Who is *we*? Attending to similarity and difference as discourse praxis in the university classroom

Collective on Praxis in Health Sciences Education[1]

Abstract

The word we *evokes ideas of both belongingness and non-belongingness through its ability to create constellations of solidarity and exclusion. In education, its use has the power to draw invisible yet substantial lines between dominant and counter-hegemonic ideologies—and teachers and students—in ways that dynamically influence the operation of power between actors. Reflections emerging from a collaborative partnership between a student, teaching assistants, and professor during an undergraduate course on sex/gender and health revealed significant opportunities for critical pedagogical practice around* we. *This paper analyzes how* we *and related terms (like* they, us, them, *etc.) function in the higher education classroom and offers our analysis into the possibilities of using* we *as a starting point for anti-oppressive and reflexive educational praxis. Ultimately, we contend that* we *has the potential to work as an intervention countering dominant ideologies and normative assumptions operating in the classroom.*

Keywords: anti-oppressive pedagogy; critical discourse analysis; critical pedagogy; reflexive education; higher education

Introduction

We is a tiny word with massive implications. *We* can evoke ideas of both belongingness, and non-belongingness by constructing an in-group, sharing in common allegiances and identities, and an out-group, a *them* or a *they* that exists in opposition to, and is excluded by, the speaker's *we*.

In the field of linguistics, this working of *we* has been described as an example of *clusivity*—linguistic forms that communicate the (lack of) belonging of certain ideas or actors (Wieczorek, 2009). In this project, however, we have been more interested in the uses of *we* from the perspective of critical discourse analysis.

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Although *we* often reads superficially as a form of inclusion, it can also operate on more insidious levels: *we* can be used to homogenize and elide difference and diversity, to center and affirm some identities while rendering others more marginal, and to obscure operations of power and privilege in a community. In the context of higher education classrooms, we contend that attention to *we* could be a valuable component of anti-oppressive educational praxis and reflexivity, as every invocation of *we* produces constellations of solidarity and exclusion, wherein different members of the same learning community are included, excluded, or precluded from meaningful recognition and belonging. Interrogating how the word *we* (or *us*, *our*, *they* and *them*) operates in a classroom offers educators and students a starting point for reflection-in-action, on-action, and for action unto itself. Indeed, in our undergraduate health sciences classroom, we found that examining uses of *we* helped make explicit some implicit workings of power, and reminded us of our unique positionality in strengthening and/or redistributing concentrations of power. In this paper, our central aim is to document our reflections on the uses and functions of *we*, and to consider how a reflexive attention to *we* in higher education classrooms could enhance efforts towards anti-oppressive educational praxis. Autoethnographic methodologies in health sciences and health professions education research have been proposed as useful mechanisms to elicit relevant and incisive reflections from individuals who are embedded in the culture being studied.

To situate our discussion, we briefly describe the context of the course, and elaborate on our own *we* before contextualizing our work with reference to theoretical understandings of identity and critical discourse analysis. We provide examples as to how *we* operates in university classrooms and how it might be unpacked, before suggesting some of the downstream effects and implications of paying attention to *we*. As we—the authors of this paper—are situated in the health sciences and medicine, we see particular application of these practices in the context of biomedical and health professional education, but contend that the general principles are applicable and valuable more broadly in higher education.

Contextualizing and locating our *we*

> Because discourse is central to the work of teaching, our
> subject positions play out loud and clear in classroom
> contexts. (Glazier, 2005, p. 232)

In a paper that seeks to talk about the function of *we* in classroom discourse, we feel that it is important to talk about the *we* that is us, the authors of this paper, how we came to be doing this work, our relationships to it, and how we are situated in and beyond the classroom.

Our collaboration formed in the Winter/Spring of 2018 in the context of an undergraduate seminar at McMaster University on sex and gender in the health sciences and biomedicine. The course is a 2nd year undergraduate seminar offered

by the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) Program entitled HTHSCI 2T03 - Sex, Gender, & Health2; it is open to undergraduate students from any program in the University in Level 2 or higher. The class consists of a weekly 3-hour seminar, 13 weeks in length, with a class size of 40–50; across the years 2018–2020, the course has been comprised of 60% students from the Faculty of Health Sciences, 31% from the Faculty of Science, 6% from the Faculty of Social Science, and 3% others.

The objectives of the course, as articulated in the course outline for 2018, are that students will be able to

> articulate a nuanced understanding of the terms *sex* and *gender* based on relevant scholarship, and analyse discourses of sex/gender in health; discuss how sex functions as a biological determinant of health, how gender functions as a social determinant of health, and the complexity of the dynamic interactions between them; constructively critique health literature and policy using a sex/gender-based analytical framework; appropriately apply sex/gender considerations into research, practice, and policy in health contexts; and show how [] they have developed [their] skills in written and oral communication, group and independent work, and giving and receiving feedback. (Ritz, 2018)

In the first half of the semester, the course was organized principally around the discussion of case studies on different topics in health viewed through the lens of sex/gender (for example, heart disease, allergy, and depression); students were assigned papers to read from the literature that shed light on how sex/gender factors influenced these health conditions, with a facilitated discussion of key insights from those papers in the weekly class time. In the second half of the course, students formed groups to pursue a project on an issue related to sex/gender and health of their choosing, and taking a form of their choosing, using an inquiry-based pedagogical model, with occasional guest speakers. Students were evaluated based on short 'response notes' to the readings, a case study project, the inquiry project, and a final reflective synthesis paper.

In order to promote an open, safe environment for discussion and student contributions in the classroom, the instructor (SR) included some guidelines in the course outline (discussed on the first day of classes) about 'striving for an equitable, inclusive classroom', avoiding ableist or unnecessarily gendered language, considerations about 'air time', 'safe space', and how to handle conflict and disagreement respectfully. The instructor also introduced themselves by their first

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2 The full course outline is available at https://bhsc.mcmaster.ca/course-outline/

name and encouraged students to address them that way, to try and encourage a less hierarchical dynamic (which, of course, cannot be eliminated).

In terms of our roles in that classroom, we are four: a student from this class (Tahmina Shamsheri—TS), an undergraduate peer tutor (Padmaja Sreeram—PS), a graduate course design consultant (Alice Cavanagh—AC), and its instructor (Stacey Ritz—SR). Initially, AC, SR, and PS began to collectively write, share, and discuss reflections on our own experiences in the course, as part of AC's course design consultancy project with the campus teaching and learning center, and also with an eye towards improving the course for future iterations. At the end of the semester, TS spontaneously shared with SR that she had been carrying out a similar and complementary exercise in reflection on the course independently, and TS was invited to join the process.

At that point, we began to understand our undertaking as a form of collaborative autoethnography, akin to that described by Lapadat (2009). In this case, we had each been preparing detailed reflections on our individual experiences of the course from our respective perspectives throughout the semester. We collectively interpreted those reflections through a dialogic process informed by perspectives from critical discourse analysis. Our dialogue identified a number of common themes in our reflections (for example, about whiteness and race; geography, location, and space in the classroom; interactions of gender identity with the sex/gender focus of the course); of these, the workings of *we* in classroom discourse were identified by all of us as the most compelling for the deeper exploration we describe here.

This theme, however, did not simply emerge from the data fully formed (Varpio et al., 2017); our interest in this facet of classroom speech acts was a product of the 'various discourses that define who we are' (Glazier, 2005, p. 232), just as our values, experiences, and academic backgrounds also infuse the analysis we put forth here (Joseph, 2009). Since our engagement with *we* during and after the course was shaped by our observations of the different valences that *we* carried relative to our own distinct subject positions, we each reflect briefly below on the discourses that shaped our arrival to this class and participation in this collective:

Tahmina Shamsheri

Before I came to this collective, I was exploring critical pedagogy from the perspective of the learner as it relates to the problem-based learning and inquiry ethos underpinning McMaster's Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) Program. Drawing on experience and relevant literature, my project focused on the interface between theory and praxis in the context of the sociocultural and institutional locations within which I found myself embedded. The project involved collecting autoethnographic field notes from each of my classes for the year. I was invited to the collective by SR after a conversation revealed a strong alignment between the goals of my project and that of the collective. As a woman of color and an immigrant, my engagement with critical pedagogy was sparked by experience first, and literature second. Thus, my enrollment in this class was driven by intellectual,

political, and personal interests in pursuing critical understandings of sex/gender and health that troubled dominant biomedical discourse and accounted for a fulsome notion of *health*.

Padmaja Sreeram

As an undergraduate learner in McMaster's Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) Program, I was trained to ask questions about the world around me, related to health, science, education, and human society. While working on a project course with SR in the area of sex, gender, and immunology, I directly grappled with constructs of sex and gender in ways that challenged and complicated reductionist and logical positivist commitments to the pursuit of a universal *objectivity*. The nature of questions I wanted to explore began to form outside the problem-field of traditional biomedical sciences, venturing into the interplay between critical social theory, epistemology, and basic and applied health sciences. Upon hearing SR's plan to create a course on sex, gender, and health, I immediately asked to contribute to the course by providing support in course design and facilitation.

I joined this collective as a peer tutor for the course, wherein I was part of the instructional team (with AC and SR) and therefore institutionally separate from many of my peers (including TS) enrolled in the course, and yet not formally charged with assessing, grading, or didactically teaching students. As the only racialized, first-generation immigrant member on the instructional team, I wanted to ensure that the course explored the imposition of cis-hetero-patriarchal, white European settler constructs of sex and gender on racialized bodies, influencing the way we are sexed and gendered.

Alice Cavanagh

I arrived to our collective as an MD/PhD student in the first year of my doctoral work, increasingly preoccupied by questions of place: place as physical (as in, 'How do the places we teach/learn/doctor structure the experiences of people in them?') and place as socially constituted and conferred ('Is it my place to teach/learn/doctor?'). My thinking around both of these questions is particularly indebted to hooks' writing (1994) in conversation with Freire (2000) as recently described elsewhere (Cavanagh, Vanstone, & Ritz, 2019). Although my academic capital—a Master of Arts in Gender Studies—qualified me to be hired as a student course design consultant providing feedback on course delivery and design, I felt uncertainty around assuming a position of power in a class intended to trouble hegemonic discourses about sex, gender, and health. As a white, cisgender settler, in training to become a physician, I am conscious of both the limitations of my partial perspective (Haraway, 1988) and the ways in which discourses we were critiquing also confer profound privileges to me and others who share in my subject position. Understanding and responding to this fueled my interest in this project and shaped my contributions to this work.

Stacey Ritz

Formally trained as a biomedical scientist in the tradition of a reductionist empiricism that values *objectivity*, and occupying multiple nodes of privilege, it has been a long-term, ongoing project for me to come to recognize and embrace the reality that 'my experiences, beliefs, and identities are necessarily reflected in how I view and interact with the world' (Glazier, 2005, p. 232), and that this has major implications for my teaching. Prior to 2011, although I had engaged significantly in critique of the practices and discourses of science, my teaching centered principally on the basic physiological processes of the immune system, and I did not give much thought to how my identity might be at play in that context; coursework from the Master's in Education I pursued while a faculty member triggered more focused reflection on my educational praxis. When I launched a new course on sex, gender, and health in 2018 (my main area of scholarly expertise), I made it an explicit goal for myself to incorporate intersectional perspectives and to foster an inclusive classroom culture. I realized that identity was going to be much more *present* in this context than in a typical immunology class, and that I would have to be particularly attentive to the tendency to center my own experiences and ideologies, particularly given that I occupy a relatively privileged social location. Work from Lather (1991), hooks (2003), Freire (2000), Glazier (2005), and others was particularly significant in informing my frameworks for reflection. This has proved to be an even more challenging task than I anticipated, humbling and enlightening in equal measure, especially drawing my attention to the ways that whiteness and Western cultural ideologies dominate my worldview.

We as discourse, identity, and interpellation

Any act of speech carries embedded layers of meaning that extend beyond literal definitions of the words used. Discourse, then, is not simply the language itself, but is the culmination of the language plus the layers of action, interaction, beliefs, ideologies, values, symbols, ways of thinking, identities, and more that serve to delineate systems of knowledge, social identities, and ways of doing and being in the world (Davies & Harre, 1990; Gee, 2011; Luke, 1996). In other words, the idea of discourse recognizes that language takes on meaning principally through the social context in which it is employed, and the meaning of words or acts depends on the context and the roles and identities of the participants (Davies & Harre, 1990). Discourse can be understood as 'a form of action that both presupposes and at the same time brings about unique ways of being in the world' (Keating & Duranti, 2011, p. 332). In Foucault's view, discourse 'creates a field of knowledge by defining what is possible to say and think, declaring the bases for deciding what is true and authorizing certain people to speak while making others silent or less authoritative' (1974, p. 49). Critical discourse analysis is the study of these layers, in relationship to the social structures of power, dominance, and oppression they may work to uphold or subvert (van Djik, 1993).

The word *we* is a particularly interesting discursive entity because of the way it represents a nexus of identity and community, producing assumptions about shared values and norms, and constituting what positions are socially available to take up in a given context. These particular meanings of *we* are often unstated but implicitly understood. van Dijk (2011) suggests that these intimations of *we* frequently fall along one or more of a few common axes: the use of *we* addresses aspects of identity (as in, 'who are *we*? who belongs to *us*?'), activity ('what do *we* do? what is *our* task?'), goals ('what do *we* aim to achieve?'), and resources ('what is the basis of *our* power?'). Using the word *we*, a speaker makes a claim both about their own membership in a community predicated on shared identity, speaks on behalf of that community, and gestures to others that they understand as included in its membership.

Important to this understanding of *we* as a discursive entity are contemporary conceptions of identity as a social construct. In this line of thinking, the characteristics said to define an individual are understood as shifting across contexts, performed in transaction with others and ideologies as opposed to being fixed in all circumstances (Anton & Peterson, 2003; Davies & Harre, 1990; De Fina, 2011; Luke, 1996). This understanding of identity is related to, but distinct from, the concept of 'subject position': identity is a product of performative materialization of one's social milieu (Davis, 2012), whereas subject position describes the situated perspective from which one engages with the world (Anton & Peterson, 2003). While an individual's performative identity may not reflect all elements of their social location, their perspective is inescapably shaped by their subject position. In this reading, uses of the word *we* are acts of identification and identity-making that may or may not correspond with the speaker's subject position. By invoking a *we*, an individual 'takes a place in the social order, making sense of the world from this vantage point' (Anton & Peterson, 2003, p. 406).

At the same time, using *we* also assimilates one's audience into part of a *we* or a *them*, whether they like it or not. This working of *we*—its effects on those made subject to its discourse—can be understood through what Althusser (2006) described as the process of interpellation. Much as a police officer exerts power over a pedestrian by calling out to them on the street, the word *we* hails an audience as part of a common whole (or not), exerting materially constitutive effects in the form of social inclusion and exclusion. Just as we know that people and communities are policed differently because of racism, classism, cissexism, and other elements of their subject positions, we also recognize that *we* does not hail all subjects equally. Indeed, *we* as used by people with social privilege most often serves hegemonic ends, falsely constructing universalities of experience that carry material consequences for dynamics of dialogue and exchange in education.

The function and sequelae of these interpellating discourses have been central themes of scholarship in critical pedagogy. According to Freire, 'banking' models of education—in which teachers didactically 'deposit' knowledge into passive learners—produce students as the objects of education (Freire, 2000, p. 71), echoing societal impulses that objectify economically marginalized underclasses.

In our reading, we understand this dynamic as producing implicit *we—them* constellations of power and disenfranchisement; teachers (a *we*) are understood as knowing while students (a *them*) are understood to occupy subjugated positions of 'absolute ignorance' (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Freire (2000) describes this dynamic as characteristic of an 'ideology of oppression' (p. 72), countered only via radical egalitarian turns that disrupt strict classroom hierarchies and privilege knowledge borne of experience. Students and teachers must become 'critical co-investigators' of social problems at play in their classrooms and beyond to foster consciousness and critical intervention into reality (Freire, 2000, p. 81). Feminist critics—notably bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994)—extend Freire's analysis of power in the classroom to attend to other forms of oppression that intersect with poverty. In this way, a feminist interpretation of Freirean pedagogy can help facilitate Rancière's 'dissensus' (Rancière, 2011, p. 1) in the classroom, collectivizing learners' capacities in service of social justice, despite the diverse heterogeneity of their lived experiences (Ellsworth, 1989). Through this reading, we suggest that creating opportunities for students and teachers to interrogate discursive *we* and *them* groups produced in their classrooms is one valuable opportunity for praxis in higher education.

The impact of *we* in the classroom

> Everything begins with the recognition of one's identity.
> The first educative act is the recognition or the rescuing of
> the fact that the identity of the educator, and the pupil, has
> its own existence. (Gadotti, 1996, p. 156)

In education, uses of *we* are manifold, each with their own tacit meanings and effects. A teacher addressing a classroom may use *we* to cognitively acculturate learners as members of a common disciplinary community (as in *'we*, who study sociology') or to describe an outcome they hope their students will achieve (as in 'today *we* will learn how to calculate the anion gap'). Students may use *we* to advocate for their common needs (as in *'we* need more information to complete the assignment') or to situate knowledge they have acquired elsewhere (as in, *'we* covered ideas about sex and gender in my second-year class').

One *we* frequently employed in higher education by both students and teachers is the *we* meaning 'those of us who are present in this room'. This *we* comes loaded with significant implications, particularly in view of structural barriers to higher education related to income, class, and other axes of social location and identity. For every '*we*, who are present', there are also members of a '*they*, who are not'—a group whose perspectives are not represented, fostering 'practices of ignorance [which] are often intertwined with practices of oppression and exclusion' (Tuana & Sullivan, 2006, p. vii). Faced with a '*we*, who are present', it is incumbent on learners and educators alike to ask: What power dynamics have

conspired to allow *us* into the room while keeping *them* out? What perspectives are missing as a result?

In addition, '*we*, who are present' can also suggest ideas of homogeneity or commonality amongst community members that may not exist, obscuring the experiences of students who may not find resonance with the *we* being invoked. One example of this occurred during a dialogue in our gender, sex, and health course discussing hegemonic masculinity and femininity that has been recreated below:

> SR – In **our** culture**, we** have the idea that there are certain kinds of activities or things that are considered to be *normal* or *permissible* or *expected* for boys and girls and men and women. This can constrain what feels possible, or affect our engagement or experience of those activities. For instance, **we** associate pink with girls and blue with boys, and there are lots of ways in which **we** make it easy for people to conform with those norms, and punish those who violate them.
>
> Student 1 – Yeah, **we** think of hockey as, like, the *national sport*, but still **we** usually act like girls aren't really legit as hockey players, or people assume things about **our** sexual orientation, like **we're** all butch or lesbians or something.
>
> Student 2 – Yeah! It's so much harder for **us** to get into it, versus for **them** [the boys]. **They're**, like, expected to play hockey.

In this conversation, for some people, hockey, gender, and *Canadian culture* served as a common touchpoint. These members of the classroom community invoked *we*, *they*, *our*, and *them* in their discussion, describing in turn, the culture they understood as belonging to Canadians, members of that culture, girls who play hockey, and boys who watched it. For other members of the classroom (including TS), this constructed a false universality—points of disidentification, illustrated through the gulf in their experiences of *our culture*, *girlhood*, and *boyhood*. To members of the classroom community who shared these assumptions, such an exchange would likely pass by completely unnoticed; for those who did not, cognitive dissonance was triggered as they were claimed under the umbrella of a *we* to which they did not feel an affiliation.

This process of active yet implicit othering and marginalization says 'You are not like *us*', often to those who are marginalized more broadly. Here, the *we* invokes whiteness, notions of what it means to be *Canadian*, and class in particular ways. It signifies that to belong, to this society, is to participate in these cultural activities. Those who do not, out of unfamiliarity, lack of interest, the high costs of entry,

(dis)ability, or a multitude of other reasons are therefore unable to assume belongingness in *Canadian-ness*.

As a complement to the invisible *they* in the room, there is merit in interrogating the other points of dissonance. For the men in the classroom, who were a minority, there was a reversal of the more typical dynamics of othering, where, in a conversation about a traditionally masculine activity, this group became a *they*. In all of this, questions can be productively raised about who we see as 'in the room', those who are in the room but not seen, and the ways that people make invisible parts of their being in order to be perceived as part of the *we*. This (real) example from the course itself may feel on-the-nose, and other instances of *we— them* constructions may not be so obvious or ideologically weighted, or may not actually hinge on the use of the word itself. Even where questions of identity and ideology are not invoked, the use of *we* can ostracize in other ways. Assuming common knowledge—for instance, of a place, a formula, a theory or a concept— frequently draws quiet lines around those who are in, and out, of *the know*. A physics professor guiding first-year students through a problem-solving exercise might comment that 'of course we all know that the first law of thermodynamics is $\Delta U = Q - W$, and since the amount of heat added to the system was given in the problem, we can easily calculate W'. Those in the class who are familiar with the field are included in a *we* while others may well feel implicitly *called out* for not knowing something the professor thought should be obvious. Another example from outside of our classroom involved a field visit for a university course on the social determinants of health in an underserved, lower income neighborhood in the city. Implicit in the exercise was an assumption that the visiting undergraduate students were not part of the community they visited, reinforcing the perception of the university (and its attendants) as always and inherently separate from the community. The consequences were that those students for whom the community was home felt alienated from their learning environments (the *we* of the class) while simultaneously being (invisibly) stigmatized for belonging to that specific community (the implicit *they* of the community the class was visiting).

Thus, the use of *we* can exacerbate feelings of not belonging and exclusion. At the same time, it can obscure the contextual dependence of social norms, and miss opportunities to challenge stereotypes, biases, and gaps. Where the goal of the educator is to foster 'a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, and splitting' (hooks, 2003, p. 49), the power of *we* to create those constellations of solidarity and exclusion should be examined carefully. At the same time, there are also scenarios in which the use of *we* can serve as a site for inclusion wherein the addressed are called to a shared understanding, goal, or struggle. Take for example the instructor's remarks for the first class:

> SR – This is a space for **us** to explore the ways that
> sex/gender influence health from an intersectional
> perspective. By the end of the class, **we** will be able to

> critically examine health issues as not just biomedical
> but also sociocultural phenomenon.
>
> SR – This will be a safe space for **us** to discuss a variety
> of, sometimes sensitive and triggering, topics.

In these two examples, the instructor uses *we* to invoke common learning goals amongst the class and the space is shared. Importantly, she establishes that safety for all students is essential to the shared space. In this way, *we* serves as a form of inclusion through the evocation of a common purpose and shared goals.

We as intervention in higher education

Analyzing the use of *we* can be an instructive exercise of discourse analysis in itself. However, we contend that *we* and its relatives can serve as opportunities for praxis, extending beyond theory and analysis into intervention and anchors for action in real-time as classroom discussions progress. By *praxis*, we mean the kind of embodied educational actions that are grounded in principle, and deeply informed by a commitment to analysis, improvement, and reflection. In Lather's words, 'praxis is the self-creative activity through which we make the world…[it is] philosophy becoming practical' (1991, p. 11).

We believe that an instructor's reflexive practice focused on *we* can function to 'mobilize identities in the classroom' (Moya, 2009, p. 56) as epistemic resources, and to shine a light on 'ideologies and associations that unfairly advantage some people at the expense of others' (p. 62). In so doing, instructors will have a concrete tool with which to take up the challenge articulated by Darder, Torres, and Baltodano (2003), to identify problematic worldviews that have been unconsciously accepted, and begin to resist them so as to avoid translating these ideologies into problematic, discriminatory practices in the classroom.

Opportunities to seize *we* can be found in just about every educational context not only a typical university classroom, but also during clinical training, conferences and seminars, curriculum and policy discussions, tutorials and laboratories, and many more. In addition, although the instructor's invested institutional authority gives them the most latitude to enact these interventions, they can potentially be used by students as well.

In its most pared-down, generalized form, any time *we* is used, the opportunity presents itself for someone to ask 'who is *we* in this context?', or to point out that 'we might not all share the same perspective.' And, since the use of *we* always implies a corresponding *they*, one could also ask 'who is *they*?', 'what distinguishes *them* from *us*?', 'how might *they* see things differently than *we* do?' Taking up opportunities to interrogate *we* and its relatives can help identify gaps in our thinking, make implicit assumptions explicit, surface unspoken tensions and points of divergence, challenge biases and stereotypes, and disrupt patterns of

marginalization and domination that perpetuate inequity in the classroom and beyond. There are many opportunities to take note of how *we* is deployed in a classroom, and we can choose to draw attention to this. For example, any person in a classroom could intervene by posing questions such as:

- I notice the word *we* has been used a lot in this discussion, and I wonder if it might be helpful to be explicit about what is meant by that. Who is this *we* that we've been talking about?
- When you say *our culture*, what exactly do you mean by that? I suspect there could be some heterogeneity in what each of us considers to be *our* culture.
- It may be worth noting that in our discussion of activism, we've consistently referred to social activists as *they*; why do you think that is?
- Are there differences in power or perspective between *us* and *them* in this context that we should be paying attention to? Are *our* goals different from *theirs*? Why?
- You said, '*we* know that depression is caused by deficient serotonin concentrations,' but I'm not sure that this understanding is necessarily shared or universal. Are there other perspectives on the causes of depression that might be relevant for us to consider?

One of the things that is potentially powerful about *we* as an intervention is that, in principle at least, any person in the situation can invoke it, not just the instructor or other authority figure in the room. Students and trainees could conceivably ask exactly these types of questions about the use of *we* and its relatives directed at their peers or to the person in authority. In the context of student group work, these kinds of questions might be particularly valuable in helping to develop common purpose and perspective for a project or task. Certainly, though, the power to do this is not distributed equally in most classrooms; usually, one or more individuals are charged with the institutional authority to set the terms of the educational encounter, and have a greater ability to steer the agenda, and latitude to direct attention and allocate time to discussions about *we*. Moreover, intersecting axes of oppression combine and intersect to produce different subject positions from which efforts attempting to interrogate *we* are viewed as more or less palatable, agreeable, aggressive, or intellectual.

Even in instances where one chooses not to draw attention to the usage of *we* in the classroom, it is possible to undertake a real-time reflexive practice linked to *we*. Schön's (1983) model of *reflection-in-action* is a form of reflection that occurs dynamically in the midst of action, as opposed to *reflection-on-action* which one undertakes *post hoc*. Using reflection-in-action, one can catch one's self in the moment of using *we* and make a deliberate choice about how to proceed—potentially by clarifying what one means by one's use of *we*, or choosing an alternative framing. In the example above, by paying attention to *we* and its relatives, the instructor could have caught themselves saying 'our culture' and

chosen an alternative framing. In fact, this particular example is one that SR noted numerous times in-the-moment, and documented in her written reflections on teaching the gender/sex and health course; as a result of paying attention to it, she has shifted to identifying more specifically which culture(s) she is talking about (most often, she now says something like 'in the dominant North American cultures'). Another possible reframing could be to say 'this culture' instead of 'our culture'—the use of a non-possessive pronoun (*this*) is a subtle but significant shift in the discourse, as it references the culture without presuming an identification with it. In making such discursive choices, the speaker not only takes steps toward changing their own patterns of thinking and tendency to privilege their own experience, but also simultaneously models it for others in the audience.

These same questions and approaches can inform *post hoc* reflection-on-action in the service of praxis as well. In addition to the kinds of questions listed above, Lather (1991) identifies some other prompting questions that can be useful in probing our relationship with *we* and how we employ it in the classroom. For example, she suggests that we might ask ourselves 'who are my "Others"?' (p. 84), but also other related questions can shed light as well, such as 'what is most densely invested?', 'what binaries structure my arguments?', and 'did I make resistant discourses and subject positions more available?' (p. 84). We can also invest time in deliberately contemplating the *we* that we typically employ. What unifies the *we*? Who is included and excluded in my use of *we*? What are the norms, values, and ideological commitments that are presumed to be shared by that *we*?

Responsibility and limitations

Of course, the utility of *we* as an intervention is subject to theoretical and practical limitations. Standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) suggests that those who do not feel themselves included in the *we* are more likely to be aware of its exclusionary usages; thus, marginalized people often have to not only endure the process and consequences of exclusion, but also to bear the burden of speaking up against it and the risks associated with doing so. In contrast, those with more social privilege and benefitting from hegemonic social structures are less likely to notice it, and even if they do, have limited incentive to interrogate their frames of reference in substantive ways (Simon & Dippo, 1986). Moreover, when privileged folks speak up to address the same issues, they are more likely to be perceived as *woke*[3] as opposed to being labelled disruptive.

This raises the question of who should take responsibility for interrogating the use of *we* and associated positionalities in a given context. In general, those with access to the greatest power should be willing to take on responsibility for recognizing their own privilege, and use that privilege to decentralize power. In that way, *we* as an intervention may serve as a very useful tool for those who already

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[3] Popular slang meaning 'alert to injustice' or 'social awareness'.

wield significant power in the classroom, particularly the instructor, and particularly if the instructor also occupies other nodes of social privilege.

The question of performativity is crucial here. If interrogations of *we* remain an intellectual exercise without informing and motivating material changes to redress inequity and exclusion, then it is a hollow exercise. It is not enough to map out the differences between in- and out-groups as signified by *we*—it is important that we are careful not to essentialize differences, that we examine and take seriously the power relations bound up in *we*, and that we responsibly work to redress imbalances so as not to perpetuate a harmful status quo. Otherwise, educators wishing to implement explorations of *we* in their classrooms will 'contribute to dominance in spite of [their] liberatory intentions' (Lather, 1991, p. 15). At the same time, one must also be conscientious of not simply *performing* or taking up excessive air time. As Khabeer succinctly puts it, 'You don't need to be a voice for the voiceless. Just pass the mic.' (2017).

Finding paths forward

This paper has parsed the implications of *we* as a discursive entity in higher education, providing examples of both its common usage, its utility, and its limitations as an intervention. We have contended that letting *we* pass unexamined often works to strengthen discourses that maintain inequities linked to race, gender, and class, amongst other facets of social position and identity. We have also suggested that interrogating *we* provides one scaffold to enable reflexive inquiry that is necessary—but not sufficient—to dismantle these same inequities.

Ultimately, educators committed to anti-oppressive praxis must strive, as Freire wrote, to practice education as 'a practice of freedom' (2000, p. 80). To aid in such a practice, we suggest that instances of *we* can serve as worthy opportunities for reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, as a part of a more general educational praxis aimed at building more equitable, just, and inclusive communities.

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