

A Tale of Intersecting Identities: Using autoethnography as an assignment to provide an affirming classroom environment for diverse perspectives

Tammy Hatfield, Psy.D.

Kaethe D.B. Hoehling, M.S., LPC

Ashley McGowan, M.S., LPCA

Objectives

1. Participants will be able to articulate at least one strategy that can be used to create an inclusive classroom.
2. Participants will be able to describe how to implement the use of autoethnography as an assignment.
3. Participants will be able to list at least one benefit students may experience when using this approach in the classroom.

Intersectionality Theory

- a frame for thinking about “the way things work rather than who people are” (Cho, et al., 2013, p. 797).
- Value individuals’ lived experiences
- Social identities are dynamic and intersecting (may have advantage or disadvantage at different times and in different contexts/places)
- Power changes in different cultural contexts and locations (Weber, 2010)
- Every person belongs to dominant and subordinate groups simultaneously
- No one individual or group is ever always and only dominant or subordinate relative to all others

Intersectional (Feminist) Pedagogy

(Used as a lens/guiding conception)

- Students' lived experiences are valued
- The valuing of personal lived experiences of diverse individuals serves as an intentional socio-political action (or point of advocacy) and results in the development of strategies to include the perspectives of those who are marginalized in the classroom.
- Connections between lived experiences and course content are made by students and instructors. Students use their own lived experiences to practically apply theory.

- “There is a co-intentional education process in which both faculty and students unveil oppression and create knowledge of reality through common reflection and action (Case & Lewis, 2017, p 139).”
- Science has the potential to harm marginalized groups (additive approach or differences approach) AND the potential to illuminate the lived experiences of individuals.
 - Social identities are mutually constructed NOT mutually exclusive (Hall, 2017)

What Does the Professor Do?

- No “Sage on the Stage”/ Yes “Guide on the Side” + “reciprocal learner who happens to have subject matter expertise, but remains actively engaged in discussions and activities so that intersectional knowledge is obtained from BOTH the students and the professor (Hall, 2017, p. 164)”
- Professors’ self-reflection is an ongoing process (both inside and outside the classroom)

Autoethnography

- Intersectional cultural analysis
- Connection between lived experiences and structures of oppression...how life histories are manifestations of intersectional forms of privilege and marginalization (Grzanka, 2017).
- Assignment Description
 - “Write about a personal experience, related to your personal and social identities (e.g. race, gender, ability, etc.), and connect that personal experience to the broader sociocultural context. In other words, how is the personal story you shared reflected in the fabric of social, political, and other structural influences. You would also cite some research about the topic to connect your personal story to the broader social context. This approach is called an autoethnography. (Hatfield, 2019)”

Brief Overview of Autoethnography

“For the purpose of this assignment, we will use the format of an autoethnography. To write an autoethnography you must be a member of the group you are writing about. For example, to write an autoethnography on the experience of women and sexual harassment in the workplace, you must identify as a woman. This is a form of qualitative research inquiry that focuses on self-reflection of personal experience and connects this personal experience to larger social, political, and cultural meanings. Autoethnography emerged from postmodern philosophy. This approach to research questions traditional, colonized ways of conducting research and values personal experience as one way to gain insight into wider cultural understandings (Wall, 2008). Rather than viewing the researcher as neutral and unbiased, the values and experiences of the researcher are made explicit. This approach offers an opportunity to approach social science from the intersection of the personal and societal (Laslett, 1999). In other words, this approach allows one to write about personal experience and consider how broader sociocultural influences contributed to that experience. Autoethnographies vary in the emphasis on auto (self), ethno (the sociocultural connection), and graphy (the application of the research process) (Wall, 2008). While exploring personal connection to the sociocultural, the writer also draws from existing research on the matter to support what is being written (Hatfield, 2019).”

Developing the assignment

- One student recalls, “the assignment unfolded fairly naturally from the flow of honest and sincere self-disclosure, self-reflection, and in-class discussion on course subject matter... it seemed that there was so much to share and learn from one another and not just from text or journals alone so (the professor) offered up the assignment to capture some of that and encourage deeper reflection.”

Potential Benefits for Students

Quotes from students

- “it allowed me to share an aspect of my own social identity very clearly within a larger societal system in a manner not feasible in other technical forms of writing”
- “promoted deeper insight for me about how power and privilege can exist side-by-side with marginalized feelings or experiences within one person”
- “allowed me to take a new approach to manage an in-class writing assignment which I felt freshened my eyes to the concepts”
- “provided me, as a learner, the chance to learn about auto-ethnography as a component in the larger body of literature as it is not typically a component of the journal articles we use in graduate school

Social Justice in Action

What Steps Have you Taken to Create an Inclusive Classroom?

What steps have you taken in each of these areas?

Your reflection

Your approach to teaching

Your selection of assignments/readings

Your structure in the classroom

Your use of student input