested within a residential environmental program that serves 4–6th grade students (ages 9–12) from a large metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest (the Seattle metropolitan area and the Kitsap Peninsula). IslandWood's program is a layered learning environment where youth and adult learners participate in a complex ecosystem of learning. Youth in IslandWood's programs learn about environmental sustainability, interconnections, watersheds, ecosystems, collaboration and teamwork, natural history, ecology, and deepen their understandings of the natural world and their place within it. Graduate students' coursework covers many aspects of education, e.g., science methods, philosophy, natural history and ecology, child development, and advanced instruction strategies. These courses are enhanced by the experiences that graduates have in the field working as instructors. Graduates can bring frameworks and approaches they are learning in their coursework into the field to enhance their teaching and sensemaking about their work with youth. Then graduates can bring the things they are learning through their experiences in the field to help with their sensemaking in their academic coursework. This is praxis.

Islandwood is a residential environmental education center on 255 acres of land that includes multiple ecosystems and field structures. Each are distinct but interconnected learning environments. Graduate instructors design Land and Waters-based learning experiences for each group of 4–6th graders who come to Islandwood.

The teaching and learning environment is a dynamic space that changes with the weather and season. Graduate instructors need to be prepared to flex their lesson to the demands of locations, weather, season, and to meet the needs that individual groups of students bring to their week at our school in the woods.

Each graduate student takes a group of 10–12 school overnight program (SOP) students into the field with a backpack full of materials, books, first aid supplies, binoculars, field guides, student journals, and plans that need to be able to change on a dime. In addition to the physical materials grads carry we want them to also have conceptual tools and always bring a JEDI orientation to designing and implementing antiracist pedagogies. This is the nature of our dynamic informal learning environment. Graduate student instructors must remain responsive to the environment and student needs, and we want them to be guided by a strong JEDI lens. This chapter focuses on the coursework that grads complete during the academic component of our praxis program in order to draw attention to the type of training and development that we feel best prepares them to make JEDI informed decisions in their curricular planning and pedagogical practices. I hope that this can serve as a guide to designers and managers of informal science and informal learning environments who are creating and implementing JEDI trainings for their staff at their respective institutions.

Prior to coming to Islandwood as a graduate student in 2007, I worked in a variety of informal learning environments with youth—museums, after school, and summer programs. The teaching and learning experiences vary greatly in these designed environments yet I was seldom asked to explore or name theories or biases that guided my pedagogical or curricular choices. This chapter offers a theoretical framework and approach to the kind of training and ongoing learning that can support instructors and facilitators who work in informal learning environments to develop a strong JEDI lens that can guide their work with the increasingly diverse audiences who visit their institutions.

In my role as program director, I teach two courses in our program, one a foundations of education class in the beginning of the year and I bookend the year with a degree-completion, qualitative methods course. I see many connections between these courses, as both teaching and research require iterative cycles of design, implementation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, and re-design. Critical frames on research and teaching ask researchers and practitioners to engage in reflexive (Harré et al., 2009, p. 6; Kleinsasser, 2000, p. 3; Ravitch & Carl, 2021) and interpretive (Rosebery et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2001) work to understand themselves in relationship to their teaching or scholarship and to create environments that allow them to hear the voices of their students or participants. These courses together contribute to a broader understanding of two of the high-level conjectures that shape the work in our graduate program. These two high-level conjectures (shared below) describe the core elements of the designed-learning environment in our graduate program. They are based upon years of graduate programming, prior design experiences within praxis-oriented teaching and learning environments, and insights from critical scholarship. They represent the intentions we have for this learning environment.

1. Praxis-oriented, iterative teaching and learning create a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, allowing graduates to leverage personal experiences, develop schema, and deepen their understanding of educational theory.
2. Self-work is an important element of becoming a JEDI-informed educator. Deepening a sense of intersectional identities, understanding positionality, and developing a sense of place all play into this work.

In Fig. 11.1, I use conjecture mapping (Sandoval, 2014) to trace these high-level conjectures or design goals for graduate student learning through the embodiments and mediating processes that connect to these desired outcomes in our program. The figure is color coded to show how the high-level conjectures in the first column are connected to embodiments shown in column two, mediating processes shown in column three, and outcomes shown in column four. Embodiments refer to tools, materials, task structures, participant structures, or discursive practices. In the case of the IslandWood program, there is considerable overlap between the embodiments and mediating processes connected to each high-level conjecture. Conjecture mapping is a design and analysis tool that takes elements of designed environments, considers their impact, and makes visible how they interact with one another to lead to outcomes.

11.5 Teaching and Learning Approach

Booker and Esmonde encouraged learning scientists to leverage critical theories to "challenge normativity and address how power circulates and sorts" (2017, p. 163). I take this to mean it is incumbent upon me as a researcher and teacher educator to challenge normativity and address power in our learning environment—a school in the woods.

I take up this challenge in the foundations course at IslandWood. I ask graduate students to write a philosophy of education that includes intersectional identities and positionality statements. In the class, I define a positionality statement for my students. I use an academic definition of positionality and explain it refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher or educator in relation to the social and political context of a learning environment. I ask them to write a statement that includes their own identities and speaks to who they are in relationship to the discipline. I ask them to think about the following questions:

1. What motivates you to do this work? Why do you want to teach?
2. What aspects of your identity connect you to this work?
3. How do your values, viewpoints, and experience shape your connections to your teaching?

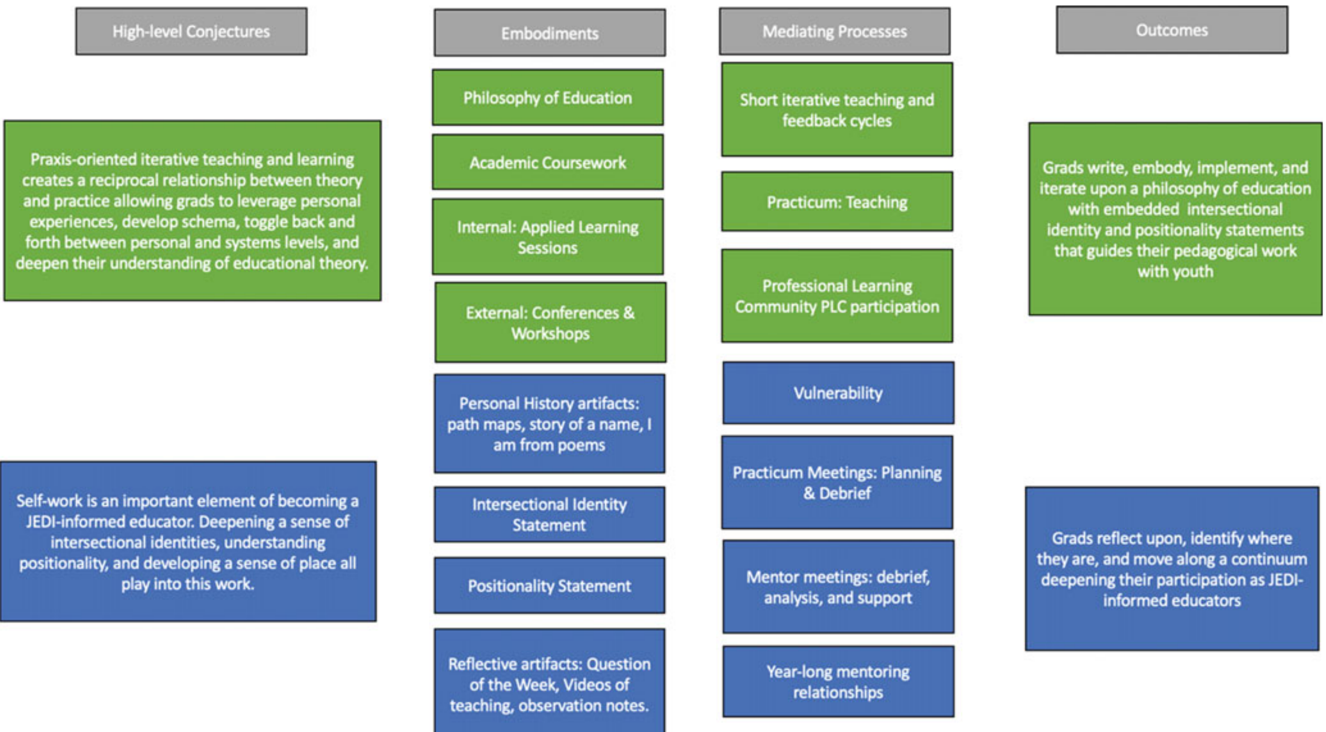

Fig. 11.1 Conjecture map (Sandoval, 2014) of the Education for Environment and Community graduate program showing two high-level conjectures with their interconnected embodiments and mediating processes leading to desired program outcomes

This approach creates opportunities for graduate students to leverage their lived experiences and place them into conversation with broader systems of power, privilege, and oppression. I use intersectional identity theory to help them better understand the complexities of their identities and positionality theory to push them to consider their identities in relationship to broader systems. The outcome is a situation in which graduate students can understand more about the role power plays in the relationships between their intersectional identities and systems of oppression. Graduate students come to realize that while certain aspects of their intersectional identities position them in powered ways, other aspects of their identities create vulnerabilities. Coming to understand these complexities helps the graduate students prepare themselves to work with youth from both non-dominant and dominant communities. This approach can be used by designers and trainers in many other informal learning institutions to prepare facilitators who can design antiracist curriculum and implement pedagogy to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse participants who come to their informal learning environments.

In the following sections, I share some vignettes to highlight how graduates respond to the assignment. For some students like Susan this type of work is novel and makes them explore elements of their identities that they may never have questioned before. The process of exploring their identities can make the familiar strange. Asking graduates to create statements about their intersectional identities resists normativity and the myth of objectivity in teaching and learning environments. Especially for members of dominant groups, it can be difficult for them to see how their identities shape their pedagogical choices, epistemologies, and the biases they are bringing into their work with youth. For Susan a member of many dominant communities who had never been asked to identify her intersectional identities this was a very dauting task. For Mary, a woman with both dominant and non-dominant identities, the activity opened up new pathways for her learning and development.

11.5.1 Positionality Vignette: Susan

One of the young women in my foundations class, I will call her Susan, asked me to meet with her during office hours because she was having a hard time drafting her philosophy-of-education statement. She was one of the younger and less experienced members of our class, having come to IslandWood straight out of an undergraduate program in natural sciences. She was typically silent in class, and I considered it a success when she began to share her opinions with the class. I sat with her during office hours and asked her to tell me what was challenging for her about the assignment. She told me she did not know how to answer the questions I had asked. The assignment pushed her to engage in a type of thinking she never had done before.

When Susan came to ask me about how to write her positionality statement, she came to figure out how to secure the grades she wanted for the class, and it was also the beginning of an exploration for her. The exploration of her intersectional identities was tied to her grade and thus the assignment pushed her boundaries and encouraged

her to develop a better understanding of the frames that she uses to make sense of the world, and how they interact with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

11.5.2 Positionality Vignette: Mary

Another young woman, let us call her Mary, came to office hours to discuss her positionality statement. She was the oldest person in the class and came to her writing from a different standpoint. Her journey through the class was one of coming to articulate her theoretical frameworks. The assignment pushed her to explore educational philosophy and theory to find work that resonated with her stances and approaches to teaching.

For Mary, the exercise allowed her to crystallize theoretical approaches she wanted to incorporate into her teaching practice. Whereas for Susan this exercise was one in which she confronted for the first time the idea of how to answer these questions. The assignment pushed both students to understand the theory and put into practice intersectionality and positionality.

Including self-work and introspection as a classroom assignment played a role in each student's willingness to engage in this task. The graduates in my program had to engage with these theories to complete the assignment which in turn pushed their thinking. However, I recognize the privileged position of doing this work within a graduate program. Without the formal teaching and learning structures of a graduate program, designers of educator training in other informal learning environments will need to explore the kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for engaging in this type of self-work.

11.6 Discussion

Strategically speaking, approaches that focus on developing empathy via engaging in conversations about privilege and white fragility remain problematic. The problem is not that these constructs are untrue but rather that they do not seem to be effective levers to pull as we seek to change perceptions and behavior, especially for educators with dominant intersectional identities and positionality that confer power and privilege. As an EE educator attempting to broaden participation in JEDI work within the field, I seek to support the development of race-equity conspirators and co-conspirators. Using the term co-conspirator to describe dominant participants appeals to me in race-equity work because it implies how deeply engaged we all must be. People with power and privilege must be to be willing to risk as much as their non-dominant colleagues as we strive for equity. I am interested in changing what it means to participate in environmental education such that more and diverse ways of knowing become included in our community of learners. This is the work of desettling environmental education (Bang et al., 2012).

Preparing educators who will work in informal environments to think about environmental justice and the disparate impacts of climate change on people from nondominant communities requires a nuanced approach. The temptation to stay within an environmentalism frame aligns with the assimilationist impulses that can pervade unexamined western approaches to EE. Rather, this work can begin with asking educators to develop new complex understandings of themselves, their intersectional identities, and positionality. These more nuanced understanding can translate into more nuanced approaches to designing and working in informal teaching and learning environments.

If researchers and practitioners are interested in informal practitioners who can develop complex understandings of nature-culture relations and the generative power of multiple epistemologies, attending to intersectional identities and positionality as they write their philosophies of education is a starting point. The work of identifying and naming intersectional identities and positionality while writing philosophies of education challenges educators to consider how they have developed as persons within structures of social practice (Bell et al., 2012). The assignment highlights self-reflection and can make visible the connections between who educators are and how they teach. This assignment is one of the ways that teacher educators can push future educators to recognize the impacts of systems of power, privilege, and oppression on their lives and on the lives of the participants they will work with in informal teaching and learning environments.

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Déana Aeolani Scipio is the Director of the Graduate Program in Education for Environment and Community (EEC) at IslandWood, an environmental education non-profit on Bainbridge Island. In her role as EEC program director at IslandWood, she teaches classes, manages the faculty, supports graduate students, and is involved in an iterative design process to improve upon the program and make ever stronger connections to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI). Her research focuses on redefining broadening participation in STEM. As a design-based researcher, she has designed and studied learning environments within formal and informal contexts. As a designer of learning environments, Dr. Scipio focuses on equitable design, creating spaces for learners from non-dominant groups to demonstrate and create disciplinary expertise, architecting community-university partnerships to facilitate multidirectional learning, and helping experts and mentors build pedagogical capacity. During her PhD program at the University of Washington, Dr. Scipio was a graduate researcher at the institute for Science and Math education and the LIFE Center where she served as the project and research coordinator for Project COOL: Chemical Oceanography Outside the Laboratory an out-of-school time chemical oceanography program that brought youth, undergraduates, graduate students, and scientists together to work on water-based science research and communication projects. COOL was developed in partnership with a citizen science organization called SoundCitizen. SoundCitizen works with the public to collect and mail in water samples from many locations around Puget Sound and then tests the samples for a variety of natural, industrial, and household chemicals in order to understand cycles of chemical presence and absence in Puget Sound waters. She continues to collaborate with researchers and colleagues at the University of Washington on writing projects, NSF grants, and research projects at the intersection of STEM learning, broadening participation that are aligned with advancing IslandWood's mission and vision.