Examining Ways in which Students are Positioned or Position Themselves in an Undergraduate Education Course Taught Across Settings

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Abstract: *The research reported here explores how incorporating multiple learning settings into an undergraduate education course, in which each setting has its own unique social and material arrangements, impacts learning. Outcomes from this study indicate that courses taught across uniquely structured course settings opens up opportunities for how students are positioned or are able to position themselves. These positioning opportunities allow students to engage with course content in ways that might not happen otherwise. How students learn to negotiate their positions in one setting—and how that carries over into other current and future contexts—is also examined.*

INTRODUCTION

When creating courses for students studying at the post-secondary level, best instructional practices (Bowen, 2017) suggest we begin by considering course learning objectives, and then backward plan learning activities from there. Oftentimes, the learning objectives that get foregrounded in course design focus on learning in the cognitive domain, particularly mastery of subject-specific content and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Wilson, 2018). While important, focusing solely on learning in the cognitive domain ignores equally important learning happening in the affective domain. The research reported here focuses on learning in the affective domain, primarily as it impacts students' beliefs about how they—and others—can conduct themselves in various learning contexts.

In this paper, through the analysis of multiple qualitative data sources, I examine how a multi-setting undergraduate course supports student learning in the affective domain with a particular focus on positioning. Within this type of course arrangement, this study seeks to understand how students are positioned or position themselves in relation to the social and material arrangements of a course. Additionally, this study also seeks to understand how students' abilities to renegotiate their positions may make learning more meaningful and personally relevant to them.

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THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Literature from the learning sciences, psychology, and the study of teaching and learning (SoTL) inform the conceptual framework of this study. Sociocultural learning principles (Ormrod et al., 2006) ground this framework, arguing that learning is socially mediated and can be measured by changes in how one participates over time within one's learning communities. Learning occurs as individuals move from the periphery of these communities, in which what is learned is necessary but low-stakes; to fuller participation, in which what is learned is equally necessary but higher-stakes (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Unfortunately, not all students are able to move from the periphery of their learning communities to fuller participation (Bell et al., 2012; Nasir & Cook, 2009). Rather, students for whom school wasn't designed may find themselves permanently at the periphery of their communities, negatively shaping what they are able to learn and the meaningfulness of those learning experiences.

Coupled with sociocultural learning principles, positioning theory (Harre et al., 2009; Harre, 2012), provides additional insight into how students may perceive their role in relation to their rights and duties—and the rights and duties of others— to act within a learning community. Within an educational context, positioning may occur through the structural, material, or interactional arrangements, herein referred to as the social and material arrangements, of a learning community (Dreier, 2009; Bell et al., 2012; Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Wortham, 2006). For students positioned in favorable ways, their ability to act allows them to participate more fully in their learning communities, providing for more robust and meaningful educational experiences. For students positioned in less favorable ways (as a function of their race, class, or other social identity), their inability—or limited ability—to act in favorable ways may limit their participation to the periphery of their learning communities, impacting what they learn, as well as the authenticity and meaningfulness of that learning.

There is research to suggest that the amelioration of problematic or asymmetrical positioning happens when learning occurs across multiple course settings (Bell et al., 2012; Stromholt & Bell, 2018), each designed with its own unique social and material arrangements. With such a re-mediated design (Gutierrez et al., 2010), learners may find that they are positioned or can position themselves differently within the various learning settings of the course, resulting in fluid participation patterns that allow for freer flow and exchange of learner expertise (Rogoff, 1994; Rogoff et al., 1996).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this research study was to explore how students are positioned or position themselves in relation to the social and material arrangements of a course taught across settings. The course examined for this study was taught across three settings: the traditional college lecture hall in which instruction was facilitated by a course instructor, field trips in which students (working in small groups) chose their sites of study and facilitated their own learning, and the asynchronous online learning environment facilitated by the course instructor, but with multiple access points to course materials, classmates, and teaching assistants.

The following research questions were explored:
- When a course is taught across multiple learning settings, each with its own distinct social and material arrangements, how are students positioned by the social and material arrangements in the different settings?

- When a course is taught across multiple learning settings, each with its own social and material arrangements, how do students renegotiate their positioning related to the social and material arrangements of the settings?
- What affordances for learning occur in courses designed to be taught across multiple, unique learning settings?

METHODS

Qualitative case study research was used as the methodology for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data was gathered and analyzed in two phases. In phase one, data from one quarter of the course was collected and analyzed. Data collected during this phase included video data of classroom observations and field trips. Other data collected during this phase included student and course artifacts, and unstructured researcher memos noting areas of interest related to learning across settings. One of the emerging themes in the researcher memos, and the one explored in greater depth in this study, relates to student positioning within and across multiple course settings. Data was then coded and analyzed for potential examples of how students were positioned or were able to position themselves in relation to social and material arrangements of the course. From this corpus of data, three potential case study participants were identified for further analysis (Yin, 2018).

In phase two of data collection and analysis, each of the three case study participants was interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol investigating their perceptions of the way they were positioned or were able to position themselves in the various settings of the course. Phase two data was coded for how students perceived they were positioned or able to position themselves in the course. Phase one and phase two data were then compared against each other to determine similarities and differences between how study participants and the researcher perceived student positioning in the course.

RESULTS

Analysis of phase one data suggests that students were positioned by the social and material arrangements of the course. This was highlighted by student reflections of their experience in the small groups they were randomly assigned at the beginning of the quarter. Within these groups, sometimes the positioning was beneficial, as in the case of one transfer student new to the university who shared that working with his quarter-long small group helped him develop a sense of belonging to his new school. As he explained in his course reflection, "since it was my first quarter at [BLINDED], I was able to meet people and create new friendships." Other times; however, student positioning was not beneficial, and may have even been harmful, as in the case of a student of color who shared that "working with my small group of predominantly white peers [was the most challenging aspect of this course]."

Phase two data, in which the three focal students were interviewed individually by the researcher regarding their experiences in the course, provided interesting insights into how students perceived they were positioned–or could position themselves–in relation to the social and material arrangements of specific course settings. Daniel, a student of color, provides an interesting perspective of being positioned problematically by the social arrangements in one setting, but then leveraging the social arrangements in a different setting of the course to position himself more favorably. In this example, during a field trip, Daniel felt positioned in a way that kept him from

correcting inaccurate and troubling information shared by a teaching assistant. Once back in the classroom and during the debrief after the field experience, however; he was able to leverage a relationship with Ayla, a fellow classmate, to share his knowledge with the class and correct the inaccuracies espoused during the field trip. When Daniel was asked why he chose to speak up in class rather than while out in the field, he shared that it was too much work to speak up on his own while out on the field trip, but that he "couldn't perpetuate the lie" being espoused by the teaching assistant. Once back in class and after sharing the troubling misinformation with his friend and classmate, Daniel explained he chose to speak up because Ayla had already begun sharing with the class the truth behind the misinformation and he "wasn't gonna let my sista do this alone. I spoke up so she didn't [have to] do it herself."

An additional critical insight noted in phase two interviews was that students' perceptions of theirs (and others) positions in current learning contexts was informed by experiences in past contexts, other current contexts, and, in fact, their own imaginings of how they might be positioned in future contexts. For example, one of the focal participants shared during their phase two interview that they felt comfortable advocating for themself in this course based on what they had learned about power and self-advocacy in a gender studies course a previous quarter.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

The educational importance of this study is three-fold. First, it highlights that what is learned in school is much more than subject-level content, so purposefully designing courses that support learning across both the cognitive and affective knowledge domains makes sense. Second, it highlights the benefit of asking students to share their perceptions of what supported or detracted from their learning experiences, since faculty and instructional designers can never guarantee how students will receive what has been designed into a course; through student voice, faculty and course designers have a unique opportunity to iterate course content and structure to make learning more meaningful and authentic for students. Finally, this study highlights the need for faculty and instructional designers to look for ways to increase equity within the courses they design and/or teach because equity only happens by design.

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