Towards Project-Based Learning: An Autoethnographic Account of One Assistant Professor's Struggle to be a Better Teacher

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

Wil Greer
California State University, San Bernardino

This paper outlines an approach to incorporating project-based learning (PBL) in a master's level educational administration diversity course. It draws on the qualitative methodology of autoethnography, and details the characteristics of this technique. In alignment with that method, the author discusses his positionality and engages in self-reflexivity throughout. Further, the paper provides a conceptual definition of PBL, examines theories recently used in its study, highlights the struggles of the professor-researcher in his first time teaching the course, and describes the path he took to improve his instruction and his students' learning. Mistakes made and lessons learned are shared as well. Providing a space for self-reflexivity and autoethnographic research, particularly for new faculty members, is recommended.

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Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach rooted in collaboration, student-led discussion, and real-world problem solving (Bender, 2012). Its emphasis on resolving practical problems has been routinely connected to John Dewey's *pattern of inquiry* model (Allison et al., 2015; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009; Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007). Therein, learners are presented with an everyday quandary, plan possible solutions, test them, and reflect—not unlike the scientific method. Others have asserted that PBL predates Dewey, and traces back to the architectural and engineering schools of 17th century Italy and 18th century America, respectively (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008). Whatever its roots, its primary purpose is to make learning active, thereby engaging students in a manner beyond traditional lecture-discussion formats (Wirkala & Kuhn, 2011).

Several pathways to PBL are illustrated in the empirical and practitioner-oriented literature. However, the consensus is that it consists of (a) introducing a topic, (b) engaging in initial research, (c) creating an initial presentation and artifacts, (d) returning to the research, (e) revising the presentation and artifacts, and (f) presenting and publishing the findings (Bender, 2012; Parker et al., 2013; Wurdinger & Rudolph, 2009). Most of these components require student collaboration and are student-led, with the teacher's role shifting towards that of a facilitator whose principal responsibility is to provide mini-lessons and offer guidance.

In effect, PBL seeks to disrupt the "extraordinary sameness" of school (Goodlad, 1984; as cited in Parker et al., 2013, p. 1430). As such, standard lecturing-questioning-quizzing formats are eschewed (Wurdinger et al., 2007; Wurdinger & Rudolph, 2009). In their place, students are tasked with reading primary source documents, holding small group discussions, and engaging in self-directed learning that results in the creation and presentation of a project. At first glance, it may appear that PBL is an instructional approach that offers minimal guidance for learners and that may be detrimental to students without sufficient background knowledge. However, this is incorrect, as effective PBL is often meticulously designed. It requires considerable teacher planning and coordination, and includes a wealth of supports and scaffolds (e.g., rubrics, directions, prompts, exemplars, mini-lessons, tutorials, project feedback) (Wirkala & Kuhn, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to outline an approach to incorporating PBL in a master's level educational administration diversity course. Because it is intentionally positional and self-reflexive, this work draws on autoethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), which will be discussed further below. An overview of relevant theories, the researcher's course, and the project—the student-planned and facilitated Equity in Education Conference—will also be discussed. A critical reflexive stance will be taken throughout the paper. By doing so, it is hoped that the fallibility and incompleteness of the author's thoughts and experiences will be made transparent.

Relevant Theories

In addition to Dewey's pattern of inquiry framework (see above), other theoretical lenses have been applied to the study of PBL. Inquiry-based learning was the guiding frame in Parker et al. (2013) investigation of the effects of PBL instruction in high school advanced placement courses. Arguing that PBL is inherently inquiry-based, they hypothesized that such an approach would better develop students' conceptual knowledge, lead to increased engagement, and result in similar or better AP test scores. This was because of the emphasis on student collaboration, problem posing, problem solving, engaged discussion, debate, reflection and revision, and the

creation of authentic products in inquiry-based approaches. Inquiry-based products are considered authentic because they are akin to those that might be created by professionals in the real world, by teams of engineers, scientists, members of congress, or architects, for example. Ultimately, they found that students who received PBL instruction did better not just on AP exams, but also on the Complex Scenario Test, which tested the depth and quality of students' thinking in real world scenarios.

Two studies of Chinese teachers' motivation to implement PBL (Lam, Cheng, & Choy, 2010) and students' motivation to engage in PBL tasks (Lam et al., 2009) borrowed from self-determination theory. The theory posits that motivation is a function of ones personal mastery, autonomy, and connectedness to others and to attachments. With this lens, the researchers' surmised that if schools provide explicit supports in these areas, it could lead to a positive effect on teacher and student motivation. This was bolstered by their path analysis and structural equation modeling results, which showed that as perceptions of supports increased, so did students' motivation and teachers' commitment to PBL pedagogy. Moreover, the studies acknowledged a host of similar motivation theories that are steeped in social-cognition and that lay the groundwork for PBL instruction: Atkinson's (1964) value-expectancy theory, Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, Weiner's (1986) attribution theory, and Dweck's (1986) goal orientation theory.

Moving from motivation to health and wellness, Allison et al. (2015) loosely tied PBL to "interdisciplinary approaches to learning" (as well as to Dewey's pattern of inquiry), and vaguely defined such approaches as emanating from "liberal and constructivist philosophies" (pp. 207-208). Their goal was to determine if PBL instruction in an outdoors environment proffered tangible health benefits. The authors conducted a series of interviews with 40 high school students who participated in a 12-day active lifestyle PBL program. The students completed PBL tasks that were based on a myriad of physical activities, such as archaeology, sailing, mountain climbing, mountain biking, and bird watching. Interviews suggested that students grew more confident, had greater self-esteem, developed meaningful relationships with other students, developed coping skills, and became more responsible.

There are clear connections between the above theories, which were used in studies where children were often the unit of analysis, and andragogy, or adult learning theory. Given the focus herein on adult graduate students—some with careers that have spanned decades—Knowles' (1973) four assumptions of andragogy also informed this work. In short, Knowles argued that adult learners differ from children in that they (a) tend to be more self-directed; (b) are more experienced, and have identities that are tied to their experiences; (c) have a social role-based readiness to learn; and (d) have a problem-centered orientation to learning. Because of their shared emphases on inquiry, authentic problem-solving, creating authentic products, engaged discussion, and self-directed learning, andragogy seems highly compatible with PBL. The section below provides an overview of autoethnographic methodology. Though this paper is not a pure empirical autoethnography, it is based on some of its components.

Autoethnography as a Qualitative Methodological Approach

Figure 1 illustrates some common characteristics of autoethnographical research (Burdell & Swadener, 1999; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008; Wall, 2006). As indicated above, addressing ones positionality and subjectivity, the limitations therein, and self-reflexivity are among the principal characteristics of the approach. It is important to

distinguish self-reflexivity from self-reflection (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012). Self-reflection entails thinking about ones experience with some phenomena (e.g., events, texts, outcomes) to aid sense making. When teachers ask students to *consider* their papers in light of some criteria (e.g., a rubric), this creates opportunities for self-reflection. (For rigorous empirical investigations into the benefits of self-reflection on learners, see McDonald and Boud, 2003; and Sato, Wei, and Darling-Hammond, 2008.)

Self-reflexivity, however, may be thought of as an advanced stage of self-reflection (Quinn, 2013; Ryan, 2014). It entails thinking about oneself *in relation to* some phenomena in order to better understand the phenomena, oneself, its impact on the self, and how one has (or has not) changed as a consequence (Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012). It is a more complex and action-oriented process than self-reflection—one that requires a questioning of "the ends, means, and relevance" of ones practice (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 227). Whereas the goal of self-reflection is to better understand something, the goal of self-reflexivity is to question its underlying assumptions, as well as our own, in order to see and think anew. When teachers ask students to *evaluate, critique* and *revise* their papers in light of some criteria, this creates opportunities for self-reflexivity. Methodologically, there are ample opportunities to apply self-reflexivity in research: when designing and conducting a research project, when analyzing data, and when writing and presenting findings (Valandra, 2012).

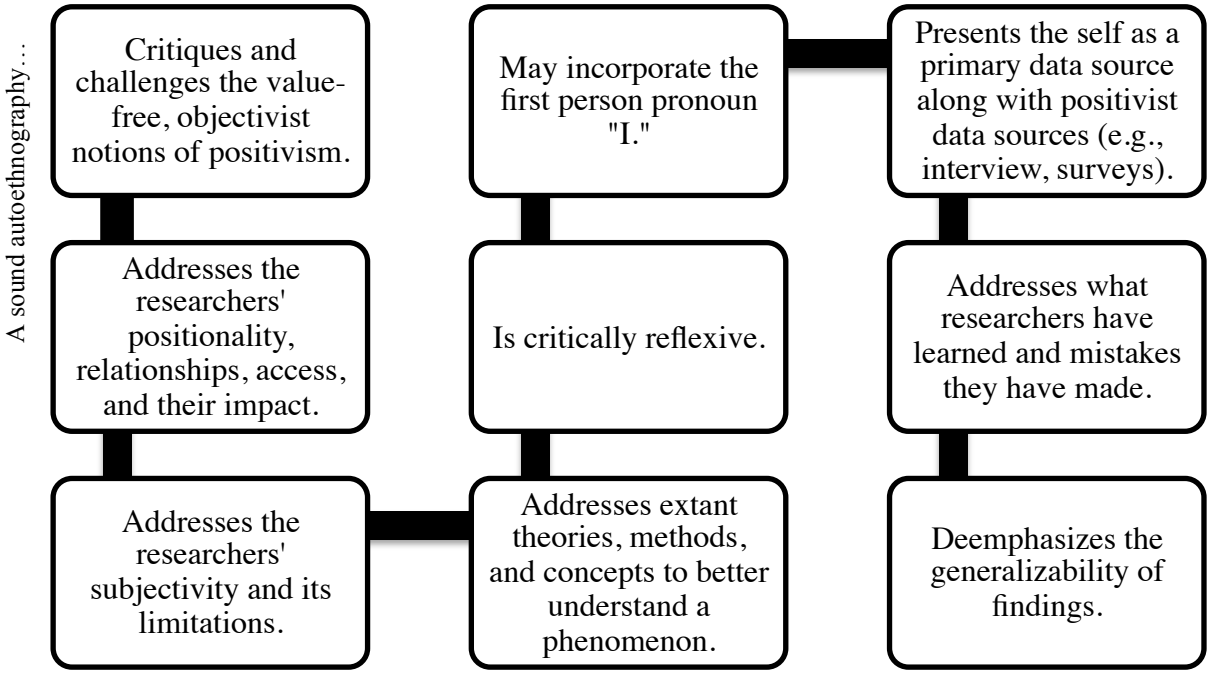

Figure 1. Characteristics of Autoethnographies

Positionality, another key construct in autoethnographic research, involves the full disclosure of the researcher's position and positioning (Anthias, 2002). Its purpose is to explicate ones subjectivity, and acknowledge the interplay of factors (e.g., social, cultural, economic, political, educational) that influences researchers and subjects (Relles, 2016). Implicit here is the postmodern notion that research is rarely value-free (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Hughes et

al., 2012; Wall, 2006). Indeed, exposing ones positionality is to recognize the multidirectional nature of research—an autoethnographer is simultaneously the "subject, object, and researcher" (Deutsch, 2004, p. 889). Methodological approaches for addressing positionality might include the use of reflexive journals, providing interview subjects with verbal and written statements of the researcher's bias, and revealing the author's subjectivity throughout manuscript drafts (Relles, 2016).

In this article, considerable efforts will be made to engage in self-reflexivity and to disclose the author's positionality. To be clear, the direction of this work is more self-reflexive than traditionally empirical by positivist definitions. As such, the author is the primary data source, though students' unedited course evaluation and reflection feedback will be drawn on at times. Consequently, the "findings" herein may not be widely generalizable. Still, it is hoped that this account provides a useful frame for other junior faculty members who are similarly wrestling with their own positionalities, students, course prep, and contexts. In keeping with established autoethnographic practice (e.g., Hughes et al., 2012; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008; Wall, 2006), the first person pronoun, "I," will be subsequently used throughout.

EADM 607 and How I Bombed Teaching it the First Time

During the 2015 winter quarter I taught EADM 607, a class for the educational administration masters degree and credential at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This was during my first year as an assistant professor, and this particular class was held at our satellite campus in Palm Desert. With just six students, the class size was very small. Two of the students were male, two were African American, one was Latina, and three students were White. They all taught at schools in the Coachella Valley, in districts where student poverty rates are above 90% and where 25-50% of the students are English-learners.

The course surveys the influence of society, culture, politics, and diversity on K-12 schools. One of the foremost objectives of the course is to help students become *culturally proficient*, which can be defined as the ability to serve and interact effectively with a variety of diverse groups (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Cultural proficiency implies forming alliances with and advocating for underserved students, as well as ongoing, independent education of self and others. It is often presented on the farthest right end of a continuum, with cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, pre-competence, and competence preceding it. Sadly, I am pretty confident that I did not meet this objective as the course instructor.

For starters, I had no idea how to organize the course or its goals. It seemed (and still does) like a massive undertaking—getting a group of people to be culturally proficient in 10 class sessions. My undergraduate training was in sociology and ethnic studies, and I spent years as a school district program specialist designing and delivering professional development on meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners. As a researcher, my chief area of interest is equity for underserved students, particularly African American males. Though this may seem to provide a strong foundation, it did not provide immediate direction on where to begin. Should we focus on the history of inequity in American schools, strategies of effective urban teachers, or on problems plaguing low-income students and the notion of cultural capital? What about gender issues and Title IX, or the discrimination LGBT students routinely face? Which specific laws and policies should we give attention? And how would I even assess their cultural proficiency?

With no coherent, unifying theory of action, I capitulated. My response was to simply cover—not necessarily teach—a somewhat neutralized, antiseptic concept of equity that would be largely agreeable and inoffensive. I went about this fairly haphazardly, with no connections to larger concepts or towards a particular point. So, in the second week of class, we took a fieldtrip to see the movie *Selma*, which had just been released. That provided, I thought, a safe historical overview of racial inequality. After that we perused state and district achievement gap data. In another session I gave a meandering lecture on terms and theories like *equality, equity, deficit deprivation, establishment bias,* and *structural inequality*. Weeks later, I discussed the concepts of male and White privilege, as presented by Wellesley professor Peggy McIntosh nearly 30 years prior. Because half of my students were White, some were male, and I was not sure how the content would be received, I set out to tread lightly, daring not to offend or seem accusatory.

Disconnected, even dispirited lectures on general concepts ostensibly related to the course were fine, in my mind, because they were merely a side dish, not the main entrée. My real goal was for students to read current research relating to underserved students and write, in a 10-week quarter, a "mini-literature review." By reading empirical, peer-reviewed research and having to write a synthesis, students would become "masters" of a given topic. And because they were free to choose from a list of several topics (e.g., culturally responsive teaching, disproportionate student discipline, closing achievement gaps), I also believed they would be more authentically engaged. But this was a fool's errand. Though I created several supports to help scaffold the project (e.g., rubrics, exemplars, directions), I did not fully appreciate (a) the general difficulty of the task, and (b) the real time needed to develop the range of skills necessary for writing a quality 8-10 page literature review.

Several data points made this evident. There were the audible groans and facial contortions students made whenever we talked about the literature review, the considerable amount of time I was spending each week delivering lessons on research writing instead of on school culture and diversity, and, of course, students' course evaluations. Despite many students remarking that they enjoyed the class and learned a lot, others were critical of the literature review project and the time spent there. One student wrote flatly, "I think that the course should be focused on policies and not on how to write a literature review." In agreement, another wrote, "Wish course had focused more on content and less on how to write Lit Review." Somewhat more gently, one student said, "I would have only liked to receive more 'how to' activities and ideas on building culture awareness in the school."

After initially blaming the students, the quarter system, and other irrelevant factors, I finally looked inward. If there was anyone to blame, it was me. Though several students had written very worthy papers, the task was too time-consuming, and could have been better aligned to a clear, coherent theory of action for the course. Frustrated, I scrapped the assignment. I held firm to my belief that masters students working to become school administrators should know how to read and understand research. Doing so would strengthen their knowledge of research-based practices, and would equip them to make evidence-based decisions. However, I had no positive strategy for achieving this goal, and had just spent a quarter swimming upstream, staring into the faces of annoyed, unhappy students. I wrestled with this duality for about a year.

A Chance for Redemption: Planning to Teach EADM 607 Again

Later that year I was informed that I would be teaching EADM 607 again, this time in the

2016 winter quarter, again in Palm Desert. Ambivalently, I was grateful for the opportunity to redeem myself, yet fearful that I would once more struggle to help my students meaningfully connect theory and practice while deeply expanding their knowledge of school diversity. After several enlightening conversations with senior faculty members, Drs. Todd Jennings and Louie Rodriguez both pointed me toward the concept of *intersectionality*.

Intersectionality was developed out of feminist theory, and was architected by brilliant women like Patricia Hill Collins (1986), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and others. It affirms the varied identities of women of color as women, people of color, and as people who may be lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. The theory supports and creates a safe space for a range of other identities as well (e.g., religious, economic, political, ability). Moreover, it shines a light on the structural experiences of women of color who are attempting to navigate various social systems, the political experiences of women of color who are attempting to navigate the politics of race and the politics of gender, and the representational experiences of women of color who are routinely devalued by popular representations of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

Eureka! Organizing course content through the lens of intersectionality gave me a coherent framework for teaching and learning. This led to two epiphanies. First, the goal of developing cultural proficiency might be attainable after all if we closely connect it to this frame. To do so, I would have to tie course readings and all of the relevant themes (e.g., race, racism, racial disparities, class, inequality, cultural capital, gender, gender discrimination, gendered approaches to leadership, sexual identity, the bullying and victimization of LGBT students, the importance of gay-straight alliances, applicable state and federal laws) to students' evolving cultural proficiency (figure 2). Second, by establishing intersectionality as our underlying theory of action, and cultural proficiency as our goal, I could use an andragogy-informed version of PBL as an instructional approach to help us get there (figure 3). This would allow me to maintain a focus on developing students' research skills while respecting their experience, supporting more self-directed learning, and ensuring their authentic engagement.

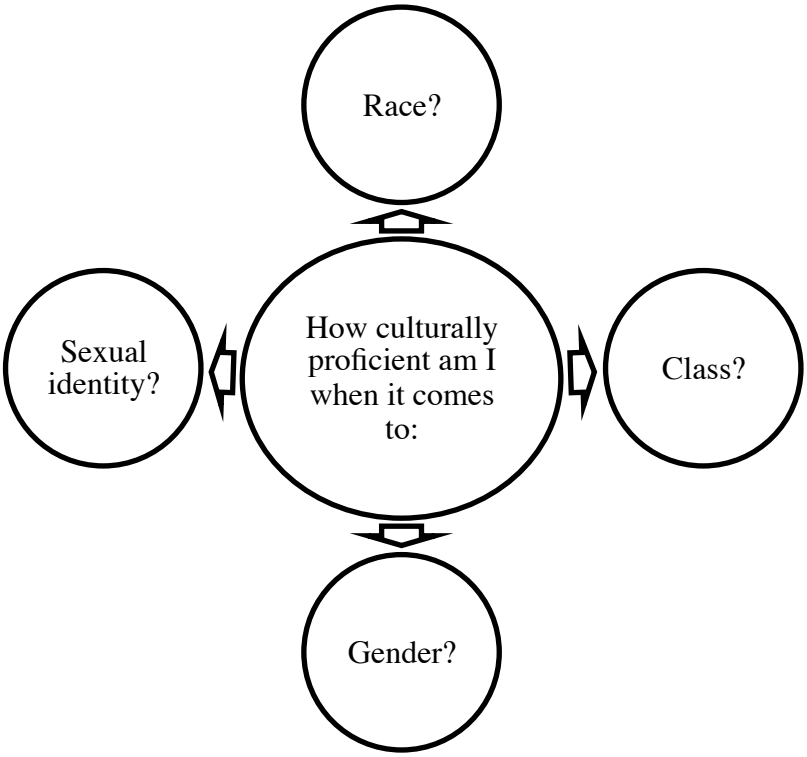

Figure 2. An Intersectional Approach to Assessing Cultural Proficiency

With a much more coherent plan in place, I excitedly went to work organizing the components. Backwards mapping the course, I first designed the summative assessment, the Equity in Education Conference (EEC). This conference would be wholly student-facilitated and student-led. It would require students to collaborate, engage in research, create a presentation and artifacts, and present their findings publicly. This was my PBL component. Believing that the work would be most efficient if students worked in three subcommittees—a management subcommittee, a marketing subcommittee, and a speakers subcommittee—I drafted a set of tasks and rubrics for each group. The task lists specifically outlined which jobs needed to be completed and their due dates. For example, by the third class session the marketing subcommittee had to have a draft of the EEC flyer. By the fourth class session the management subcommittee had to complete and submit a grant application to the University Diversity Committee. This subcommittee would use any funds granted to pay for refreshments, parking and room rental, and any other costs. The speakers subcommittee was expected to have the keynote speaker secured by session five. Given that the students in this group were also the workshop facilitators, much of their time was spent developing presentations. The task lists also included the names, email addresses, and phone numbers of helpful faculty and staff (e.g., the associate dean, parking services manager, technology specialists). The rubrics delineated the expectations for each task and how students would be graded on them. Each task earned a score between *Missing* (0 points), *Beginning* (2 points), *Strong* (3 points) and *Superior* (4 points). The

EEC would be held on the final class session, and all subcommittees were expected to submit a 2-3 page post-conference reflective paper afterwards.

Next, I worked on reorganizing the curriculum. The first time I taught this class I assigned just one reading—a quantitative study on the Black-White gap in student suspension rates, which we used as a sort of primer on reading and understanding research. This time, I spent days poring over peer-reviewed studies, book chapters, policies, and video clips. My goal was to identify those well suited for learning about race, class, gender, sexual identity, urban schools, and as much as possible, their intersections. Eventually, I settled on seven studies; two book chapters (one on race and one on class); two videos; Titles I, II, and IV of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (President Obama's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act); and several sections of the California Education Code (see figure 3 on the following page). In addition to these readings, students were required to choose a topic related to the course, use the CSUSB online library to download four empirical studies of their choosing, read, and outline them.

Instructionally, I planned a series of whole and small group mini-lessons. Whole group mini-lessons would focus on helping students understand larger concepts (e.g., intersectionality, cultural proficiency, privilege) and would be used to teach explicit skills (e.g., using Microsoft Excel to graph student data, reading and outlining research). Conversely, I planned to be much more of a participant and a learner in small group mini-lessons. With their subcommittee members and I, students would share their initial flyers, conference objectives, shopping lists for refreshments, grant applications, social media pages, press releases, and presentation drafts. In the small groups, I would occasionally ask clarifying questions and offer guidance only when asked.

To bolster our learning on the needs of LGBT students, I organized a panel discussion with local LGBT youth advocates during our seventh class session. This was as much for me as it was for my students. Though I am comfortable discussing and teaching about issues related to race, class, and gender, I have very little research-based knowledge of sexual identity issues. My goal was to be a participant and a learner here as well. After planning the instruction, smaller formative assessments were designed to scaffold the EEC and to help develop key PBL skills, like research, use of technology, and presentations. The class was organized and seemingly improved. Yet I still did not know if it would matter.

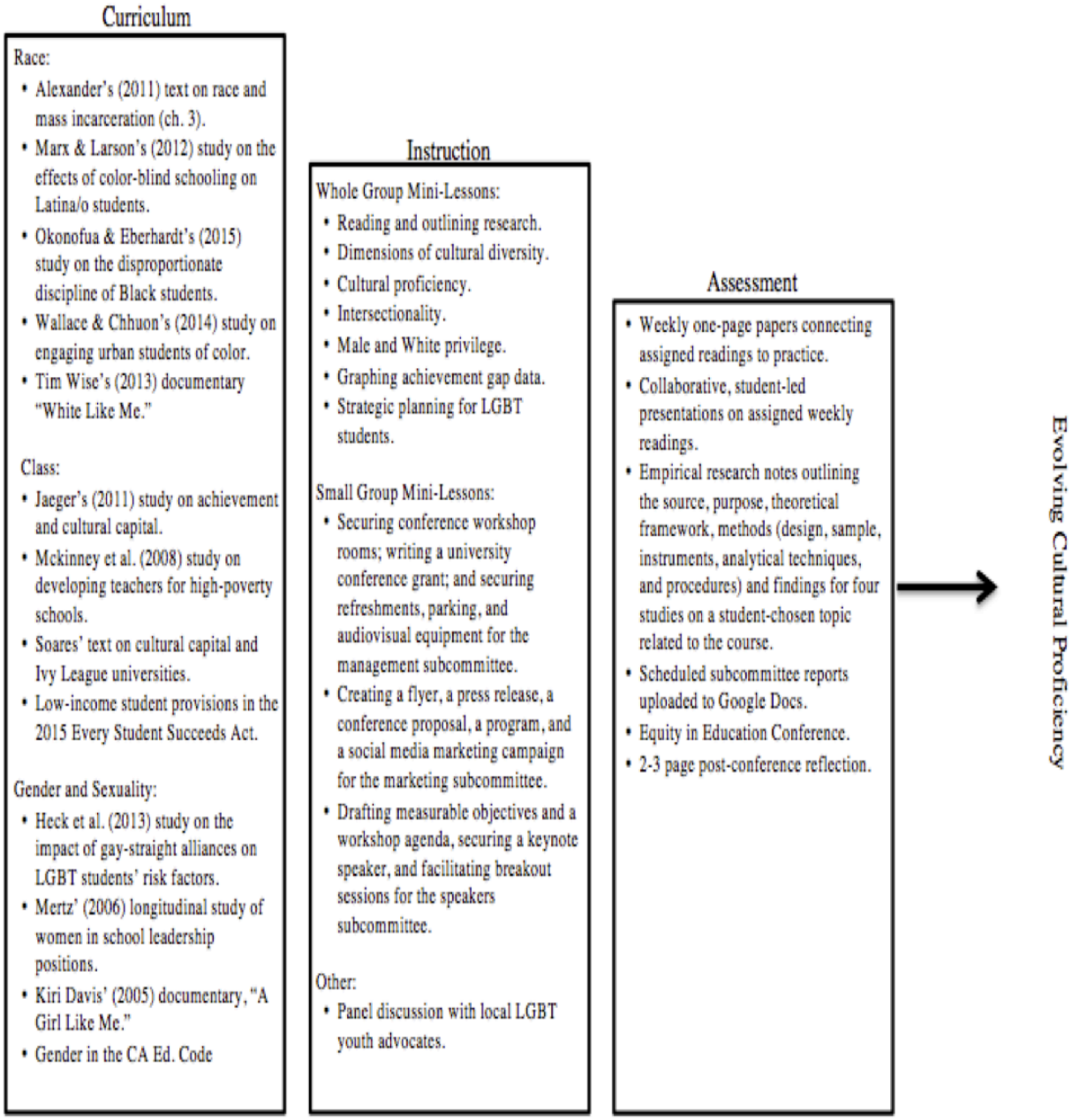

Figure 3. Intersectionality as a Theory for Organizing EADM 607 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Act II: My Second Time Teaching EADM 607

With 13 students the 2016 class was considerably larger than the one I taught the year before. Yet, it was also more diverse. Five of my students were males, six were Latina/o, one was Asian, six were White, five were English-learners, and almost all of them were first-generation college students. They taught in the same Coachella Valley districts as my students from 2015, and in schools that had a number of challenges.

On the first night of class, after some icebreakers and an introductory discussion of cultural proficiency, we reviewed the syllabus and the EEC assignment. I stated the objective, described the three subcommittees and their related tasks, and used the rubrics to clarify how students would be graded. Despite feeling confident in my preparation, I was concerned that students would not want to engage in such an extensive, laborious undertaking. After all, these are adult learners. They work full time jobs as teachers, counselors, and specialists. Many of them have families and some have been quick to tell me that they have children my age. What if they rebelled and complained en masse that the expectations were too great, or if they simply resisted organizing the conference? With no backup plan in place, I was entirely unprepared for a mutiny.

Thankfully, there was no uprising. Students quickly signed up for subcommittees and used the remaining time allotted to meet with their groups and begin planning. A few students did not hesitate to share their anxiety over the magnitude of the task—and they were probably speaking for many others who were not comfortable speaking out in our first session. However, their anxiety dissipated over the coming weeks. We repeatedly engaged in whole group mini-lessons that defined major concepts and ideas; small group discussions that allowed students to reflect, plan, and get clarification; and we were immersed in course content that increasingly underscored the need for a conference on better serving diverse students. The weekly readings helped provide a foundation for the completion of tasks, and for the conference generally. This was particularly true for the marketing subcommittee. As we read about and discussed issues of class or sexuality, for example, it was common to see related posts, resources, and websites shared on the EEC Facebook page.

Also helpful was the succession of small successes my students had along the way. The management subcommittee was able to secure grant funding for the conference, a feat that marked their first time writing a successful grant. They also collaborated effectively with university staff to secure rooms, parking, and equipment. The marketing subcommittee designed a creative and eye-catching flyer that was prominently displayed on the CSUSB marquee and website. They drafted a press release that was published in local newspapers, and used social media to reach hundreds of educators and community members. The speakers subcommittee landed an incredible keynote speaker. They also created presentations on social justice leadership, the disproportionate assignment of students of color to special education, and regional resources for low-income families. Their successes seemed to be contagious.

Whereas the literature review assignment evoked dread among my students in 2015, the 2016 EEC generated more energy, excitement, and enthusiasm with each passing week. The project took on a life of its own. Students continually amazed me with their creativity, problem solving, novel thinking, and commitment to each other. On their own, they often met before class, after class, and on weekends to ensure tasks were being completed—and this was in addition to the 30-60 minutes I was allotting for them to meet during each session. The experience was similar to what Knowles (1973) described when the Boston University graduate program in adult education was reorganized: "I was amazed at the difference in spirit with which the students entered problem-centered units in contrast to their feelings about subject-centered units" (p. 48). It appeared that my fears were unfounded. Not only were my students up to the task, they excelled, and were authentically engaged throughout.

More importantly, we did not have to dilute course content or forsake the teaching of other relevant, graduate-level skills. They candidly discussed issues of race and institutional racism as they saw it on their campuses and in their communities. Students talked openly about

the ongoing problems affecting English learners, students of color, low-income students, and LGBT students. Because of their experiences, clusters of students gravitated more strongly to some readings and course concepts (e.g., students who grew up poor could relate to the readings on low-income students, students of color related to the texts on race). Whenever this was evident, I attempted to use these instances as teachable moments. I repeatedly explained the concept of intersectionality, and the importance of using their particular lenses as entry points toward a better understanding of what our diverse K-12 students face. The readings and discussions were critical scaffolds in developing our cultural proficiency, mine included.

Table 1 outlines categories of descriptors that were used by students in their course evaluations. To create this table, I recursively read students' comments in their course evaluations, coded what appeared to be 19 categories, read them again, and recoded them into the 14 categories below (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

Table 1
EADM 607 Winter 2016 Students' Evaluative Course Descriptors

Descriptor Categories: Professor and Course	No. of References
Engaging teaching and discussions	9
Contributed to student learning	8
Knowledgeable	7
Well-prepared and organized	6
Motivating and inspiring	4
High expectations	3
Helped me develop research skills	2
Grading was too subjective, or took too long	2
Supportive	1
Professional	1
Authentic personality	1
Lots of work	1
Discussions were too long	1
Didn't provide enough information	1

My 13 students used terms like *variety of activities*, *great teaching style*, *good delivery*, and *great discussions* in nine different comments. In six distinct comments, students referred to the professor or course as *well prepared*, *well-organized*, and *clear* in terms of assignments and expectations. To this point, one student noted in the final reflection:

> I appreciated the fact that the rigor of this class was high, but more importantly, I really benefited from the obtaining the sentence starters, paper exemplars, and detailed rubrics. Having all of these items on the first day of class allowed me to understand the expectations for each assignment. When I became confused or didn't understand an assignment, I referred to the rubric and examples for guidance.

Expounding on the skills gained by connecting research to practice, another student wrote:

> Through the review the empirical research and though the analysis of relevant studies regarding the achievement gaps, cultural capital and social differences I can now make data-driven decisions to properly respond to cultural differences in a manner in which I would otherwise not be able to. I found great value in completing the argumentative papers because it helped me develop important skills in reading, researching and make connections between theory and practice. This course was the first time I really had a chance to look at scholarly studies from an informational aspect to implement in my practices at school. I teach in a high poverty school and have discussed with my administrators and grade level members the finding of some of the studies, specifically the ones on successful high-poverty schools and have recommend we implement some effective strategies for student achievement found in the studies.

As for the EEC, one student aptly captured what others shared in their reflections, and confirmed that the course goals had been met:

> The event was a creative approach to having our cohort demonstrate proficiency for our class as a final project. The conference discussed topics about disadvantaged youth and shifting the focus in education from equality to equity. The disadvantages due to race, gender, class, and sexual identity impede the success and education of many students in the K-12 system, thus affecting their success in college and beyond… The process of organizing the event was a great opportunity for our cohort to work on team-building, collaboration, communication, and application of knowledge.

This lay in sharp contrast with how several students perceived the course in 2015.

On the other hand, there were two references across the 13 evaluations to grading being too subjective, or taking too long. One student recommended "adding numerical values to rubrics." Given that the rubrics did indeed contain numerical values I was unclear how to interpret this at first. But after revisiting the assignment rubrics, I realized that numerical values were more clear for some projects (e.g., EEC subcommittee tasks) and less so for others (e.g. empirical research notes). Within this comment, the student also wrote, "Additional information should have been provided for the subcommittee." Though the class feedback was primarily positive, the course was not at all perfect. This will be discussed further below.

Mistakes Made, Lessons Learned

The conference went off without a noticeable hitch. We had what appeared to be over 100 people in attendance, many of them were the high school pupils of my grad students. The Associate Dean, Dr. Doris Wilson, opened with warm, spirited welcoming remarks that set a good tone for the event. Our keynote speaker, Dr. Len Cooper, a local educator-turned-entrepreneur, gave an amazing speech—one that was off the cuff, because we told him his audience would be mostly adults, and it turned out to be mostly youth. He talked about the transformative, life-changing power of education, and when he was finished, he received a resounding ovation. Around this time, the students in the speakers subcommittee quietly slipped away to their assigned rooms so they could facilitate their workshops. Throughout the evening attendees, students, faculty and staff members remarked about how positive the event was.

Nevertheless, there were some glaring problems, and most of them had roots in my course planning, three months prior. For one, there was a lack of communication between subcommittees. Though students worked and communicated well within their subcommittees, I did not think to plan opportunities for them to talk across groups. There were times when, say, the management subcommittee needed to collaborate with the marketing subcommittee so they could use information in the press release for their grant, or when the marketing subcommittee needed guidance from the speakers subcommittee on the specifics of the workshops they were planning. Unfortunately, there was no express time during class meetings that was devoted exclusively to cross-group communication. I should have planned for this.

Another problem was the limited support and guidance I gave students in the speakers subcommittee. The work of the management and marketing groups was much more immediate and concrete, like having a conversation with Parking Services to secure event parking, or creating a flyer, or creating an event Facebook page. Consequently, it was easier to support and oversee their work. Students in the speakers subcommittee, on the other hand, were given most of the quarter to work on their conference workshop presentations. These were more fluid, and were expected to evolve as students read more research and learned more about course concepts. Additionally, they had no template to follow, or specific instructions other than having workshop objectives, knowing their content, and engaging the audience (which were on the rubric).

As a result, some students never got comfortable with their presentations and made drastic changes, even right before the conference. In hindsight, I should have made it more clear that students' presentations needed to be research-based and tied to their four empirical research outlines. I could have then scheduled benchmarks for presentation completion, like having a Power Point slide overviewing the topic by session three, a few slides detailing the problem and ways it has been studied by session six, slides outlining the research findings by session seven, and slides with recommendations for practice and policy by session nine. Beyond this, the conference would have run more smoothly had I assigned a designated master or mistress of ceremony. Though the event and the quarter were, by most accounts, a success, I see ways to improve both next time.

Conclusion

Project-based learning combines student collaboration, discussion, research, and presentation. Its goals are to authentically engage students and resolve real-world problems. By redesigning the EADM 607 course within the framework of intersectionality (Collins,1986, Crenshaw, 1991), I was able to use PBL to engage my students in a manner far greater than in the previous year. It should be noted, however, that there is one key recommendation for PBL instruction that I did not closely follow—allowing for student choice in the final project (Fallik et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2009). In many cases, either the teacher or the students develop a question that drives the project, and students have latitude to design projects that uniquely address and resolve the question. In contrast, I told students what the project would be on the first night of class, and I did not provide them with a specific driving question. Though it may be just a matter of preference and planning, there are some who would argue that student choice is essential to an effective PBL unit (Bender, 2012).

Clearly, my positionality had an impact on the PBL assignment as well. My position as the course instructor made it so that students would have to participate in the conference if they wanted to do well in the class. They were not participating purely by choice. In fact, this was

true of nearly every decision that was made regarding course content, instruction, and student assessment. As an African American male who was born in the United States, I also prioritized some curricular topics over others. For example, I assigned a study and showed a video that addressed the impact of racism on African American students, despite there being few African American students in the Coachella Valley. One student picked up on this, and wrote in the final reflection that it would have been helpful "to study the challenges migrant students face on a daily basis," as well as "the obstacles undocumented students face," especially because there are so many of them within the region. When I teach this class again I will absolutely revise the curriculum to incorporate research on migrant and undocumented students.

The autoethnographic approach taken herein allowed me to play both researcher and subject. It enabled and even pushed me to consistently employ a self-reflexive lens. Furthermore, it provided a unique opportunity to juxtapose untraditional data sources (e.g., the researchers' memories, thoughts, reflections) alongside those that are more classically positivist (e.g., students' written evaluations, coded by the researcher), interrogating them all as credible. Such exercises and forms of scholarship seem particularly useful for new professors. Simultaneously trying to navigate the academy, develop as a scholar, publish, engage in meaningful service, and, of course, be a good teacher, demands frequent bouts of reflection and self-reflexivity. Being granted the space for this important self-work can only improve the skill sets and long-term output of junior faculty members.

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