

Exploring intersectional approaches to pedagogy

Paromita Pain

As a professor, teaching a class on social media and its effects on society, has been instrumental in showing me that students, often, can be naturally intersectional in their approach. For example, discussions around online hatred and women invariably bring about questions that clearly demonstrate the relational richness, students accord different concepts, of gender, sexuality, patriarchy and oppression, to ensure that neither are encased in categories and addressed narrowly (Nash, 2008). As teachers and educators, how can we encourage such patterns of thinking and enhance the ability of students to naturally consider intersectional approaches?

Organizing pedagogy around an intersectional framework encourages nuanced explorations of how gender, race and class interact, and help students reframe concepts of society and politics; in the process, the class supports incisive examinations of ubiquitous social and political structures. As we strengthen our understanding of differences, we will increase tolerance and develop an ability to stand up to and fight inequality. This chapter discusses and provides a roadmap to assist instructors in making the approach to intersectionality clear, identifying effective intersectional perspectives and assisting learners to discern and delve into the different and inherent contradictions and tensions that shape different societal experiences. This chapter will identify and address common challenges of teaching and using intersectionality in classrooms.

Intersectionality in the classroom

As a feminist, professor, and researcher, my work, revolving around alternative media's ability to empower the poor and powerless, scrutinizes how social class, culture and gender influence notions of power. In my media-related classes, discussions centered around the inherent inequalities of the internet, demand a consideration of technical and social hierarchies and power structures in the offline world that are often replicated in the online world. I interviewed 20 professors, teaching a variety of theoretical, research methods and media-related classes to get practical perspectives on how such critical lenses and theories can be introduced to help students understand the multiple and intersecting discriminations in the areas of race and gender and other concepts as well as their different implications.

The interviewees teach undergraduate as well as graduate classes ranging from purely journalism classes like reporting and writing and history of media to classes on gender, misogyny, race theory and research methods; classes often are cross listed with various other liberal arts departments like history,

anthropology, women's studies, and political science. In the interest of privacy, names and organizational information have been kept anonymous.

Common challenges

Most agreed that there was little understanding of intersectionality among undergraduate students. Students are generally exposed to such ideas at the college level and hence have, generally, very little time to let the meanings sink. They often tended to look at experiences through a single lens. For example, as one professor with over 20 years of experience said, "They understand (willingly and eagerly) that women were oppressed and exploited. But it takes a while for them to see how being black and a woman has harder implications."

While graduate students certainly have more discernment towards such notions, it is often not "critical enough." One professor, teaching in a women and gender studies department at a mid-size state university said, "They understand how gender and race might interact but often they don't see beyond the obvious." This was reiterated by a majority of my respondents. Issues ranged from a lack of ability to see how intertwined social structures can be, to believing that social categories are watertight, and that discrimination is unidimensional in nature.

A professor at a very selective private university, said:

Many students believe they know everything that there is to know about diversity, inclusion and intersectionality, whether they use that term or not. While younger generations do tend to be more open, depending on where they come from and the location of the school they are attending, they often are not aware of their own unconscious biases. They also don't understand that people can become members of different communities, willingly or not. For example, a colleague can become a paraplegic after a skiing accident. He thus now is a member of the differently abled community in middle-age, something he never expected. So, he was now an immigrant *and now* someone who many see as disabled. (2018)

Intersectionality as a theory is complex and it is important for instructors to delve in and clear nuances to themselves before entering the classroom. A professor, who very consciously uses intersectionality in his classes, said, "We must first admit to ourselves that intersectionality is difficult. We often treat it as a sort of 'fix.' For example, we assume that understanding that gender and race are related is enough to resolve gender imbalances. This is a part of the problem. We must recognize that these are not issues that are fixed; rather they are managed with the greater understanding that intersectionality brings."

The race collision

Teaching intersectionality as professors of color has its own set of challenges. It is clear that centering pedagogical design and practice through an intersectional lens supports the advancement of critical thinking that makes privilege and power structures obvious and visible (Case & Lewis, 2012). But what happens when the instructor's race is an obvious aspect of the connections that are being discussed? "Being black and teaching intersectionality can often imply that your understanding and observations, especially about race and power relations, are personal and therefore unscientific," said one black professor, who teaches in a mid-sized university with mostly white students. "It is very important to make clear that your lectures reflect social reality. Back up everything you say with facts. Use statistics. It's hard to argue numbers."

This also makes providing students feedback more effective. "When you are basing issues in research, students understand the value of detail. Students often assume that as long they are making connections, they are good to go. But they need to understand that the connections they make must be logical threads that will stand up to scrutiny. Intersectionality is not rhetorical fancy dance. Every conclusion must be backed up with fact," explained one professor from a private institution. Another issue, not discussed much among instructors, is how an emphasis on intersectional issues often affects student evaluations negatively. Issues of race and gender are often so basic as ideas, that students often find it wearisome and challenging to think about in depth. One professor said this was a "fallout of making students think about issues that made them uncomfortable. Ideas that they have nurtured for most of their lives are suddenly being questioned."

Acknowledging personal bias

A majority of my respondents said that a constructive way to begin would be to start by acknowledging "our own biases as people." One interviewee said:

I always tend to look askance at women who change their names after they get married. I know I shouldn't. Everyone can make their own choice. That's part of what feminism gives us – the freedom to make our own choices. But I always ask, 'why?' The answers are often disappointing. 'It was really important to my husband,' which is weak in my opinion, or 'We want our whole family to have the same last name,' which also doesn't make any sense. Again, I admit this is my personal weakness or bias, but at least I acknowledge it, which is step no. 1."

Instructors warn against "overloading" students unfamiliar with the idea with too many critical ideas at the start. A professor of media studies at a prominent state university said that a constructive approach here would involve making the nature of pedagogy intersectional and easing students in through class

exercises. “For example, in a research methods class, students come in expecting to learn methods. Talking about research that explicitly shows how social issues of race and class can intersect and be valuable influences on the research questions is a useful way to ease in,” she explained. She finds the resources available at Toolkit for “Teaching at the Intersections” useful. “I especially like the films they have to make things from round the world familiar to my students,” she says.

Another professor advised the use of examples that come up every day in the media. For example, the case of Tamir Rice (who was killed by the police at age 12) opens up discussions about race, power and racism in the United States. “I sometimes draw on my own experiences as well, which is interesting given the age difference between me and my students,” she said. Most recommended the use of examples that would immediately establish some sort of connection. For example, the issue of Tamir Rice is at its heart about a child who was playing and who got shot. “When you introduce the example, emphasize that a child got shot, not randomly, not by accident, but by design because the police as an institution is extremely racist,” she explained. “Students are shocked that children can be shot, and that’s when you explain what it’s like to be young, black, and poor in the U.S. today.”

Constructive not combative

Conversations around intersectionality often make students defensive about their views. “I come from a very religious background myself, so I understand,” said one respondent. She said being receptive of where the student came from is important, if we were to make conversations around the subject constructive and not combative. As instructors, she explained, we cannot emphasize our beliefs in the classroom nor show disagreement or disbelief no matter how outrageous the idea may seem. An approach that encourages the open sharing of thoughts generally leads to deeper understanding.

For younger students, especially those at the undergraduate level, defining what intersectionality is helps them parse the theory better. “Define concretely and with examples what social categories are, why they are necessary and how do they intersect with concrete examples, so that students can develop strong foundations to build on,” said one professor from a large state university. He uses the Oxford dictionary meaning and carries a dictionary with him to physically show students and encourages them to keep this definition in mind as they start thinking about their concerns. “It provides for a concrete start,” he said.

Safe spaces

Creating safe spaces where students can express emotions and ask questions is often key. One professor in a mid-sized state university said that she taught intersectionality by using different aspects of embodied practices like theater. She realized early on that students come in with a repertoire of defenses about how they will engage with the subject. “I make them hold hands and look into each other’s eyes. Suddenly they are faced with something that does not have to be reacted to but rather something that requires a response in a very immediate way. For when we hold hands, we immediately notice things like body temperature, moisture, and texture of skin,” she said.

This can be emotional, either positive or negative, and while students don’t always express their feelings, it happens. There is often nervous laughter and she helps them recognize that this laughter is their reflex reaction to unmediated experiences like holding a stranger’s hand. “I explain how their emotional, physical, and reflex reactions are all interrelated, and this gets us out of the hyper intellectual approach that we often take towards ideas of intersectionality,” she said. Holding hands and connecting with another student creates associations that help make students feel safe to ask questions and share different experiences.

Intersectionality is about inclusion and diversity but often classrooms do not reflect national diversity. Thus, explaining how disadvantages overlap and are compounded can be tricky. A way to approach this, explained one interviewee, would be to use the simple example of what we omit when we focus on one thing. For example, the interviewee said, as I look at you, I don’t look at the door. Why do I make the choices that I do? in case I cannot look at the door because I am looking at you. What dictates choices? How do choices work in social settings?

It is important to emphasize that intersectionality is an important part of the human experience. “Begin by talking about human relationships to stuff like food, clothes, culture and emphasize, right at the outset, that what is important are human relations and that human relations are imperfect and messy,” said one professor from a large state university. As Kimberly Crenshaw has long asserted, “Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term” (Crenshaw, 2015, p. #?).

Examining intersectionality through a map of shared experiences also helps. For example, one professor from a large state university said that in a class on criminology, he gets students to create maps of crimes in the U.S. and compare them with crimes in other countries. Class discussion centers around

whether other countries share the same characteristics and why some attributes are similar but not others.

Using history to create a rich context around issues is an integral part of most teaching plans. This context can also be used to answer the challenges raised by students. One professor at a large state university said that while her students would not directly question her in class, sometimes white males would push back against the idea of gender discrimination. “They would often say that why haven’t women sorted out issues of pay gaps yet and why do they work for such low wages,” she said. “We would then start to historically trace the evolution of discrimination and work to understand how gender discrimination is many faceted.” It is also important here to understand the complete story. For example, while women in general get lower pay than men, Hispanic and Black women get paid lower than white women.

One professor said that her classes dealing with religious identities online are always naturally intersectional. So, she makes “really concerted efforts” to get to know her students. “Once I know about their backgrounds, I am very respectful about the issues I bring up in class. I make sure my terminology is right and each concept is explained thoroughly before we move on.” Clear-cut examples help students anchor their thought process and introduce the concepts as organic growths from class discussions. This reduces ambiguity about the idea and the student’s stance on it. Depending on the level of student understanding, issues of intersectionality can be given further thought as part of class and homework assignments. Getting to know students also means getting to know about their identities. “I did not know I had a transgender student in class,” she said. “The minute I came to know, I immediately ensured that we were using preferred pronouns, addressing the student they way they wanted to and with sensitivity towards their needs.” This sends out a message to the rest of the students that diversity matters and will be respected.

Respect, beginning with valuing student views, was a point many respondents underlined. Teaching intersectionality begins with the creation of a classroom that welcomes different views. “The university makes us include the generic lines about how we must be respectful of each other in my syllabus,” said one professor at a small liberal arts college. “But I always make clear in my class, on the first day, that all opinions are welcome. I don’t talk about the respect aspect but imply it through all class conversations and interactions that we have. That makes students feel that they can share their thoughts and are more willing to rethink their ideas.”

As professors often see, students mostly try to find answers to very general questions like how to make America more diverse or bridge gender inequalities in classes that use intersectionality.

The focus, as one respondent said, “was all about finding the right answer!” They want to use intersectionality to get to the answer quickly and often use notions of intersectionality to draw conclusions that are false. For example, a common misstep is to group all marginalized groups together, and so students assume, if this is the Black experience, then we can say that it is the same for the Native American experience. They refuse to critically look at how the physical body is categorized across different groups. As educators, we must beware of gross overgeneralizations. Intersectionality is about similarities, but it is also about the multitudes of other scenarios. Intersectionality does not override the uniqueness of individual experience. Echoing this line of thought, another participant said that she also uses intersectionality to show students that connections between two seemingly unrelated ideas like heart surgery and engineering may exist but that does not mean that all connections are valid. “Research principles of reliability and validity must be rigorously applied here,” she said.

This is also a chance to encourage students to think about issues that will always be outside their realm of experience and the ways things are usually categorized. “We must encourage students here to break out the narrow constraints in which we put even education in,” said one participant. “We expect students to go to school and learn a narrow set of skills to apply in a specific field. Through an intersectional lens we can help students critically evaluate even the education they are getting and that is always a great starting point.” For example, the interviewee starts his class on technical writing by talking about what defines good writing and the applications of being able to conceptualize and write well across all fields. Students are encouraged to explore different genres of writing and see how certain styles work, even if it’s for a few early classes, before they turn their attention to purely technical writing.

Explaining the many different facets of the theory can be difficult since each student will uniquely approach it and thus have different questions. Discussions at times will have to be individual in nature to resolve doubts and encourage critical thinking. In large lecture courses this can be a problem. The *Teaching Media Quarterly* (<https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/tmq/article/view/1054>) has specific lessons plans for large classes with various questions that can be explored to pique interest and introduce the subject.

Another aspect that is often ignored is that change in social structures and the ways we think are inevitable and thus intersections among social categories too will undergo transformations. Coined by legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality as a term has also been criticized for leading to much “backlash and confusion” (Emba, 2015). Thus, “we must understand that social intersections are not set in stone and must be negotiated and renegotiated as time goes on,” as one professor at a teaching university explained. Thus, the role of educational institutions is extremely important. Some

believe that students from grade K2 onwards must be and need to be made aware of intersectional issues. Also, universities must play a greater role to fostering classes that are naturally intersectional in nature. “We often tend to think that as a theory it is applicable to only gender and race related classes,” explained one professor from a large public university. “But that creates a fence about it. Intersectionality can be used in every field and intersectional approaches must be made a matter of norm if we are to really work towards a more equitable society.”

Tips and tricks to slip in intersectionality

The different people, I interviewed, shared some of their tips for using and encouraging more intersectional thought in the classroom.

1. A variation on a Poynter Institute exercise called “Peeling the Onion” involves making a list of how people can identify themselves. For example, a young college student might list – college student, sorority member, newspaper staff member, journalism major, daughter, sister, etc.” It depends on how they identify. But this identity is different for every person and can change over time. Later, someone may say their identity is – Mother, spouse, daughter, sister, Latina, friend, educator, journalist, diversity advocate, etc. Clearly, it has changed from “me first” to “family first.”
2. Pop-up newsrooms. This is a method some universities use in the introductory classes. Students go out in groups of three and set up a table and chairs in specific neighborhoods to try and learn what the important issues are to members of that community. They are encouraged to set up in parks, church parking lots, mall parking lots, etc. This is intersectionality in action. They may be in a Latino or Asian or Black or gay neighborhood, but they will learn about a range of issues.
3. The Teaching Tolerance lesson plans available at <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies> provide various teaching and lesson plans.
4. The low-hanging fruit is the journalism “diet” students are required to consume during the semester. Professors often post articles to discuss that are tied to the class subject, but also happen to focus on diversity and intersectionality to keep it in the conversation.
5. Some professors explain how everything has to do with human experience. For example, in an engineering class, as some professors talk about technology, they bring in how some people will experience ordinary things like ordering food online differently because they have access to technology while others will not know anything about it because they lack this.

How is access defined? And is access a singular concept or is it defined by political, economic and technical issues?

6. Some professors in their intro classes use the BuzzFeed, “How privileged are you” quiz to introduce the idea. It’s BuzzFeed; students are usually aware of it and comfortable with taking quizzes on it. Suddenly, issues of race and sexuality seem more accessible. It helps lower their guard down and it can lead to important discussions.

7. One professor has a module on the Maynard Institute’s Fault Lines approach to introducing diversity in her diversity courses and she finds that it is a good way to introduce the concept of intersectionality. She also uses it in other classes she teaches. Dori J. Maynard, president of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education in Oakland, CA, based her five Fault Lines of race, class, gender, generation and geography on her father, Robert C. Maynard’s philosophy, because he believed they were the most enduring forces that have shaped social tensions since the founding of this nation. The Fault Lines approach can be downloaded from: <http://media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Z%20Current%20MDI%20Resources/How%20inclusive%20is%20your%20coverage%20%5BEN%5D.pdf>

8. For their undergraduate classes, some instructors use lesson plans from the PBS Learning Media kit which has various lesson plans that help students examine the concept of intersectionality as it applies to building inclusive social groups and movements and different other situations. This can be found at : <https://knpb.pbslearningmedia.org/subjects/english-language-arts-and-literacy/informational-texts/integration-of-knowledge-and-ideas/diverse-formats-and-media/>

9. The Institute for Humane education (<https://humaneeducation.org/blog/2017/resources-teaching-learning-intersectionality/>) has various useful resources.

10. *The Washington Post*’s, “Intersectionality,” a primer (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/21/intersectionality-a-primer/?utm_term=.c1e8285c4fb3) is a must-use in my journalism class. It is done by a well-known mainstream newspaper, and it helps students understand the importance of intersectional work in journalism.

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