



*Intersectional Pedagogy: Complicating Identity  
and Social Justice*  
By Kim Case, Editor

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**Abstract**

*This review of Intersectional Pedagogy: Complicating Identity and Social Justice (2017) discusses how Kim A. Case's edited volume mobilizes knowledge about incorporating intersectional approaches in a range of classroom contexts. This book powerfully demonstrates how intersectionality can be meaningfully infused into course design in such a way that post-secondary students are empowered to understand and interrogate items including their own privilege(s), social locations, and potential social action. Each chapter uniquely provides scholarly reflection on personal understandings and valuing of intersectional theories, struggles and successes with intersectional pedagogies, and useful strategies that readers might try in their own classrooms and/or research.*

**Keywords:** *intersectional pedagogy; evidence-based pedagogy; gender; social justice; diversity; multiculturalism; inclusivity*

Kim A. Case's (2017) *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* is a fresh, motivating text valuable for scholars and educators alike. Organized into three sections; "Intersectional theory and foundations," "Intersectionality and classroom applications," and "Intersectional pedagogy for social justice," Case successfully orchestrates a chorus of contributors who not only speak to these three foci, but also with one another's ideas and impressions. Unlike how Case points out that teachers so often operate "in silos" (p. 15), each chapter resists attending to only its own project; contributors explicitly acknowledge the intersections existing between papers, effectively building on one another's learning, experiences, and expertise. As a result, and as a well-edited book should, there is careful attention to drawing connections between chapters. Case leads the contributors in not only an artful unfolding of how an intersectional framework might enhance learning in different contexts, but also, provides multiple entry points and inspiration for educators to progressively reframe their practices and classrooms as well.

Elizabeth R. Cole and Case set the foundation for this validating tone in (1) the foreword by Cole and (2) the first chapter by Case. Cole first calls attention to the necessity of the collection, highlighting the limits of how intersectional feminism has been taken up when rooted in tunnel-vision-like understandings. She reminds us of intersectionality as a "mechanism" to think about socially constructed identities rather than understanding it "flat[ly]" as "merely descriptive"—"the

obvious fact that every individual simultaneously occupies multiple social locations with respect to race, gender, social class, sexuality, etc.” (p. ix). As a result, several scholars link back to the surface-value quality of such single-axis analysis (pp. 6, 28, 37, 63, 103, 112), calling for complexity and depth in intersectional work. Cole also provides a brief overview of the history of intersectionality, beginning with Crenshaw (1989) and how it has since manifested in literature and culture. She concludes that we have not arrived at a “post-intersectional moment” but rather, at a place for the potential of intersectionality, especially in the classroom, setting up nicely Case’s “case” for intersectional pedagogy in chapter one.

Buoyed by Cole, Case calls for intersectionality particularly with social justice learning. Refreshingly, she reveals past intersectional pedagogical mistakes as a starting point, admitting that in her first attempt served “as a lesson in what not to do” (p. 1). She taught from an additive perspective, keeping “social categories artificially separated” (p. 2). However, she then illuminates what a productive model might look like, with her visual aids especially capturing a compelling vision. The first, by artist Greg Kitzmiller, depicts multiple sets of overlapping circles, demonstrating different major aspects of social identity (race, ability, social class, etc.) as well as representing invisible or forgotten intersections as well (“immigrant status, global nationality, or imperialist/colonized citizenship” etc.) (p. 4). Overall, her goals are clear: to “examine how educators and learners can address issues of intersectionality in a diverse classroom” (p. 5), to provide an “intersectional pedagogy model,” “develop inclusive intersectional studies,” and “promote an [inter/multi/disciplinary] infusion of intersectional studies” (p. 8). As such, she provides: (1) a succinct overview of a model for and tenets of effective intersectional pedagogy, (2) instruction to maintain “vigilant connection[s]” (p. 10) to foundational Black intersectional scholars, (3) a warning to avoid “flattening” the framework by, for example, only considering personal marginalization, (4) discussion regarding privilege analysis and social action as integral, and (5) encouragement to form educator peer learning groups for pedagogy development.

The following chapters detail a handful of perspectives regarding intersectional theory, how it functions in classrooms, and how it might frame social justice teaching. In chapter two, Ronni Michelle Greenwood takes up the challenge to examine intersectional foundations by exploring a few disciplinary applications: nursing, social work, and psychology, punctuating her work with specific classroom applications. For instance, in investigating intersectional social work education, she suggests students might “discuss cross-cultural differences among women in agency and choice” such as the “ways context shapes Muslim women’s agency and choice to wear, or not, the hijab” (p. 33). Although scholars such as Sensoy and Marshall (2009-2010) argue that the veil in its many forms often “exclusively function[s] as the shorthand marker of women’s oppression” and warn that “the repeated circulation of the image of the veiled, sad Muslim girl reinforces the stereotype that all Muslim girls are oppressed” (p. 16), Greenwood argues that such talks could deepen students’ intersectional analysis so that they think beyond social positions to consider “time, place, and history in experiences of power, dominance and subordination” (p. 33).

In chapter three, Tugçe Kurtis and Glenn Adams importantly explore decolonial intersectionality, informed by transnational feminist perspectives; they argue such an approach has transformative potential. However, they don’t shy away from discussing critiques, such as how “mainstream approaches” can function to “neutralize its revolutionary potential” (p. 49), concluding that its most effective use is to teach about privilege, and how decolonial intersectionality “attempts to make invisible intersections visible” (p. 55). They also provide two strategies of cultural psychology analysis for application—“normalizing silence” and “denaturalizing expression-oriented rationality” (p. 52). For instance, their research suggests “an appreciation of maintenance-oriented

relationality...[that] may even be expressive of authentic personal desires and promote well being” (p. 52). Overall, their zeroing in on “lurking” (p. 56) forms of racial and colonial privilege(s) serves to reinforce major themes of foundations of intersectional theory discussed across the volume as well as uniquely explore the affordances of decolonial intersectional approaches.

Next, section two is focused on intersectionality in the classroom, beginning with Patrick R. Grzanka in chapter four. After a compelling personal anecdote, he moves into an intimate reflection at his first attempt to establish an intersectional psychology of gender course, much in the confessional spirit as displayed by Case, whom he draws from. As any teacher would appreciate, he details the difficulty with inheriting learning outcomes, designing the syllabus, and piloting lessons and coursework. For instance, he honestly addresses the tensions between teaching psychology and intersectionality. Further, he details both failed and successful strategies, such as, like Case lamented, taking an additive teaching approach versus assigning meaningful ongoing fieldwork including having students “go to a public place where a meal is occurring and...observe gender” (p. 71) “to facilitate an iterative process of consciousness-raising” (p. 70). Additionally, he reflects on feeling troubled by potential missteps. In one such moment, he states: “As a White, queer man, I find myself personally and politically troubled by any efforts to displace gender that might inadvertently obscure my own cisgender privilege” (p. 70). The chapter concludes with Grzanka advocating for pedagogies of “critical ambivalence” (pp. 76-78), and again, displays powerful personal reflection in expressing that such an approach “helps [him] resist fetishizing feminist and multicultural approaches” as “a critical ambivalence towards the structures we inherit and inhabit can help sustain the kinds of intersectionality-grounded conversation this volume encourages” (p. 78).

Returning to Case in chapter five joined by Desdamona Rios, they pair up to provide a nearly exhaustive list of ideas about how to launch a course using intersectional pedagogy while also avoiding some of the challenges detailed by both Case and Grzanka in chapters one and four. Case begins by describing the evolution of learning goals on her intersectional syllabi before launching into how intersectionality was infused throughout the course. Of particular interest are the tables of lists of course readings and resources used, helpfully providing several items educators might use if embarking on a similar intersectional pedagogical project. Admittedly, as a former high school teacher and current PhD student researcher investigating adolescent literacy, I would have liked to see the authors to discuss the potential of and possibilities for intersectional pedagogy in the K-12 system rather than focusing solely on higher education contexts. However, that said, I would argue that many of the lesson design ideas are applicable for at least upper secondary school contexts. For instance, Case’s list of resources including TED talks, blog posts, BuzzFeed videos, and so forth (pp. 92-93) are an excellent starting point for teachers of young adult students.

Nancy A. Naples examines intersectional approaches in chapter six, and how they differently provide powerful analytic lenses. She calls for feminist researchers to be explicit with their epistemologies, methods, and implications for praxis, and for feminist teachers to historicize complex intersectional approaches. Offering insights based on teaching an interdisciplinary course on theories of intersectionality, she suggests: “the most powerful approaches to intersectionality examine the ways these interactions produce contradictions and tensions across various levels of analysis and dimensions of difference with the goal of producing insights for feminist praxis” (p. 114). Like Case, Grzanka, and Rios, Naples also divulges challenges, including how her graduate students struggled to conduct intersectional research, which, as a current graduate student with a keen interest in taking this direction with my dissertation project, I found to be a valuable insight.

Chapter seven represents another return to Case, this time joined by Michelle K. Lewis, where they address approaching intersectional LGBT psychology with a racially diverse student body. The course focused on developing students' critical thinking and reading, with the aim to promote conscientization. Like Case and Rios, Lewis also offers helpful tables of sample class activities and assignments including group readings and skits, quote and video analysis (p. 134), and sharing cultural backgrounds (p. 137). Photography and public education campaign projects especially emphasized intersectional learning and proved fruitful; one student designed a cross-word puzzle to "encompass all of her intersecting identities in one powerful visual aid" (p. 139). However, Case and Lewis's inclusion of minor, powerful details that any teacher would appreciate, such as using short poems that "can be built upon in terms of using them for teaching and critical thinking" (p. 141), are especially indicative of the usefulness and thoughtfulness of this volume.

Teaching intersectionality with a student population of primarily racial minorities, Naomi M. Hall, like Case and Lewis, and takes a culturally centered approach in chapter eight. Like several chapters, Hall also goes into detail regarding effective teaching strategies including quote analysis, reaction blogs, autobiographical diagrams, and counter storytelling. For instance, for counter storytelling, Hall thoroughly describes the three phases of the narrative process that unfolded, even reflecting, "I found that giving the students at least a week...provided sufficient time" (p. 163)—a tip any educator would appreciate when planning their program. As such, Hall contributes to a volume that provides both breadth and depth of teaching ideas across chapters.

In chapter nine, David P. Rivera marks the beginning of the final section on intersectional pedagogy on social justice. Drawing from critical race and queer theories, he delves into more "hidden," marginalized intersections by continuing the tradition of this text to foreground his work in a personal experience of early naiveté in learning about identities. Furthermore, he asserts that such personal divulging can be a powerful teaching strategy; self-disclosures can be critical for effective modeling for students to consider privilege in their own social locations. Similarly, he also advises educators to invite students to provide ongoing feedback, so as to "strengthen the student teacher alliance, a necessary component in an effective educational process" (p. 188). Considering often-silenced intersections, he advocates for moving experiences of the oppressed to the forefront to increase visibility and reduce microaggressions. He also discusses pertinent strategies, such as being mindful of language intentionality, for example, the "unconscious practices" of consistently presenting significant terms such as "race, gender, and sexuality" in the same order, "which might imply that race deserves exploration before gender identity" (p. 180).

In chapter ten, Matthew J. Bowling and Jacquelyn Harris join Rios tackle moving past student 'uniqueness' in intersectional pedagogy. The four texts they incorporated into their course proved impactful, as evidenced by their students' discussions and writing. For instance, reflection papers connected their learning from the texts to their own lives and potential social action projects and the service-learning Intersectionality Project was the "most powerful" (p. 201) of the course. However, what stands apart is the inclusion of student testimonials chronicling what elements of the course were most meaningful for them; for example, Jackie admits that she was "defensive" at first, but after discussions, she came to recognize the intragroup differences in their group of African American women (p. 204). Matthew admits he came to better understand "the unique [White, male] privileges [he] possesses and the contexts in which these are most advantageous" (p. 206). Creating space for students to speak to their experiences not only legitimizes this teaching approach, but effectively functions as a sort of "practicing what they preach"; as Cole outlined in the forward, "our students need to be about to nimbly employ an intersectional analysis to make sense

of the complexity and diversity of human experience as well as the processes that create and maintain inequality” (p. xi) and the students testimonials demonstrate evidence of this.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Adrienne Dessel and Timothy Corvidae delve into experiential activities that social justice educators might employ, including metaphors of intersectionality, writing testimonials of social identities, and privilege fishbowls. For instance, using metaphorical thinking as a design challenge during discussions stands out as a meaningful group activity. A compelling example of this was a “playful and flexible” metaphor where a group used art to facilitate intersectional thinking, co-creating a mural of various colours and shapes that “change[d] each other as they overlapped” (p. 219). Such experiential activities are elegant in their simplicity in terms of how easily an educator could prepare materials for such a lesson, but also inspired because of how powerful the metaphorical thinking can be. Additionally, a helpful handout is provided with an overview of five such metaphors—a convenient tool any educator could take right from the book and into their teaching context as it is nearly a ready-made lesson plan.

Overall, while reading this book, I felt inspired and certainly, nostalgic for my classroom. However, as a novice researcher, I was motivated while reading, as its goals align with my own scholarly interest in bringing intersectional thinking into the classroom—specifically, in literacy and literature learning contexts. Particularly, Grzanka’s question, “What happens to intersectionality in English?” (p. 77) prompted me to connect my reading back to my teaching practices, my aspirations with my dissertation, and how I might teach literature intersectionally during my PhD. However, this book is applicable to a variety of classroom contexts, expertly demonstrated by the contributors working with an array of students in different disciplines. As such, I thoroughly believe that this volume offers clear, thoughtful, and necessarily concrete ideas about how to undertake intersectional pedagogy in such a way that educators can create transformative learning experiences.

### References

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