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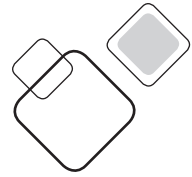
Positionality in Teaching: Implications for Advancing Social Justice

ANGELICA PAZ ORTIZ, BETH TARASAWA, NOELLE AL-MUSAIFRY, ANMARIE TRIMBLE, AND JACK STRATON

ABSTRACT | Teaching classes concerned with justice and equity led us to understand that we must model justice and equity in all of our work. In order to ask students to be vulnerable in talking about how they have been exposed to, and impacted by, society's messages about race, gender, and sexual identity, we have a responsibility to first demonstrate that vulnerability ourselves. Thus, our work is more about "being" than "doing." Modeling honest self-assessment allows us to ask students to be reflective about their relationship to power, privilege, and oppression. A reader hesitating to do this work should remember that analyzing power imbalances, misshapen structures, and hidden assumptions are familiar critical thinking tasks. If talking about our own mistakes, struggles, and fears is central to the curriculum, that lessens the fear of making mistakes in a new endeavor and even normalizes and values these moments. Just as students benefit from a new openness to authentic stories of others, and a deeper understanding of their own stories, so are teachers' lives enriched thereby.

We teach at a large public university that has nontraditional students, ages ranging from 18 to 80. Our individual disciplines span humanities and natural and social sciences. What unites us is a call to develop the capabilities of our students beyond the mere understanding of a structural basis of inequality, where we encourage them to look deeper into their own stakes in systems of power and domination. We implement specific pedagogical practices and theories in our classrooms with the intention of giving students the tools to co-create impactful learning communities, and we see our classrooms as sites for transformative education to develop civil discourse.

More specifically, we see it as our responsibility to advance the Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice goal. In doing this, we hope to empower our students through practicing reflexivity that fosters a greater understanding of positionality and power (Ackerly & True, 2008). We facilitate expanding worldview, navigating vulnerability within and valuing people's authentic stories in order to challenge false universalism. We have to acknowledge our multiple identities (within ourselves and across the classroom community), our particular disciplinary lenses within an interdisciplinary context, and pedagogical tools to foster that shift in our students, and also to help them figure out what power and hope they have to work toward social justice.

In this article, we examine how we develop students' ideas and actions about various systems of oppression in our University Studies freshman courses "Race and Social Justice" and "Work of Art," and a senior-level "Mentoring and Empowerment" Capstone course. (For a detailed description of the program, please see the introduction in volume 1 of this issue.) We discuss how we guide our students to be engaged citizens and successful in their careers, while also critically reflecting on the ways we bring our own identities to the classroom to create a student-centered pedagogy for teaching University Studies' diversity, equity, and social justice goal. We highlight ways we meet the challenges in this navigation and the pedagogical approaches made possible by it with specific attention to how our positionalities differ from each other.

Pedagogical Approaches by Faculty of Color to Unpack Color-blind Racism

—Angelica Paz Ortiz and Beth Tarasawa

Like many general education programs in higher education, University Studies pushes for greater attention to issues of equity and inclusion and calls on faculty members to address power relations and social justice. However, research suggests that college students often avoid topics of racism because they do not think of themselves as racist, or as being complicit in the reproduction of institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Moreover, while many students accept that race continues to be a consistent determinant of various educational, employment, and sociopolitical outcomes in the United States and abroad, far fewer students are willing to challenge their positionalities in the perpetuation of structural inequality. We work with a Freshman Inquiry class titled "Race and Social Justice." A majority of the students we work with in this class have self-selected to be in this course rather than other courses that do not have the word "race" in their titles. Having many of the students choose to be in a course that foregrounds a racial analysis creates a unique opportunity for us to bring

advanced critical lenses about race and oppression to a first-year freshmen class and necessitates our genuine commitment to teaching students about systemic and systematic racism.

Being committed to students in a way that not only acknowledges but also honors their identities in the classroom requires intention and self-reflection. Education that is concerned with justice and equity has responsibilities to every student. Unfortunately, the identities of people of color are often marginalized in institutions of higher education–where whiteness dominates space, curricula, and activities on college campuses across the nation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). A pedagogical practice that frames our ability to advocate for students' most meaningful learning is actively decentering what Patricia Hill Collins famously calls "Eurocentric masculinist epistemology" (2002). Two concrete ways we can do this work is (1) to center scholarship rooted in communities of color and (2) by honoring the salience of identity.

We argue that epistemologies situated in communities of color *and* queerness have the capacity to understand the complexities of the social world. These counterhegemonic epistemologies bring critical lenses to historical and political contexts that dominant epistemologies mask (Bernal, 2002). Furthermore, we believe pedagogical tools that allow all students to learn from a variety of nondominant perspectives empowers students of color by affirming their lived experiences and makes advancements in reducing the alienation and antagonization often felt in institutions of higher education (Harper, 2012).

Honoring the salience of identity in the learning community of the classroom is essential as it brings a real-life application to the forefront of a curriculum. We do a social identity mapping workshop where the students and instructors, as a learning collective, create a list of different forms of oppression and their corresponding agent and target identities (Adams & Bell, 2016). For example, a student would map cisgender, which refers to people who identify with the gender they are assigned at birth, as an agent identity. That student would then identify transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, 2 Spirit, and other nonbinary genders as target identities and name the oppression that privileges cisgender individuals. After mapping about nearly 20 different forms of oppression, we, as instructors, map ourselves in front of the class and then ask students to map themselves independently. We conclude the activity by having a free write and short discussion about how it feels to connect systems of oppression to our own identities.

This activity asks students to be honest about their relationship to power, privilege, and oppression. In asking the students to be vulnerable in this way, we have a responsibility to first demonstrate the vulnerability in the mapping of ourselves. Often in the short discussion following the activity or even

throughout the mapping of different oppressions, students will share their experiences with systemic power. We find this activity also brings challenges and tensions to the forefront, which can be beneficial. For instance, students who have exceedingly more agent than target identities might be resistant to claiming their privilege. This challenge comes up inevitably throughout the course. When this tension arises, it pushes students to have a conversation that differentiates struggle and suffering from oppression. Furthermore, such pedagogical approaches challenge hostile racial climates frequently cited by students of color on college campuses that fail to address the negative experiences of racism and marginalization (Harper, 2012).

Our identities are never separate from our work or education. Though we do not have a choice in this as many of our identities are physically visible, it is an intentional part of our practice to bring our identities to the classroom consciously. Our families of color taught us early on to be critical of, and to trouble, Eurocentric masculinist epistemology. Because of this, disavowing hegemonic epistemologies is an essential part of our learning and teaching practices. One of Eurocentric masculinist epistemology's most defining frameworks is the privileging of objectivity (Collins, 2002). In the context of social identity, objectivity is problematic. Rejecting the prioritization of objectivity helps the learning community to understand each other as whole human beings with rich perspectives. In class discussion, this often looks like students connecting their experiences to course materials.

Our class is often one of the first experiences where students are encouraged to think critically about their relationships to power. Since students are not always accustomed to deciphering their experiences from systemic patterns of power and oppression, it is common for students to conclude their singular experiences are universal truths. Since our framework disavows a hegemonic use of objectivity, we must strategically create a curriculum that helps students to understand the world beyond themselves. For example, one of our assignments asks students to observe a public space, of their choice, with a critical queer and feminist lens. We ask students to carefully analyze a specific space in Portland as a starting-off point for thinking about how physical spaces both shape–and are shaped by–the social interactions that occur within them. After spending a couple of hours observing the physical, social, and cultural dynamics of the space, they write a reflection that examines the relationship between the structure of the space and the unspoken gender and sexual norms at work in that space. We ask them to reflect on what assumptions are at work that allow some people and not others to access that space or to experience safety and belonging, to consider how other forms of difference (e.g., race, age, ability) might be shaping the character of the space, and to offer concrete suggestions to make this particular space intentionally more inclusive.

We foreground such assignments with lessons on heteronormativity as it is stitched through society, structures of power, and everyday life. Additionally, Bernal (2002) claims that the systematic rendering of students of color as ignorant or intellectually incompetent is one of the most effective ways that higher education disenfranchises students of color. Honoring the ways that identity is central to our experience of education can begin interrupting this narrative. Thus, it requires faculty to shift toward the centrality of diversity as an institutional priority with continued self-evaluation to drive meaningful systematic change (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). Only by sharing our own experiences of racism in education can students think through their own in broader contexts.

Can I Really Teach Diversity If I Am _____?

—Jack C. Straton

Can those trained in a field without apparent ties to social issues teach diversity? This quantum theorist finds that the structural issues, power imbalances, and the hidden bias of oppression are largely critical-thinking issues familiar to anyone trained in an analytic field (Straton, 2007, 2015).

The more difficult challenge may be finding a natural path to the topic from the broader curriculum. In "The Work of Art" Freshman Inquiry course, I help my students find their authentic voices as visual artists, musicians, and such. Once they come to value authenticity in artistic expression–even valuing more those authentic voices significantly different of their own–the extension to valuing authentic voices of those culturally different from them becomes possible and even exciting.

A second key is to have students teach each other lessons they would not as willingly hear from their professor. I have groups of six students choose an "-ism" they wish to teach about and one of nine lenses a full course on oppression theory might address—overcoming resistance to learning, presenting the voices of the oppressed, institutional oppression, and so on (Straton, 2000, 2005)—and present a 75-minute workshop winter term after I train them on facilitation skills fall term. Some student workshops on racism and sexism, in particular, have outshone some of the finest professional presentations on these topics that I have ever seen.

If neither the research field of the instructor nor the primary story-arc of the course needs be a barrier to successful inclusion of a significant diversity component, what about the identity of the instructor? Since I am on the top-side of most societal hierarchies, a course designed to bring into the room authentic stories of the experience of oppression runs the risk of exploiting students of color to educate white students, female students to educate male students, and so on. I have circumvented this problem by extracting hundreds of roughly

three-minute video clips from documentaries and films showing men of color, women of all ethnicities, queer folk, and so on, speaking about their experiences that I can bring into the discussion.

One might also ask what right I have to engage students on this topic. If one interprets "diversity education" as about "multicultural appreciation," this may be a valid concern, though no instructor of color is going to have the inside experience of every ethnic group, either. In any case, if one instead interprets "diversity education" as having a significant anti-bias training component, a European American may have the inside track.

Many Freshman Inquiry classes are composed mostly of white students, many of whom have led fairly insular lives, having ideas of race formed by dominant culture and family members that center on denial, minimization, and false universalization of the experiences of people of color (Nile & Straton, 2003). I have found that the key to unlocking student willingness to imagine that racism actually exists is to lay bare my own internalization of racial judgments.

I show a film (Davis, 2005) recapitulating the 1940s doll studies (Clark & Clark, 1947) in which black children as young as five still internalize a preference for white dolls over black dolls. What do white kids learn about blackness by age five? Margaret Beale Spencer tested 133 children from four schools in the greater New York area and four in Georgia and found that 66% of the four- to five-year-old white children pointed to the two darkest skin tones when asked to "show me the mean child," and 76% responded in this way to "show me the dumb child" (CNN, 2010). Does this early learning eventually wear off? I tell the following story to my class to answer this question:

> I grew up with parents who were believers in justice. I began working for gender justice in 1985, and a few years later began doing antiracist workshops around the country. I facilitate an interracial dialogue group that has been meeting monthly for 17 years. So if anyone were to be free of racial prejudice, it would be someone like me.
>
> Yet a couple of years ago, I was facilitating an interracial dialog on the topic of White privilege when one of the Latinos present mentioned a book he was reading in French. My instant mental response was, "French? But he is Latino!" Rapidly following upon the first thought was a second mental flash. "Well, of course, he is bilingual in his birth language and English, but English does not count because he needs that to survive in the U.S. My third thought was, "What the Bleep?"
>
> How many languages do you guess I am fluent in? Indeed, one [language]. I, who know less nevertheless feel free to sit in judgment of those who know more. That is the consciousness of white supremacy. Thus, mine is the face of white supremacy!

This is a fascinating moment in the classroom because the worst thing many white students could imagine is being told they "are racist" and here I am owning up to a worse condition. I have seen jaws literally drop. As I continue, this shock seems to open the door for some learning:

> My next mental response to my initial startlement at a Latino's fluency in French was, "Where the hell did that come from?" I have never consciously thought through the differential linguistic propensities of various ethnicities. Why would I have any reaction other than, "That's great, I wish I had taken French"?
>
> Interestingly enough, I did not feel guilt at my prejudiced reactions. I felt slimed. I was angry at a society that could slip such thoughts into my skull without me knowing it. After all, I never signed up for Bigotry 101, and yet the learning was there. I was also grateful for the opportunity to shine a light on the corners of my mind where white supremacy lurks, examining specimens and hopefully putting them out with the trash.
>
> I generally feel no shame for the racial stereotypes that turn up in my mind, because I am not the one who put them there. This culture is awash in prejudicial messages and every person of color with whom I have talked about racism has said that she or he has taken on some of society's messages telling people of color that they are inferior. They all fight it, but it is still there. Why should people like me be surprised to find that we have internalized these same messages?
>
> Please hear that I am not calling anyone here "a racist"; I am simply offering you my own story and a process for healing if you ever do notice anything peculiar in your own responses to things. Instead of feeling shame for having internalized bigoted thoughts, I recommend getting angry at a system that teaches us lies and then teaches us to lie to ourselves about what we are taught. I find that this process gives permission to all of my students to be open about the times that they, too, have noticed some of society's messages about race and gender and such sticking to the insides of their skulls, without fear of being "called out" for it.

A Pedagogy of Role-modeling Positionality in Community-based Learning

—Anmarie Trimble and Noelle Al-Musaifry

Our "Mentoring and Empowerment Senior Capstone" invites students from diverse majors to be academic mentors and tutors at the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), a trauma-informed, urban Indian organization.

NAYA is a large, dynamic, wraparound social services agency that includes educational programs for youth spanning kindergarten through college. This continuum of services strives to combat the poor enrollment, attendance, achievement, and graduation rates seen in Native communities. These programs work by forming a relationship with youth rooted in education that affirms their identity. NAYA's mission is "to enhance the diverse strengths of our youth and families in partnership with the community through cultural identity and education," and is a response to genocide through education. To support this mission, Anmarie teaches capstone students the pedagogy and practice of peer-relational mentoring/tutoring at Portland State concurrent with weekly time engaged at NAYA, where Noelle operates a culturally specific afterschool program and acts as a community liaison and trainer for volunteers in several programs at NAYA. Our collaboration illustrates the effectiveness of instructor and community-partner mentorship that role models dialogic reflective practice in both the academic classroom and community site, to create an educational environment emphasizing relationship building and exploration of personal identity within social power structures.

Community Partners as Role Models in Overcoming Trauma through Mentor Relationships

—Noelle Al-Musaifry

You are on native land. Right now. This land is not yours. Ours is not a nation of immigrants. Do not look away from the ongoing genocide against the original inhabitants of this land. While various aspects of colonization and genocide have bestowed violence, substance use, and poverty upon my community, the malevolence of boarding schools has left us with significant historical trauma regarding education. My primary responsibility is to support NAYA's youth in the context of this trauma, and I am also the main on-site support for our primarily White capstone students. I welcome them into our community and ask them to reflect on the harmful notions they hold about my people. I share the impact of boarding schools on my family and the difficulty of being indigenous in academia, as well as how mentoring helped me survive and persist through graduate school. Understanding this dark legacy is prerequisite to providing my community educational support.

Pedagogy that does not situate itself in the historical and political context of learners and partners is insulting and oppressive. Therefore, we begin the term introducing capstone students to boarding school policies which, from the 19th century, forcibly removed hundreds of thousands of our children

from their homes to "educate" them in order to destroy our communities and culture. The motto of these institutions was "kill the Indian and save the man," disguising assimilation and eradication as education. Capstone students learn this by watching and reading accounts written by my community that embody this legacy and its continuing impact on us. Modern history texts describe my people in the past tense and glorify genocidal colonizers. Modern pedagogical tools oppose our ways of being while labeling our children incapable. This aggressive program of dispossession socializes and incentivizes mainstream ignorance and denial.

These voices are critical to Anmarie's curriculum, but also a necessary context for our relationship, and for building relationships between our students. Helping our community requires understanding our lived history. Texts can help, but the pedagogy we use requires voices and worldviews from within the community, applied with an understanding only possible through relationship.

The pedagogical framework we use is the Relational Worldview Model (RWVM). It focuses on a balance among body, mind, spirit, and context and is often represented by the medicine wheel (Cross, 2013). This model is about healing and avoiding harm. I explain to them what my grandmother explained to me: I must approach things in a good way. I affect everything, which in turn affects me, my family, my community, and my world. The RWVM challenges the idea that we can understand or even see things in isolation, grounding us in the reality of the space between us. When we invite capstone students to consider the RWVM as a foundation for mentoring, we ask them to suspend the linear and dismembered way of thinking encouraged in academia. Reintegration or wholeness is the goal of the RWVM.

Anmarie heeds this model by bringing her whole self to her students and our relationship. While struggling with racism is not inherently virtuous (though some view it as such), Anmarie's transparency about her struggle uncovers valuable insights that become teaching opportunities. Reflecting on early missteps in cross-cultural communication has helped her identify essential skills for her students, such as emphasizing listening and asking questions as the foundational basis of creating relationships, and that mentorship is more about "being" than "doing." This vulnerability and role modeling have been crucial to an effective pedagogical structure that supports cross-cultural mentoring, and it strengthens the peer relationships formed between our students. These relationships establish trust early in the term, giving my students opportunities to ask their mentors in-depth questions about navigating universities, which aligns well with a one-on-one, hands-on learning model that is more familiar to Native students. Through these relationships, my students can begin to see themselves as more connected to the university and gain a broader and more concrete conception of what their future may hold.

Instructors as Role Models for Reflective Self-actualization

—Anmarie Trimble

When NAYA and I first partnered in 2006, I saw the capstone as an opportunity to connect NAYA youth with college students as well as an interdisciplinary inquiry into oppressive educational legacies. However, halfway into the term, despite an academically rigorous curriculum on student-centered mentoring with supportive cultural and historical context, non-Native students' assumptions posed significant barriers to creating meaningful relationships at NAYA, not to mention with students of color and indigenous peers in our class. White students claimed NAYA youth were just like "any other kid" since they did not conform to their idea of "Indian," and puzzled why the Learning Center did not focus exclusively on homework. Further, students wondered what historical narratives had to do with tutoring practice and, in startling moments of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), interpreted the texts as "attacking whites." I realized I needed a more conscientious curriculum for students to identify and reflect on the assumptions they were bringing to NAYA.

A focus on unpacking assumptions has remained core to my class as white students consistently bring at least one of the following attitudes: a desire to "save" the disadvantaged "other"; minimization of colonialism's impact on current cultural beliefs; and a fear of being perceived as racist, resulting in silent passivity. To role model the vulnerability needed to reflect on these assumptions authentically, I introduce bell hooks's (1996) pedagogy of self-actualization and share examples of coming to terms with my "savior" beliefs as a teacher (with MadTV's "Nice White Lady" [2007] sometimes serving as springboard), and continually unpack the social power I see at play in my racial and cultural identity. My students have been more willing to share their mistakes and fears, and empathetically listen to others, when I talk about my own mistakes, struggles, and fears.

This practice is supported by the RWVM as well as the neuroscience of perception, which I introduce alongside practical cross-cultural communication texts and in-class exercises intended to help reduce (or redress) the inevitability of mistakes. I scaffold these concepts according to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (2011), as most white students at Portland State tend to minimize difference.

A central supportive practice is the weekly written reflection assignment, which prepares them for in-class discussion. Students reflect on the week's readings and their time at NAYA. The assignment asks students to broaden the traditional academic emphasis on intellect, to consider their emotional

experiences as a rigorous subject. Students often wonder if it is appropriate to write about their strong emotional reactions to the readings. It is not only appropriate, but also I encourage this: emotional experiences are an important component of learning. Though I suggest, instead of summarizing their reactions, "turn the mirror on yourself and ask, why am reacting this way? What cultural or other 'lens' is influencing how I view the information or narrative? How might my experience with the issue (or lack thereof) be shaping my reactions? What do I want my peers to understand about my reaction to the text?"

Most students share these experiences when framed around the RWVM, and by term's end, most can engage in complex dialogue about diversity, equity, and social justice. Sharing anxieties, fears, and confusion about engaging across difference also fosters empathy and a sense of responsibility to continue these dialogs beyond the campus, despite our divisive social climate.

Conclusion

As educators who are committed to anti-oppressive teaching, we are continuously called to provide critical reflections of what we bring to our classrooms and community partners. In this article we discuss some of our strategies that engage students in anti-oppressive work and learning. Our tactics are determined by the details of our courses, our contexts, and our identities. For those of us who are white, we must be honest and forthcoming about the ways that our whiteness inevitably and constantly indoctrinates us with feelings of superiority. This serves as a model for our students with a variety of agent identities to reflect on the ways that they benefit from an oppressive power imbalance. Once we know how to identify the ways we wield privilege in oppressive ways we can begin to subvert that and instead wield privilege toward social justice.

For those of us who are people of color we must interrogate not only our agent identities (being cisgender, for example), but also the ways that we have internalized white supremacy in our lives and in our perceptions of self. To be a person of color in academia is to be unceasingly conscious of not being taken advantage of and to know that the knowledge of our mothers and grandmothers is even more abundant than that which we are trained to see as most valuable (read: eurocentric masculinist epistemology). As seen in each of our sections, all of our pedagogical choices are deliberate and strategic and determined largely by our positionalities. We craft our classes in such a way to continue learning about social justice for, and to empower, our students and ourselves.

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