

Doing One’s Own Personal Work on Privilege and Oppression

Overview

Inclusive teaching is not defined as a set of practices to implement nor is it a set of boxes to check. As defined by the Center for Research on Learning & Teaching (CRLT):

“Inclusive teaching involves deliberately cultivating a learning environment where all students are treated equitably, have equal access to learning, and feel welcomed, valued, and supported in their learning. Such teaching attends to social identities and seeks to change the way systemic inequities shape dynamics in teaching-learning spaces, affect individuals’ experiences of those spaces, and influence course and curriculum design.”

A key component to inclusive teaching is for an instructor to be self-reflexive regarding their relationship to privilege and oppression. This guide is intended for instructors who are preparing to implement meaningful inclusivity practices in their classrooms. It is intended as a starting place for instructors to think through their own relationship to, and experience of, privilege and oppression as a crucial part of the foundational work of inclusive pedagogy. This guide offers reflective questions for instructors to explore and provides suggestions for appropriate ways and forums to work through the personal challenge of anti-oppressive work.

This work is not intended to be a clear-cut path to a finish line. We must regularly address our relationship to privilege and oppression, identifying how they are made manifest in the different contexts of our lives. Although this guide provides resources and strategies, it is not intended to be the one opportunity for you to engage in your personal work. This guide can be used as a primer to fully engage in self-reflexive and exploratory practices regarding privilege and oppression.

Parts of this resource guide are derived from the recommended reading:

Robin DiAngelo & Özlem Sensoy (2010) “OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!”: Why We Can’t Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education, *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12:2, 97-102, DOI: [10.1080/15210960.2010.481199](https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2010.481199)

Goals

- 1) To encourage instructors to view the personal work they do on privilege and oppression outside the classroom as vital to inclusive pedagogical practices.
- 2) To relieve students who face oppression from the pressure of having to educate their instructors.
- 3) To provide some resources for instructors to begin doing their own work on privilege and oppression.
- 4) To provide a starting point for instructors who are engaging in this work for the first time.

Implementation	<p>Personal work on privilege and oppression should be ongoing, but it must begin before the instructor enters the classroom. This resource is best used before you even begin planning your syllabus. However, there is no prescribed time to start this work as it is more important to simply start than to worry about when it is appropriate. Engaging in reflection and learning about inclusive teaching is always appropriate, no matter the time.</p> <p>This resource is broken into three topics of discussion:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Why do we as instructors need to do our personal work first and continually? 2) What is our personal work? 3) How and where might we do our personal work?
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Approaching one’s relationship to privilege and oppression requires a lot of vulnerability and personal accountability which can be emotionally taxing. 2) This personal work is time-consuming and requires commitment, time, and patience.
Citations	<p>Adapted for use by The Program on Intergroup Relations, University of Michigan</p> <p>Carr, P. 2008. “But What Can I Do?” Fifteen Things Education Students Can Do to Transform Themselves In/Through/With Education. <i>International Journal of Critical Pedagogy</i>, 1(2): 81–97. (Summer 2008)</p> <p>Pizaña, D. 2017. Understanding oppression and “isms” as a system. Michigan State University Extension.</p> <p>Robin DiAngelo & Özlem Sensoy (2010) “OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!”: Why We Can’t Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education, <i>Multicultural Perspectives</i>, 12:2, 97-102, DOI: 10.1080/15210960.2010.481199</p>

Topic 1: Why do we as instructors need to do our own personal work first and continually?

In order to teach about or facilitate explorations of social identity, social relations, inequality, and social justice education, we must be willing to delve into these issues and concepts within ourselves. We ask our students to trust, take risks, question, and share their learning with us and others. To do so authentically, we have to be willing and ready to do the same. We need to be able to model sharing and vulnerability with others and yes, with students! As a result, students may better see what they can do and may need to do.

However, as mentioned in the overview, this ongoing personal work requires us to move away from formulaic approaches and “if-then” thinking. Just as practicing inclusive teaching is a lifelong process so is our personal work regarding privilege and oppression. Our experiences do not happen in isolation from the world around us and our personal work requires us to take on a critical lens as we examine historical and social contexts of privilege and oppression. Ongoing learning and context are key in our personal work and this point is summed up nicely in the following quote:

“The notion that a quick eight-step approach could be used to have people become engaged in culture, learning, institutional change, diversity, racism, and many other highly complex areas of inquiry conflicts with the notion that critical learning and engagement involves an on-going process, not just a lesson plan...While content certainly has a place in education, the context is pivotal to education and schooling (Carr, P., 2008, p. 81).”

Engaging in inclusive teaching requires us to explore our identities in relation to historical and social contexts. Just as we cannot teach a subject without having prior knowledge on it, we cannot expect to practice inclusive teaching without setting a firm foundation that is grounded in self-reflexivity and exploration. If we find ourselves looking for easy answers or quick fixes, we will undermine our effort to learn more about our identities, biases, privileges, ultimately preventing us from doing our personal work.

Lastly, when we feel like we just want to be told how to do this work or how to engage in inclusive teaching, it will be important to remember the following:

No one can tell you how to do it because: You need to see complexity. You need a basic understanding of how power relations work in society, and your own position in the matrix of these relations (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010)

No one can tell you how to do it because: One size does not fit all. You need to be able to consider both the macro (big picture) level of observable well-documented patterns, and the micro (individual) variation within that big picture (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010).

No one can tell you how to do it because: You need to understand the historical dimensions of intergroup relations. Our intergroup relations have not emerged in a vacuum, they are the outcome of our history (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010).

No one can tell you how to do it because: You need to be able to recognize patterns – within yourself and your society. Awareness of yourself as a socialized member of a number of intersecting social groups within a particular culture in a particular time and place (social location) will increase your multicultural vision (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010).

Topic 2: What is our personal work?

What do we need to work on? The content of our personal work related to intergroup dialogue facilitation varies by individuals – by who we are and who we wish to be. There is not a one size fits all approach when considering how we go about doing our personal work. The following are concepts and ideas for you to consider when starting this journey. For instance:

- Our social identities and [intersectionality](#).
 - We are not defined by one identity. Understanding our identities in relation to privilege and oppression is crucial to our self-reflexivity. One identity may grant us a certain level of privilege while another may experience a certain level of oppression. Intersectionality is an important lens that we must look through when engaging in our personal work.
- Our identity socialization and development.
 - Our socialization has been ongoing since childhood. Our earliest interactions with our parents, teachers, and other personal connections helped shape our norms, values, roles, and rules. These messages are then reinforced by institutional and cultural socialization coming from churches, schools, television, media, etc. These enforcements result in dissonance, anger, dehumanization, violence, crime, and internalization of patterns of power. From here, there are two paths to take, either we choose to do nothing and maintain the status quo, or we raise our consciousness by educating ourselves and reframing our socialization. For a visual representation, [view the Cycle of Socialization diagram](#).
 - An exercise to aid in your reflection on the socialization of a particular identity is our “[Mapping Social Identity Timeline activity](#).” Consider going through this exercise to practice self-reflexivity.
 - Another exercise you may consider is our “[Social Identity Wheel](#)” activity. In this activity, you will reflect on the various ways certain identities impact your life and perceptions.
- Our attitudes of conscious/unconscious bias.
 - If you are unfamiliar with unconscious/implicit bias, review our resource guide “[Implicit Bias](#)” that provides readings, videos, and a more comprehensive overview of the topic.
 - Being able to regularly check ourselves when we find a biased thought coming into our mind is critical personal work. At times we are aware that a thought we have is entrenched in a bias or stereotype we have associated with a group through our cultural socialization. Other times we are unaware that our thoughts and actions are biased, making it more difficult to acknowledge them. Whether they are conscious or unconscious, we must recognize that we all hold biases and that rather than deny this fact, we work to constantly check our bias and explore it further.
- Our sense of group entitlement and/or oppression.
 - As referenced when discussing intersectionality, our identities shape our lived experiences. A white cisgender man has a different lived experience compared to a Black transgendered woman. Whereas the white cisgender man holds privileges through his identities that are part of dominant groups in society, a Black transgendered woman holds identities that are oppressed and othered in society. Therefore, we must examine ourselves as individuals but also as part of larger groups. We are constantly socialized through our interactions with each other and as part of larger social groups.
 - Consider reviewing our resource guide “[Facilitation Through ‘Perfectly Logical Explanations’](#)” to learn more about dominant narratives and how perfectly logical explanations serve to reinforce and hinder dialogue.

- Our personal experiences of privilege and oppression.
 - If you are new to discussing privilege, review our resource guide [“An Instructor’s Guide to Understanding Privilege”](#) for more information.
 - Privilege and oppression are found throughout society. If you find that it is difficult to identify personal experiences of privilege and oppression, this is a sign of privilege in and of itself. Privilege lies in having an identity tied to the dominant culture in a society. If we are attached to this dominant culture, privilege and oppression can become invisible to us as we never have to consider our identities in a given setting. According to DiAngelo and Sensoy, “We do not tend to see ourselves as socialized group members, especially when we are in the dominant group (i.e., White, able-bodied, heterosexual)...Because we are in the dominant group and segregation is normal for us, we don’t tend to see how alike we are in terms of a major organizing forces of society: race, class, and gender. This is a key dynamic of social dominance – one is allowed the privilege of seeing themselves as an individual rather than as a socialized member of a group.”

- Our understanding of societal inequality, oppression, privilege, power, and “isms”.
 - Key to doing our personal work on these concepts is that we understand them in their different forms or manifestations. It is not enough to be aware of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, and other oppressive “isms” on the personal level. If we do not expand our understanding beyond our individual experience, we will fail to see privilege and oppression as systems, leading to an incomplete perspective. We must examine these concepts on a personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural level in order to fully understand systems of oppression. For further reading, review ([Pizaña, 2017](#)).
 - Consider going through the activity [“Invisible Knapsacks,”](#) which explores the connections between white privilege and white supremacy.

- Our behavior that may sustain/challenge inequality/injustice.
 - Once we start to do our personal work, we open ourselves up to a choice with two options. We can either continue to maintain the status quo or we can disrupt the status quo. Doing your personal work is disruptive work as self-reflexivity is a critical component to dismantling systems of privilege and oppression. However, only focusing on ourselves limits our ability to sustain and challenge inequality and injustice. As stated throughout this topic, we find ourselves in a number of social settings and contexts, modifying our behavior accordingly. Tapping into these behaviors allows us to broaden our perspective outside of the personal level.
 - Each day we are presented with opportunities to examine our implicit bias, acknowledge our privilege, challenge the status quo, and critically examine our socialization. Choosing to ignore these actions serves to maintain inequality and injustice as what we do as individuals is not mutually exclusive from how we treat each other as a society. In Topic 3, we will provide a list of ways you can engage in behavior that challenges inequality and injustice. This list is not intended to be a comprehensive one as there are numerous ways to do one’s personal work.

Topic 3: How and where can we do our work?

It is important that we do not use student space to do our own personal work. It is inappropriate and potentially exploitative to expect students to work with and process our “stuff”. This may seem contradictory to the importance of mutual sharing and modeling, but that is not necessarily the case. It may be appropriate and useful to briefly own and share moments of our own struggles and learning – such modeling may afford students the opportunity to see how we continue to learn and struggle with social justice issues, and thus how they need to, but this should not be done with a focus on ourselves. Thus, modeling for students should be done with deep thought about the educational benefit for students and consideration of what and how to share.

Appropriate off-line venues and strategies may include (as examples):

- Undertaking some of activities/exercises and related readings on our own (perhaps the two books by Adams, Bell, & Griffin (2007) *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. Routledge. And Maxwell, Nagda, and Thompson (2011) *Facilitating Intergroup Dialogues*. Stylus.).
- Debriefing with our co-instructors or colleagues.
- Getting feedback from students (but see the cautions above).
- Working with allies and partners who are willing to and can support us... but not placing on them the burden of “educating” us.
- Finding opportunities to try new things...to work the edges of our comfort zones.
- Finding places and opportunities (conferences and workshops) where such issues are explored (e.g., NCORE, National Multicultural Institute, Social Justice Training Institute, Study Circles, Sustained Dialogues, White Privilege Conference, etc.).
- Seeing ourselves in a continual/lifelong process of learning and growing. As we gain more knowledge and skills, our perspective on privilege and oppression will evolve.
- Review the LSA Inclusive Teaching website [resource guides](#) and [activity guides](#) to deepen your knowledge on various topics related to inclusive teaching.

Strategies and mindsets outlined by DiAngelo and Sensoy include:

- Think in terms of structures and patterns, not individual acts and people.
- Understand that how we respond to the world (actions/practices/solutions) comes from how we see the world (perspective/theory/consciousness). When we see more complexity, we have more complex responses, therefore we must never consider our learning to be finished.
- Recognize that we are social beings, always in contextual and dynamic relation to one another. Teachers do not impart knowledge on their students, they co-produce it within a socio-historical framework and cultural context.
- Develop meaningful relationships with people who don't share your identity locations.
- Practice seeing and articulating both micro and macro-level analyses of any dynamic involving social groups. Ask: how is this situation (or my interpretation) based on my individual experiences with this individual, as well as based on the historical and socio-political patterns among the social groups we both belong to.
- Develop stamina and courage to talk about issues that you and your peers have been socialized not to talk about. Challenge your comfort zone. Begin to use language (privilege, socialization, power) that may have been foreign to you until now. Expect this to take time and practice.

- Understand how the experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups has been obscured in mainstream curricula, giving us an incomplete picture of our nation's histories. Read research and scholarship on multicultural education and ethnic group histories in continuation of your education.
- Subscribe to journals and websites that address culturally responsive teaching, such as *Multicultural Perspectives*, *Rethinking Schools*, *Radical Teacher*, multiculturalcanada.ca, and become active in your community's local historical association.
- Study history through films and books that take a critical perspective, such as the PBS film series: *Race: The Power of an Illusion* and Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, or Chris Harman's *A People's History of the World*, and Eva Mackey's *The House of difference*.
- Join organizations and devoted to enhancing cross-cultural communication and skills.
- Understand that racism, sexism, classism, etc., are always operating in every social setting (not just when an incident occurs), and continually practice recognizing and articulating how they are operating.
- As you build your critical thinking skills, build your practice skills by working to challenge the manifestation of oppression that you see.
- Attend trainings on anti-racism. Participate in racial caucuses and other exercises designed to expose you to differing world views and experiences.
- Create a support network to find other multicultural educators.