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## Student Engagement in Peer Dialogue About Diversity and Inclusion

Barry L. Trentham

*University of Toronto, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy*

Sylvia Langlois

*University of Toronto, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy*

Ruheena Sangrar

*McMaster University*

Jill Stier

*University of Toronto, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy*

Lynn Cockburn

*University of Toronto, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Abstract

Student engagement in peer dialogue is a key aspect of a transformative learning process. However, the dynamics of peer dialogue become more complex when applied to concepts of diversity and inclusion, due to increased risk of student vulnerability and exclusion. This study examined how curricular content and contextual features in educational settings facilitate peer dialogue by analyzing the learning narratives of eleven occupational therapy graduate students. Considered within a transformative approach to learning, findings suggest the need to consider how students experience and name diversity. Critical questions are raised about the value of and potential caveats about exposing students to first person accounts, as well as pedagogical strategies aimed at creating respectful learning classroom spaces that acknowledge the many intersecting social identities that students bring. Insights from this study informed the development of the linked concept of critical intersectional peer dialogue (CIPD).

## Keywords

Inclusive pedagogy, transformative learning, cross-cultural competencies, cultural safety, social inclusion

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## Authors

Barry L. Trentham, Sylvia Langlois, Ruheena Sangrar, Jill Stier, Lynn Cockburn, Deb Cameron, Rebecca Renwick, and Chantal DSouza

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Barry L. Trentham<sup>1</sup>, Sylvia Langlois<sup>1</sup>, Ruheena Sangrar<sup>2</sup>, Jill Stier<sup>1</sup>, Lynn Cockburn<sup>1</sup>,  
Deb Cameron<sup>1</sup>, Rebecca Renwick<sup>1</sup>, and Chantal D'Souza<sup>3</sup>

University of Toronto<sup>1</sup>, McMaster University<sup>2</sup>, and William Osler Health Centre<sup>3</sup>  
Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Student engagement in peer dialogue is a key aspect of a transformative learning process. However, the dynamics of peer dialogue become more complex when applied to concepts of diversity and inclusion, due to increased risk of student vulnerability and exclusion. This study examined how curricular content and contextual features in educational settings facilitate peer dialogue by analyzing the learning narratives of eleven occupational therapy graduate students. Considered within a transformative approach to learning, findings suggest the need to consider how students experience and name diversity. Critical questions are raised about the value of and potential caveats about exposing students to first person accounts, as well as pedagogical strategies aimed at creating respectful learning classroom spaces that acknowledge the many intersecting social identities that students bring. Insights from this study informed the development of the linked concept of critical intersectional peer dialogue (CIPD).

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As countries around the world experience significant demographic changes and high levels of migration, education and practice contexts are becoming increasingly more diverse. Accordingly, health professional education programs must reconsider how they prepare students to practice with clients/patients and colleagues who represent a diversity of intersecting social identities. However, insufficient theoretically-grounded, evidence-based literature exists to effectively respond to this pedagogical challenge (Dykes & White, 2011; Horvat et al., 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2006). Without a critical examination of existing pedagogical strategies aimed at facilitating effective engagement across differences, learning may be ineffective (Chun, 2010). Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990) offers a sound theoretical grounding promoting inclusive practices in contexts of diversity. Critical approaches to

transformative learning expose learners to differing lived experiences and worldviews, while encouraging reflexivity and peer dialogue to explore unacknowledged assumptions and beliefs. Through such shared exploration, students become aware of socially embedded hegemonic forces that privilege, normalize, and reinforce dominant perspectives over those of more marginalized social identity groups (Giroux, 2010; Mezirow, 2000; Shor, 1996). Peer dialogue can contribute to this transformative process and is viewed as central for effective learning across social differences (Gayle et al., 2013; Hurtado, 2005). However, when applied to concepts of diversity and inclusive practice, the dynamics of peer dialogue become more complex as experiences of vulnerability and discrimination (due to inequities across differences) amongst learners are highlighted (Daniel, 2011; Park, 2012).

The objective of this research is to better understand how curricular content and contextual features (i.e., the teaching venues, pedagogy, and student diversity) facilitate student engagement in peer dialogue on issues of diversity and inclusion within an occupational therapy (OT) curriculum. Narratives of eleven OT graduate students describing how they engaged in learning about diversity and inclusion in the curriculum were analyzed with respect to their experiences of peer dialogue.

### **Background and Study Context**

This study was situated in a two-year, professional Master of Science Occupational Therapy (MScOT) program in a large Canadian city with students from a variety of urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Intersecting identities of the student body represented self-described differences in ethnic heritage/culture, race, religion, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and abilities. Equity, diversity-and-inclusion-related issues were integrated throughout the curriculum in clinical case scenarios, clinical fieldwork, class presentations, course readings, assignments, and workshops. Within the first three months of the program, students and faculty collectively develop classroom norms and strategies to create a learning environment supportive of peer dialogue (for details, see Trentham et al., 2019). To bring “the marginalized experience to the centre of the curriculum” (Bierema, 2010, p. 322), instructors expose students to the lived experiences of historically disadvantaged populations (e.g., Indigenous, LGBTQ, disability groups) and introduce students to concepts such as cultural safety (Ramsden, 1993), cultural humility (Chang et al., 2010; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), privilege and anti-oppression (Larson, 2008).

Despite efforts to engage students in peer dialogue on issues of diversity and inclusion, course evaluations and students’ unsolicited observations suggested that in-depth dialogue was not occurring to the extent required to meet curriculum objectives and students’ expectations. This pedagogical challenge and the dearth of evidence-based approaches provided the impetus for a study aimed at better understanding how study participants experience curriculum components aimed at fostering peer dialogue on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.

### **Definitions, Literature Highlights and Theoretical Underpinnings**

Multiple terms, often used interchangeably, describe cross-cutting aspects of diversity, inclusion, and health care practice across social identity group differences. Therefore, it is important to define the key terms discussed in this paper, including *intersectionality*, *diversity and inclusion*, and *transformative learning*.

*Intersectionality*, as described by Crenshaw (1991), considers how people hold multiple social group identities, with privilege contingent on the social contexts in which they engage. Intersectionality also highlights the reality of socially oppressive consequences with varying combinations of social identities.

Building on Crenshaw's (1991) definition of intersectionality and Trentham et al.'s (2007) discussion of diversity as the complex array of lived experiences of privilege and/or oppression that play out in differences across ethnicity, religion, sexual orientations, gender, socioeconomic status, and other named social identity groupings, we define the combined term *diversity and inclusion* as the creation of conditions and opportunities that enable the engagement of all people across intersecting social identities to participate as citizens in their everyday activities.

A curriculum informed by *transformative learning* principles acknowledges that the breadth of students' diverse lived experiences is central to graduating professionals able to engage effectively within contexts of diversity (Betancourt & Green, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Kumas-Tan et al., 2007; Talero et al., 2015; Trentham et al., 2007). Further, transformative learning (Giroux, 2010; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2013) proposes that learners can be "transformed" into competent professionals able to engage across social identity differences through both naturally occurring and structured education processes (Frenk et al., 2010; Ortiz & Jani, 2010) when they can learn from peers and can challenge taken-for-granted or privileged, dominant perspectives. Student education using this approach must consider, for example, the power dynamics at play in therapeutic relationships and how these vary across differing professional and social contexts (Daniel, 2011; Preston & Aslett, 2014).

While the health professional education literature acknowledges the urgency of developing inclusive practice (Bonder & Martin, 2013; Caplan & Black, 2014; Maroney et al., 2014; Ramsden, 1993; Talero et al., 2015), there are limited illustrations of evidence-informed strategies guided by transformative learning (Betancourt & Green, 2010; Dykes & White, 2011; Kumas-Tan et al., 2007; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Walker et al., 2010). Evidence suggests that immersion in diverse social settings and exposure to different cultures, ethnicities, and worldviews can offset stereotyping and discriminatory behavior, leading to inclusive practice (Allport, 1954; Gibson, 2015; Koskinen et al., 2012; Kumagai & Naidu, 2015; Smith et al., 2014; Whiteford & Wright St-Clair, 2002). For example, Hurtado (2005) found that students engaged in what they referred to as cross-cultural intergroup dialogue demonstrated positive attitudinal change regarding race-based initiatives. However, these experiences may not have encouraged adequate reflection on the impact of power inequities within the therapeutic relationship and within society (Hurtado, 2005). In fact, brief experiences can reproduce

systemic oppressive processes and structures if they are not adequately processed through facilitated reflection (Beagan, 2015; Beagan & Chacala, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2006; Vandenburg & Kalischuk, 2014). Similarly, using a structured intergroup dialogue approach to social change, Buckley and Quaye (2014) illustrated the detrimental effects of group facilitators' reluctance to interrupt the peer learning processes to help students situate their personal experiences within systemic structural contexts. Without facilitation to critique existing power inequities within and between their social identities, students may not be able to challenge their *a priori* cultural assumptions and implicit biases. Consideration of how to best support peer dialogue that foster the development of inclusive practice competencies led to the following research question: *What do student narrative accounts reveal about how features of their educational program, (i.e., curricular content and contextual features), shape their experience of peer dialogue on issues of diversity and inclusion?*

### Methodology

The study took a constructivist, narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995) while employing principles from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), in particular, the concept of problematics. Narrative interviews were conducted to elicit student accounts of learning through peer dialogue about diversity and inclusion.

### Participants and Recruitment

Following approval by the university's Research Ethics Board, eleven students from three cohorts of students (first year, second year, and the graduating MScOT classes) were recruited over a three year period by a research assistant (RA) to participate in face-to-face interviews. For descriptive information about the participants, see Table 1.

Table 1

#### *Description of Participants*

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Total participants                                              | 11                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Male                                                            | 3                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Female                                                          | 8                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Grew up in a rural environment                                  | 2                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Grew up in an urban environment                                 | 9                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Self-identifiers<br>(Most students<br>identified more than one) | Caucasian/White (10)<br>Asian (1)<br>Part aboriginal descent (1)<br>Christian (3)<br>Atheist (1)<br>Jewish (1)<br>Canadian (3)<br>Pan-sexual (1)<br>Heterosexual (3) |

**Table 1 Continued**

|                                             |                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Year in MScOT Program                       | Year 1 (5)<br>Year 2 (2)<br>Recent graduates (4)                             |
| Socio-economic background (self-identified) | Lower class (1)<br>Middle class (7)<br>Upper middle class (2)<br>Unknown (1) |

### Information Gathering

Research assistants (RAs) were under the supervision of the first author for all research phases, including recruitment, interviews and creation of narrative summaries. The RAs had no prior relationships with the participants and were responsible for recruitment and obtaining informed consent. They used a semi-structured interview guide to elicit contextually rich accounts of students' experiences in the MScOT program. Interview questions explored their framing of concepts of diversity and inclusion, pivotal moments throughout their program that shifted their understandings, and nature of experiences of peer dialogue about these concepts. Audio-recorded interviews (45 to 90 minutes) were followed by additional conversations to clarify any gaps. Drawing on the recorded interviews, the RAs constructed short narratives (using pseudonyms; 4-7 pages long) in consultation with the first author. Participants reviewed these narratives to confirm they resonated with their lived experience and to make any needed changes. Students in the MScOT program who volunteered to participate received cinema tickets for their time. All authors were unaware of the identity of participants and used pseudonyms assigned by the RAs.

### Analysis

The co-constructed student narratives served as the initial interpretive step in the analysis process. The second step, informed by Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, was the development of cross-cutting themes across the narratives. All authors were involved in this process, starting with each author completing the analysis independently. Then the authors met several times to collectively negotiate the development of the themes using an analytical chart.

Developed themes were then examined for ideas that, in institutional ethnography, Smith (2005) referred to as 'problematics.' Problematics are problems or questions arising across the narratives. For this study, problematics were seen to either constrain or limit peer dialogue about issues of diversity and inclusion. After this process, the first author re-reviewed participant narratives against the analytical chart and all authors finalized the themes and subthemes.

The critical perspective embedded in Smith's (2005) approach to institutional ethnography assumes that power inequities shape how individuals engage with and experience their social worlds. Because most of the authors were also faculty members in the program under study, they were embedded in the power structures of the

students' learning environment. For this reason, extensive team discussions and dialogue facilitated critical self-reflection on their roles in shaping both positive and negative aspects of the students' experiences and in the interpretation of the narratives.

### Findings

The findings are presented as two cross-cutting categories, *Student Descriptions of Diversity* and *Curricular Influences Fostering or Hindering Peer Dialogue*, each with two sub-themes (see Table 2). Problematics and questions arising from the themes are examined and contextualized within the broader literature as part of the Discussion section.

Table 2

#### Summary of Main Themes and Sub-themes

| Main Theme                                                                 | Sub-Themes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student Descriptions of Diversity<br>(Category 1)                          | Perhaps not such benign differences<br>Experiencing geographic and socioeconomic class diversity<br>Mental health issues and physical disability<br>identity markers                                                                                    |
| Curricular Influences Fostering or Hindering Peer Dialogue<br>(Category 2) | Varying value of first person accounts<br>Faculty explicating and valuing diversity and inclusion<br>Still just skimming the surface despite diverse lived experiences<br>Safety in numbers and anonymity: Small groups, large groups, and social media |

#### Category 1: Student Descriptions of Diversity

As a starting point to an examination of peer dialogue, it was crucial to understand how student participants viewed the diversity of their peers. While students used common descriptors of diversity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class, abilities), they also identified dimensions of diversity seen as less politically charged. Participants viewed the student body as quite diverse, while acknowledging minimal differences in gender and social class. Students perceived that their peers predominantly belonged to a middle to upper middle socioeconomic class. Sub-themes presented below further describe the ways in which participants described the diversities of their peers.

#### *Perhaps Not Such Benign Differences*

Observations about diversity among their peers included multiple differences, such as: being more introverted versus outspoken, their peers' levels of understandings of diversity and inclusion concepts, or differences in learning and working styles. Though



these differences may be viewed as benign in terms of power inequity, some participants emphasized the impact they had on small group learning, a core component of the curriculum. As one student noted:

Half of the group was fairly hard-working and wanted to get their work done as soon as possible, where the other half was more laid back. They did not mesh well at all.... The issue was never resolved.... You just had to live with the beast, until the study group was done. (Evan, Graduate)

Overall, diversity was mostly perceived as favorable to students' learning, though some suggested that it presented potential misunderstandings. As one student summarized:

Everyone comes from a really different background—even if they come from a place within the same society. And having that different background contributes to different kinds of knowing about things, and different ways of understanding a phenomenon, actions, and what's good and what's right. There can be misunderstanding in diversity, but there is also a lot of interesting diversity of experience. (Melissa, Year 1)

This quote is typical of many such positive descriptions of diversity, but also illustrates how reference to power inequities across differences were less often articulated.

### ***Experiencing Geographic and Socioeconomic Class Diversity***

Participants identified geographical diversity by referring to an urban-rural divide, cultural distinctions between different Canadian cities or smaller urban areas, and the need to commute. Geographical distance limited participation by commuting students in informal learning opportunities (e.g., pub discussions, house parties). Although social media such as Facebook somewhat offset this isolation, virtual peer interactions were viewed as less organic than informal, impromptu conversations. As one student stated in reference to those having to commute: “[It] affected who could come out or who represented the social circles.” (Evan, Graduate).

In some cases, geographical differences were linked to class differences. For example, newcomers to the university from elsewhere in Canada conveyed a sense of being outsiders. As one student stated,

[Name of University] is really, really different. It moves differently, people dress differently. You see business fashion on all the students going to [Name of University]. That was very strange for me; seeing the wealth openly displayed as wealth was a shock. That was the biggest adjustment for me. (Melissa, Year 1).

Class differences among students were experienced most acutely by students who came from less affluent backgrounds. Referring to an apparent lack of awareness of financial privilege amongst her peers, one student noted how wealthier students influenced peer dialogue:

I think if my family owned multiple cottages, I probably wouldn't just casually drop it, which to me, speaks to their comfort and perhaps not recognizing that that's not a norm.... I felt that the group was fairly divided among class lines. Again, a lot of that came about during conversations about people talking about their cottages or whatever, and other people not being able to participate in that or not having anything else to say. (Vera, Graduate)

Conversations about students' holidays highlighted differences in socioeconomic status and contributed to as Alex (Year 1) stated, "silences those less privileged."

### ***Mental Health Issues and Physical Disability Identity Markers***

Numerous students named mental illness and physical disability as indicators of diversity. Several students related how their own experience of sharing this aspect of their identity was facilitated by the presence of someone courageous enough to "pave the way" (Alex, Year 1) with respect to peer story-telling. As the MScOT program abides by principles related to equitable participation in learning activities for all students, Alex saw this as a reason to share experiences related to disability as it, "is the subject that everyone is attenuated to."

### **Category 2: Curricular Influences Fostering or Hindering Peer Dialogue**

The following sub-themes represent key features of the curriculum (e.g., processes, learning spaces, pedagogical strategies) that were viewed by students as fostering or hindering inclusion, dialogue and learning.

#### ***Varying Value of First Person Accounts***

Most students alluded to the value of first person accounts, particularly discussions that raised awareness about the lived experiences of people from marginalized or underserved social groupings. For example, several students referenced a session on aging and sexuality highlighting the experiences of discrimination of older LGBTQ people. As one student put it, "I appreciated that one. For me it was a new topic, so that was exciting. I think that's where the conversations have been more interesting and challenging" (Rachel, Year 2). In reference to a session on Indigenous ways of knowing, another student stated:

"We had a speaker on Native Ways of Knowing come in and I really appreciated that. It made me feel good. Even though the content was quite unpleasant, I think it helps to address bad things that have happened" (Melissa, Year 1).

Using narratives to convey first person accounts was welcomed as an effective way to raise awareness of issues and stimulate dialogue. Ana (Year 1) stated that she "learns through stories" and another student highlighted how the use of real-life client scenarios shared by instructors from community organizations was valuable, "because the issue of diversity needs to be heard through different voices" (Rachel, Year 2). Exposure to first person accounts during clinical fieldwork was also viewed as essential. For example, when referring to criticisms made by a black female participant in a parenting group about therapists' insensitive approaches to parenting education, Evan (Graduate)

stated that such learning is “something that can only come from living those experiences directly.” He spoke to the importance of out-of-class, “real life” exposure to first person accounts that “kind of frames the lens that you take in the information within class.” Cara (Year 2), speaking of her clinical fieldwork in an Indigenous community, stated, “I think that I really came to appreciate Indigenous culture and their ways of knowing... I think that was really powerful... I’ve kind of learned how to be more of an ally.” During fieldwork in the MScOT program, questions arising out of clinical ethical dilemmas offered rich material to be explored later in class discussions. As Vera (Graduate) stated:

When you have a client who is perhaps of a lower status and recognizing that a lot of the issues that they encounter are due to things like poverty and things outside of the OT scope that you can’t necessarily change... but trying to figure out how to make them aware of how that’s impacting them, and whether or not you should. Whether or not you’re doing someone a service or a disservice by pointing out perhaps the way their race is impacting them.

Fieldwork settings were venues where students often experienced intersectional clinical dilemmas and where the press for dialogue seemed most evident.

### ***Faculty Explicating and Valuing Diversity and Inclusion***

Several students suggested that by valuing questions of diversity and inclusion, faculty created an expectation that inclusive practice was an important part of student learning. The extent to which instructors made diversity and inclusion concepts explicit in teaching material was thought to be an important factor in facilitating dialogue. As Rachel (Year 2) commented, “When it’s explicitly the topic, people will talk about it. When it’s not explicitly the topic people don’t always comment on it.” While the value placed on diversity and inclusion was viewed as facilitative of dialogue, it was not always perceived as leading to concrete competency development. Another student amplified this point:

I could tell that they’re trying to integrate it.... I’m able to see kind of specks of it scattered throughout. But at the same time, I haven’t really applied it yet, so it’s kind of really hard to tell, you know, what did I pick up from there and how did that translate to field. (Lisa, Year 1)

### ***Still Just Skimming the Surface Despite Diverse Lived Experiences***

Participants shared different perspectives about diverse class composition as a rich foundation for peer dialogue. As one student noted:

I would say we are a pretty diverse group and coming from more of a dominant background myself, it’s very refreshing to hear those different perspectives from people that are coming from different backgrounds and have definitely different educational backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds... so I would say we definitely bring that to the table during class discussions. (Ana, Year 1)

While some thought that students brought their diverse lived experiences to the class, others felt that in-depth peer dialogue did not happen to the extent that they would have expected. For example, Vera (Graduate) commented on the superficial nature of some sessions when diversity and culture was addressed in terms of things like what people eat... not leading to real important discussions. Similarly, with respect to the ongoing pedagogical tensions between information-sharing about culturally specific content versus general capabilities associated with developing inclusive practice, another student expressed the concern that “I don’t find that we get a lot of depth in many other cultures. We talk in generalities rather than specifics. And I think sometimes specifics can help understanding.” (Melissa, Year 1).

### **Safety in Numbers and Anonymity: Small Groups, Large Groups and Social Media**

There were numerous opportunities for peer dialogue in small group settings (i.e., either student-led study groups of up to 10 students, or practitioner mentor led groups of 8-10 students), which provided greater opportunities to engage in peer dialogue for students uncomfortable speaking to a full class. Similarly, diversity in learning and personality styles, sometimes expressed as introversion or extraversion, were seen as being accommodated by opportunities to engage with the curriculum in a different context. Speaking to her preference for small group dialogue, Vera (Graduate) stated:

There is so much fear of saying the wrong thing or coming across as insensitive, and it certainly can happen. Within a larger group it’s too bad because you don’t always get an opportunity to unpack things in the same way.

Students shared differing views about the extent to which social media (e.g., class cohort Facebook discussions) facilitated peer dialogue on issues of diversity and inclusion. Alex (Year 1) observed that a sense of ongoing surveillance leads to students “filtering” their discussions accordingly and that the anonymity provided by some forms of social media can be “one of the best tools for discovering the diversity in the classroom.”

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how faculty could best support peer dialogue that enables inclusive practice competencies. The findings from this study identify a number of important questions interpreted as *problematics* both in terms of what students say about their experiences of peer dialogue across different lived experiences and about diversity and inclusion issues, as well as what they do not say. These problematics are discussed in relation to their contribution to the broader academic conversation on contextual features that facilitate student engagement in peer dialogue within a critical lens in OT.

### **Questions of Power, Intersectionality and Not-so-benign Diversities**

Students’ accounts of diversity are limited in their references to power inequities except with respect to professor-student dynamics. Absent from these narratives were explicit discussions of the intersectionalities at play in the classroom, particularly with respect to the multiplicity of social identities. The authors found the absence of explicit comments

reflecting understandings of intersectionality surprising, given that faculty perceived these ideas to be emphasized explicitly in the curriculum. This disconnect suggests the need to find strategies to better convey and illustrate these important concepts. If recognition is not given to the impact of socioeconomic features and power inequities amongst “labeled groups” (Kumas-Tan et al., 2007), educational efforts may be limited and risk reinforcing stereotypes.

In response to the challenge of instructors needing to assist students to recognize power, privilege, and oppressive processes in everyday interactions, Hikido and Murray (2015), in discussing white privilege, called on educators to integrate insights from a critical multiculturalism framework. They asserted that apart from structural measures to reduce inequities (e.g., faculty hires, student recruitment, recognition of historical exclusions), faculty (the majority of whom were white) must clarify the role of whiteness in maintaining inequities. They added that instructors should clearly illustrate “historical and structural reaches of white supremacy” (Hikido & Murray, 2015, p. 19) while also highlighting how such historical realities shape current interpersonal interactions, including those taking place within classroom discussions.

Clearly, peer dialogue will remain a limited learning strategy unless the power dynamics of intersectionality are made explicit and integrated into facilitated discussions of personal experiences. However, participants suggested that, despite their diverse cohort, peers focused on differences which might be seen as more benign or politically less charged, in an effort to avoid singling themselves out or responding insensitively. While acknowledging the whiteness of the majority, they made only cursory comments about racial differences and ethnicity, with minimal references to associated power inequities or white privilege. More often, the differences noted by students were related to geography, socioeconomic class, and learning and working styles. These differences were examined to understand how they influenced peer dialogue across learning contexts. While the lack of recognition of white privilege or other inequities may be seen as taken for granted by the predominantly white participants and instructors, or as avoiding engagement in difficult discussions about whiteness and privilege, the findings from this study uniquely suggest that the student-identified differences, benign as they may seem, could be a starting point for a more critical approach to peer dialogue.

### **Creating Disorienting Dilemmas in ‘Safe’ Classrooms**

A feature of a transformative approach to teaching and learning involves the creation of situations that students (and course instructors) might find troubling or disruptive to their current way of interpreting the world around them (Mezirow, 2000). These disorienting dilemmas offer rich ground for peer dialogue yet may be seen to be at odds with what students consider a “safe” classroom. As one a participant noted, there may be a tendency to overdo the “safety” message. By “overdoing” this message, students may become overly cautious, try to avoid conflict, thus preventing rich and valuable dialogue, which Smele et al. (2017) critiqued as a reflection of neoliberal influences on higher education. To experience transformation, learners must be supported to go beyond their own experiences and grapple with the discomfort of seeing the world from alternative perspectives, even if that includes an awareness of their own unearned privilege, or

their emerging understanding of diversity and inclusion. This approach raises the question of how instructors help students critically examine inequities and “sit” with this discomfort.

Buckley and Quaye (2014) discussed tensions experienced by intergroup dialogue facilitators who recognize the need for creating a safe space, while acknowledging that much learning takes place during those “moments of discomfort.” However, while this direct, process-oriented approach to learning through discomfort was found to be beneficial in facilitating reflections on personal experience, they perceived that it remained at the level of individual feelings and was not sufficient to address broader social justice issues. These findings underscore the need for facilitated small group reflection where students can debrief on their feelings of discomfort and challenge their own assumptions (Furlong & Wight, 2011) through critical self-reflection.

In the current study, students’ comments describing intersectional “disorienting” dilemmas experienced during the experiential component of the MScOT program were an important reminder of how out-of-the-classroom contexts may be fertile for addressing diversity issues. As one participant noted, it is these experiences that provide an experiential “lens,” such that material can be brought back to the classroom for in-depth student-directed discussion. Faculty might want to consider ways to facilitate the links between fieldwork experiences and analytical discussions in the classroom. Based on these observations, the current authors have since initiated a process of informing fieldwork preceptors about student-identified issues and student-directed peer dialogue norms as a means to bring outside experiences into classroom conversations and inside classroom conversations to the outside world.

### **Paying Attention to Pedagogical Spaces**

Another problematic identified in this study reinforces the need to pay attention to the physical venues and fora used to facilitate peer dialogue. Many comments made by participants challenge educators to be mindful of their expectations for peer dialogue and debate within a large classroom setting. Students commented on the fears associated with potential conflict situations and being afraid to create discomfort in these settings. While the objective of challenging peer assumptions based on lived experiences might be laudable, students made clear that the large classroom setting is not a venue that facilitates dialogue. Such comments can be misconstrued as oversharing and inappropriate for such a setting. Instructors cannot guarantee that further marginalization or discrimination will not be inflicted on students by their peers in response to student “first person” accounts in class. Instructors might consider how their encouragement of students to share their lived experience in class might be perceived as pressure to do so in an unsafe space. Multiple venues are needed, particularly those that offer small group peer learning facilitated by instructors who are able to effectively model and encourage critical reflection. It is essential that facilitators consciously intervene to link student lived experiences to broader social justice issues, in a way that clearly demonstrates care and respect (Buckley & Quaye, 2014; Sharma et al., 2018). In naming geographical diversity in its various forms (e.g., commuter vs. non-commuter; rural vs. urban; regional differences), study participants highlighted the need to consider

how these differences influence informal learning venues. Students reported that discussions of diversity often take place at informal venues (e.g., pubs, social media). This reality ought to be appreciated and facilitated by faculty. For example, faculty can consider how social media fora are made accessible to all students in order to bridge geographical barriers and, in turn, how they are harnessed for their learning potential.

Engagement in peer dialogue assumes that one has access to opportunities to do so whether these are informal student-initiated opportunities or learning opportunities embedded in the curriculum. As identified by participants, inequities in access to such opportunities exist and may be due to forces such as socioeconomic status or religious observance. Additionally, informal pub gatherings are not always an option for students with limited finances, students living with disabilities or, for those whose religion or culture proscribes such activities.

### **Culturally Specific Learning Versus Developing Critical Intersectional Peer Dialogue Competencies**

A final problematic raises questions about how learners learn from first person accounts. The study conveyed a disconnect between student expectations to learn about the cultural specifics of various cultural groups and instructor objectives to build general peer dialogue competencies. Though desiring processes that do not reinforce stereotypes and reduce people to singular and fixed identities (as was typical of previous approaches to “cultural sensitivity” training), instructors are challenged to ‘disrupt’ student thinking by exposing them to diverse worldviews while providing them with concrete learning opportunities that facilitate skill development. Students do seek grounding in first person accounts about various social identity group practices, but how these learning opportunities are presented, facilitated, and problematized requires thoughtful reflection on how instructors can assist students to examine the many intersecting identities that shape the first-person accounts being discussed.

One potential response to this dilemma is for instructors to create opportunities in which learners are placed in situations where their experiences are not the norm (i.e., international or community-based experiential placements, with underserved populations). With facilitated critical reflection, these experiences could be analyzed further, including how power dynamics and privilege are experienced and examined. For example, Talero et al. (2015) proposed a model as a way to facilitate students’ critical reflection on their experiences integrated into the learning process including phases of: narrative imagination, critical reflexivity, critical consciousness, and critical action. The use of such a framework may help students to critically reflect on and analyze their own intersectional interactions encountered during experiential components of the curriculum, with further analysis in a classroom setting. In this current study, participants’ comments suggest that it is in experiential settings where peer dialogue dilemmas are evident yet insufficiently debriefed.

Study findings conveying a disconnect between student and instructor learning led the authors to reframe peer dialogue more explicitly within a critical and intersectional perspective. As the findings from this study and others (Buckley & Quaye, 2014;

Hurtado, 2005; Kumagai & Naidu, 2015) suggested, peer dialogue with others from different lived experiences alone does not lead to, as transformative learning principles would suggest, a more critical understanding of power inequities across those differences. Dialogue participants bring many and intersecting identities (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) to group discussions. For this reason, we have introduced the concept of CIPD. CIPD in this study refers to how students engage in discussions about their intersecting social identity differences. CIPD is viewed as a pedagogical strategy to inform inclusive practice. It is conceptualized as being grounded in the intersectionality of social identities (Crenshaw, 1991) each which hold varying levels of power, privilege and/or experiences of oppression or marginality dependent on context. What might distinguish this framework from similar pedagogical approaches is a critique of a common assumption that there is an “us” who represent a typically privileged cultural location, and a “them” who represent an “other” culture who are oppressed and in need of the services from “us”. Rather, the dynamic is much more fluid and complex, particularly in urban practice settings, where learners engage within contexts of diversity, where individuals’ intersecting identity differences and similarities convey shifting power relations.

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Education**

Acknowledging the need to educate OTs employing approaches that promote development of skills, knowledge and critical perspectives they require to navigate practice contexts of diversity and health inequities, this research illustrates a number of important considerations for OT educators. Informed by a CIPD framework, educators are encouraged to create opportunities for peer dialogue amongst students. Dialogue must be grounded in an understanding of the historical and political roots of inequities across differences. Through facilitated peer dialogue students are encouraged to consider their own intersecting social identities and locations of privilege and/or marginalization. Peer dialogue can also draw on relevant observations in clinical fieldwork, first person accounts in classroom settings as well as their own everyday lived experiences of diversity, inclusion and/or inequity.

For effective and respectful peer dialogue to occur, educators need to ensure that the learning spaces (e.g., small group vs large group) are conducive to trusting conversations. This includes the creation of peer-developed norms that support respectful dialogue and acknowledge power and privilege differences as well as the potential vulnerabilities experienced by students from historically marginalized social identity groups. While recognizing that students come to these dialogues with very different levels of relevant knowledge, educators will need to consider how content is scaffolded across the curriculum in a manner that builds on students’ growing understanding of diversity and inclusion concepts. While targeted sessions focused on diversity and inclusion may be necessary and offer valuable transformative and disorienting dilemmas for students to wrestle with, curriculum planners need also consider how the concepts explicitly discussed in these sessions are further developed throughout the curriculum. That is, concepts related to diversity and inclusion should not be relegated to special classes alone, but should provide an additional lens for students to interpret, evaluate, and synthesize information throughout the curriculum.



### **Limitations**

While findings from this study are helpful in illustrating how curricular content and contextual features shape student experiences of peer dialogue, some cautions are warranted regarding the transferability of these findings to other settings. Several features likely influenced how students responded to the research questions. Specifically, relatively few students offered to participate in this study. While five participants self-identified with a minority social identity (i.e., Indigenous ancestry, sexuality, mental/physical disability, Asian Canadian, and secular Jewish roots), persons who identified as otherwise racialized did not participate. Familiarity with the authors in their roles as faculty members may explain the relatively low number of recruits and may have influenced how students responded to the RAs' interview questions. Further, students' responses may have been reflective of their stage in the educational curriculum (i.e., first year, second year, or graduating cohort), though such differences were not readily apparent from students' narratives.

The authors' perspectives likely shaped how the student narratives were interpreted. The authors are members of the department's Diversity and Inclusion Curriculum Committee and are familiar with key aspects of the curriculum where diversity and inclusion issues are addressed. As such, they may have brought their own concerns for the curriculum to look favorably, or conversely, overly critically at their own roles in promoting or limiting peer dialogue in the classroom. However, while clearly influencing all aspects of the study, the authors' insider-outsider positionality offered a valuable insider appreciation of the curriculum context and teaching dilemmas that add to the discussion of identified problematics. Overall, while the relatively small number of participants limits transferability of this study, it has generated several important questions and insights highlighting foci for future studies.

### **Conclusion**

By asking students to share narratives about their experiences of engaging in peer dialogue on diversity and inclusion, this study offers OT educators insights into how curricular content and contextual features influence student engagement. In accordance with the emphasis of transformative learning and on acknowledging learners' experiences, this study highlights how students' experiences of diversity may be defined and described differently from those of their instructors. By tapping into students' descriptions of the diversity in which they are embedded, instructors are provided with potential starting points for structured, facilitated dialogue about the power dynamics at play across differences. This study offers strategies to broaden and deepen conversations about difference by building on student encounters with a diversity of first person accounts across various learning venues.

Study participants' comments illustrate the tensions between a desire to learn about diverse culturally specific practices and their instructors' more generic objectives related to what the authors have termed CIPD skill development. The findings illustrate the value of bringing outside experiences of intersectional dilemmas into classroom discussions. This requires a conscious effort to spread the conversation beyond the academic setting and engage fieldwork faculty. True to transformative learning

approaches, it is these disorienting dilemmas that, if effectively facilitated, can lead to new ways of seeing the world. This study also offers a reminder that contextual features such as classroom size and class formats impact CIPD among students. Careful consideration should be given to the physical spaces and venues in which CIPD is structured and where students feel safe enough to make mistakes, to learn from each other, and to engage in conversations about their diverse lived experiences and perspectives.

Future research is needed to better understand the impact of pedagogic strategies to make explicit both power inequities and intersectionalities across diverse identities. Further exploration should identify optimal opportunities to promote critical reflection and foster transformation of perspectives, particularly as experiences in fieldwork environments are brought into classroom discussions. Further study is also needed into how and when instructors themselves choose to share their own social identities and experiences of oppression and privilege. This question may be more unique to health professional programs such as OT, given the norms associated with disclosure and boundary-crossing within the health professions.

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