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Transferring Knowledge and Opening Pathways: The Unconventional Doctoral Student-Adjunct Instructor

Samantha Prado

University of California, San Diego

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CHAPTER 4.

TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE AND OPENING PATHWAYS: THE UNCONVENTIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENT-ADJUNCT INSTRUCTOR

SAMANTHA PRADO

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Doctoral student/adjunct instructor is a unique and important positionality that can provide perspective on the range of graduate student instructor experiences that exist.
- Positionality can be used to break down educational barriers and increase equity in the classroom.
- Transferring knowledge between contexts can be a form of advocating for social justice.
- There are both advantages and challenges to being a doctoral student/adjunct instructor.

INTRODUCTION

I have been an adjunct college instructor for longer than I have been a doctoral student. I am about to wrap up my eighth year teaching sociology at the community college level as an adjunct instructor. At the same time, I am in my third year of a doctoral program in education. Leaving teaching to fully embark on a doctoral program did not seem like a possibility for me for multiple reasons, mostly connected to my positionality (Espino, 2018; Takacs, 2002). In the following paragraphs, I will address plenty of these reasons.

I am a woman of Color who teaches at behavioral and social sciences departments at the community college level. My presence as a woman of Color has been crucial due to the lack of minoritized representation in this higher

education setting, so I, in my effort to increase diversity and underrepresented student access to higher education, feel I must remain lecturing for community college for as long as I can. The lack of diversity in faculty directly impacts representation as our community college student bodies tend to be largely composed of students from minoritized groups. The lack of faculty diversity at the higher education level is a nation-wide issue not exclusive to any of the institutions I have worked for.

POSITIONALITY

Not only am I Chicana, but I am also a second-generation Mexican-American, daughter of immigrants who left their country in their early adulthood so that they could build something for their growing family. Furthermore, my immigrant parents never mastered the English language, nor did they possess a formal higher education. They did not have friendships and social ties in the United States that could facilitate their transition into American culture and upward mobility. My parents did not have a stable legal status either, having arrived in the United States with passports and overstayed their allotted time. Additionally, one of my siblings was born in Mexico, so they also never had a stable legal status in the United States. I was part of a mixed-status family, a situation that did not change until my early 20s when, fortunately, my parents and sister were all able to gain American citizenship.

English was my second language since Spanish was exclusively spoken in my household. When I was in grade school, we moved to Mexico, so I was only educated in Spanish through the Mexican public school system. I came back to the United States at age 10, so I then was able to learn English through my American public education schooling.

I was a first-generation college student, having followed my siblings' example of embarking on the higher education journey through the local community college. Like my brother, I attained my GED certificate and immediately began my community college coursework with the hopes of finding my way into completing a degree. Through a lot of challenges, dedication, and drive, I reached the goal neither of my siblings was able to attain, which was to transfer to a four-year college. Transferring was not only a victory for myself but my entire family and my community. I transferred to a state university that was near my home which also had higher acceptance rates in comparison to the state universities in the region.

The university I transferred to had been recently established. It was located approximately 20 miles away from my home, which was a fairly close driving distance, as remaining in San Diego and home was a priority for my parents. After two years, I graduated with my bachelor's degree. It was unbelievable! None of my friends had done it, and up until this day most still have not. During my second semester at the university, my brother was diagnosed with cancer, and he soon lost the battle with it before I entered my third semester. I graduated without any celebrations and continued to work full-time in clerical positions. After a couple of years of bereavement, I decided to pursue a master's degree since I felt I did not have the platform for fulfilling my vision of creating equitable opportunities in education for others. All these experiences I had faced continued to motivate my intention of obtaining a higher education. I had no clue of how to write a letter of interest for a graduate program, did not know how to adequately request letters of recommendation from faculty, and did not possess any familiarity with the process of graduate school. Fortunately, my significant

other at the time was working at our community college's English tutoring center, and he encouraged me to seek tutor guidance there. Although I was no longer an active student at the time, I decided to use my student ID and request a tutor's aid for what I called an independent study assignment. I met a kind tutor who was an older white female and held a bachelor's degree. I shared with her my intentions of applying to graduate school, and she taught me the necessary skills to complete an effective graduate program application. I got into the master's program and completed my graduate degree in sociology. The tutor passed away before I could thank her.

Then, I had the privilege of teaching at the same continuing education program that enabled me to get my GED certificate and teach at sites that were located in the areas in which I had grown up. I found a way to connect with my community and empower them. I was different from other faculty—I shared with my students my experiences getting a GED, I showed them my actual GED in class, and I encouraged them to pursue higher education or whichever goals they had for themselves. While the struggle was real, I fully understood that it was possible to make our dreams come true. With a master's degree, I was now able to teach sociology at the community college level.

At the community college level, I am one of the consistent brown people teaching. My pedagogy was strongly supported by my department chair and the other tenured sociologists. My pedagogy has been strongly focused on Paulo Freire's teachings, which discourage education as a banking system and rather spark critical thinking values (Freire et al., 2001). I came across Paulo Freire's work briefly in graduate school but especially during faculty professional development workshops. I was also greatly influenced by bell hooks (2013) and her focus on teaching as a gesture of love, keeping in mind intersectional identities and how oppression plays a role in learning. I was also fortunate to have been exposed to bell hooks in my last semester as an undergraduate by a Black male professor whose own student-centered pedagogical strategies motivated my future teaching. I taught critical sociological courses in the same community college where my own higher education journey had begun. Again, I often shared my experience as a former alumnus, first-generation college student, and woman of Color. Throughout my teaching experiences, my positionality had been centered on matters of underrepresented statuses, such as my low socioeconomic status growing up and post-college, my ethnic minority status in a time of much xenophobia, my gender identity which has been negatively impacted as a result of patriarchy, and my multiple invisible and visible disabilities (Allen, 2011; Johnson, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). These underrepresented social identities had been key to my experience navigating the community college setting and the classroom environment. My underrepresented social identities are also what sparked my thirst for knowledge and desire to develop a space where students who shared some of these identities could succeed and imagine endless possibilities for themselves. I acknowledge my privileges as well as the oppressions that limited my teaching experiences. I would constantly experience pushback from privileged students who discredited the research or the validity of my lectures and knowledge.

All these aspects of my identity informed my pedagogical strategies and understanding of student experience. Understanding the challenges of the educational journey and the losses that occurred along the way enabled me to be very empathetic to my students. My training as a sociologist and my own experiences of engaging with wonderful caring people and books such as *Reaching for the Stars: The Inspiring Story of a Migrant Worker Turned Astronaut* by Jose Moreno Hernandez and *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez have left great imprints in my soul and

given me further motivation to build community with my students and create an opportunity for healing and deeper understanding life experience.

TRANSFERRING TOOLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FROM THE FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Upon being accepted and beginning my doctoral program in education at an R1 institution, I realized there was much more gatekeeping in higher education than I had first realized. Just for starters, Latinxs comprise a minority of all doctoral degrees granted in the U.S (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). My process of navigating higher education and obtaining greater forms of capital (Becker, 1989; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Stanton Salazar, 1997) allowed me to realize that there was so much knowledge that had been restricted to students with greater financial access and privileged backgrounds. Some unspoken rules and expectations marked the institutional barriers that some face and the institutional privileges that others are automatically granted. For example, traditional college students attending four-year universities may experience opportunities leading to competitive internships, networking, status, substantial scholarships, exposure to greater social capital, and ensured degree completion. Most importantly, traditional college students attending these four-year universities can find validation of their ways of knowing, cultural affirmation, self-entitlement, power dynamics in the classroom which favor them, as well as a greater spirit of optimism and confidence. For this reason, I decided to continue encouraging my community students to think critically about unequal social arrangements, question everything and anything, and pursue their goals no matter how big they were. Most important of all, I decided I must continue to provide them with as many tools as I could for this for however long I was permitted to do so.

After taking classes at UC San Diego and UCLA, I learned pedagogical techniques using educational platforms and software such as Mentimeter, Padlet, Google Docs, Slides, Sheets, and Jamboard. I then used these tools to increase my students' engagement in the classroom, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. I assigned my students readings and the most recent research publications on matters that concerned them or were of their majors' interest. I gave my students website addresses, workshop links, and other information that was relevant and important for their educational growth. I then began to see myself as less of a passive educator and more as an active agent in the struggle for educational equity and access (hooks, 1994; Solorzano, 1989). While I have always acknowledged my complicity with institutional oppression as I am part of the system by perpetuating colonized teaching practices, upholding unequal outcomes by following institutional grading systems, and internalizing hegemonic educational values, I continue to find ways of decolonizing education, developing equity-based teaching practices and grading systems (Alba Cisneros, 2021; Battiste et al., 2002).

I hold autonomy in the classroom as an instructor of record. This leadership position allows me to engage in academic freedom to develop and implement classroom curricula. This freedom also allows me to share the knowledge and experience provided to me by my journey through my GED, community college, and master's degree, as well as my current doctoral student journey. I view myself as a bridge between the community college and the primarily white institution where I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree. I am bringing my knowledge, experience, and resources to my community college students, most of whom are from underrepresented backgrounds and are facing challenges as difficult, and sometimes more difficult, than those I once faced.

It is important for doctoral students and graduates who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and those with other underrepresented social identities, to hold spaces of leadership in education. Due to the limited representation of such backgrounds, these identities are vital for equity in the classroom and for increasing access to education (Neville, 2015). If an underrepresented doctoral student serves as an adjunct instructor in the community college setting that serves non-traditional student bodies, stepping away from the predominantly white institution (PWI) or historically white institution where they may be pursuing their degree, they can invest energy, efforts, and resources into groups that have faced historical oppression rather than just keeping that energy siloed at their university. Personally, serving as an adjunct instructor has provided me with formal educator experience. I encourage graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds to obtain adjunct instructor positions as this experience provides multiple benefits: it benefits underrepresented students by infusing doctoral education experience into the community college setting; at the same time, it allows the doctoral student to obtain formal teaching experience, providing them an advantage on the job market.

Some examples of the benefits the underrepresented student groups may receive from being taught by graduate student adjunct instructors are engagement in the most current research findings, recently published articles and books, the most modern theories in the field of study, and the newest forms of technology and programs that may enhance community college non-traditional students' learning experience. In my case, through the courses I have taken at UC San Diego and UCLA and workshops I have attended virtually in numerous parts of the world, I have been able to learn about the latest research findings and theories and I have brought them into my community college classrooms for students to learn about. I have been able to bring into the community college classroom technologies such as Padlet, Mentimeter, Google Docs, Slides, Sheets, and Jamboard. These forms of technology allow for educators to have real-time interactions with students, as well as offer the opportunity to engage in innovative teaching and learning strategies. For example, before the pandemic, in my community college classes, I had students play a virtual game called PlaySpent collectively. This game offers a scenario of a single parent impacted by job loss and poverty. While I assign readings on the sociological imagination (e.g., Mills, 2000), this activity provides a deeper understanding of that concept. While teaching during the pandemic and working towards my doctoral degree, I have been able to lecture my students synchronously via Zoom and have them play PlaySpent on their own and post their reflections through Padlet boards. Another example of a learning activity is teaching about deviance: I share a social worker scenario handout where students have to decide to place a child in a home, ranging from the most acceptable home to the most unacceptable home. Usually in the classroom, I let students complete this activity for a few minutes and then come together and share collective choices. This activity enables us to understand how deviance is socially constructed and viewed differently from case to case. Since switching to virtual classes, I assign this activity by providing the handout to my students and having them go to menti.com where they vote their choices. At the end of the votes, I can see a bar graph that shows their collective choices. I then share my screen during synchronous class discussions for them to understand their social construction of deviance. I am later able to download the class results as a .pdf document and save it into my course learning platform, where the students can access it and reflect at any time. I have received positive feedback from students on these kinds of pedagogical strategies and student-centered teaching style.

CHALLENGES AS A GRADUATE ADJUNCT INSTRUCTOR

While there are many positive outcomes to adjunct teaching, there may be challenges faced by the graduate student as an adjunct instructor, such as demanding requirements to allocate significant time and efforts to professional development activities. For such challenges, it is important to pair these professional development or work-related expectations with their graduate research, such as presenting at conferences and developing workshops. Graduate student instructors must limit their personal energy allocated to these events and multi-task. While there is no one way of dealing with assigning time and emotional labor to department meetings or enduring student evaluations, it may be important to attend or comply only with the mandatory tasks. In the case of student evaluations, which can be vital for ongoing instructional opportunities, it is important to comply with program requirements while at the same time being true to one's pedagogy. Proving the effectiveness of a student learning outcome through an innovative or decolonized instructional method and assessment instruments may be one way of effectively complying with program requirements (hooks, 2013; Yosso & Solórzano, 2007). Office hours may be time-consuming, but they are vital for building community and engagement with students. Additionally, this time can be used for grading and preparing the course, and also reviewing student submissions, and providing feedback in face-to-face dialogue. While there is a high possibility of course cancellation due to low student enrollment or courses being transferred to contract/tenured faculty, it is useful to use software and materials that allow replication so that materials and strategies can be recycled for similar or identical teaching plans.

CONCLUSION

I think about who will support my students and who will teach my classes once I am gone from the community college setting. BIPOCs are disproportionately found in the classrooms (Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019). For this reason, I keep my motivation to continue pursuing a doctoral education and writing this piece, so that other BIPOC and people of underrepresented social identities can deeply reflect on their role in educational equity and access. We need to set an example for future generations to follow.

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