

Diversity and inclusion: intersectional reflections on our teacher identity and our pedagogy

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Abstract

In this paper, we adopt an autoethnographic method in critically reflecting on our own ever becoming identities as educators and our personal development and learning from our teaching experience following the development of a new Undergraduate (UG) module on diversity and inclusion. We employed an inclusive approach to both curriculum design and in classroom delivery, to create and facilitate a ‘democratic classroom’ environment. Here, we use an intersectional lens to reflect on our positionality in the classroom, our learning and development with regards to our teacher identity in this space as inclusive educators and how our pedagogic practice has evolved throughout teaching on the module. In sharing this, we aim to offer insights into our challenges in pursuing a safe and inclusive classroom and explore a reflexive, collaborative approach for professionals within HE to foster a more inclusive approach to learning and teaching.

Track: Research Methodology

Key words: teacher identity; higher education; inclusive pedagogy; intersectionality; autoethnography

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a societal push for universities and its teaching professionals to ascribe increased importance to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues (Advance HE, 2021). Although somewhat acknowledged by Advance HE in observing “a desire for universities ... [in] building inclusive environments for teaching and learning, inclusive curricula and adopting more culturally responsive learning and teaching practices” (Ansell, 2022, p.17), progress in this area does not appear forthcoming in universities in England (Advance HE, 2020).

Here, we adopt an autoethnographic approach to critically reflect on our learning following the development of a new UG module on EDI and what this means for our own teacher identity development (van Lankveld et al., 2017) in terms of being engaged teaching professionals, incorporating our own research and that of colleagues in the EDI field. We use intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as a lens through which to critically examine and reflect on our positionality and the ensuing shifts and changes of our teacher identity in the classroom environment, mindful of our own social demographic identities and protected characteristics as delineated by the Equality Act (2010). We use the tenets of intersectionality to build upon sociocultural approaches to teacher identity (e.g. Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The purpose of our autoethnography is to offer our reflections on the struggles in striving to be(come) inclusive educators in business schools. Ultimately, we aim to provide suggestions to other professionals working in higher education in terms of developing a more inclusive approach to learning and teaching, in our pursuit to becoming mindful educational practitioners.

Teacher identity in the higher education context

UK higher education (HE) has undergone considerable political, social and economic changes in recent years, evidenced mainly via the commercialisation of HE in student feedback and teaching evaluations (Steyn et al., 2019; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021) and tuition fee increases (Hubble, 2018), which has shifted conceptualisations of the tutor role (Ottewill, 2001). The increasing and vast diversity of learners (e.g., varying ages, cultural backgrounds, work experiences and whether they are ESL learners), presents multiple challenges to the student, tutor, and HE in general (Kelly & Moogan, 2012). With differing learning styles and time management skills, educators are advised to be “producers of environments that allow students to learn as much as possible” (Senge et al., 1994, p.489). As such, teacher identity is negotiated and navigated through experience and the sense-making made throughout that experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), as opposed to an identity which is fixed or previously assigned (Sachs, 2005; Day et al., 2006). It is ever becoming and iterative within the context of the lived experience within and outside the classroom.

Reflecting upon more recent sociocultural approaches to identity, which view identity as constantly shifting and evolving journey and process, constructed, negotiated and reimagined through social practice (Bloome et al., 2005; Taylor, 2017), we position ourselves as evolving educators and our narratives within an intersectional framing (Duran & Jackson, 2021), so as to develop an “intersectionally-aware teacher identity” (Grant & Zweir, 2011, p.186).

Intersectional framework

Intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), was borne out of Black feminist struggles and experiences of marginalisation in White, middle-class America (Davis, 2008; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Cho et al., 2013). Intersectionality recognises that

multiple identities (e.g., race, class, gender and sexual orientation) simultaneously interact with each another and with wider societal and power structures to construct experiences of oppression and/or privilege unique to each individual (Crenshaw, 1991). Since its inception, intersectionality has become an interdisciplinary term (Cho et al., 2013) and can adapt and be applied to many different fields “as long as it maintains its focus on systemic issues of power and oppression” (Duran & Jackson, 2021, p.343). Only very recently have studies on intersectional pedagogy and work on effective pedagogical tools for teaching and learning about intersectionality begun to emerge (Case, 2017).

Overview of our autoethnographic approach

Autoethnography is qualitative method, with focus on using the personal experience (‘auto’), in describing, analysing and interpreting (‘graphy’) understandings of the cultural and sociological world (‘ethno’) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Adams et al., 2017). As a method, autoethnography “humanizes research by focusing on life as “lived through” in its complexities” (Adams et al., 2017, p.8), reminding researchers to be mindful that they are involved, embedded in and part of the research taking place within a particular social context: ‘relational ethics’ (Ellis, 2007). Under the umbrella of autoethnographic practice (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), our interpretation in doing autoethnography entails the writing of a personal narrative, whereby we engage in thorough self-reflection (Adams et al., 2017) of our experiences and shifting personal and professional identities in striving to be(come) inclusive educators of an inclusive curriculum in the business school context. Importantly, this goes beyond individual reflection but must also entail narrative and reflexive conversations between us which may align best with a duoethnographic approach. In this, we therefore outline some of the reflections on key conversations that we had at different stages of the design, development as well as pre/post delivery.

However, although it is broadly accepted that identity is narratively constructed, the problematic issue, which tends to be influenced by philosophical viewpoint of the researcher, pertains to how this narrative is constructed and conceptualised (Watson, 2012). Indeed, personal narratives have been critiqued for lacking truth due to narrative distortions brought about by memory fade (Shotter, 1989) and romantic self-conceptualisations of previous experiences (Atkinson, 1997). However, Ellis & Bochner (2000, p.746) argue that while stories may indeed fluctuate, personal narratives are not about accurate mirror-like reflections on the past, but rather about meaning-making of the consequences of one's own story and making sense of the lived experience in the social world, asking oneself: "What kind of a person does it [the story] shape me into?" As such, the narratives we present are a result of reflections based on key events, rather than carbon copies of conversations at the time. The intention here is to stress how such practice impacted on our identities as educators and, in turn, our practices in facilitating an inclusive classroom space. As such, in our reflections, this also includes the meaning-making and shaping of each other's teacher identities by drawing on and sharing our own intersectional experiences within and outside the classroom. Given the multiplicity of understandings and implementations in doing autoethnography, scholars are advised to 'recognize and respect' these numerous approaches to autoethnographic practice (Adams, 2017, p.63).

Reflections on the inclusive curriculum and inclusive classroom environment

In designing the module, we were mindful of the decolonising curricula debates (e.g., Advance HE, 2020; Ansell, 2022). Banerjee (2022) notes that this political decolonising project is complex and difficult, as it tends to be 'co-opted' by EDI policies in Business Schools: 'diversity is not decolonisation', he states, but 'a change of world view' – being

conscious of, and deconstructing, ethnocentric and colonialist views of the world. As the aim of the module was to challenge the way students thought about EDI at work, given the nature and content of the module, this work was perhaps somewhat easier. In following an inclusive curriculum design approach, we considered “students’ educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being” (Morgan & Haughton, 2011, p.5). In developing the reading list and module content, we enriched our curriculum by including previously marginalised voices and perspectives. The content covered sensitive topics, from career inequalities and discrimination at work, topical LGBTQ* debates, to privilege and microaggressions. We presented a range of perspectives in case studies and employed alternative and accessible online formats, such as videos and podcasts, which we felt could positively impact engagement and learning.

Joint reflections on initial delivery

In the development of the module, when reflecting on previous classroom experiences with the aim to generate critical debate on EDI issues, we often discussed challenges in getting students to speak up in discussion – even more so than with other academic issues.

Steff: “Students often opt to stay silent, due to worries on saying the ‘wrong’ and ‘potentially offensive thing’”.

Juliet: “Yes, I agree. I think at times, we all find it difficult to express ourselves, especially with EDI, as the language and terms are changing all the time”.

To encourage collaborative and inclusive classroom practice in seminars, in the very first session, we co-created a learning contract with students about appropriate behaviours. This is demonstrative of the critical pedagogical approach: the ‘democratic classroom’ (Mercer-

Mapstone et al., 2017; Matthews et al., 2019), in which the traditional power dynamic between teacher-learner is more balanced, enabling students to make decisions (Morrison, 2008) and creating a learning environment “in which students recognize that they themselves are equal stakeholders in their educational experience” (Meinking & Hall, 2020, p.189). Yet, we must recognise that co-creating such a space is not readily achieved by undertaking a single learning contract activity. Rather, it necessitates active signalling of such an approach throughout continued sessions to empower students; not only to speak out but also to be unafraid to make mistakes. Beyond raising the student’s recognition to become part of the learning process, creating a safe and more level classroom space was also important to us, to enable and empower occupants of that space to share voice, experiences and uncertainty about topics without judgment. The field of diversity can be particularly fraught with sensitive, contentious and charged discussions, which may often be circumnavigated with caution or avoided all together. In preparing students for future professional careers and the field of diversity at work, it is important to instil a setting in which everyone may raise queries and is allowed to make mistakes when discussing these with respect and permission to be challenged. From a conversation:

Steff: “Students do not necessarily have the confidence and tools to challenge each other, especially on sensitive topics, in a way that is received as a positive challenge as opposed to a personal attack – therefore it is essential that as facilitators we model such debates and discussions”.

To reassure the student’s sense of co-creation, we aimed to position ourselves as the facilitators and part of the learning and becoming. We aimed to engage with openness and trust in difficult discussions where we as facilitators showed ways to admit gaps and challenge each other’s taken positions. To a certain extent, this meant we modelled an

approach to conversations where we took on a vulnerable position, as we allowed ourselves to show flaws and make mistakes, for example, in our use of language. In turn, we saw that this empowered students to become more open in sharing thoughts and using mistakes as a useful learning tool that not only fostered engagement with topics, but also served as a starting point for reflection and change.

Throughout the module, we noticed that in seminar activities students felt more confident to voice their thoughts and challenge each other. This also included the disclosure of personal experiences in regard to EDI in a safe space, without judgement; enabling students learning from each other. For example:

Steff: “In one of the activities we discussed LGBTQ issues and a student spoke out on how he experiences being a gay man in the community. This was a student who felt confident enough to share their own sexual orientation with the group. Clearly the group was unaware and there seemed to be a moment of silence.”*

Juliet: “Yes, I remember this vividly. I was at the same time a little taken-aback but also absolutely delighted inside. I felt so humbled that this student felt confident to share and express his authentic self to us all. I felt, ‘this is it’, we have encouraged this safe space”.

However, in creating a learning environment with an appropriate level of challenge for all students (Scager et al., 2017), a dilemma occurred (Kelchtermans, 2009): we were mindful of the sensitive content, learner wellbeing, developing a safe classroom environment and creating and maintaining a good relationship with students. As Steff highlighted:

Steff: “I sometimes find it challenging to discuss issues when the topic at hand is clearly pertinent to a small number or sometimes perhaps only one student in the room”.

Juliet: “Yes, I find this difficult and at times, a little awkward, especially given the demographic diversity of the students, which may not be very diverse. I feel that I become very aware of myself and extremely conscious not to focus on that single student or group of students, while also trying to explain some form of discrimination to the cohort that will likely be affecting that student or group. More so when I have not experienced that form of disadvantage myself”.

Whilst as staff, we endeavoured to present as role models, sharing our own contexts in discussions to foster a safe space of sharing; embodying the humanistic *facilitator* role (Ottewill, 2001). In a constructivist sense, this enabled students to see a wider spectrum of lived experiences and encouraged them to speak to their own experiences and consider their own personal biographies in relation to the social world. We felt that this inclusive and collaborative method resonated with our ethos for the module, promoting a sense of student agency and autonomy, whilst “simultaneously encouraging a classroom environment rooted in community” (Meinking & Hall, 2020, p.190).

Concluding remarks

Our pedagogical aim is to embody a humanistic *facilitator* role (Ottewill, 2001), focused on student-centred learning to promote a deep approach to learning, whereby learners think critically about concepts, process and apply new ideas and knowledge and engage in self-reflection; akin to metacognition (Schwartz et al, 2009; Biggs & Tang, 2011), to help learners achieve their full potential (Smith, 2007). Adopting the critical pedagogy of the ‘democratic classroom’ (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) shifted the traditional power dynamic and created an inclusive learning environment which gave agency to students to shape their educational experience (Meinking & Hall, 2020).

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