Exploring Intersectionality

A Self-Study of Learning Together

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Critical Friendship | Dialogical Self Theory | Intersectionality | https://equitypress.org/

> *"We must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict and confusion and possibility; and we must become adept at making do with the messiness of that condition and at finding agency within (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 176).*

We are teacher educators at a small catholic liberal arts institution in the mid-Atlantic, USA, who infuse intersectionality and social justice topics in classroom discourse attending to our students' experiences as first-generation college students from immigrant and underrepresented backgrounds. Charity is a faculty member and associate dean in the School of Education. Self- study affords her the opportunity to explore and refine her pedagogical approaches and to engage in productive and meaningful critical friendships. Lavina is a faculty member in the School of Arts and Sciences, teaching philosophy and coordinating the undergraduate honors program. When teaching ethics, and dialoguing about contemporary moral and social justice issues, Lavina regularly notices paradigm shifts in student thinking. This led Lavina to self-study to evaluate her role in such shifts and to explore the self-study approach. The two questions that guided this study were: 1) In what ways can the introduction of the dialogical self and intersectionality in early college coursework facilitate both students' and educator's growth in the teaching and learning process; and 2) How does critical friendship expand upon, improve and enhance our teaching practices about intersectionality in our respective classrooms?

Theoretical Perspectives

In analyzing student and teacher positionality in the situated environment of the classroom we used self-study to evaluate the intersections between dialogical self and our intersectional identities**.** The self-study method helped us closely examine the shifts in our identities and its impact on our pedagogical practices and student learning. This evaluation provided us with tools to evaluate the fluidity of intersectional identities and its implications on the dialogical self of teachers and students.

Dialogical Self

We understand the "Individual self" from the lens of Dialogical Self Theory (DST) proposed by Hubert Hermans (2001, 2012, 2014). From this perspective, the self is emergent through interactions in society and is reflective, dialogical, and context-driven. Using psychosocial and philosophical approaches (James, 1981; Mead, 1934; and Bakhtin, 1981), Hermans described the self as dialogical, decentralized, and multivoiced, navigating several I-positions in the individual

self at any given time Since the “I-position” is an “internalized positional designation” (Stryker, 1980, p. 60), it is a “unique voice” of opposition or relation in response to multiple social narratives the individual finds themselves in (Hermans, 2001, 2014). Hermans posited that these I-positions are internal and external with dialogues extending into the environment. He added that the various I- positions in the self shift temporally and spatially, within the individual causing identity fluctuations. Thus, the dialogical self “...is not only part of the broader society but functions, moreover, itself as a “society of mind” with tensions, conflicts, and contradictions as intrinsic features of a (healthy functioning) self (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). From this lens, identity is the outcome, “it is the expectation held by each I-position” due to “sociocultural positioning” (i.e. situatedness) the individual finds themselves in (Sequeira, 2017). Therefore, the formation of intersectional identity takes place as a process, through which various voices within the self-speak from different I-positions.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality as a post-structural theoretical lens takes into consideration the nuanced and the situated nature of identity to account for newer emergent evaluations of multiple identities. Intersectionality defined as "…an innovative and emerging field of study provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 1) provides the impetus for understanding the intersection of multiple identities within the social context of academia.

Early intersectional identity models focused on the fluidity and situatedness of social and personal identities occupied by the individual contributing to the core (Deaux, 1993, Jones & McEwen, 2000, Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Later models focused on capturing the nature of intersectional identity and on meaning-making capacities “...as a filter through which contextual factors are interpreted prior to influencing self-perception” (Abes, et al., 2007, p.6). Additionally, Jones and Abes (2013) used “multiple theoretical perspectives in conjunction with one another, even when they contradict” (p. 260) as a way of evaluating identity intersections at the micro and macro level thereby acknowledging the dynamic nature of multiple identities as vital to an individual’s conscious evaluation of self. The later reconceptualized models of intersectionality seek to recognize the situatedness of identity along multiple axes to include oppressed - privileged identities within institutions of power. As Carastathis (2016) asserted, intersectionality should not be an end, but rather should be engaged in as a concept to change one’s thinking.

Self-Study

As educators, we are compelled by a need to expand the existing knowledge base, to cultivate ways of knowing to transform our pedagogical practices specifically those shaped by social forces, relational interactions with students, and situatedness in the classroom. Such knowledge is based on individual positionality (Mullings, 1999) stemming from the fluidity and multilayered complexity of human experience. Further, given that our interactions with students are critical to the development of pedagogical practices that change according to students’ needs, self-study is complimentary for our purpose.

Self-study allows educators the space to negotiate shifting positionalities for critical reflexivity, fluidity in identity, and conscious decision making. Our positionalities have been formed by historical and cultural limits through our interactions in the educational space. We find ourselves constantly negotiating pedagogical practices and intersectional identities through interactions with our students. Through self-study, we reflect and collaborate on the meanings of various narratives of what it means to “educate” through our interactions with students. Thus, the ongoing process of “becoming.”

Methodology

Self-study as an inquiry-based methodology embraces multiple methods of research seeking to “understand the relationship between the knower and the known” (Kuzmik & Bloom, 2008, p. 207). It helps examine explicitly the impact of pedagogical practices on students within the classroom while critically evaluating its effects on the self by

maintaining reflexivity toward one's practices. The self-study design suggested by LaBoskey (2004) guided this collaborative inquiry into our practice because it "focuses on the nexus between public and private, theory and practice, research and pedagogy, self and other" (p. 818). Our critical friendship helped us explore our practices as teacher educators, with a lens focused toward intentionally broadening how we understand ourselves, our students, and reconciling the tensions that emerged, using intersectionality as a process of thinking. We also drew from Pinnegar and Hamilton's (2009) qualitative methods that are transformative by providing different understandings of what it means to do inquiry. As Hall (1990) suggested, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within" (p. 223). Thus, as researchers in this self-study we focused on creating a negotiated space for us and our students that supported fluidity and new becomings.

First, we wrote individual narratives exploring the nuanced nature of our identities as educators and researchers and shared these narratives via google drive. To critically evaluate our roles as researchers and teacher educators we utilized introspective reflection and evaluation. Over a year, we engaged in both face to face and online regular meetings to debrief and analyze all sources of data. Data sources included reflexive journals, recorded class sessions, feedback of class observations, students' artifacts, and recorded meetings. We engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry where we provided one another with ongoing feedback (Placier, et al., 2005). This process of collaborative inquiry included analyzing data sources both individually and then together to identify emerging themes. We added credibility to our study by using introspective reflexivity and peer debriefing.

While reflecting on our teaching practices we served as each other's critical friend (Russell & Schuck, 2004). Costa & Kallick (1993) define a *critical friend* as a "trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers a critique of a person's work as a friend" (p. 50). As Schuck and Russel (2005) posit, "a critical friend is essential if self-study is to involve critiquing existing practices and rethinking and reframing practice; a critical friend also provides essential support and maintains a constructive tone" (p.108). We took the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the goals each one of us set to work toward. To this end, when our university moved to virtual instruction due to the COVID 19 pandemic, we continued our critical friendship by joining one another's courses virtually, using zoom for observations, pre- and post-observations, and debriefing meetings. We provided feedback to each other by offering provocative, clarifying, and probing questions. We dug deeper and sought clarification, and explored both similarities and differences between our experiences. We met after our online classes and discussed our observations and narratives through the lens of DST and intersectionality.

Findings

Vulnerability

Lavina's first narrative had a profound effect. She described her "7-year tedious dissertation journey" how she presented "in a haze" and how "the whole atmosphere was surreal" returning home not to celebrate but instead she found herself "staring into the unknown not fulling grasping what I was supposed to do" (Lavina, Journal, 8-19). Her honesty set the tone for our critical friendship. She opened up and shared that "my professional life and my personal life and identities intersected in very negative ways. My 'Self' was devoid of voice. How could I empower my students to find their voice if I had none?" Such questions helped ground us in the knowledge that to educate is to be vulnerable; it is how "teachers live in their job situation" (Kelchtermans, 1996, p. 307). For Charity the first time Lavina came to observe, "I was nervous to have her observe me teach...it struck me... how much I do not want Lavina to see me as a failure and how vulnerable we are to have another person come in and observe our teaching practices, see our very identity and how we are with our students (Charity, Reflection, 1-20). As Loughran (2006) pointed out "learning about teaching is a very personal experience" (p. 118) Trust in one another and a supportive collaborative approach was necessary for this self-study work (Strom, et al., 2014). An essential part of our critical friendship has been acknowledging the risk and consciously choosing to trust one another to open our classrooms to one another as educators. For example, Lavina worried about time management, reflecting, "Charity will be observing!! What will she think of me? Bad classroom management? Further, "I am not looking forward to the debrief with Charity. I did a terrible job. Terrible way to start research (Lavina,

Journal, 1-20). Yet, after meeting this changed. Lavina wrote "I was beginning to find my voice and own it. Without her knowing Charity was able to lift me up. It is good to be out of that rut" (Lavina, Reflection, 1-20).

While vulnerability can have negative connotations, we also came to recognize how it was an essential and humanizing part of our critical friendship and our teaching practices with students. After our university went fully virtual during the pandemic, Lavina's observation of Charity's zoom class noted how:

> *students were asked to dress up, (i.e., a silly hairstyle for April fool's day, or to bring your pet to zoom virtual school). Charity set the example by wearing a silly headband and allowing her students a peek into her world as her husband was in the background cooking, her daughters were twirling around and one of the dogs was pottering around too. While some of the students had silly hairstyles, some used their camera to showcase their cats and dogs. All in all, the emphasis on the "sharing of ourselves" set the stage for a comfortable virtual classroom. (Lavina, Reflection, 4-20)*

Knowingly our intersectional identities speak of empowerment. Sharing our worlds with our students provided a semblance of normalcy with students doing the same. Given the situation, providing a little peek into each other's world as educators and students had positive effects; we shared struggles, showed compassion, and provided a sense that we are in this together.

Critical Reflection as a Means of Empowerment

Lavina's initial vulnerability was matched by her commitment to critically reflecting; often her journals revealed not only affirmations of her growing self-acceptance and confidence but also pushed the boundaries of her growth.

> *I am happiest when interacting with my students. Many mentioned that I had made a difference in their learning. Me!!! I wanted to learn what I did that made their learning so accessible. For the longest time, I felt that I needed to study my pedagogical practices to understand what worked and what didn't and to modify it for the benefit of my students. (Lavina, Journal, 9-19)*

We found that critical reflection helped with the meaning-making process, providing us a link between thinking and doing. As educators, it was transformative to experience our teaching practices through each other's eyes. These reflections helped inform our future pedagogical actions and left us with ideas to empower our students. Lavina articulated this perspective after observing Charity:

> *...the idea of "common struggle" has powerful implications for education. Of course, it serves a humanizing purpose, and it provides educators with intrinsic opportunities to look inward and modify their pedagogical styles by harnessing the strengths of the student community. This type of education is more authentic, more empowering, more freeing, in that all of us come together in situations of struggle as a community of learners. (Lavina, Reflection, 4-20)*

Receiving this feedback provided Charity with affirmation that while her class did not go as planned, through active problem solving together as a class, both her students and she learned something together. Further, Charity asserted, "I feel a sense of hope that this work observing one another will garner: 1) a greater sense of awareness of my practices and how I can better prompt student reflection, and 2) ways to be more explicit when modeling theoretical connections and pedagogical approaches (Reflection, 1-20). Lavina concurred, "what better way to make a change than to take a good hard look at our teaching practices— all to benefit our students, make changes at the institutional level, and to conduct workshops showcasing our research and best teaching practices" (Journal, 10-19). This is consistent with Dewey's (1933, 1938) assertion that effective educators critically reflect on their teaching practices by acting deliberately and intentionally in the classroom.

This process also helped bolster our confidence as new faculty members. By providing affirmation and support of one another, we have moved past some of our sorrows and earlier insecurities:

> *I am grateful that Lavina and I have this critical friendship. When we meet and discuss ideas, I notice that we can share openly and honestly. Her questions are thought-provoking, and I find myself returning to them later, thinking more deeply about aspects of our conversations. Having Lavina as a critical friend to share ideas, examine our teaching practice together, and then exchange feedback, is exciting. (Charity, Journal, 12-19)*

Observations and debriefing required time, patience, and supportive feedback that was instrumental in fostering critical self-reflection. Charity received suggestions and recommendations about her practice from Lavina, "I am especially encouraged by Lavina's suggestion to be more explicit. It is something I am immediately excited to try in the next class. She really gets me and what I am striving to do with my students. It will help me close the loop on my lesson (Charity, Reflection, 1-20). Throughout this study, critical friendship played an instrumental role in promoting awareness of our own intersectional identities, how they manifest in our teaching practices.

Multifaceted Identities and our Dialogical Selves

We engaged with our students about the multiplicitous nature of our identities in class, which benefited our students' learning. In doing so, we challenged our understandings. Before the pandemic, we emphasized "sharing of ourselves" which helped foster a positive classroom environment (Charity, Reflection, 4-20). Our activities were designed to increase students' awareness that "self" is a combination of factors; some of which are active at moments while others may be dormant (Charity, Journal, 1-20). For example, students represented themselves in posters and other visuals and began to see the ways they described who they are their self as individuals. It is in self-definition, a discovery of *self* and identity, that makes you *"you*" (Charity, Journal, 1-20). Similarly, Lavina reflected on the shifting nature of identity with her students "why we choose particular identities over others and how such identities are situated is due to the circumstance one finds them in. Our values and even aspirations contribute to our identities and showcase the way we act in the world" (Lavina, Reflection, 1-20). Through these interactions, our identities are reshaped and our self is renegotiated.

During this study, when our university shifted to virtual learning, we became more aware of student inequities that were not as noticeable when meeting physically on campus. Further, we were forced to face our privilege. When some students were sick or struggling with caring for loved ones, Charity was struck with the absurdity of her focus on devising etiquette guidelines for effective virtual classroom engagement. Lavina reflected in her journal "A classroom tends to equalize students. You really don't know their 'background' unless it is visible (race) or personally shared" (Lavina, Journal, 4-20). When Charity read Lavina's journal the "so what" of this work became evident:

> *I was struck with the home situation of my students. One student was feeding her year-old sibling bottled milk. Another, a young mother of 2 mentioned she wasn't getting enough sleep due to homeschooling her kids. In the background of another student, I saw at least 4 kids and a grandmother all in one room. These were in stark contrast with other students who had a quiet place, their own room, and animals prancing around. It saddened me to see that students who had issues were students of minority backgrounds. (Lavina, Journal, 4-20)*

Their struggles impacted us greatly and made us question our biases and taken for granted assumptions about teaching and learning in general.

Our classroom communities had changed overnight. Using technology applications offered opportunities for problem-solving, authentic discovery learning, and transformation of practice (Dacey, et al., 2017). We began to wrestle with the idea of the "common struggle" as it has powerful implications for education. It serves a humanizing purpose and provides educators with intrinsic opportunities to modify pedagogical practices by harnessing the strengths of the learning community. But as gratifying as these moments were, they were fleeting. In the background, the consistent visual signs of students struggling with life circumstances were apparent. We debated how to best address them. At one point, it hit us that this was at the heart of intersectionality. As Lavina conveyed:

> *I am keenly aware of their situatedness. They don't have to tell me; I can see it. I wonder whether some students don't put the video on because they are embarrassed by what others might see. Maybe they feel unsafe and cannot share themselves. Maybe they are afraid of the mask falling away. If I consider myself as a caring teacher, I must take this into consideration. (Lavina, Journal, 4-20)*

Identifying these dynamics and the power relations for ourselves was sobering. We reflected on what was the best approach, a true dilemma:

> *The more time I spend in the virtual classroom, the more disillusioned I become as I face the lack of equity and equality. How must the student feel in showing their world to the rest? At times like this, I am keenly aware of my own privilege. Now the question remains: how do I use my privilege appropriately to empower them? How do I negate the problems of their world? How do I try to truly use a virtual classroom to equalize them in some way? And the most important question of all… is this even remotely possible? How do I make my classroom (virtual) a safe space again? (Lavina, Reflection, 4-20)*

We reflected on being decentered and being positioned temporally and spatially, by our students and by oneself, the external and the internal, a dialogue between positions within the individual self-a conflict in the metaphorical space of the Self.

As researchers and practitioners, we recognized that we had a lot more to learn about the intersections between Self, identity, and social justice and how to address it sensitively in the classroom. Our meaning-making left us asking how we could better unpack this with our students since we were reminded of the charge that:

> *every dimension of a research project is an opportunity to work toward social justice. Intersectionality deals with the complexity and messiness of lives, relationships, structures, and societies, so data collection and analysis methods must be responsive to contexts and serve liberatory objectives. Thus, in our view, the animating consideration for critical researchers in undertaking intersectional research is one of continuously and unequivocally interrogating at every stage of the process, "Am I doing justice?" (Rice, et al., 2019, p. 420)*

Conclusion

Teacher educators seek to prepare future teachers to further students' academic learning and overall development. This includes possessing content knowledge, pedagogical skills, dispositions, and fostering critical engagement in equity and social justice issues. As teacher educators, we recognize this begins with identity. We prioritized connecting with students around issues that are central to their lives, in a critically oriented way. We were transparent with students that our identities are multiplicitous; belonging to various socio-cultural and historical backgrounds, that cause tensions as competing identities blur, collide, and recursively emerge. The inherently relational nature of this work led us to a critical friendship that is grounded in our situated recognition as new assistant professors with a shared context. As we navigated the complexities of the learning environment together, we constantly tried to be attentive, negotiating our positionalities "to be with" the uncomfortable moments, and "stay with" the ambiguity, to find resolutions to complex issues.

In this study, we set out to examine how dialogical self and intersectionality in early college coursework facilitate both students' and educator's growth in the teaching and learning process. When we examine the events of this year's efforts, we can see evidence of our growth, we hear each other's evolved understandings, and yet we have not arrived at a comfortable place, settled into a deeper confidence, or even have a sense of completion. What we know is that we now question some of the realities we once took for granted. As Lavina confided: "They call education the great equalizer…Really…???!!! I am not so sure. Education can become an amazing equalizer if and only if individual equity is considered. As part of the education machinery, I can safely say that we are failing our students" (Lavina, Journal, 4-20). Yet, we recognize that problematizing these inherent tensions can improve our practice and help students better accept these tensions as an integral aspect of the learning process.

These are strange times. We teach to the best of our ability and at times we acknowledge that we can be too hard on ourselves. In our postmodern society, teachers increasingly face moral, social, and emotional dilemmas at every turn. This is just another in which we must look closely between the layers to find both the meaning and the connections with one another. We are navigating the tensions, embracing the possibilities, and trying to define who we are currently, and who we are becoming. We are grateful for one another's support, to help make sense of the tensions, confusion, and possibilities. The moral and ethical dimensions are noticeable, as we become more adept at making do with the messiness we will not lose sight of what St. Pierre (1997) refers to as our sense of agency within us as we evolve, transform, and renegotiate our Self.

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