CULTURE, EQUITY, POWER & INFLUENCE
This week’s questions:

- What is power?
- What is equity?
- What is influence?
- What is intersectionality?
One of the core ideas for this course is that educators must be aware of the ways in which power shapes how cultures are understood and valued (or not valued). The terms “oppression,” and “privilege” will be central in our conversations as we discuss the ways in which differences in power shape the micro level (interpersonal relationships) and the meso level (communities and institutions).

Too often, discussions of “multiculturalism” are superficial and do not focus on power. Culture is often looked at in terms of food and music and clothing and maybe family structure, without including a careful consideration of how differences in power determine whose culture is deemed “civilized” or “deprived,” and whose language is considered “broken,” or “slang” or “sophisticated,” and whose values are considered “backward” or “enlightened.”
Another core idea shaping this course is that individual educators need to be aware of their own social position — their “positionality”. This means we need to be aware of our own relationship to power; of the ways in which we have experienced privileges and oppression. And we need to be aware of how our social position shapes our work as educators — both how we see others and how others see us.
What is “equity”? How “equity” is different from “equality.”

In the first image, it is assumed that everyone will benefit from the same supports. They are being treated equally.

In the second image, individuals are given different supports to make it possible for them to have equal access to the game.

In the third image, all three can see the game without any supports or accommodations because the cause of the inequity was addressed.
Equity

- As the image on the last slide depicts, equity means that people get what they need; while equality means everyone gets the same thing. As the image shows us, equity is essential for creating a level playing field.

- Our goal as educators is to promote equity — to create the conditions (whether in our classrooms or our offices or our agencies) that will create a level playing field so that all students have a fair opportunity to be successful.
And another core idea for this course is that educators have influence – educators can influence, shape, change their classrooms, their offices, their agencies, their institutions, and yes, the broader society.

Educators can exercise influence at the individual level and also through membership in groups.
The Influence without Authority model is particularly well suited for educators because so much of our work happens through the cultures we create in our work sites, and through the relationships that happen in our work sites, rather than through traditional hierarchies in which a boss tells the subordinates what they have to do. (I realize almost all of us do have a “boss,” and some of what we do is mandated. I also realize that classroom teachers do have authority over their students, though we all know that authority has to be earned and maintained; it’s not a given that students will respect a teacher’s authority.)

In other words, much of what you will want to do as a change agent will require that you understand how to exercise your influence, rather than relying on your authority.
One of the ‘big ideas’ for this course is that it is necessary and worthwhile to take the time to think deeply about how we think about the concepts of culture, power and equity. Because educators tend to be action-oriented people, the culture of our profession has often not embraced theory, considering it not relevant enough, not capable of taking care of the real problems educators wrestle with each day. I disagree with that critique of theory. I believe that too often educators have initiated simplistic, ineffective solutions due to under-developed understandings of the complexities of culture, power and equity. Taking the time to think about how we think, taking the time to reflect on theories and conceptual frameworks that can help us ‘see’ the world in more sophisticated ways will increase the likelihood that our analyses of problems and our remedies/solutions will be effective.
In “Conceptual Frameworks,” Maurianne Adams provides an explanation of the four concepts that shape the _Readings for Diversity and Social Justice_ text. These also reflect the focus of this course.

**ONE:** Social group identities have been used historically to justify and perpetuate the advantages of privileged groups relative to the disadvantages of marginalized groups;

**TWO:** These social identities have been socially constructed within specific historical conditions;

**THREE:** We need a theory of oppression in order to understand it; this theory must move beyond the micro level (individual/interpersonal) to analyze how oppression occurs at the meso level (institutional) and macro level (society).

**FOUR:** A theory of oppression must also envision opportunities for empowerment and help us to explain the success of past and present social movements. (p. 2+)
Re-Cap: Theoretical Foundations

- In “Theoretical Foundations,” Lee Anne Bell writes, “We need clear ways to define and analyze oppression so that we can understand how it operates at individual, cultural, and institutional levels, historically and in the present.” (p. 21)

- Key points she makes are that “individuals hold multiple complex and cross-cutting social group memberships that confer relative privilege or disadvantage differently in different contexts.” (p. 23) She also writes that unitary theories of oppression have failed to take into account the multiple identities people hold and the range of experiences of oppression lived within any given group. (p. 26)

  - Note: a ‘unitary theory of oppression’ refers to examining one form of oppression without considering other forms of oppression. For example, looking at sexism without also looking at racism. This approach to looking at sexism negates the experiences of women of color, and therefore is not a sophisticated enough approach to analyzing sexism.
Thinking in more complex ways than “unitary theories of oppression”

- This week’s focus on intersectionality allows us to deepen Bell’s critique of unitary theories of oppression, and to envision what Adams means when she calls for a theory of oppression that accounts for the complex levels and types of privilege and disadvantage that play out at various levels of human society.

- Traditionally, educators (and scholars in general) have examined forms of inequality as separate from one another (=unitary theories of oppression).
  - They would look at race, but not look at gender.
  - When they were looking at gender, they were not looking at social class.
  - When they were looking at sexual identity, they were not looking at race.
  - When they were looking at social class, they were not looking at religion.

- By compartmentalizing these different forms of inequality, we overlook the ways in which they impact one another — and therefore change the ways in which the inequality manifests itself. We also overlook the ways in which people’s identities are multifaceted.
Intersectionality

“Intersectionality holds that classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia...do not act independently of one another; instead these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the ‘intersection’ of multiple forms of discrimination.” (wikipedia)

In my words: Intersectionality is a concept, which is to say it is a way of thinking. Specifically, it is a way of making sense of how inequality functions in our society. It helps us understand the ways in which someone, or some group, experiences different forms of inequality simultaneously. Intersectionality helps us see that we cannot examine the different types of inequality separately from one another because that is not how people experience it. Also, intersectionality helps us see that each manifestation of inequality is shaped by other forms of inequality.
The theory of intersectionality was coined by legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw. She saw that the law only recognized racial discrimination OR gender discrimination, but that women of color experienced BOTH forms simultaneously. Crenshaw saw that it was more than adding together two forms of discrimination – it was an entirely different way that discrimination worked. She set out to conceptualize the “compounded discrimination” women of color faced in order to bring to the law a framework and a language that could make visible what was happening to women of color.
Magazine Interviewer: Tell me about the origins of your concept of intersectionality.

Crenshaw: It grew out of trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them.”
Applying Intersectionality Broadly

- While “intersectionality” initially was used to explain legal discrimination faced by women of color, it has been applied outside of legal frameworks to understand how inequality works in multiple ways throughout our society.

- It also is now applied broadly to look at the intersection between racism, sexism, homophobia, religious discrimination, classism and other forms of inequality.
Intersectionality recognizes that each form of oppression is transformed as it intersects with another form of oppression.

That means, for example, that a white woman and an African American woman do not experience gender discrimination in exactly the same way. And it means that an African American woman does not experience racism exactly the same way as an African American man. Gender is racialized, and race is gendered. That means that race shapes the way in which gender is experienced, and gender shapes the way race is experienced. (And we could continue with other examples...)}
What Intersectionality Means for our Work in this Course

- One of the big ideas for this course is that no one has just one cultural identity; people have multiple cultural and social identities. This means that people are simultaneously part of dominant groups and oppressed groups. The same person can benefit from certain forms of inequality and be the victim of other kinds of inequality.

- Another big idea for this course is that people do not experience different forms of inequality separately, but rather simultaneously, much the way they experience their multiple cultural and social identities simultaneously.

- A corollary for that is that we cannot understand inequality at the meso and macro levels unless we examine the ways in which different forms of inequality intersect with one another, thereby reinforcing and strengthening the inequality.
Accepting the Challenge of Thinking in Terms of Intersectionality

- It is easier to organize a class around separate forms of inequality: to focus one week on racism, another week on sexism, another on religious oppression, etc.

- Indeed, the text for our course is organized that way. It appears, based on the weekly topics in our syllabus, that our course is organized in that way, too.

- Our challenge will be to continue to look at each of our weekly topics cumulatively so that we are looking for intersections between them and so that we are recognizing the differences between people who share a cultural membership.
  - This will allow us to recognize the multiple cultural and social identities our students have, and to recognize the complex ways in which they experience inequality, and to better understand how inequality is reinforced and maintained in our education systems.
I encourage you to avoid types of questions that lead to “either/or” thinking.

When people are talking about social inequality, I often hear them ask, “Is it really about racism? Or is it really about economic inequality?” The assumption behind that kind of question is that it’s one or the other. To think in terms of intersectionality, the question shifts away form “either/or” to consider the “and,” to consider the connections and overlap.