

Visibility in Virtual Space

Racial Identity in an Online Diversity Course

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Along with the increased diversification of the U.S. public education system as well as the United States as a whole (NCES, 2018) comes an increase in the number of institutions of higher education that are implementing mandatory diversity courses in their teacher education curricula (Bowman, 2010; Parker et al., 2016). Diversity courses, which may include courses teaching concepts such as equity literacy, cultural competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, or culturally relevant pedagogy, are generally defined as those that introduce students to diverse social groups and issues relating to race and ethnicity, and often also gender, ability, and socioeconomic status. The benefits of introducing concepts of diversity explicitly through required coursework are multiple and may include better preparation for a diverse workforce, better educational outcomes, increased civic engagement, and improved moral reasoning, empathy, communication, and collaboration skills (Bowman, 2010; Castellanos & Cole, 2015; Gurin et al, 2002; Parker et al, 2016). It has been suggested that such courses are especially beneficial for future educators, as a vehicle for instilling “cultural critical consciousness” or “intercultural fluency” that allows teachers to provide a culturally appropriate curriculum to their students (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Williams, 2019).

Why is integrating diversity into the curriculum necessary when students are increasingly surrounded by diversity among their peers? While naturally occurring intergroup exposure as a result of diversification of the student body is beneficial, it has not been shown to be as effective in developing the above outcomes as diversity curricula which include a focus on identity—in other words, it is necessary but not sufficient. Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann’s (2014) study of approximately 5,000 undergraduate students across institutions found that over half of white students surveyed never or seldom think about their race, and only about 20% think of it “often”; the reverse was true for Arab American, Asian American, Black, and Latinx students.

This reveals disproportionate intergroup levels of what Hurtado et al. label *identity salience*, “the frequency with which individuals think about their group membership” (p. 128). This is a gap which diversity courses that explore identity may help to narrow. It may be due to white students’ generally low identity salience that teacher educators’ expectations of their knowledge and skill when it comes to issues of racial diversity can be low (Laughter, 2011)—an assumed deficit that, if more students received diversity education, may be better contested and changed.

One vehicle for introducing diversity courses that are more available and accessible to the most students is making them available through an online format. Online courses are increasing in prevalence alongside diversity curricula, including at brick-and-mortar colleges and universities that have traditionally delivered courses exclusively face-to-face. However, questions remain about the “effectiveness” of online diversity courses. Smith and Ayers (2006) investigated students’ relation to cultural “insiders” and “outsiders,” among other knowledge, in distance-learning community college

courses, and conclude that the online format “may not solve problems of equity and inclusion. In fact, it may even exacerbate such problems” (p. 413)—certainly an undesirable quality in any course, but especially ironic for one concerning diversity with the goal of teaching inclusively. More recently, however, Stauss, Koh, and Collie (2018) assessed social work students’ awareness of cultural diversity and oppression in online and face-to-face diversity courses. They reported significant improvements in both contexts, with no significant differences between groups, suggesting the potential for successful execution of an existing diversity course curriculum in an online format. This contradiction in the existing literature suggests the need for further exploration of the perceptions of online diversity courses for those involved in them.

As a white female instructor of an online teacher education course on diversity, I engaged in this self-study to examine my practices not only as an online instructor but as a white instructor of diversity material. Self-study is necessary for those of us in this position, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) has observed, “Teacher educators are reluctant to address their own culpability in reproducing teachers who cannot (and will not) effectively teach diverse learners” (p. 98).

The appropriateness of a white person teaching courses on race could be, and has been, called into question on legitimate bases. On the other hand, some scholars argue that allies, including those who identify as white, need to take up their fair share of the work of social justice and not place the burden solely on the shoulders of people of color:

It is necessary to explode the widely-disseminated myth that the minority scholar, for example, not only is a purveyor of difference but also represents its most competent spokesperson. Such a purview fails to account for the fact that not all minority scholars are interested in investigating ‘minority issues.’ ... This strategic segregation directly impinges on the minority scholar’s right to academic freedom. (Aching, 1996, pp. 288-289)

When beginning to teach this course, I struggled with how to address my own identity as a white scholar. I perceived my race to be a weakness in my qualifications – or, more accurately, I believed my race to be a potential weakness in the eyes of my students. Once the course began, however, I also noted that most of my students shared similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to my own, and I decided that, despite my discomfort, I could support my students’ professional teacher identity development by urging them to consider the influence of their privilege and whiteness, when relevant, in their role as teacher. I decided to be open in acknowledging this influence, modeling reflexivity in the spirit of Mezirow (1991), who argues that transformative learning occurs in the presence of challenging one’s core identities, a process often met with feelings of discomfort and vulnerability, and often – when one holds dominant identities – avoidance, which I recognized as exactly what I had been tempted to do. In order to foster transformative learning in my students, I need them to be open, so I decided that I needed to model this openness myself. Julian Kitchen (2019) came to a similar conclusion in a recent study, suggesting that “relational approaches, in which teacher educators are humble, vulnerable and receptive, can create safe spaces for teacher candidates to examine their resistance in order to become more inclusive as teachers.”

Context of the Study

Self-study serves us as a tool to maintain and develop our professional identity. As Lunenberg, Zwart, and Korthagen (2010) explain, “[i]dentity is socially constructed by how others perceive and define us, by our relationships with others, and by the setting ... to be a teacher educator at this time, in this culture, is complex, culturally determined, and dialogical” (p. 1281). This is especially the case when teaching courses that deal with issues of social justice and diversity. In these cases, the teacher educator’s identity is brought to the forefront by class discussions and debates around social identity and its meaning and power in student-teacher interaction.

This self-study was conducted in the context of a case study I conducted of a diversity class I taught, which I am developing into my dissertation. The dual nature of my positionality as instructor and researcher prompted me to do a self-study alongside my educational case study. I felt that dedicating this space to reflexivity was necessary to provide a balance to the analytic nature of the rest of the project, which Feldman (2003) points out, “while satisfying criteria for validity, do not allow for the subtleties required to present one’s way of being to others” (p. 27).

I utilize Korthagen and Verkuyl’s (2002) theory of professional identity to investigate the role of my disclosures about my own identity, and my students’ perceptions of identity, in the effectiveness of my teaching of a diversity class on race and racism. Korthagen and Verkuyl explain that, in their own self-study, “we could not undertake this enterprise without questioning our own professional identities and missions as teacher educators A major role must be reserved for reflection on one’s own professional identity and one’s social-pedagogical goals and responsibility” (pp. 43-44). Therefore, in a course that grapples with race and identity, my own race and identity must be addressed both internally via reflection and externally, via acknowledgment to my students.

Another important element to the context of this study is that the class is held entirely online. In the past few years, more self-studies are beginning to focus on the growing area of online teacher education (Cutri & Whiting, 2018). This provides an opportunity for expansion of S-STEP methodology (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2017; Dacey et al, 2017). It is, in fact, an ideal environment in which to conduct a self-study as defined by LaBoskey’s (2004) criteria, as the “construction, testing, sharing, and re-testing of exemplars” are retained as written record via the course materials themselves; the Blackboard LMS serves as a validation tool, as it has preserved every word of my interactions with my students in their original context.

Objectives of the Study

The areas of exploration in this study are twofold. First, I considered my own racial identity and how explicit acknowledgment of it, and its influence on my professional identity as a teacher educator, affects students’ own racial identity development. Smith, Kashubeck-West, Payton, and Adams (2017) point out that “underlying White professors’ impostor syndrome is the fear that we are not as far along in our understanding of our Whiteness and racism as we think we are or should be, and that this deficit will be exposed if we dare to speak about race in the company of others” (p. 657).

The second area of focus in this study is the confounding factor of the course being online. The experience of a white person teaching ethnic and racial diversity has previously been explored in self-studies (Bass, 2002), and I will apply a similar lens to an online context, exploring my legitimacy as a white woman teaching a diversity class. My racial identity was made visible to students through my

modeling of course assignments and engagement of identity-related course content with students on the discussion board. Students were also able to make judgments about my racial identity based on my physical presentation in video lectures, avatar, and photos I posted. In this exploration, I seek to investigate the role of these disclosures about my own identity, and my students' perceptions of online race and identity-centered class discussions, in the effectiveness of my teaching of a diversity class on race and racism. While such discussions are often faced with resistance from students, the online element may change the nature of students' engagement with each other and the material, in part because thoughts committed to written text are rendered immortal, a permanent record that prompts more hesitation and reluctance from its authors than if the words were spoken face to face (Ham & Davey, 2002).

In addition to these objectives specific to this study's context, I also subscribe to the broader, collective objective of all quality self-study research, to find commonalities in experience—"to see if the case for me is also the case for you" (Ham & Kane, 2004, p. 117).

Methods

The participants of this study are the 35 students in my course and me. The research plan was reviewed by institutional IRB and, perhaps unsurprisingly as is sometimes the case with self-study research work, the project was deemed "not research" (Ham & Kane, 2004). Three data sources were utilized for this study: first, students wrote reflections on the course content, which I coded and analyzed for reflectivity on their own identity. In their reflections, students were encouraged to respond to the following prompts: "What was the most challenging part of this class?" "Which diversity competencies¹ did you achieve from this class?" "What suggestions would you provide future students and/or instructors of this class?" Secondly, I used reflective journaling as a primary data source throughout the course, which was analyzed and mined for meaningful excerpts. In order to determine what constituted meaningful excerpts, I utilized *in vivo* coding as described below, and cross-referenced my own codes with those reflected in students' writing, to identify patterns in experiences that students and I shared, as well as incidents that we may have both written about but interpreted differently. Finally, I used students' evaluations from the course as an anonymous source of relevant insights they may have had into my teaching. Frederick Lighthall recommends examining one's own teaching by "study[ing] students' responses to one's efforts" (2004, p. 208), which implicitly suggests that student evaluations and course reflections would constitute a legitimate data source for such a self-study.

While I conducted this self-study as an independent researcher (e.g. in the absence of "critical friends"), I have strived to meet and exceed standards for trustworthiness and validity while analyzing these three data streams. In accordance with LaBoskey's (2004) criteria, it is self-initiated, improvement-aimed, and utilizes qualitative research methods. It is also interactive in that I engaged in discussions of teacher identity with students throughout the semester as well as provided responses to their reflections, and in my analysis of these discussions, I engaged in multiple cycles of interpretation. In alignment with my research question, coding was open and *a priori*; I did not want to impose any assumptions I may have made about the student experience onto their own words. I applied both *in vivo* and *emotion* coding following Saldaña's (2016) recommendations of both coding methods for "attuning yourself to participant perspectives" (p. 73). I also applied *emotion* coding (Saldaña, 2016; Prus, 1996) in order to properly attend to the participants' feelings and personal experiences.

While maintaining standards of integrity and trustworthiness in alignment with accepted guidelines and recommendations for the field of self-study, I fall back on the reminder that “it is the reader of a report who ultimately judges the validity of the study by considering whether it is informative, relevant or useful in his/her own setting” (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 518).

Outcomes

“Diversity competencies” are 14 institutionally-defined outcomes of diversity courses, described in general as “the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to function productively in a complex global society, by fostering an understanding of and respect for differences among individuals and groups of people.”

Student Feedback

Reflections. Analysis of students’ reflections on their own professional identity development uncovered three themes that appeared across five or more reflections: recognition of whiteness, reflection on online discussion, and implications for teaching practice.

Recognition of Whiteness. Acknowledgment of racial privilege and the impact of one’s whiteness on their perception of the world often emerged in response to the “challenges” prompt, as students recognized the discomfort of these realizations. This pattern is evident in statements such as

Frankly, the most challenging part of this class was the very first reading I did. [It] forced me to spend some time contemplating what my privilege means for the career path I intend to follow. Thinking hard about myself was the most challenging part, as self-reflection has not always come easy.” “This [class] made you think intellectually about how and why we present ourselves the way we do. I really enjoyed this because not only did it make you think, but we realized we don’t typically walk around saying ‘Hi my name’s Jamie and I’m white’ just because it’s typically assumed.

Reflection on Online Discussion. For many students, this was the first online course they had taken. References to the online aspect of the course typically voiced trepidation towards the format or appreciation of the interactive nature of the discussion boards, which were an important and required part of the course. Positive reactions to the discussions included comments such as “I loved... the ability to look at other students’ work. I grew through the sharing of my own opinions and the comments of others on my own work. I don’t think that this class would have been as impactful for me if it weren’t for the online structure filled with discussion boards and peer responses.” “I really enjoyed the discussion board for this reason; it held each of us accountable for having positions and opinions.” Negative reactions included “At times I did struggle with discussion board responses. I found that it was a very open space and I felt very vulnerable. This is something that I typically would not feel in a classroom setting if it was in-person feedback, but something about the ‘behind the screen’ users made me feel unsure and hesitant in my responses.” “I think it’s really easy to disregard viewpoints in the discussion board... that differ from yours I think I wish I had sought out opinions that were different than my own when I was reading through and commenting on others’ reflections.” And “The only thing I’d like to suggest that the class would do in the future is to make the discussion posts anonymous It is imperative to have open and honest ‘conversations’ through these posts, and I felt like students, including me, shied away from sharing some details and thoughts

knowing that their name would be associated with whatever they say.”

Implications for teaching practice. The final theme that emerged across reflections was the potential applications of course material to their professional praxis.

My hope is that I can continue this work and have a really solid foundation of what my role as a privileged white female is, and then work these ideas into my classroom in a creative way in an attempt to make some change.

I believe that being cognizant of my privilege puts me at an advantage when dealing with people from all backgrounds because although I may not fully grasp where they are coming from I am self-aware in a way that makes me more understanding.

Course Evaluations. Course evaluations did not provide a useful source of triangulation, as the content was not very substantive. The relative ineffectiveness of student evaluations of instructors as an assessment tool in isolation has been noted and seems to be at play in the present study as well (Boring et al., 2017; Zabaleta, 2007). Likert responses concerning organization and course assignments did not align with research questions and were disregarded in this analysis; only qualitative responses were considered. Qualitative responses were optional, and therefore many chose not to provide them. Students who did provide qualitative feedback responded to three prompts, all listed below.

Prompt	Response
	•
	I have expanded my knowledge on how to be inclusive to students with different backgrounds in many varieties of ways.
	•
What to you were the most beneficial aspects of this course?	I learned many different things about [E]nglish language learners. I learned about different policies and racisms effects people.
	•
	the beneficial aspect of this course was being able to communicate with other students that were taking this class even though it was online.
	•
	the mini-projects I felt were more informative than all the reading. Less reading and more activities
	•
What changes would you make to this course and why?	It would’ve been helpful to have that list you gave us for the midterm maybe at the beginning of the semester. There was a lot of readings and it would’ve been nice to see what information we should be focusing on.
Would you recommend this instructor to other students? Why or why not?	N/A; notably, none of the responses here were identity-related. Of the 10 qualitative responses, 9 were affirmative, and one was left blank.

Personal Findings

One theme is that of tensions inherent in me, as an educator, presenting and discussing aspects of my identity, and the corresponding potential for imposter syndrome, as a pedagogical tool. A teacher of diversity courses who wishes to be authentic must walk a fine line between “exposing one’s

vulnerability as a teacher educator and maintaining student teachers' confidence in the teacher educator as a leader" (Berry & Loughran, 2005, p. 171). Berry and Loughran describe this as

the tension between a constructive learning experience and an uncomfortable learning experience. We argue that good teaching about teaching should lay bare one's practice to the scrutiny of others through honest discussion about the impact of teaching on the development of others' learning. (p. 175)

Ultimately, after reviewing students' feedback and my own journals from the semester, as well as memos from the research process, I feel that this exposure, laying bare, and explicit acknowledgment of the corresponding tensions is well worth the risks and have strengthened my own teaching practice as well as my confidence in my own qualifications.

Discussion

Although some students did tackle the tension of their own racial identity and their social justice orientation in their reflections, the relative lack of reflection on racial identity proportionate to more "safe" content-based review of course materials reflects the avoidance referred to previously. Korthagen and Verkuyl (2002) describe similar avoidance and the role of the educator's disclosure:

the workshop almost forced us to show our own genuine inner selves to student teachers, especially in those moments where these students were confronted with parts of themselves they had long tried to avoid being aware of. In trying to stay close to these students in such moments, we as teacher educators were confronted with the question "do we meet our students or ourselves?" (p. 46)

Other self-study researchers have highlighted the importance of vulnerability (Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Stolle et al, 2018), and modeling more of this vulnerability for our students may help encourage them to be more reflective practitioners themselves. Encouraging this reflective vulnerability and risk-taking among students could reduce avoidant behavior, increasing student engagement as well.

Another theme that became apparent from multiple data streams was that development of one's professional identity involved growing pains for both the instructor and students. While I was concerned with students' impressions regarding my expertise and knowledge, students revealed discomfort in realizations about their ignorance in statements such as: "The most challenging part of this class ... realizing how uneducated I am about most of the topics we talked about," and "I had trouble because I was raised to believe that someone can do anything they want to if they set their mind to it I have learned to recognize my affluent background in helping me achieve what I want easier than someone who may not have the same immediate opportunities." These excerpts depict not only personal growth but also acknowledgment of the difficulty inherent in recognizing one's privilege.

Implications for Teaching

Personally, the "challenge" of self-reflection emerged as a theme in my own experience as well as students'. Self-reflection and social justice are both processes that are never fully achieved or "done,"

never to be checked off and moved on from. Therefore, this self-study has reaffirmed the value of continuing to reflect on my teaching practices and explore areas of vulnerability and discomfort to allow for further growth.

Students' reflections on the impact of the online format on their peer discussions also hold implications for educators hoping to discuss race and privilege in online teacher education courses. Ham and Davey's 2002 aforementioned observation appears to hold true, at least in this case, as students reported feeling vulnerable posting their opinions on the discussion board with their names and avatars attached. However, most students who reported these feelings also acknowledged it as a valuable aspect of the course. While one student indicated that they would have preferred anonymity, this raises the question of whether the comfort provided by anonymity would be beneficial for this type of discussion; after all, one never has the opportunity to stand in front of a class and teach anonymously. Therefore, teacher educators utilizing online discussions may support students by acknowledging the vulnerability inherent in engaging in such a platform and explicitly discuss the connection between this vulnerability and professional identity development.

Implications for Research

In response to the proliferation of online courses in recent years, S-STEP researchers have also begun to focus more on online teacher education (Garbett & Ovens, 2017; Murphy & Pinnegar, 2018). But it still represents a small sliver of self-studies when compared to those conducted in the context of more traditional classrooms. Continued self-studies conducted by online teacher educators would serve to further understanding from an emic perspective of how online classes contribute to teacher educators' development similarly to, or differently from, face-to-face contexts. They would also support the qualitative exploration of students' experiences of online teacher education courses, a question that has been addressed disproportionately by quantitative comparative studies of online versus face-to-face classes.

Educational researchers, in general, have recently devoted quite a bit of scholarship to computer-supported collaborative learning, but not much of this research overlaps with the scholarship devoted to diversity and social justice education. As the need for social justice-oriented curriculum becomes more clear and urgent, further research on social and ethical implications of engaging in such personal and identity-driven discussion on a virtual platform would be valuable for any teachers, teacher educators, and administrators who are involved in online teacher education.

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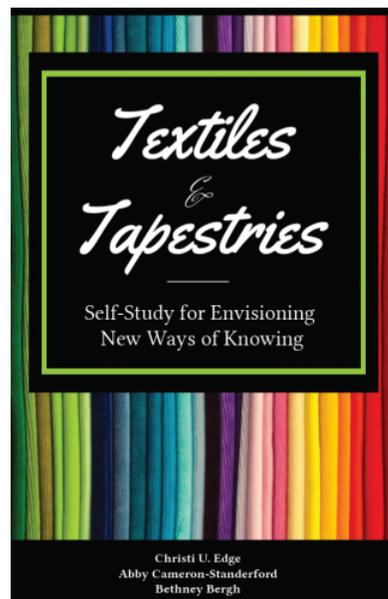
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