



# Navigating Challenges and Teaching Through Lived Experiences as Graduate Student Instructors

## ABSTRACT

Historically, graduate students across academic disciplines have been expected to teach courses in their field, at the college level, without sufficient guidance. This is known as a stressful and difficult experience, but for some graduate students this can be compounded by their positionality, both in the hierarchy in academia as well as their individual minoritized statuses (racial, sexual, gender, or otherwise.) Brought about by our own experiences and struggles, this paper addresses two primary questions: (1) How do our identities impact our experiences as graduate student instructors? And (2) How do we use lived experiences as sociologists and instructors to create a better learning experience for our students? We answer these questions and end the discussion with a call to action, highlighting anti-racism and disrupting the status quo of academia. The call to action is especially pertinent considering the current social and political tensions laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuous fight for racial justice and equity.

## KEYWORDS

radical pedagogy, lived experiences, graduate student instructor, learning community

## INTRODUCTION

As the next generation of academics, graduate students who are also instructors have the opportunity to make real change in the teaching methods used, the overall academic mentality, and the relationships between students and instructors. As graduate students, we often hear about and/or experience the “I suffered so you should suffer too” mindset. Whether this occurs in the relationships one has with their thesis committee members, fellow graduate students, or the students one teaches, the idea that one should suffer through the graduate program is prominent and normalized. As sociologists, and graduate student instructors, we are actively working to break down these barriers.

One way to do this is through making the information that we teach accessible, understandable, and impactful. Much like bell hooks discussed in *Feminism is for Everyone* (2004), and Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), it should not be only the academic elites who have these conversations and work towards creating change for the good of society. The reality is that few of our students will join the ranks of academia, so it is in our best interest to teach in a way that students will learn the information, remember it, and gain the ability to apply it. When students can connect ideas to their lives, they can take it with them outside of the classroom and apply it in their own communities and careers. Our goal is to use our positions as educators to create a community of active, engaged, and reciprocal teaching and learning, and to continue the conversation by adding our perspective as graduate student instructors (GSIs).

We find ourselves in a unique position which we are forced to navigate without much direction or instructor training. Beyond this, the anxieties, extra uncompensated labor, and other disadvantages sometimes associated with this position can be exacerbated by negative interpersonal interactions. One aspect of this role that has greatly impacted us but is often ignored or trivialized by those around us is the interaction between the professional roles we inhabit and our own intersectional identities. Having discussed this topic for several years, we have finally gathered enough first-hand experience to pair with the pedagogical knowledge and resources that have informed our praxis to bring this conversation to a wider audience. In this article, we address two primary questions: (1) How do our identities impact our experiences as graduate student instructors? And (2) How do we use lived experiences as sociologists and instructors to create a better learning experience for our students?

To address how our actions and strategies can make lasting change within academic departments and graduate programs, we briefly discuss existing research and resources, and examples from our own experiences in academic spaces. We then present strategies for asset-based teaching practices in the classroom through the application of anti-deficit models. We provide examples of how we have used these strategies in our own teaching with reflections of what worked and what is still in need of refinement. We end with a call to action for instructors, those supporting graduate student instructors, and institutions of higher education to address the lack of teaching support in graduate degree programs and implement inclusive teaching strategies across disciplines. Each of these topics serves an important role in discussing, understanding, and challenging the status and treatment of graduate student instructors and undergraduate students.

## WHO WE ARE

Our identities and experiences as students influence how we navigate the instructor role and shape how we treat our students. Thus, we believe we should briefly introduce ourselves and the parts of our identities most salient to these roles. I, Alana R. Inlow, am white, non-binary, femme-presenting, and young-looking (for a college instructor). I grew up in a middle-class family, but in a wealthy area (we were middle-class relative to the median household income of the area). My siblings and I all attended college, as did my mother, whereas my father did not. I am the first in my family to attend graduate school and earn a graduate degree. I have invisible disabilities and health issues that are not always recognized as real by others. My family has always been a great source of support and I know that I have that safety net to fall back on should something happen to me, my job/finances, etc. I recognize that I am privileged in many ways.

The parts of my identity that influence me as an instructor most are my race, my gender and assumptions made about it, and my invisible illnesses and disabilities. Not everyone is accepting of differently identifying folks (yes, even in sociology...). Not everyone believes that people like me deserve to be treated with respect. Sometimes this is obvious, sometimes it is covert, but either way it causes undue emotional labor and thus takes a toll on my work as a researcher and instructor. This obviously shapes the way I listen to and treat my own students. I have developed a teaching and advising style that is open, caring, and inclusive. However, I am also overly cautious. I do not disclose my identities to most of my students. Because of my experiences as a student and colleague in academia, I have taught myself to hide certain parts of myself, but to remain open enough for students to feel that they can confide in me if they choose. I also recognize my immense privilege as a white person. I try to

make myself, and my privilege, available and accessible to people and communities who, historically, have been denied access to resources and space as well as victimized and oppressed by those in power.

I, Marisa V. Cervantes, am a Chicana, cisgender woman, petite, and young-looking. My light brown skin, dark hair, and dark brown eyes can be perceived as racially ambiguous at times. While it is not always obvious to people that I am of Mexican descent (as if there is a standard for what Chicanas/Mexicanas look like), these unsolicited inquiries marked by the “Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” clearly communicate to others that I am not white. I am first-generation in multiple forms; first-generation U.S.-born, first in my family to go to college and graduate from a university, and the first to pursue a doctorate. I was born and raised in a low-income, high-crime, predominantly Black and Latinx community that is undergoing significant changes because of the rampant and violent gentrification of our town. While my family has not always been able to relate to or understand my academic endeavors, they have been unconditionally supportive of me and my choice to earn a PhD and work toward a career as an educator.

The part of my identity that is most salient in my position as a graduate student instructor is what is most visible. I am a young, Brown woman. I am often assumed to be an undergraduate student, and as such, I have learned to make an extra effort to present myself accordingly when in the classroom. Through the clothes I wear, how I style my hair, and the amount of makeup I apply, I take the time to consider how my appearance will effectively communicate my position of authority in the classroom, which is a common issue for women of color in academia (e.g., Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Smith-Tran 2019). For as long as I have been teaching, students are always surprised to see that I am the instructor. Whether or not they voice these concerns, the facial expressions and whispers to each other let me know that I am not what they expected when they signed up for the course. I count this as a win and the first step to challenging the norm.

In addition to the extra labor I do to demonstrate my status as the instructor, the material that I present is often used as a tool to question my authority. My intentional efforts of including research by and about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) scholars and communities into my syllabi and course lectures has resulted in students assuming that I have a personal agenda and only care about these communities. The accusation that I am doing and teaching “me-search” is something I have encountered numerous times and one that weighs on me and my decisions on what to incorporate into my syllabi. Though I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to develop most of my own syllabi, it is one of many additional burdens that I carry because of my identity as a woman of color and one that often goes unrecognized by peers and professors.

Unlike what Marisa has experienced, I (Alana) do not receive any pushback for including lectures and readings surrounding race. Thus, we can see from our own experiences how racial privilege, or lack thereof, plays into classroom authority. On the other hand, I do receive pushback when it comes to lectures and readings about sex and gender (as does Marisa), which I can only assume is because I am femme-presenting. If I were more androgynous-presenting, I might experience a completely other type of pushback and disrespect. So, just as race plays into authority in the classroom, so too does gender and gender presentation. One of the reasons I am sometimes not fully open about my gender identity is because of the region in which I lived and worked as a graduate student, as well as the often-conservative student body for which I was a graduate student instructor.<sup>1</sup> However, I recognize that I have a lot of privilege in being able to keep certain parts of my identity quiet, so to speak.

Another aspect of my identity that takes a toll on my academic work are my invisible illnesses and disabilities. Many people still do not believe these things exist (again, yes, even in sociology...). So, trying to push through these hardships in order to show my department, and the academy in general, that I am capable of being in this space takes a toll on other aspects of my job as an instructor. The energy we both expend on covering our bases and ensuring that we are meeting the formalized and arbitrary requirements of being students and instructors only adds to the burden of our marginalized identities. The time and labor spent on this takes away from what we could do instead in relation to our research and teaching. Overall, this isn't fair to our students or to ourselves.

We include this information about ourselves for two reasons. One is to demonstrate the importance of recognizing one's positionality in each space and identifying the privileges afforded to them. This is central to our praxis, discussed below, and we encourage readers to take a moment to consider their own positionality and identities as they reflect on their experiences in various academic settings, particularly in the classroom and in their interactions with students. Secondly, we recognize that the challenges we describe in this paper are not limited to graduate student instructors. We understand that the difficulties of teaching continue for professors of all experience levels and rankings. However, speaking from our position and experiences as graduate student instructors, we believe it is important to highlight what we have experienced in this stage of our academic careers. Overall, it is our hope that this piece will resonate with and provide resources for a wide range of academics, but more importantly, that GSIs and those supporting GSIs will be able to carry these strategies into their (future) positions as educators.

## PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCE

The challenges GSIs face are multifaceted and point to their precarious positionality within the hierarchy of academia. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all of the documented challenges, we highlight some of the common findings from existing research and testimonies of graduate students as they align with the strategies we propose below. The challenges faced on both ends of the student-instructor role leave GSIs to grapple with how to navigate these positions. Studies have documented the challenges of first-time teaching (Meanwell and Kleiner 2014; Smollin and Arluke 2014), stressors and role strains of the student-instructor positionality (Grady et al. 2014), and the processes of developing an identity as a doctoral student (Foot et al. 2014; Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, and Militello 2008). For graduate students of color and those from international (non-U.S., and especially non-European) contexts, these challenges are compounded by the microaggressions<sup>2</sup> perpetrated by colleagues to question their teaching ability and belonging (Gomez et al. 2011). Research and testimonies have demonstrated the multiple ways in which graduate students from historically excluded communities experience social inequalities of race, class, and gender throughout their educational trajectories and particularly in their graduate/doctoral studies (Ramos and Yi 2020; Van Galen and Sablan 2020; Walkington 2017).

Graduate students have implemented strategies to navigate their roles, such as adopting the instructor status and embracing the student status to manage the demands and expectations of each (see Irby et al. 2013 for more on these strategies). Although these have proven effective for many, it also means that graduate students are expected to learn the strategies on their own. When GSIs consistently report feelings of under-preparedness, lack of confidence, and challenges with demanding workloads and time management (Smollin and Arluke 2014), we must recognize these are more than solely

personal problems. What this speaks to is a larger issue within academia through the lack of pedagogical training for graduate students, and a lack of recognizing and admitting that there is little to no training integrated into graduate degree programs or provided to students (Blouin and Moss 2014).

Although not as common as it should be, some institutions of higher education have attempted to address the issues mentioned above at a structural level. For example, faculty and instructor formal learning communities offer spaces in which instructors can discuss teaching and share resources to learn from each other (Glisson 2014). Incorporating scholarship of teaching and learning into graduate level courses also helps promote reflective practices and collaboration between faculty and graduate students (Auten and Twigg 2015). These communities have shown more long-term effectiveness than one-time teaching workshops and other short-term trainings (Drane et al. 2019).

In an attempt to create spaces in which instructor identities are taken into account and to encourage “radical pedagogical reflection,” Drane and colleagues (2019, 110) discussed the idea of a “transgressive learning community” stemming from bell hooks’ concept of creating an inclusive and engaged learning community in her book, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). The ultimate goal is to transform academic structures of “heteropatriarchal whiteness”<sup>3</sup> (Drane et al. 2019, 107) into spaces of empowerment for instructors, especially for those whose identities are marginalized. This type of community focuses on dismantling structures that define the current academic system through collaboration, reflection, discussion, and action. These communities and resources can and should be integrated into the very structure of an institution, particularly within the coursework requirements of graduate programs. However, for most graduate programs outside of education-specific degrees, teaching graduate students how to teach is neither formalized nor integrated (see Blouin and Moss 2014 and Pescosolido and Milkie 1995 for a discussion of the lack of teacher training in sociology graduate programs). This is particularly problematic if graduate students are expected to teach as part of their program requirements and it does a disservice to undergraduate students’ educational experience.

Thus, for graduate student instructors like ourselves who did not receive formal pedagogical training in our graduate program, pursuing radical pedagogical reflection can only be achieved through individualized, concerted efforts. Through our own informal “transgressive learning community” within our circle of fellow minoritized graduate student instructors and our intentional efforts of seeking external training, we have developed and implemented strategies into our courses to reflect an inclusive teaching philosophy. This unstructured and self-guided gathering of ideas and creation of space is, of course, extra unpaid labor that we undertake. We do this to do our small part in dismantling current systems of marginalization and oppression within commonly used teaching and learning methods (Skallerup Bessette 2014). One aim of this paper is to once again call on institutions to re-organize their resources and teaching structures in order to take the extra burden off of already marginalized instructors through formal communities like the ones mentioned above (see Drane et al. 2019, Glisson et al. 2014, and hooks 1994; 2003).

### **Critical race theory**

Integral to dismantling the status quo, we situate our pedagogical practice in critical race theory (CRT). One of the tenets of CRT in education is to challenge the dominant ideology and recognize the centrality of experiential knowledge as, “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination” (Delgado Bernal, 2002; see Solórzano 1997, 1998 for the five tenets of CRT in education; Yosso 2005, 74). CRT emphasizes the importance of narratives from

people of color to counter white supremacist ideologies and privileges the voices of people of color. Along with this, critical race theorists (e.g., Bell 1995; Delgado Bernal 2002; Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Yosso 2005) point to a need to shift away from defining the “normal” experience as that of the cisgender, heterosexual, white middle-class individual. When minoritized students do not conform, they are often othered and further marginalized. This perpetuates a model of deficit thinking wherein the experiences, knowledge, and strategies utilized by minority students are viewed as detrimental and ineffective in predominantly white institutions, especially in higher education.

While academics in our discipline, sociology, tend to rely on Bourdieuean understandings of cultural capital in education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), in which the knowledge of the upper- and middle-classes are considered valuable in society, Yosso (2005) argued that this mode of thinking essentially discounts the knowledge that marginalized communities possess. Thus, Yosso’s (2005) model of community cultural wealth highlights six forms of capital (aspirational; linguistic; familial; social; navigational; and resistant capital) that minoritized students bring with them to college.<sup>4</sup> These forms of capital often go unacknowledged or unrecognized but are essential and effective for the success of minoritized students in these institutional spaces. We encourage instructors to learn about and integrate these forms of capital into their classrooms. The expectation of marginalized students to prove that they have cultural capital, or to feel forced to assimilate to the white heteropatriarchal norms, is but another form of oppression. Thus, it is the responsibility of those in positions of privilege within the hierarchy of academia to do the work of understanding the existence and importance of additional forms of capital.

As instructors, we apply an asset-based philosophy in our efforts to teach students about the institutionalized systems of inequality, power, and oppression. It is our responsibility to educate ourselves on the forms of capital included in Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model to encourage and assist our students. Through these concerted efforts, we can help students build upon their existing capital and recognize that they are not coming into these institutional spaces as blank slates. This practice can help mitigate imposter syndrome and allow students to apply what they are studying to their own lives. An accessible and applied approach to teaching makes sometimes difficult-to-read literature much more interesting and relatable to students. In a similar vein, encouraging students to choose topics and research questions to which they can connect lessens the stress associated with trying to understand something completely unrelated to the student’s life. Thus, we strive to build up more excitement within our students and encourage them to enact critical and culturally informed praxis in their own communities, discussed more below.

### **Pedagogical praxis**

One concept that flows from CRT and which is embedded in our pedagogical praxis is to encourage students to reflect on their own lived experiences and to connect those experiences with published research. Instructors leading with empathy and the knowledge that every individual’s experience is unique, is integral to the utilization of lived experiences as a tool in the classroom. This idea is not new and has been discussed and documented across generations of educators. For example, bell hooks wrote about and discussed this type of practice frequently in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community* (2003). Another set of educators have called this idea a “field of empathic connection” (Yorks and Kasl 2002). More recently, Skallerup Bessette and McGowan (2020) wrote about similar pedagogical actions in their research and discourse surrounding what they call “affective

labor.” Together, and building off each other, these pedagogical ideas and practices suggest that by encouraging students to call upon their lived experiences as sources of knowledge, when related to course material, and by practicing empathy, we can engage a CRT perspective in our teaching philosophies and actions.

As instructors of sociology courses which focus on social inequality, we find value in using personal anecdotes to build an empathic connection to help students relate real life experiences to concepts that can seem distant or abstract (Yorks and Kasl 2002). Several scholars have written about the benefits of providing autobiographical examples in the classroom both from instructors (e.g., Smith-Tran 2019; hooks 1994) and between students (e.g., Greenfield 2006). We use these as opportunities to help students draw connections from their—and their classmates’/instructors’—experiences to the course material.

This practice also serves to dissect the intersecting social locations of each and examine how one’s identity creates differential experiences of a given concept. As Smith-Tran (2019) explained, the benefit of giving “more concrete examples that were illustrative of course concepts” also helps in the “creation of a safe space for ‘nontraditional’ students” (5). However, in order to facilitate a safe environment for students to share, professors must be willing to do so as well. As hooks (1994, 21) stated,

In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material.

Thus, instead of falling into the traditional classroom set up, in which the instructor talks at students as an all-knowing authority, we strive to create spaces in which learning happens through shared discourse. Demonstrating to students that their experiences are theoretically important is key; without the lived experiences to draw upon, theory is lacking. Especially on topics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and other socially constructed categories, providing autobiographical examples facilitates a space in which students can offer their own examples and learn how to situate their lived experiences as empirical and theoretical contributions.

This practice is particularly important to allow for a diverse understanding of theory and trends in social behavior. Many of the foundational theories in sociology, like many other disciplines, are centered in the white cis-male heteronormative experience (e.g., Marx, Weber, and Durkheim), and in our efforts to teach these ideas, it is necessary to explore and emphasize their limits. With pointed examples from our own lives as people who do not identify with the white cis-male heteronormative experience, we can demonstrate to students how to understand “traditional” theories through our lived experiences, and also how to critique them. Through emphasizing that these theories focus on the singular perspective of the white cis-male, we can begin to guide students in interpreting empirical research on social inequality and in dismantling the status quo.

## IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES

To introduce students to the application of lived experiences, we find it pertinent to create a collaborative and comfortable environment where everyone can share about themselves. Stemming from our pedagogical influences, it is necessary for us as instructors to participate in sharing our identities to create an environment suitable for critical class discussions. We are cognizant that students are not just learners but also co-creators of knowledge, thus one of our goals is to help them realize that through their connection of lived experiences to course topics. To make this happen, establishing trust and common ground is necessary. Our classes are often discussion-based and cover topics that may spark debates due to differing opinions and perspectives on social matters. For some students, taking sociology classes in the college or university setting may be one of the first opportunities they have to discuss these topics or to have discussions with people who have different views on the issues. Thus, curating a classroom climate based on mutual respect and a willingness to learn and be challenged is foundational to our praxis.

To that end, our first recommended strategy is to make time at the start of the term to develop and establish class norms, much like is done in K–12 classrooms. While the instructor should provide their own list of expectations, usually outlined in the syllabus, we also ask students to offer their wishes for the classroom climate and expectations, which can then be added into the syllabus. By allowing students to participate in setting the class norms at the start of the term, it can help ground the students in their own expectations of each other and the expected class dynamics. Furthermore, by allowing students to have a say, rather than solely having expectations imposed by the instructor, it helps to create a collaborative environment of accountability, as all were involved in the development of the norms. Asking students to come together in the creation of class norms sets the foundation for a reciprocal learning and teaching environment.

### **Helping students access what they already know**

One source for inspiration and good teaching practices is the work done by Dr. Barbara Komlos from Montana State University (Komlos 2011; 2019). Some of our ideas stem from one of her workshops, which we both attended, on teaching roles and instructor/student identities. One activity that creates a sense of connectedness and community within the classroom is adapted from Komlos's identity list activity. At the beginning of the semester, we ask our students to think about their identities. Not just their racial and/or gender identities, but also things like learning style, health status, mental/physical capabilities, relationships, and more. We then ask them to think about how their identities shape their experiences as students, much like we did earlier in this article. After considering their own complexities, we ask them to think about their fellow classmates' intersecting identities and how they might be reducing their classmates to what they see on the surface. Finally, we ask students to pair up and learn about each other through these identities. By acknowledging the nuances of the marginalized and privileged parts of their identities, students can build strategies to navigate their roles (see Appendix A for a printable, handout version of the Identity Exercise).

Another tool that can be used as an in-class activity or a more involved take-home assignment is what we refer to as, "Check-in & Reflect." If used as an in-class activity, we like to make it anonymous so that students can feel free to be as honest as they want. We ask them to do the following: (1) think about the topic(s) we've discussed this past month/week/day, (2) with bullet points, list out any preconceptions you had about the topic(s) before coming to class, (3) now list out anything new that



you have learned about the topic(s); did anything make you think differently about the topic?, (4) what new information raises questions for you? (5) do you still hold the same viewpoint as you did before, and if so, what evidence supports your view?

Overall, this activity should challenge students to think about what they thought they knew, what they now know, and how the course material has changed the way they think, if at all. It should also help to introduce and/or reinforce the action of critical thinking. If the student still holds a viewpoint that opposes the material and research presented, they should be able to support their argument using published, peer-reviewed research. This activity is most useful when covering topics that may be perceived as taboo or uncomfortable, and/or when encountering resistance from students, discussed later. A class discussion after this exercise is optional, depending on the level of anonymity desired.

If this tool is used for a take-home assignment, we ask students to think about and answer the same questions, but to also dig more deeply into the complexities and nuances of the topic(s) in relation to their own identities and lived experiences. We suggest grading these assignments as pass/fail so as not to give the impression that some personal reflections are more worthy than others (see Appendix B for a printable, handout version of this activity). Although grading the assignment removes the anonymity provided through the in-class activity, we also know that giving credit encourages higher response rates. However, it may also mean that students are not as forthcoming in their responses when their names are attached to the assignment. Instructors should take this into consideration and determine which method is best for their class when using the Check In & Reflect. This activity/assignment also serves as a check-in for us as instructors to gather information on whether multiple students are struggling with the same topics so that we may review and clarify any confusion in class.

The use of this exercise is certainly beneficial for students who were uninformed on a given topic prior to learning about it in their courses. But we also want to highlight how this can be useful for encouraging and nurturing students' existing knowledge and elucidate a greater understanding of their lived experiences, per the tenets of CRT and model of community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005). For students who understood the ideas presented in the course, either through their own experiences or knowledge acquired in other settings, learning that they were on the same track as what has been found and verified through peer-reviewed research can positively influence their motivation and desire to continue in their learning and critical thinking. Similarly, if students can formulate critiques of the research presented and identify reasons as to why or how the research is lacking, instructors can further guide them in drawing connections to the larger structural reasons. Instructors can also encourage a thought process that may enable students to take it a step further, such as through developing a research proposal or an applied intervention.

An example of this occurred in one of Marisa's classes following a lecture on school discipline and academic achievement. Students were asked to reflect on their K–12 educational experiences and consider how they compared to what was presented. While many students identified times when they or their classmates had been disciplined in school and how the infractions may have been categorized per the concepts covered, there were students who vocalized how much the material helped them to better understand their own trajectories.

Those who self-identified as going to wealthy schools seemed to recognize the privileges afforded to them based on the resources available in their homes and schools. Those who self-identified as coming from marginalized backgrounds, such as low-income communities, expressed a greater understanding of how the structural makeup of residential segregation and the allocation of public-

school funding shaped their experiences. The discussion also provided some validation of the structural factors which had enabled them to “make it out” of their communities and go to college, while many of their family members and peers could not. During the discussion, students became emotional in sharing their frustration with what they had experienced and witnessed. They also reported a sense of relief in finally having the evidence to support something they had been taught to believe was primarily an individualized problem was actually endemic of their community’s high levels of poverty and crime, and low educational attainment.

The students’ ability to share and express the amount of emotion they did was reflective of the initial efforts to establish a respectful and trusting classroom environment. Their agreed upon “what is said here, stays here” class norm provided a sense of safety and confidentiality within the group. Students offered their thanks and support to those who shared, and many others were moved to (near) tears themselves. While this is certainly a testament to the importance of norm setting and the establishment of a supportive and collaborative class climate, what is noteworthy is how this incident, of both the sharing of experiences and emotion, encouraged students in their term projects, which was an application-based proposal. Through providing the space and guidance to recognize how their experiences fit into larger scale structural issues, students became invested in their projects and at the possibility of using their ideas to support their communities, particularly those who came from marginalized backgrounds.

### **Managing resistance in the classroom**

Given the likelihood that we will encounter some type of resistance in our classes, the initial norm setting exercise described above is crucial to effectively managing conflict in the classroom. It is necessary to explicitly state the difference between being critical versus being combative. The ease with which an instructor will set these ground rules will vary depending on certain aspects such as, but not limited to, the content of the course, the instructors’ identities, and the composition of the class. For example, a statistics or research methods course may not present the same opportunities for students to challenge the material presented. On the other hand, a course on gender or racial inequality may be full of “opposing”<sup>5</sup> views. Other contextual factors such as the student body population, the location of a college/university, and the political climate, for example, may also factor into how an instructor navigates these discussions in their courses.

Nonetheless, these ground rules should be continually referenced throughout the term as a reminder to the students of their responsibility in maintaining a culture of respect and accessible learning. Because they have contributed to setting these norms, students are responsible for holding themselves and each other accountable to an effective classroom dynamic. These ground rules can also be used as a sort of trigger warning prior to a lecture or class discussion entailing particularly sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence. By encouraging students to come prepared for potentially contentious conversations, we work to advance understandings of said topics and have students critically contribute to the discussions.

Though we encourage our students to be critical of the ideas that we present in our classes, we must also illustrate what that means and how it differs from being combative. There is a fine line between the two that can be crossed quickly. The instructor should be able to quickly gauge whether other students and/or the instructor themselves are becoming uncomfortable. Because students will often rely on their opinions and value systems to argue against scientific research that differs from their

own experiences, these statements can cross over to an overt dismissal or disrespect of other students' lived experiences. Additionally, it must be noted that although the majority of students (in our experiences) do not cross the line into the combative side, students may also have difficulty grasping what it means to be critical.

One example of a student's noncritical response to a lecture on racial inequality, that Alana was giving in their 100-level sociology course, demonstrates the process an instructor might take to cultivate critical thinking and discussion skills. The student attempted to argue that one's race affects their athletic ability and cited this belief as "common knowledge." As educators (and sociologists), it can become quite frustrating when students use "common knowledge" as a source to support their argument, especially if the student is unwilling to consider the scientific evidence being provided. Alana recalls the mental and emotional process they underwent while managing the situation so that it did not become combative.

One's initial reaction, especially for someone who is familiar with academic research, might be to immediately dismiss the student, tell them they are wrong, and move on. However, we must remember that we are there to teach, share knowledge, and engage in reciprocal learning. Students are there to learn and engage in knowledge creation; they are not there to be scolded, belittled, or ignored. Instead of dismissing the student, de-escalating the interaction by offering some type of acknowledgment or understanding as to why the student would make that argument can serve to keep the student's interest and invite them into a deeper discussion. For example, saying something along the lines of, "I understand where that thought is coming from, it does seem that way, doesn't it? But if we look at the research..."

In Alana's real-life experience, when the student offered another attempt at their argument, Alana invited the student to do some research and find evidence to support their claim and bring it back to the next class session. This included quickly explaining how to search for relevant literature on the school's library website and downloading articles. As we have experienced, most students do not actually follow up on these invitations, but it does serve to de-escalate the situation while challenging the student to do the work of supporting their position. If the student does take the instructor's advice to look for literature to support their claim, they will most likely end up reading research that proves their initial argument wrong, and they will hopefully come to a more educated understanding of the topic. If an instructor wishes to do more, they can send out supplemental readings to the class as a whole or to the individual student, as Alana did in this instance. There is always the possibility that a student will show no interest in discussing or researching the topic further. But, it never hurts to share supplemental readings or to revisit the topic during lecture on another day.

Overall, this process emphasizes to the students that they need to have sources to support their claims and that without data or a solidly backed refutation, the argument cannot effectively be made. We reiterate that providing evidence to support one's argument is required in the context of the classroom, but we hope that students will apply this to their lives outside of the classroom as well. Essentially, de-escalating the situation is a type of conflict resolution before it gets to the point where conflict ensues. In these contexts, showing the students respect and offering to discuss it more at another time serves as an effort to keep the student engaged and receptive to the course material without detracting from the overall lesson.

While this is a great strategy to use, we need to recognize that Alana is a white instructor, thus affording them the privilege to avoid most conflict because students tend not to question white

instructors, especially on issues of race. For instructors of color, this is not always the case when dealing with conflict in the classroom. There is an added labor for an instructor of visible marginalized identities, such as race, to not be perceived as becoming angry, frustrated, or showing any other type of emotion towards a potentially combative student. The double-edged sword that exists for instructors of color to not only manage the class and to keep the conversation from getting derailed because of one (or a few) students' comments, but to also manage their own reactions requires a constant vigilance of the potential consequences.

When considering the process described above, there are additional aspects that instructors of color must take into account. In an instructor of color's attempt to respond in a calm manner, students may perceive them as being timid or lacking authority. However, responding too harshly or firmly may lead students to perceive the instructor as angry. Especially for a woman of color, the emotional aspect is heightened as there are both gendered and racialized factors at play.

For example, in one of Marisa's course evaluations, a student reported that she should work on better classroom management because it was evident that certain students and comments "got under her skin." The perception that an instructor is too emotional may also cause the combative student to shut down and no longer care to be an active member of the class. This occurred at the end of a course Marisa taught on gender inequality, where a student found issue with one of the assigned readings and proceeded to argue about it with her loudly and forcibly in the middle of class. The student proclaimed that they had not read the text but based on the few lines they skimmed in the middle of the ongoing discussion, they decided they would not read anything else for the remainder of the term.

The outburst in this situation came as a shock by how quickly it escalated, and it also made the other students visibly uncomfortable, resulting in an immediate shift in the classroom atmosphere. While Marisa attempted to use the tactics described above, the interaction was beyond a calm rationalization or attempts to mitigate. Instead, the contentious situation required her to shut it down through asserting her authority and declaring that the conversation was over. Although this was not the preferred course of action nor outcome, the decision was made because it was an unproductive argument and especially because other students were being affected.

If an instructor were to give more attention and time to a student's purposefully disruptive outburst, it would take away from the quality of instruction and other students' right to learn in a safe environment. While there were students who approached Marisa at the end of class to express their sympathies for how "bad" she must have felt and supported the way it was handled, it nonetheless had a negative impact. This incident influenced students' perceptions of Marisa and her ability to manage the class, as well as her emotions while teaching, as evidenced in her end of semester teaching evaluation.

Thus, there are numerous aspects to consider when dealing with students and they may vary according to the instructor's different identities. Although we have outlined the decision-making and thought processes that we followed, it is not an easy task to accomplish. We have experienced and witnessed the commonality that graduate student instructors have with these interactions. The incessant questioning and second-guessing of our own behaviors, wondering if we made the right decision, and worrying about the impact that it may have on future class sessions and course evaluations takes a toll on our ability to focus on other aspects of our academic work, as were true of both examples described in this section. What we have found helpful is to have our own transgressive learning community in which we can share with others who understand what we are going through, who can offer advice, and more than anything, validate our experiences and challenges.

## A CALL TO ACTION

The strategies and ideas we have discussed thus far are intentional efforts to de-center heteropatriarchal whiteness (DeChavez 2018; Drane et al. 2019), establish a sense of community in the classroom, be anti-racist (Bakan and Dua 2014; Lawrence and Dua 2005; López 2003), and be inclusive to all. It is not enough to simply mention one scholar of color during lecture, say that racism is bad, or teach without making sure to accommodate all student's needs even if they are not requested or documented. We must first recognize our own privilege (especially white instructors), admit our faults and failures, and learn and grow from them. It is still possible for us to make mistakes, perpetuate racism, sexism, ableism and more, and unknowingly (or knowingly) act as gatekeepers to academia. It is important to admit where we have gone wrong, and not only correct, but over-correct for it (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2018).

If an instructor is cisgender, this is also a privilege. If a cisgender and/or heterosexual instructor does not address gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and/or LGBTQ+ identities nor integrate those voices into the course, it can be just as dismissive and exclusionary as including only readings/research by white scholars. We need to make these historically excluded voices heard, so that non-binary persons like Alana, and other people who identify differently than the status quo, do not feel as though they must hide their identities in order to gain respect and authority in the classroom and in academia in general.

The work we have done on this topic<sup>6</sup> has confirmed the need for these conversations. Graduate students across the country are navigating these and other issues because of how they are perceived and treated as members of marginalized communities. In discussions with graduate students from different institutions, many have confided in us about the lack of space in their own departments to have conversations like these, especially surrounding the teaching role that we are sometimes thrown into without much (or any) experience or training. Thus, we argue that graduate programs institute stronger and continuous teacher training for their graduate students.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer step-by-step program solutions, we advocate that departments and graduate programs ensure the space for GSIs and faculty to have these conversations. A combination of structured and informal settings where instructors of all levels can discuss challenges and share strategies on how to navigate relatable instructor experiences should be part of GSI pedagogical training, as suggested by previous scholars such as Drane et al. (2019) and Auten and Twigg (2015). This should be done in a way that does not make a GSI feel incompetent or less than, as these are not individual problems or flaws, but rather structural issues that come with the territory of being an instructor. With the implementation of this type of teacher training, the additional challenges and unpaid labor that students like us have done to learn how to teach inclusively, can be minimized.

To overcome this lack of structured training in our own programs, we began to recognize and use our in-between positionality as students and instructors because it provides us with the opportunity to relate to the current student experience. Rather than shying away from this aspect of our professional identity, we have the opportunity to use it to benefit our undergraduate students and ourselves as graduate students. Creating open dialogue and inclusive teaching practices that allow for non-graduate student instructors/faculty, GSIs, and undergraduate students to build upon their various forms of capital and knowledge. By doing this, we can keep students more engaged and interested in course material, and work to dismantle the barriers that face untrained graduate student instructors and faculty.

Furthermore, the training should include an emphasis on inclusive teaching strategies for student engagement, innovative assignment design, and outward-facing assessments. For example, we

can modify course requirements to include alternative assessments/assignments that might be produced through popular forms of media such as podcasts or videos. The finished products stemming from these assignments can then be made accessible to the general population through social media (if the student wishes) as a way to share knowledge and teaching/learning practices. With these forms of stronger training, dialogue, and the sharing of strategies, departments can cultivate a community of reciprocal, engaged, culturally relevant, and inclusive pedagogy that would benefit instructors of all levels. These methods are becoming increasingly important as we continue to live in a world where remote learning is pertinent, and flexibility is needed.

For professors who resonate with our experiences, we hope that this article can be a reminder that you have the ability to help foster a better experience for the graduate students you mentor. For graduate students, we want you to know that you are not alone in this experience. If you are a tenure track or tenured faculty member who has experienced some or all of what we have discussed, we ask that you be transparent about it. A large part of why GSIs feel like we are going through it alone is because we do not feel comfortable approaching faculty, especially if the “I went through it, so you have to go through it too” attitude persists within departments. Graduate students often feel incompetent or are plagued by imposter syndrome, making it even more difficult to seek out advice and help from more experienced instructors. Lastly, for those supporting student instructors who are of privileged identities, being aware that your privilege makes your experience different than that of people who do not have privileged identities is an important step in shifting the status quo.

On a larger scale, these topics are especially pertinent given the current social and political climate. The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has shed light on the injustices and inequalities that many people were ignoring or failing to see. On top of that, the protests, uprisings, and all-around actions regarding racial injustice, particularly with respect to the Black Lives Matter movement, further necessitates the need for educators to implement—not just talk about or form committees regarding—anti-racist strategies. The well-being of our students, staff, and faculty, especially BIPOC, is of utmost importance. As scholars, we must do more than simply theorize about social impacts. We must demand an equitable shift in how our educational institutions operate. Once again, it is the responsibility of institutions to re-organize their resources and teaching structures to take the extra burden off already marginalized instructors and to promote the necessary critical pedagogical training for all instructors and academics. By communicating these strategies, we hope discussion will turn into action and implementation on an institutional level.

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## NOTES

1. It should be noted that while Alana R. Inlow was a graduate student when working on this paper they have since graduated, obtained their PhD, and transitioned to an assistant professor position.
2. “[E]veryday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue 2010).
3. A culture, in this case academic culture, dominated by heterosexual white males who are biased against anyone and anything that is different from them, or that they see as a threat to their power.
4. See this website, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/first-generation-college-student-/community-cultural-wealth.10>, for a helpful summary and breakdown of Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model (Da Graca and Dougherty 2015).
5. We added quotation marks around the word, “opposing,” because students’ oppositions are often rooted in maintaining the status quo of racism, sexism, ableism, etc. and not based on acceptable, factual evidence.
6. The authors have served as members of a teaching committee within their department and have organized teaching-focused workshops and panels for the American Sociological Association and Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meetings in 2018 and 2019, as well as for their own university.

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APPENDIX A

**Identity Introduction Exercise**

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1. Have students make a list of their identities on paper, along with their name(s) and pronouns; another option is to tell students to focus on the identities most salient to their lives as students, depending on the type of discussion you want to take place
2. Ask students to introduce themselves to their classroom neighbors and/or go around the room and have students introduce themselves to the whole class using their listed identities (anyone who does not want to publicly disclose identities, does not have to)
3. See below for some identity examples you could give to your students; sometimes it is helpful to give examples, but sometimes leaving it up to students to think on their own can spark more lively conversation
4. After students have introduced themselves ask them to think about why they wrote down the identities that they did; ask them to consider the intersection of their identities and how their identities shape their own lives; ask them to consider the intersection of others’ identities, and how we may be reducing others to what we see on the surface
5. By acknowledging the complexities of the marginalized and privileged parts of our identities, we can build strategies to navigate our roles as students, family members, workers, etc.

**Examples:**

Race	Mental/Physical Capabilities	Learning Style
Ethnicity	Religion	Age
Gender	Geography	Politics
Sex	Relationships	Job/Career
Social Class	Education	Health Status

## APPENDIX B

### **“Check-in & Reflect” an anonymous reflection activity**

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The purpose of this activity is to challenge you to think about what you thought you knew, what you now know, and how the course material has changed the way you think, if at all.

1. Take a couple minutes to think about the topic(s) we have recently discussed.
2. Using bullet points, list out any preconceptions you had about the topic(s) before coming to class.
3. Now list out anything new that you have learned about the topic(s); did anything make you think differently about the topic?
4. What new information raises questions for you?
5. Do you still hold the same viewpoint, and if so, what evidence supports your view?



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