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Using a Minoritized Graduate Instructor Identity to Cultivate an Inclusive and Diverse Learning Space

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CHAPTER 3.

USING A MINORITIZED GRADUATE INSTRUCTOR IDENTITY TO CULTIVATE AN INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE LEARNING SPACE

FAQRYZA AB LATIF

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- How to humanize the classroom climate and establish an authentic presence that can challenge the conventional Westernized classroom structure.
- How graduate instructors can use their malleable identity to their advantage in cultivating an inclusive community of diverse learners. There are experiences that are unique to graduate instructors, especially for those of us who come from underrepresented cultural backgrounds. These experiences can be utilized to construct a more inclusive and diverse learning environment, which could then encourage students to do the same.

Navigating graduate school is difficult enough on its own, but navigating graduate school when you are a student from an underrepresented group is even more difficult. Language barriers, sociocultural differences, the occasional harassment from random passersby due to my Asian Muslim identity—these are some of the things that I have had to face while juggling my own class assignments, teaching duties, and research projects. Slipping in and out of my student hat, teacher hat, and researcher hat has become more natural with time, but it has not necessarily become easier. Some days are better than others; still, there are days where I struggle with navigating all these different identities. However, it is always good to remind myself that I am in graduate school to

learn, and part of that learning process is learning how to reconcile the different identities and turn them into a strength instead of a burden.

Park and Ramos (2003) described being a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) as similar to being a "donkey in the department" due to our limited autonomy and our heavy workload as a student, instructor, and researcher. While being overworked is a universally shared experience among graduate students and graduate instructors, graduate students of color experience the added stress of being confronted with racism, microaggressions, isolation, lack of sense of belonging, and mental health risks that stem from the aforementioned issues (Brunsma et al., 2017). Additionally, Muslim graduate students face the additional challenge of being discriminated against based on their religious identity and of practicing their religious traditions amidst academic obligations and logistic constraints (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). For example, class times often conflict with prayer times, exams are occasionally held on religious holidays, and there are no mosques or prayer spaces on campus. I can attest to all these and more.

Even though it is not all rainbows and sunshine, I would not exchange my graduate student and instructor experience for anything else. It is difficult to navigate these issues, but I have come out of it with more compassion and empathy, and with a stronger resolve and determination to continue striving towards my goal of becoming an instructor. It is because I have gone through these hardships that I value student diversity and aim towards fostering an inclusive and safe learning space for my students. My experiences as a member of an underrepresented group in higher education are an invaluable resource in my attempt at reimagining approaches towards teaching, which is consistent with the idea—posited by Collins (2021)—that identity work can be done from the challenges faced by marginalized graduate instructors, which can then subvert the structure of a traditional Westernized classroom. The goal of this chapter is to discuss how this can be done.

Graduate students exist in a liminal space of wavering and transitioning between different states. This period of liminality may be accompanied by feelings of uncertainty or confusion as we oscillate between our roles as the recipient of knowledge and the producer of knowledge (Keefer, 2015). With that in mind, pursuing a graduate degree is as much about identity formation as it is about acquiring and producing knowledge (Green, 2005). Building off this idea, Jazvac-Martek (2009) suggested that graduate students frequently oscillate between their identities as students and academics depending on the context. This work is based on role identity theory, which asserts that individuals simultaneously hold multiple identities and roles, and we switch between these roles while taking into account the expectations engendered by our social positions. Certain interactions or experiences may make one identity more salient than another at a given time. For instance, doctoral students are more likely to feel like academics when they experience intellectual engagements, such as exchanging ideas with faculty members or presenting at conferences, and receive acknowledgement and support for these engagements (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). This suggests that inhabiting a particular role or identity may be an active process. However, some identities are imposed by others upon an individual or passively accepted instead of being actively sought. This might occur in instances where the graduate student compares their level of experience with that of their mentor (Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

Oscillating between a student identity and an instructor identity, then, might be considered as both an active and passive process. When we seek guidance and advice from our mentors, we are actively

inhabiting our student role, but it is also a role that is beyond our control and imposed on us due to the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship and the interaction that transpires within that relationship. Similarly, performing our role as instructors may largely be an active process, but it might also be something that we have to passively accept when we are in the presence of our students. Winstone and Moore (2017) suggested that graduate instructors can actively choose to identify as students or as instructors depending on the context. Regardless of whether it is active or passive, it is critical that graduate instructors work on reconciling the identity of student and teacher rather than letting them be in conflict with each other.

HUMANIZING THE CLASSROOM SPACE AND ESTABLISHING AN AUTHENTIC PRESENCE

With our liminal identity as both student and instructor, we are more open to trying out new practices in class, revising and polishing each instructional method as we figure out what works and what does not based on our own experiences as students and on our students' feedback (Winstone & Moore, 2017). We are also able to engage more deeply and familiarize ourselves with the teaching materials when we field student questions (Park, 2002). Most importantly, we also have the privilege of being able to exercise more empathy towards our students if they face issues that are exclusive to the college student experience. Muzaka (2009) found that undergraduate students perceive graduate instructors to be more relatable and understanding than faculty instructors because of shared experiences regarding high academic workload and deadlines. Additionally, Park (2002) found that undergraduates can identify better with graduate instructors and vice-versa, which allows graduate instructors to teach from an empathetic position that recognizes the difficulties that undergraduates may face when it comes to—for example—understanding course materials and coping with student life. True enough, I have found that I can use these shared experiences as a tool to bridge any gaps between myself and my students, and as a method to humanize the classroom climate and establish instructor presence. While lamenting about the trials and tribulations of being a university student can be a point of commiseration, a more scholarly approach to humanize the classroom and assert instructor presence is through the use of icebreaker and discussion activities. Throughout the semester, I implement icebreaker and discussion activities to get students to engage with me, with each other, and with the day's lesson. For example, before starting a lesson on moral development, I ask students to answer this prompt: 'Think of something nice you did for someone this past week. What was it? What was your motivation in doing so?' I would ask them to contribute to a Padlet, where they can anonymously share their answers. These kinds of activities are meant to carve a space for the students to connect the class content with their own experiences and share them, if they are comfortable doing so. While connecting the icebreaker and discussion topics with the learning objectives is a crucial component to keep in mind, it is equally crucial to consider the activities as a way to humanize the classroom space and make students aware of my "being there."

Based on Paulo Freire's work, Martinez and colleagues (2016) define humanization as a process where individuals become more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, and creative people who participate in and with the world. Instructors who apply humanizing pedagogies can engage in "mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970, p. 26) through dialogue with their students. These humanizing exercises are rooted in the objective of practicing critical and inclusive pedagogies by engaging the "whole" student – whether emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually – in

the teaching and learning process (Tuitt et al., 2016). Instructor presence, on the other hand, can be defined as the sense of "being there" that students get from the instructor, and the sense that the instructor is closely accompanying the students in their learning (Gemein, 2021). Starting the class by asking students questions about themselves and their experiences while connecting them to the class materials, for example, is one of the ways to incorporate these notions of humanization and presence by building intentional learning relationships that bring student voices into the classroom, ultimately culminating in an inclusive classroom. This strategy is related to intercultural teaching competencies, which refers to "the ability of instructors to interact with students in a way that supports the learning of students who are linguistically, culturally, socially, or in other ways different from the instructor or from each other, across a wide definition of perceived difference and group identity" (Dimitrov et al., 2014, p. 89).

An example of an activity that I have implemented to achieve the goal of humanizing the classroom and establishing instructor presence is an activity related to language development. Since the topic of that lesson is centered around learning language, with specific focus on learning more than one language, I ask students if they are monolinguals or if they can speak more than one language. Then I ask a few of them to share what their language development was like, if they could recall it. I occasionally join in on the activities by sharing some of my own experiences, partially to humor the students who outwardly expressed their interest in my answers, and mostly to model the behavior and to humanize myself. It is also aimed at establishing my presence as an instructor in the classroom, which had become more imperative to do when classes shifted online during the COVID-19 pandemic. This aligns with what Collins (2021) refers to as decentered teaching and resistance, where graduate instructors, particularly those of international status, shift the active role onto the students when generating discussions rather than centering these dialogues around the instructor. In this practice, the graduate instructor becomes a learning partner who—while taking a step back—is still a part of the exchange of dialogue, occupying the role of both teacher and learner (Collins, 2021). This might be easier to implement with our malleable identity; students have tended to report that faculty instructors, who have more concrete teacher identities compared to graduate instructors, appear more distant and formal than graduate instructors (Kendall & Schussler, 2012).

While there is a risk to bringing the whole, authentic self into the classroom for instructors from minority groups who try to subvert the conventions of predominantly White institutions (Williams, 2016), there is also value in working through this process of introspection and taking subsequent action. As a graduate instructor with a malleable, unfixed identity, I already engage in reflective practices centered around my positionality and vulnerabilities. For example, while it is inevitable that I face social challenges stemming from my identity as a foreign woman of color, it is also undeniable that I am in a position of power as an instructor to my students. Henderson (1994) asserts that the presence of a non-White male instructor in the classroom is in itself a disruption to the status quo that can potentially bring about the discussion of preconceived notions of classroom authority. This indicates that with an introspective mindset that acknowledges the existing classroom power dynamics, I am able to resist and challenge the entrenched institutional structure by simply being authentic and present.

FOCUSING ON COMMUNITY VALUES AND DIVERSITY

Resisting the conventional institutional structure through a liminal identity can also be done by

focusing less on individuality and more on collectivism. It goes without saying that independent thinking and independent work are important in facilitating learning; however, too much emphasis on the individual may obscure the impact and significance of group work and collaboration. It may also inadvertently discourage students from asking for help when they need it. Drawing from my own experiences as a student, I admittedly (and a little begrudgingly) find it helpful when I am tasked to do group work. Naturally, preferences vary across different individuals; I personally prefer to work alone and am usually more focused when I am on my own instead of with my peers. That does not mean, however, that I do not see the importance of collaborating with others, of seeking guidance and help from others, and of forming community support.

When you are a foreign Muslim woman of color, establishing these ties becomes more imperative. Although a few studies have found that perceived support from those of similar cultural backgrounds can act as a buffer against the stresses of cultural adjustment (e.g., Asvat & Malcarne, 2008), other studies have found that perceived support from people outside of one's ethnic or cultural background is correlated with lower acculturative stress (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Forming connections with the local Muslim community or with other Asian students has been the cornerstone of my mental health throughout my time in the United States, but forming connections with domestic students of varying backgrounds has been just as valuable. Ultimately, it is about the diverse kinds of people you interact and form connections with. It is about coming to understand that your identities and lived experiences influence almost every aspect of your life, including the ways that you engage with the construction and reproduction of knowledge. For instance, with my identity as a graduate instructor, I approach teaching the way that my supervisors have trained me. For example, ask students questions to probe their understanding and wait out for their responses in silence no matter how long it takes to avoid spoon-feeding them. But, as a graduate instructor who comes from a foreign culture, the way that I approach teaching will be influenced by my background in one form or another. For example, as an instructor whose first language is not English, I approach teaching with the assumption that language barriers might be a hurdle for a lot of students. Obviously, this is not always the case, but it does not prevent me from repeating questions in different ways to ensure that students can understand them instead of waiting out for their responses in complete silence, because I myself have always found it helpful to reformulate questions in different ways to get a deeper comprehension of them.

Under many—if not all—circumstances, diversity is fundamental and beneficial, whether it is about fostering a sense of belonging (e.g., Wu et al., 2011), advancing academic performance (e.g., Konan et al., 2010), or increasing open-mindedness and lowering fear of different others (e.g., Williams & Johnson, 2011). Of course, the diverse make-up of my classroom is beyond my control, but what is within my control is the ways that I can convey my values regarding diversity and interpersonal connections through the use of group work. Diversity, in this context, refers to differences in individual identities—such as personality, learning preferences, and prior knowledge—and social identities—such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability status, and nationality. It also refers to differences in ideas and values (Racial Equity Tools, 2020). With regards to the classroom context, underscoring diversity also means acknowledging and appreciating that there are various ways of knowing and learning, some of which might be "non-normative" or outside of what is considered "conventional" (Moore, 2020).

Before I provide an example of how I focus on group work and collaboration between my students, I must first mention that I explicitly communicate my views on community building and collaboration to my students. This is something I began to do when classes shifted to Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. With students fatigued and burnt out, they were less likely to be enthused by the idea of engaging in group work in their breakout rooms. Because of this, I would always make a point of reminding students that—for example—collaboration means delegating tasks, and delegating tasks means less work for one person. I would also remind them that a few of their classmates might not have the level of knowledge or the digital tools necessary to complete the task alone, so it is important that they support each other because we all share the responsibility of ensuring equitable engagement and access in class. These are examples of the ways that I communicate the importance of working collectively instead of individually. They might not have always worked, but making my intentions and rationales clear is a good strategy in inclusive teaching practices, nonetheless. Addy and colleagues (2021) postulated that providing students a rationale behind instructional decisions or classroom policies can give them a clearer understanding of what they need to accomplish in terms of meeting learning goals, and it can give them a better grasp on when and how to make use of the resources provided to them. Furthermore, it can allow students to be better equipped to advocate for themselves. Essentially, giving students a rationale behind one's decisions can "level the playing field" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 65) and create a more equitable learning space, which is especially important for students who do not have the means of understanding or experiencing the unspoken "norms" and "rules" of academic success.

Encouraging peer-to-peer support and learning is also related to the effort of decolonizing the curriculum. Decolonizing the curriculum entails the acknowledgment that knowledge is not owned by anyone; it is a shared resource that is co-created by people of all kinds (Wilson, 2021). It also acknowledges that there are certain behaviors in Western classrooms that are traditionally more valued than others due to the social hierarchies shaped by a colonial history. For example, those who speak up and speak often are marked as being intellectual because they are exhibiting their identity as "self-willed, free-thinking individuals" (Heble, 2002, p. 4). If this is the case, then what about the students who do not speak up? Do they automatically get tagged as uninterested and idle? What if they have plenty of thoughts to share but are bound by unseen circumstances that prevent them from doing so? How can instructors provide opportunities for engagement that do not rely solely on one medium of communication? These are the sorts of questions that arise when I start thinking about dismantling barriers in the learning community and revisioning ways to approach teaching and learning so as to challenge the conventional classroom or institutional structure.

An example of how I focus on group work and collaboration between my students is by assigning them a task in class where they need to review an empirical article and extract the most essential information from each section of the article. Each group would be in charge of a different section. I hold them accountable by having them produce an artifact that they can show when we regroup as a whole class and by having at least one member of each group present their work. For example, I have them create Google slides that contain the information they found. This would allow students to engage with the content either orally (i.e., when they present to the whole class) or through text (i.e., when they create the artifact). Dividing them into groups would also allow the students to discuss their ideas with each other before sharing them with the rest of class. This would enable students who are too shy or anxious to share their ideas in larger groups to still have a chance to engage in

conversations that would allow them to express their thoughts. Additionally, a collaborative activity would allow students to help the group members who might not have suitable devices to work on the artifacts or the group members who might need a longer time to compose their thoughts, such as students with a learning disability that impacts writing speed or students who are non-native English speakers.

Is this practice effective in inculcating an appreciation for collaboration among students? Results from Student Course Surveys (SCS) indicate that it is a mixed bag. Some students like participating in group work; others do not. From one particular semester, a student stated in their SCS that they liked having "small groups to discuss things with" because they were "comfortable sharing ideas with each other," while another stated that breakout rooms "were not very beneficial" because they "learn more as a big group." As I mentioned before, preferences vary across different individuals. We cannot win all our battles, but it is still important to keep in mind that a sense of community—while not spread among all the students—can be fostered through the use of group tasks. As one student put it, being able to discuss ideas in smaller groups "reduces a great deal of the anxiety that is associated" with speaking in larger groups. There is value in collaborating with peers, whether it is pertaining to increasing support for sustained engagement or facilitating equitable access in class (CAST, 2018), and there is value in acknowledging that there are diverse learners within one classroom who differ in not only learning preferences but also lived experiences. By encouraging them to work together, I hope to give them the space to form meaningful connections. I also hope to give them exposure to different perspectives and ways of knowing and of expressing that knowledge.

FINAL REMARKS

It is important to me that students, especially those who come from underserved populations, have a platform to share their unique experiences. If there is one thing I have learned from my own experiences as a minority student is that my voice and my experiences are just as valuable as any other student's, and that being allowed to share them as appropriate in a safe learning environment has been fundamental to my growth as a student and instructor. It is why I strive to offer the same opportunities for my students as well. My attempts to achieve this goal includes applying activities that humanize the classroom climate and establish an authentic presence, and implementing group work that facilitates interpersonal connection between diverse learners. While being a graduate instructor who exists within a liminal state comes with its own set of challenges, it also comes with unique characteristics that allow for meaningful engagement with ourselves, our students, and the entrenched institutional practices.

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