Teaching Intersectionality: Moving Between Theory and Practice

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Cover Page Footnote
Thank you to my WGSS 201 students for all of the lessons we learned together. Additionally, thank you to Rachel Silverman and the wonderful people with the OSCLG. Lastly, thank you to Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Kathryn Armstrong, and Joan Dudley for all of the words of support.

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Teaching intersectionality: Moving between theory and practice

Intersectionality was developed to address that we belong to multiple identity groups that simultaneously shape our positions in this world (Crenshaw, 1991). Each identity category carries hierarchical social dynamics. Even if someone is privileged in a particular category, they are still subject to the system overall. As feminist educators, we teach our students to understand the importance of one’s standpoint and the oppressions faced by particular groups. As we encourage our students to work against systems of oppression, intersectionality reminds us that systems of oppression are connected. We cannot address one system without addressing the others. Therefore, intersectionality is a useful tool to moving toward a more equitable society.

Below, I share the ways I teach intersectionality in my classrooms by moving between theory and practice. While not the only way to teach intersectionality, my approach helps students comprehend and later apply intersectionality in engaging ways, such as advocating for social change and developing service projects. First, I discuss how to introduce intersectionality through classroom discussion. Second, I highlight how starting with the self, benefits student understanding. Lastly, I mention ways to incorporate intersectionality throughout the course.

Shifting to Visible

When I talk about identity, power, and privilege with students in freshmen and sophomore-level communication courses and gender studies courses, I get four student responses: 1) students who cast me as someone promoting a liberal agenda, 2) students (typically non-white/non-man) who can’t wait to bash white men or talk about how they are marginalized, 3) students who are apathetic, and 4) students who understand intersectionality. My hope is that all the students will move to or remain in the last group. To help get students to that fourth mindset, I start the classroom conversation with the able-bodied experience. I begin with the question: “Where is the nearest ramp?” While many students know that there is a ramp outside adjacent to the parking lot, few ever know where it is in relation to the doors of the building. “What if you needed the ramp?” I ask. Eventually this discussion leads to the conversation about buildings and pathways being originally created without a consideration for people with disabilities. The addition of ramps was an afterthought. I tell my students to imagine what it feels like to be an afterthought. I want the students to imagine what it feels like to be invisible in those contexts – there they are existing for everyone to (not) see.

In the discussion, I move from practice to theory – using the example to explain the concept of intersectionality. Since most of my students are/were able-bodied, many of them do not readily recognize their able-bodied privilege.
Therefore, I am able to sneak around potential bias and misconceptions, such as intersectionality only relates to belonging to multiple identity categories (Grzanka, 2019) or intersectionality only benefits marginalized people (Carbado, 2013). These misconceptions are built on the simplification of intersectionality as only identity and ignore the critical nature of the concept. Our belonging to multiple identity groups is tied to interconnected systems of oppression. All identities (those privileged and those marginalized) are affected by those systems.

**Starting with Self**

After the discussion about ramps, I move conversations to the students by having students question the identities they have and how they function in society. This has been a great way for students to get practice with understanding and applying the concept of intersectionality as they personalize it. It also provides an opportunity to correct misconceptions. In one assignment, I had students write about how intersectionality shows up in their lives. One past student – a cisgender Black bisexual woman – only listed her marginalized identities. Another student – a cisgender white heterosexual Christian male – stated that intersectionality only helped marginalized people. In another assignment – an ad analysis – most students were able to mark identities like age, race, and sex through physical appearance, but then they struggled to mark those which may be harder to readily discern, like sexual orientation and citizenship. In these moments, the class and I get to shift back to the concept to understand intersectionality better. During this shift to the concept, I shift practice to theory. I remind students of why intersectionality was developed. This reminder helps students understand how intersectionality is both theory and practice. It was created not just to think about inequality but also to address it. Furthermore, I link student examples to the definition, so they see how I move from theory to practice.

After reviewing the concept again, I have students consider how intersectionality can make a difference – their turn to move from theory to practice. The cisgender Black bisexual woman student shared that her sex education in high school would have benefitted from intersectionality. She stated that more inclusive comprehensive sex education would help LGBTQ+ students like her understand their sexuality. I pushed her further to consider how heterosexual and/or cisgender students would also benefit by gaining a fuller understanding of human sexuality. She and others acknowledged how learning inclusive comprehensive sex education would help them better understand themselves and others. It would also help them have conversations with others about gender and sexuality. In particular, the cisgender Black bisexual woman stated that she had limited knowledge about the transgender experience. So, she would have learned more and could be a better advocate. The cisgender white heterosexual Christian male student discussed how he had not thought about his
gender, race and sexuality affected his life. But after learning about intersectionality, he was felt more aware and wanted others to be more aware as well. He stated that awareness was the first step in addressing systemic oppression. These classroom moments show that when students reflect on their experiences, they are able to see what intersectionality looks like in the real world and how it can make a difference to people like them. After a while, they are able to extend their application to how intersectionality can make a difference to all.

**Incorporating Intersectionality Throughout**

I have found that the classroom offers a space to engage in liberatory praxis (hooks, 1991). Since intersectionality serves as a productive analytic tool to examine the rhetorical discourses of erasure and to challenge oppressive discourses, movement between theory and practice helps students develop an intersectional lens to highlight identities often invisible in dominant discourses. So, working from an intersectional framework creates opportunities for a liberatory, critical praxis, connecting theory and practice, in the classroom. Therefore, I incorporate an intersectional perspective throughout the course even before we talk about the concept in class.

There are several things that I do to incorporate intersectionality throughout the course. I cannot ask students to move between theory and practice if I don’t. One of my favorite things has been increasing the diversity of supplemental materials in the classroom and including works on/by diverse peoples. I’ve invited speakers to discuss a variety of topics from Black queer performance aesthetics to escaping a cult to the stigma strippers face. I link videos, articles, and blogs from content creators representing different faiths, races, sexualities, and genders. I do this to counter an epistemically privileged canon. The lack of diversity in course material from most courses reflects that we accept an epistemically privileged canon without questioning that privilege. Epistemic privilege shows “how the world is currently structured in a way that implicitly affirms the belief systems of the socially privileged” (Pilipchuk, 2016, para. 6). An epistemically privileged canon keeps certain peoples invisible. More diversity addresses that visibility.

At times, I have felt intimidated to teach the works of/about those from other social groups (Lorde, 1984). In this case, “permission” to speak on groups to which I do not belong is important. The intersectional educator does not speak for all oppressed peoples but amplifies the voices of those who are marginalized. This amplification helps the educator point back to voices in the community. Moreover, this amplification can address rhetorical discourses harming those most vulnerable. For example, while I cannot speak to being non-binary, I can amplify that experience in my classroom by inviting non-binary guest speakers. While I do not know what it is like to be undocumented, I can introduce writings and videos from those who do. In turn, students become more mindful of the various
systems of oppression at work. They start to bring in supplemental material from their own research to expand conversations in class. And fortunately, many of my students who rolled their eyes and immediately cast me as someone promoting a liberal agenda, who couldn’t wait to bash White men or talk about how they are marginalized, or who were apathetic shift to a greater understanding of intersectionality.
References