Crystena Parker-Shandal, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO, crystena.parker-shandal@uwaterloo.ca

Participation in Higher Education Classroom Discussions: How Students' Identities Influence Perspective Taking and Engagement

ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of students' identities on how students participate in classroom discussions in postsecondary courses. Participation in such discussions is known to increase students' learning, but, despite this, little is known about how students' identities influence how and whether they choose to participate. Drawn from a larger study on the experiences of postsecondary instructors and students, this article focuses on students' perspectives and experiences. Survey data were collected from undergraduate students enrolled in an interdisciplinary undergraduate program. Students' race, religion, gender, and their first- or continuing-generation university status were found to have varying influences on their participation in classroom discussions. Most students with marginalized identities opted out of actively participating in discussions about contentious or sociopolitical topics. This study suggests that inclusive approaches to classroom discussion can be useful in promoting students' engagement and academic learning.

KEYWORDS

postsecondary education, classroom discussions, identity, controversial issues, first-generation students

In university classrooms, students come together to discern and reflect on differing ideas and perspectives. Participation in postsecondary classroom discussions helps build strong, just, anti-racist communities, and increases students' academic and social learning (Alderman et al. 2021). By participating, students learn to identify positively with their classmates, other cultures, and society. Their social, cultural, and political identities shape the ways in which they participate in classroom discussions. Many undergraduate students experience transitions in their political and social outlook on the world through these discussions; they develop their own perspectives, which may differ from those in which they were raised.

However, classroom discussions can be exclusionary for some students, particularly those with marginalized identities—such as first-generation university students, students with accessibility needs, and female, Black, Indigenous, and students of colour (Cuellar, Bencomo Garcia, and Saichaie 2022; Harbin, Thurber, and Bandy 2019). When contentious topics are raised in university courses and students are given the opportunity to share and reflect on their perspectives, their engagement varies—some choose to confidently participate while others remain silent.

This article considers how students' identities inform their participation in discussions and explores how various indicators—such as discussion topics and instructors—contribute to engagement

levels. It also sheds light on what students need in order to be active participants in classroom discussions.

THE BACKGROUND

COVID-19 demonstrated the need for pedagogy in higher education to move further away from authoritarian, lecture-based approaches that constrain spaces for students' voices and reflection (Daddow 2016; Tang and Servin 2020). Students who attend classes in-person benefit from small-group discussions and experiential exercises, and inclusive pedagogies allow all students to engage. But whether classes are held in-person or virtually, lecture-based approaches are no longer relevant in a world where students can easily access information on multiple media platforms.

Benefits and difficulties encountered in postsecondary classroom discussions

Research focused on secondary-school adolescents has shown that participation in classroom discussions builds strong pathways for students' success and civic engagement (Godfrey and Grayman 2014; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Such open debates are also critical for addressing the spread of misinformation and teaching students how to critically engage with online media sources (Kahne and Bowyer 2017).

Postsecondary classroom discussions can provide a critical space for students to go more deeply into dialogue about socially or politically charged topics (Rocca 2010), which may contribute to addressing misinformation they have encountered in secondary school or from their familial upbringing. Literature that focuses on postsecondary classroom discussions points to the benefits of these discussions for students' learning and increased involvement in their postsecondary experience (Akman and Alagöz 2018; Rocca 2010). Classroom discussions encourage critical thinking (Hanna 2014; Kuhn 2010), students' engagement (Doody and Condon 2012; Parker 2016a; Seals 2018), and a heightened university experience (Davis 2012; Garside 1996). Students' positionality influences their experiences in such discussions. It can contribute to creating better learning for them, and it can increase the ways they may contribute generally (Dudley-Marling 2013).

Encouraging classroom dialogue and discussion allows students to practise and develop perspective-taking skills (Bickmore and Parker 2014). It contributes to teaching students how to constructively respond and engage respectfully with each other and with difference, deepening their empathy and strengthening their relationships (Howard 2015; Kazanjian and Rutledge 2022). However, even though posing open-ended, high-cognitive-demand questions better supports student learning and facilitates open discussion (Sedova, Sedlacek, and Svaricek 2016), many controversial discussions are not explored deeply (An Le and Hockey 2022; Pace 2022).

Despite the democratic potential of classroom discussions, the power to limit how much a student speaks and what they speak about ultimately rests with instructors (Nunn 1996). Pedagogies that educators implement have a tremendous impact on all students' learning. Many social science courses deal with contentious topics, such as racism, sexism, and systemic inequality. While these classrooms are ripe for deep examination of such issues, many instructors choose to avoid controversial discussions, fearing student or collegial reprisal (Parker and Bickmore 2012; Pace 2019). For their part, many marginalized students choose to remain silent, out of fear of further stigmatization (Howard and Henney 1998; Parker 2016b; Tyson 2003).

Perhaps influenced by the public debate about trigger warnings, many university professors and their students feel unprepared to engage in controversial discussions related to sensitive or contentious social issues, particularly when they are connected to race, class, culture, religion, or gender (Diem and Welton 2020). Although aimed at protecting vulnerable students, trigger warnings may silence some students, thereby hurting their mental health (Bellet et al., 2020; Reda 2009). In postsecondary spaces rife with trigger warnings, many conversations are shut down, despite their potential to be constructive and transformative. The result can be adverse outcomes, such as emotional outbursts, silencing, name calling, and microaggressions (Bodenner 2017; Ogunyemi et al. 2020). Even facilitated conversations about difference become challenging and controversial, particularly when hate rhetoric is present (Fox 2009). Thus, classroom discussions can marginalize as well as engage students.

Teachers and students navigating classroom discussions

Even though classroom discussions are beneficial for student learning, facilitating them—and participating in them—is risky pedagogy. The anti-critical race theory (CRT) movement coming out of the United States has heightened this risk; educators and administrators fear losing their jobs or being ostracized on social media, particularly when they raise issues concerning racial and social justice. Anti-CRT rhetoric—based on fear and collusion—impacts educators everywhere, including those in Canada, who might question the merit of taking such a risk. While classroom discussions about race can help students critically understand past and ongoing racial politics (Teitelbaum 2022), a default position of genericizing or glossing over contentious topics allows instructors and students to avoid reflecting on white complicity (Applebaum 2017). It also perpetuates white liberalism (Parker-Shandal 2023).

Bakhtin's (2010) concept of discourse patterns distinguishes between monologic (instructor-centred) and dialogic (student-centred) methods. Student-centred dialogic interventions have a vital impact on undergraduate students. They stimulate, guide, and shape the experiences of postsecondary students, encouraging them to be self-reflective and active learners (Carnell 2007; Gunnlaugson and Moore 2009; Moustakim 2007). Such classroom dialogue challenges the notion of students as passive learners, and instead engages them in the process of critically examining and deconstructing challenging ideas—creating space for the development of critical consciousness (Freire 1994).

When teachers take risks, students are encouraged to do the same (Harrison, Burke, and Clarke 2020; Howard et al. 2018). Teachers who discuss contentious issues gain further confidence and skills in allowing alternative or dissenting perspectives to come forward (Clancy and Bauer 2018). For students, engaging with controversy facilitates intentional learning—where various learning situations develop—refining the students' interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Bereiter and Scardamalia 2018).

Educators play a critical role in this facilitation: they create the necessary spaces to work through problems, providing the time and energy to undertake that work collaboratively and collectively. For instance, they can create spaces for students of colour to work through difficult histories and the intergenerational impact of oppression and racism, naming and affirming how whiteness has perpetuated these harms (Moats 2019). This is challenging, and it is hard work. However, the impact on students and educators can be transformational (Parker-Shandal, Tiflati, and Chan 2023).

When critical incidents do occur and sustained opportunities for reflection on disparate issues are available, students can practise their skills for dialogic engagement. Much of undergraduate students' experiences rely on exposing them to perspectivism, i.e., to multiple ways of viewing a phenomenon (Folger, Poole, and Stutman 2021; Ramos 2012). Through empathic scaffolding—pedagogical

strategies for moving students out of their comfort zones—white students in particular may be better equipped to have conversations about race and social justice (Bauer and Clancy 2018). When issues or assumptions about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sociopolitical identities inform the dialogue, students can develop further capacity for understanding the value of difference and diversity in society. When discussing racially charged issues or identity-based conflicts, what people share in class can either reinforce or interrupt racist or discriminatory ideologies. Some educators or students may choose to speak up and contest varying beliefs; others may intentionally remain silent.

Understanding how students experience instructors' facilitation of discussions can provide critical insight into determining how contentious issues impact students' participation in the classroom. Considering this, I set out to study how undergraduate students experienced classroom discussions. I drew on a mixed-methods approach, looking at how classroom discussions about contentious issues impacted students with varying identities.

THE RESEARCH

Many factors (including familial perspectives, media, and formal education) influence students' views and perceptions of social issues. In the current study, undergraduate students were invited to participate in research exploring their experiences in classroom discussions.[1] Their self-perception and the perception of others, including peers and instructors, were considered. The study was designed to expand the limited extant research on how students respond to and engage in classroom discussions covering social and conflictual issues.

While the intention of this research was not to produce generalizable results across the population of all undergraduate students, I hoped that it would offer insights into the ways in which diverse groups of undergraduate students might readily subscribe to classroom discussion and interactive engagement. I sought responses to four questions:

1. How do students engage in classroom discussions about conflictual issues?
2. What are their perceptions of and feelings about participating in those discussions?
3. What characteristics of the discussion topics, course instructors, and students contribute to student engagement, perceptions, and feelings?
4. What kind of pedagogical approaches can be used to facilitate these discussions?

Methods
Sample

All students ($n = 632$) enrolled in an undergraduate program that focused on social issues at a university located in southern Ontario, Canada, were invited to participate in the study. A total of 152 students—a response rate of 24.1%—completed the data collection (88.4% of those who attempted the survey responded to all the questions). The response rate was slightly below the average response rate (24.8%) for online surveys reported by the Fluid Survey web platform but was still sufficient for obtaining valid results (Visser et al. 1996).

Of these students, 34.9% were in their first year, 21.7% were in their second year, 19.7% were in their third year, 15.1% were in their fourth year, and 8.6% were in their fifth year of studies or above. All the students were enrolled in an undergraduate program; most of them were pursuing careers in social work and associated human services fields, such as education, psychology, sociology, and general arts. Similar to most undergraduate programs focused on community-service related professions, 92.1%

reported identifying as female, 7.2% as male, and 0.7% as other. The university was in a town that is predominantly white but attracts students nationally and internationally. Most of the participants did not identify as persons of colour (73.7%) and most were not the first in their family to attend university (67.1%).

Instrument

The data for this study were collected via a questionnaire that asked the students about their choices in classroom discussions, their sense of preparation and confidence for these discussions, and their apparent understanding of what it meant to address conflict in the classroom in relation to their perceptions of political and social diversity. The survey included 32 multiple-choice, 5-point Likert-scale questions; and seven open-ended follow-up questions, including:

- "To what extent should discussions involving students' personal perspectives on social and political issues happen in the classroom?"
- "How confident do you feel when participating in classroom discussions?" and
- "How often does your identity, such as your culture, race, or gender influence how you contribute to classroom discussions?"

The open-ended questions invited students to describe and expand on their multiple choice responses. The students were also asked to provide some background information related to the study research questions (year of study, racial identity, sex, and first-generation university student status).

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the university research ethics board, all the students were invited to participate in the study. An email invitation was sent to all students electronically through a student Listserv administered by the department's administrative staff. Once students clicked on the link, they landed on the survey information page and the electronic consent form. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The students could leave the survey page at any time.

Data analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed separately to address the study research questions and then were combined to further the analysis of the study results. This mixed-methods process contributed to a deeper exploration of the research problem (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

Select-choice survey questions were analyzed descriptively, using frequency tables and bar graphs; they were also analyzed inferentially, using chi-square tests of independence.

The qualitative survey data from open-ended questions were coded to identify categories, codes, themes, and outlier data. Categories of data were distilled into codes, and the codes were defined. The purpose of the coding was to identify thematic patterns and relationships amongst participants' responses.

Results

Students' identities influenced how they participated in contentious classroom discussions
Students described the importance of being able to relate to the topics being discussed. However, many also expressed the need to feel safe when topics were controversial. At times, students'

various identities caused inner conflict between how they felt they should respond and what they actually wanted to say. For instance, a student who identified as transgender[2] felt that they would have to present a liberal point of view because of their marginalized identity. This led them to constrain their voice in classroom discussions:

> I am a transgender man, and sometimes I feel I am expected to have a "super" liberal belief system. While many of my opinions are liberal, I quite often disagree with what some liberal-minded people have to say. I fear being removed from a social group simply for disagreeing. (Male white student)

Many students agreed that identities and positionalities could increase the potential for conflict; some saw value in this discomfort for building empathy and exposing themselves to differing points of view:

> It can be scary to state my opinions on topics that run so deep to my core and are tied into my identity, knowing that others may disagree and reject these opinions because of their experience and views that are so closely tied to THEIR identity. Discussions could easily get out of hand because everything is hyperpersonal, so a disagreement can be escalated to feel like a personal attack. That being said, I believe this kind of dialogue is really important to have (when done respectfully) because it teaches us about other people, broadens our views, and gives us an empathetic perspective for other people. We are all different, and that's a good thing. (Male white student)

Considering this contention, the students were asked whether various political and social issues, about race, gender, religion, and immigration, should be discussed and whether students' personal perspectives regarding these issues should be shared in university classrooms. The distribution of responses for both questions are presented in Figure 1. As shown in this figure, most of the students felt positive about the appropriateness of discussing these issues and presenting students' perspectives on those issues.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses for appropriateness of classroom discussion
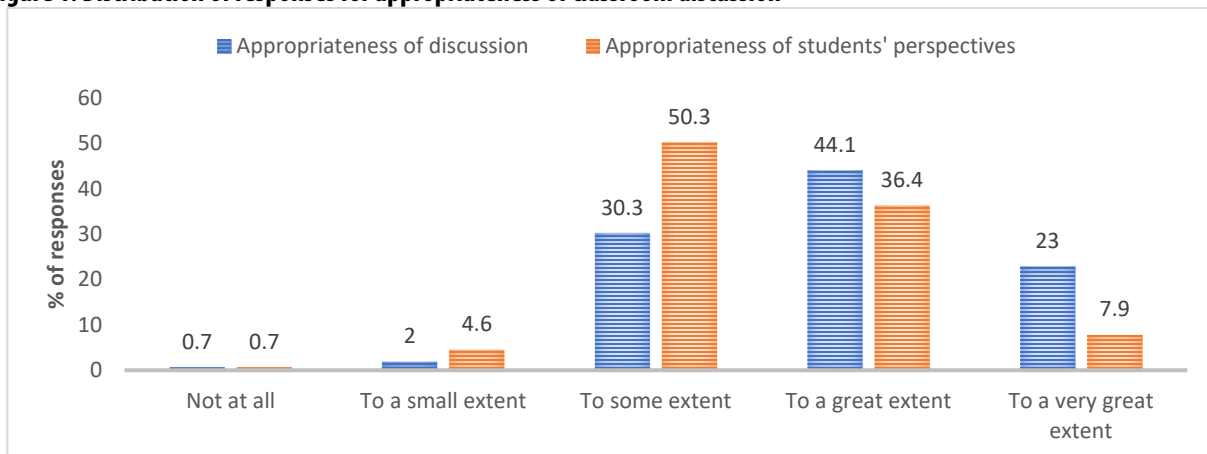
In their open-ended responses, most students further elaborated on what they felt were critical discussions for forming their personal identity and their personal growth. While uncomfortable, most still felt it was appropriate to demonstrate their understanding of the transformative power of learning through discomfort. One student who identified as cisgender reiterated how classroom discussions about contentious issues contributed to further understanding her political ideologies and knowledge acquisition:

I really found where I stand regarding politics. I never noticed how much I value equality. I also did not realize how much I value democracy and having the right to freedom of speech. We spoke about some controversial things in class such as euthanasia, abortions, [and] LGBTQ rights, and all these topics made me realize how I place myself in this world which to me is a huge realization considering I am now 23 and just seeing this. (Female white student)

Many students felt liberated through discussion of contentious topics. However, some still felt the need to remain silent about their liberal views. For example, the fear of being politically incorrect constrained one student: "Although my views are pretty liberal, I don't want to offend anybody who may have different views than I do" (Female white student).

This sentiment extended to students of colour, some of whom had similar fears. They were more consciously aware how what they shared could be attributed to their identity as persons of colour. One student described her anxiety around having to perform this kind of correctness:

I usually do not share stories and participate in class, because public speaking and sharing things when I'm not sure if [they are] correct, or do not know how people will react, gives me huge anxiety. I am super chatty outside of the classroom but inside when everyone is sharing so much it intimidates me and makes me nervous, so I just listen instead. (Female student of colour)

The distribution of students' responses about their participation in classroom discussions and their level of enjoyment during such discussions are presented in Figure 2. The figure shows that the majority of students reported minor participation in and minor enjoyment of the classroom discussions. There was a moderately strong correlation between the level of participation in and the level of enjoyment of classroom discussions (Kendall's *tau-b* = .49, *p* < .001), indicating that students who engaged more in classroom discussions also enjoyed them to a higher degree.

Figure 2. Distribution of responses for students' engagement and enjoyment of classroom discussions
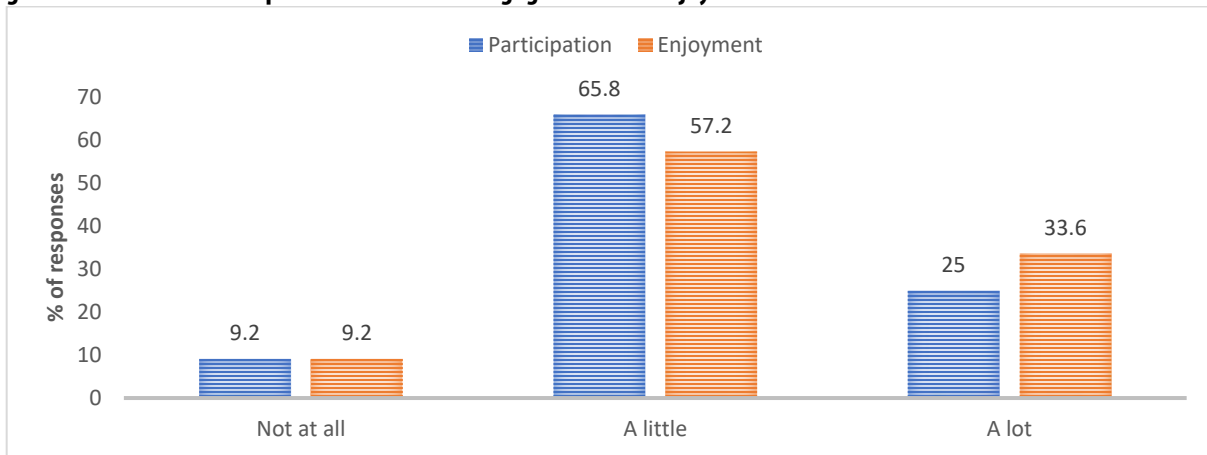

Most students (57.6%) said they sometimes made important contributions to classroom discussions, and some students (31.2%) said they always or often contributed to these discussions.

Most students who enjoyed actively participating in the classroom discussions said they enjoyed sharing their personal experiences during the discussions. Those who enjoyed the discussions less felt apprehensive about participating and did not participate as much. They said they were concerned about what their peers would think of them, and this—as shown in Figure 2—led many to feel anxious during classroom discussions. One white female student said, "I don't want to feel stupid," and explained that, like others, she chose to remain silent because of this fear of appearing intellectually incompetent.

Overall, students still preferred classroom discussion as a method for learning and felt at least somewhat confident participating in discussions. They valued the discussions because they allowed them to take a more active role in the course content and encouraged them to understand their peers' perspectives.

The survey asked students several questions about factors that contributed to their engagement when difficult or contentious issues were discussed. The factors were classroom environment (safety), identity of the course instructors (ethnic/cultural and gender/sexual), and student academic characteristics (preparedness and confidence). The distribution of responses for each factor are displayed in Figure 3. For example, the majority of students felt safe participating in classroom discussions about difficult or contentious issues. They did not see the ethnic or cultural and gender or sexual identity of the course instructors as a factor that impacted their participation in these discussions. However, most of the students responded that their own identity, level of confidence, and preparedness affected their engagement in classroom discussions, at least to some extent.

Figure 3. Factors contributing to level of participation in classroom discussions
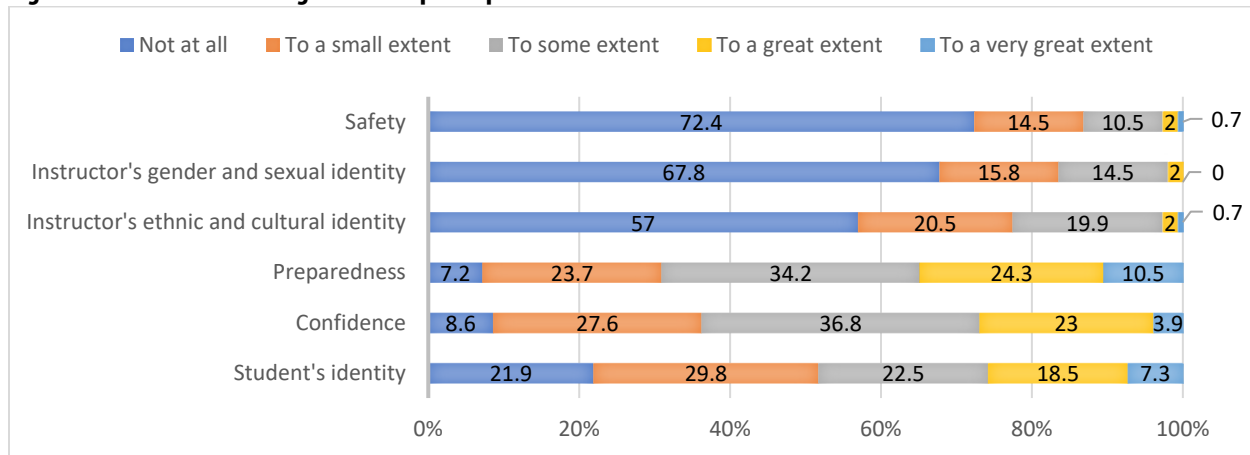
Since many students indicated that their identity influenced their participation in the classroom discussion to a great or very great extent, further analyses were conducted to find whether the students' sex, identity as a person of colour, and first-generation student status were related to their survey responses. A series of Mann-Whitney tests was conducted to explore these relationships. None of the tests were significant, indicating that students' responses were not related directly to these identities. However, the insights provided by individual students indicated some level of discomfort in their classes that could be related to their identity. Many students felt that their gender impacted how people listened. For instance, one female student felt that she would be dismissed by her male peers, so she often silenced herself out of the fear that they would not listen to her:

> In some classes I have felt that as a woman I would be argued with more or dismissed by male classmates. As stated, as a female sometimes it affects the way I engage just because I feel that I won't be listened to in the same way by my male peers. (Female white student)

Other students felt that their instructors' gender or sexual identities influenced how they participated. One student felt more compelled to present an informed argument for male instructors; he expressed indifference as to how female instructors felt about his knowledge capacity: "With male teachers I often feel more motivated to sound very informed, whereas with my female teachers, I am not as worried about potentially not fully knowing something" (Male white student).

Another student felt more at ease with a female instructor because she felt she was received with more compassion: "I usually feel that when the instructor is female, she will be more compassionate and responsive to female opinions" (White female student).

These qualitative responses illustrate how gendered expectations influenced how students experienced and engaged in classroom discussions. Female voices were often constrained due to dominant male norms (Tannen 2002). Entrenched gender stereotypes led students—male and female—to see female instructors as less authoritative and less influential in leading conversations (Combs et al. 2022; Kostovicova and Paskhalis 2021). These discriminatory, gendered perceptions impacted students' participation.

In their responses to the quantitative survey, students indicated that the identities of students, the instructors, and themselves were neutral in classroom discussions. However, their qualitative responses demonstrated that they were still keenly aware of how their identities and personal histories informed their participation. Further analysis showed how the sex, gender, and cultural identities of their peers and their instructors influenced their level of confidence and comfort in participating. Many students with privileged identities appeared to justify a white liberal agenda, arguing that their participation was at the behest of those with marginalized identities. Some of those who identified as being in a marginalized group felt constrained by the expectations of having to represent their entire cultural group. The situation could be further amplified where there were few students of their cultural group in the class:

> I'm always the one that professors look to for cultural insights and it can be kind of uncomfortable. It's not my job to always be a "minority" because I'm a student just like everyone else at the end of the day. (Female student of colour)

During in-person classes, discussions about identity-based issues could be further complicated by how people's body language communicates their reactions. For instance, some students described how instructors might look directly at them or nod at them, pressuring them to speak about a particular cultural phenomenon. In spaces that are unsafe for students of colour, this kind of gesturing can be harmful:

> I think that it's difficult to share things regarding my cultural background because I'm always one of few (or the only) members of my class who is a part of a minority. For this reason, I feel like it's really hard to share those experiences and reach that level of understanding with others. (Male student of colour)

Some white students said that their ability to participate was easier because they assumed that most people would agree with them. Some of these white students were aware that it was less likely that what they said would be attributed to their racial identity, unlike what they thought would be the case for their peers of colour. Overall, despite identity-based tensions, most students reported positive experiences, and discussions allowed them to share their opinions with their peers and instructors. Nevertheless, others reported feelings of apprehension about discussions, articulating a fear of being judged or misunderstood.

Considering power and privilege when sharing personal experiences in class discussions
Most of the students (47.4% "somewhat" and 10.5% "extremely") felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences as part of classroom discussions. However, about a quarter of the student respondents felt uncomfortable about sharing personal experiences (5.3% "extremely" and 21.1% "somewhat"). The rest of the students reported neutral feelings. Their perceived sense of neutrality was complicated by qualitative responses indicating how their experiences were clearly influenced by their cultural, ethnic, gender, and religious identities. A Black, Muslim female student said:

> It is hard being the only Black person in some classes, or the only Muslim person. I sometimes feel like I have to watch my words because some people think I speak for all Muslims or all Blacks (which isn't true). I think every Muslim agrees that when topics like ISIS and 911 come up, we all feel dread. I feel like in class discussion I am forced to explain myself and defend my right to be Muslim. It takes more work than the average person unfortunately, and maybe that is why many minorities feel like they'd rather not participate. (Female student of colour)

While many students appeared to feel comfortable, others felt that their identities complicated how they would participate. Students of colour or those who visibly showed their religious affiliation (e.g., by wearing a hijab) experienced a different kind of marginalization: "Being the only ethnic minority in some of my classes does not make me want to participate in class sometimes, even if I know that participation will count towards my grade" (Female student of colour). Still others, those who held dominant identities, might have held dissenting views but chose to conceal their positionality:

> I grew up in a Catholic and socially conservative family and would still identify as a Catholic and a social conservative today. This is a very unpopular perspective to share in a university classroom and I have encountered censorship of my views, as well as ostracization from my peers. (Male white student)

This socially conservative white male student felt unheard and silenced by what he experienced as the dominant liberal rhetoric in the university classroom; however, he was able to make the choice about whether to participate.

Students' identities impacted how they perceived others would respond or not respond to their views during a classroom discussion. Some white students were aware of the power they held in choosing whether or not to participate. They could also choose whether or not to present their views about being an ally to marginalized groups, or in opposition to inclusion and equity. Students from dominant white backgrounds, as well as marginalized students, each carried their own perceptions and challenges around how their identity impacted their participation and engagement. One white female student reflected on the complexity of this dynamic, saying that, recognizing her privilege of being white, she needed to be mindful of how to balance that power during classroom discussions: "Because I am a white woman, I think it is important for me to not always be the first or only one to share" (Female white student).

Another student shared a similar sentiment when approaching topics about difference and diversity: "As a white cisgender middle-class woman, I know I have a lot of privilege and I try to approach conversations about culture, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and other topics with an open and quiet mind" (Female white student).

When given the opportunity to share their personal experiences connected to their cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, a small number of the students (7.2%) reported not being engaged at all. However, most of the students (49.3% "slightly engaged," 33.6% "very engaged," and 9.7% "completely engaged") were engaged to some extent. The students' personal identities clearly influenced the degree of their engagement in the classroom. Marginalized and white students' experiences varied; also, people from religious and ethnic minorities felt that their identity impacted whether they

participated and if they did, how their perspective would be understood. Some white students indicated a preference to listen rather than speak, particularly when the content involved racially charged issues.

Resources and supports influencing participation

Students were asked several questions about the extent to which they shared perspectives or heard different perspectives from their peers and course instructors on social and political issues. (See Figure 4 for the distribution of responses to these questions.) As can be seen in Figure 4, most students responded that sharing perspectives divergent from their peers and instructors was helpful for them. They experienced disagreements with each other's perspectives only infrequently. Most of them did not witness their peers expressing racist, xenophobic, homophobic, or misogynist views. However, most respondents indicated that their peers shared conflictual perspectives at least to some extent.

Figure 4. Distribution of responses for agreement/disagreement during the classroom discussions
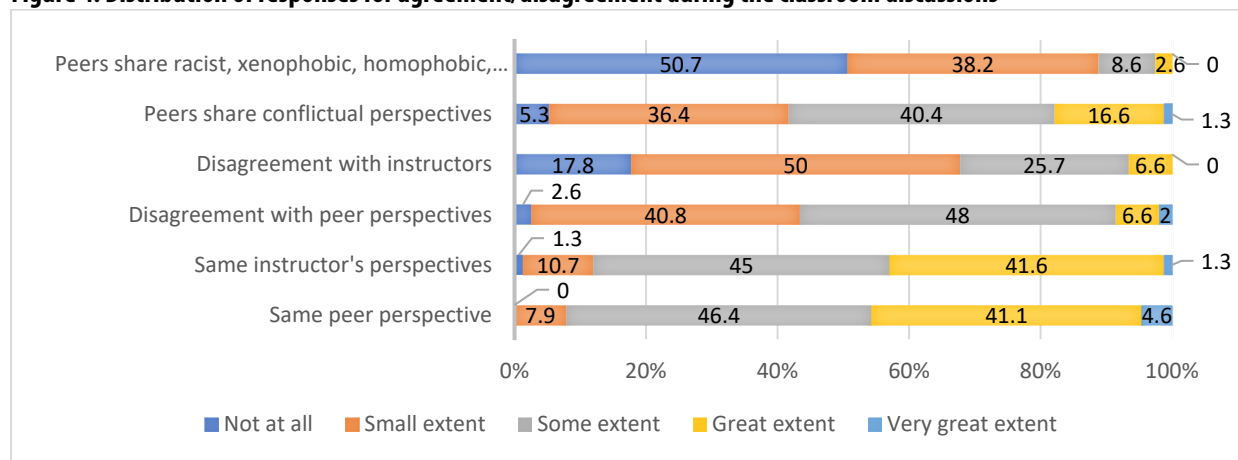
Students—both white and students of colour—said that there was value in sharing their personal experiences, particularly when it exposed them to perspectives they had not thought about before, such as when a student of colour shared their experiences of being racially profiled or discriminated against. However, some students of colour said that they sometimes felt a sense of remorse; they feared they had disclosed too much and would be treated differently by their peers. One female student of colour reflected on her experience of sharing personal experiences: "Sometimes sharing parts of your story can be difficult. You don't know how your classmates will perceive you. Nonetheless there's power in sharing it anyway, and walking in your experiences" (Female student of colour).

Another female student of colour said she felt confident expressing her opinions in all her classes. However, she said she felt more comfortable fully expressing herself when the instructors reflected her own ethnic backgrounds:

Usually, I am able to speak about my opinions whether the instructor is of the same ethnic background as me or not. But I am definitely more involved in discussion when I know the instructor shares a background with me. I feel like this would allow them to understand my point of view better. (Female student of colour)

In many instances, students' sense of safety and comfort to share their perspectives was contingent on both their relational and cultural connection to their instructor.

Students were asked what types of resources or support would enable them to participate actively in classroom discussions about political or social issues. These options included small-group discussions, interactive activities, knowing the instructor's position, writing responses ahead of time, having their perspective affirmed by instructor, and knowing that a peer agreed with them. As can be seen from Figure 5, most of the students reported that small-group discussions would be beneficial. About a third of respondents indicated that other resources would enable them to participate actively in classroom discussions.

Figure 5. Resources and supports for participation in classroom discussions
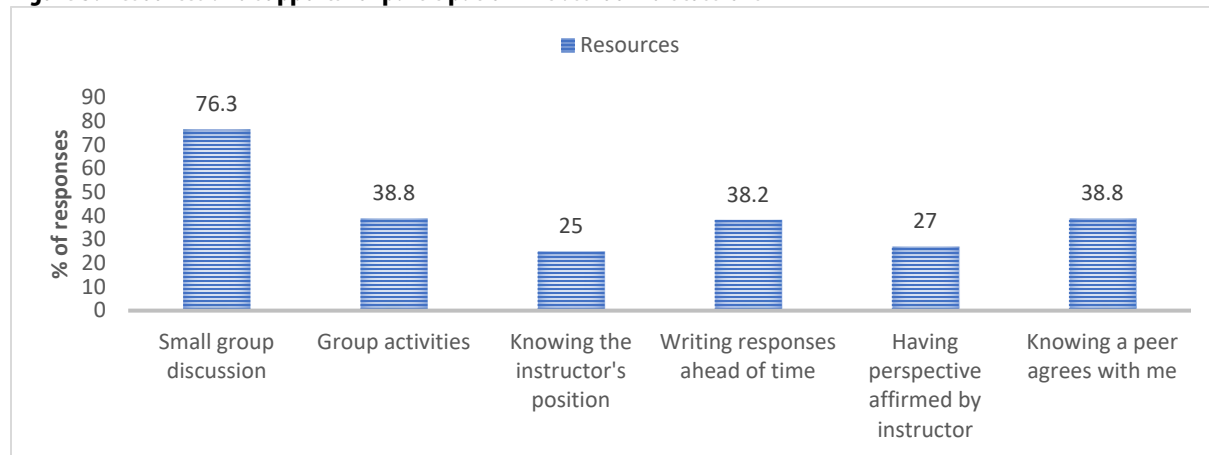
The norms and structures for how students engaged and disengaged allowed spaces for disagreement. The power of disagreement appeared to enhance many discussions for at least some students.

DISCUSSION

As students described their experiences of learning from a multiplicity of perspectives in classroom discussions, they also demonstrated how moments of contention developed their sense of empathy and understanding. By considering diverse cultural knowledges through multiple lenses, classroom discussions stimulated enhanced perspectives on social and political conflicts and issues (Spry 2022). In this way, students saw the transformative power of exploring conflict through multiple and varying lenses. The intention was not to break or shatter others' perspectives; instead, classroom discussions allowed students to sharpen and broaden their own vision.

Learning in an inclusive environment can better equip students to be civically engaged and to effectively contribute to their workplaces once they graduate. These moments in the classroom can prepare them to communicate across differences and deepen awareness of how power and privilege intersect with cultural diversities, such as ethnicity, race, religion, and gender (Tatum et al. 2013). Furthermore, in this study, students' identities not only influenced their overall participation in classroom discussions; they also impacted how the students understood the importance of discussing contentious issues. While some instructors might not choose to disclose their own perspectives, students felt that knowing instructors' identities and positions helped them solidify their own perspectives. Even though most students appeared to agree that contentious political and social issues should be discussed

in university classrooms, their perspectives and willingness to share was complicated by their places on the political spectrum.

Some students may intentionally choose to self-silence to protect themselves from the emotional and psychological toll of sharing (Dods 2015; Ellsworth 1989). Marginalized students, such as those who are disabled, may lack collective agency to advocate for themselves (Nieminen 2022). Inadequate preparation (of the instructor and/or student groups) could allow such particular viewpoints to reinforce the status quo and silence some students who do not share those perspectives (Kester et al. 2022). Thus, creating safe spaces for contentious, yet constructive, conversations is critical (Wansink et al. 2023). Developing these social norms with students and having continuous check-in points throughout the course can contribute to deeper and safer discussions.

Most students appeared to sit on the fence when it came to how they wanted instructors to respond to students who expressed racist, xenophobic, homophobic, or misogynist views in the classroom. They felt that if the person's views made others uncomfortable, the instructor should either address the student privately or in a class discussion. They distinguished between whether such a student was knowingly discriminatory or was ignorant and insensitive. Some felt that instructors should move on and not intervene, arguing that a student's freedom of speech should be respected. Still, most students pointed out that racist comments were wrong and should be addressed immediately as teachable moments on addressing discriminatory views.

Overall, the students felt that preparedness (having time to reflect on the question and share with a peer) and confidence (feeling safe and assured) were the most significant factors contributing to their engagement and participation in classroom discussions. Furthermore, students also identified small groups as the most preferred method for ensuring their participation. More often student-centered discourse patterns (Bakhtin 2010), such as peer-to-peer dialogue, encouraged students to become more active in their learning process (Freire 1994).

Most students indicated that they wanted to participate and be engaged. Students of colour identified the need to feel safe and included in order to participate and did not want to be the voice that represented all people of colour, or for instance, all people who are Muslim. Some white students strengthened their awareness of their privilege during classroom discussions, while others felt silenced because of their conservative views within what they believed were liberal classrooms. The results of this study illustrate the need for universities to better prepare higher education instructors with tools to prepare and stimulate students to not only deliver content, but to critically engage with their peers in dialogue that disrupts deficit perspectives about marginalized groups (Hall 2022; Strom and Martin 2022).

LIMITATIONS

A key benefit of studying undergraduate students in courses focused on contentious social and political issues was to better understand how they experienced classroom discussions, since many of their courses used discussions as a pedagogical method. The students who participated in the survey likely had opinions and perspectives on the nature of classroom discussion. The respondents might also have been generally more engaged in the academic process and thus more inclined to participate in research focused on their classroom engagement. As a result, the findings of this study are not generalizable. Rather, they are meant to provide possible insights into the diverse experiences of

postsecondary students based on their identities and positionalities, and to comment on the benefits and complexities of classroom discussions.

This research relied on identity categories to distinguish the different ways in which students participated. The students' identity intersections, while influential and informative, were not always apparent in the descriptions of their experiences, and some focused more on one aspect of their identity than on the others.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

University classrooms are no longer stages for top-down authoritarian lectures. Today, the most important reason for attending in-person classes is the opportunity for relation and communal connections between students, and between students and faculty. Rich in-person classroom experiences are shaped by dialogic exchanges, critical reflection, and students' participation in the course content and material. In the ideal classroom, people from various backgrounds and positionalities are all free to participate in democratic discourse.

As educators strive to create more inclusive classrooms, they need to understand how students perceive and experience discussions about conflict and social issues. This kind of classroom learning is critical for helping students work through conflict in constructive ways, in both their personal and professional lives (Folger, Poole, and Stutman 2021). To help students prepare for such culturally sensitive discussions, educators may provide appropriate training in inclusive, student-centered dialogic practices (Boyd and Markarian 2011). Yet developing confidence and competence for engaging in complex communications requires more than coursework. It needs horizontal practice and support built around experiences of dissent and dialogue among peers (Bickmore and Parker 2014; Parker-Shandal 2022).

Facilitating controversial issues is a skill that many educators, particularly university instructors, have not been taught (Pace 2019). Some faculty have learned this skill through practice, but their experiences vary. In all cases, instructors are expected to be experts in handling contentious conversations (Kishimoto 2018). Yet, many respond in prescriptive and normative ways, avoiding conflict and possibilities for deepening discussions.

The very conversations that educators are tempted to ignore or avoid can be the most powerful, if facilitated effectively (Ellsworth 1989). Discussions about contentious social issues carry the potential for interrupting destructive conflict and instability—and for restoring balance and harmony, and challenging injustice (Davies 2004). But issues concerning systemic racism in policing, religious perspectives on whether life begins at conception, or discriminatory immigration policies can become fraught with conflict if a minority or dominant student overtly expresses ideas that appear different from those of their peers. Students in marginalized positions (such as students of colour or religious minorities) have a higher probability of disengaging from the classroom and the campus community. Diverse campus communities may invite dialogue about difference, yet campuses with dominant white majority groups may thwart opportunities for such dialogue, thus inciting further prejudice (Cuellar 2022). This is a matter of concern currently, since a greater number of racially motivated hate crimes occur on campuses that are predominantly white (Van Dyke and Tester 2014).

Facilitating productive discussions to resolve questions and issues can help students learn to practise tolerance and inclusion and to become participatory citizens. Still, to make these pedagogies useful and relevant for diverse postsecondary students, we must first understand how students

experience these processes and how to better support students' inclusion in classroom discussions about contentious issues. Students' identities and experiences contribute to creating unique spaces for such knowledge engagement. They also play a role in whether students feel free to participate in classroom discussions, and this in turn shapes their level of confidence (Spencer 2015). High-quality teaching in higher education involves creating safe learning spaces where all students can posit differing perspectives and ideas while also making mistakes and experimenting with their positions on issues (Wood and Su 2017). University classrooms need to be spaces where classroom participation in exercises and activities opens up space for inclusive classroom discussions. Such discussions, connected to course content and focused on topics and issues that are connected to students' lives, are pivotal for sustaining classroom attendance and capitalizing on the rich in-person classroom experience that university classes have the potential to offer.

Overall, a key factor in determining the success of university classroom discussions is the preparation undertaken by instructors, who need to provide discussion-rich environments. While this study focused on in-person classroom experiences, discussions that take place online, in-person, or in blended forums all provide optimal opportunities for collaborative learning and knowledge construction (Islam, Sarker, and Islam 2022). Instructors must apply inclusive pedagogical processes that encourage diverse student participation and engagement. Many students entering postsecondary institutions are bound to encounter differences in new ways. It is my hope that as students become more comfortable and confident in voicing their divergent perspectives (in ways that are respectful and expressed within safe classroom communities), they will be better prepared to respond to each other in ways that promote empathy and inclusion.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Crystena Parker-Shandal is an associate professor in social development studies at Renison University College at the University of Waterloo, Canada. She holds a PhD in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development and a Master's of Teaching from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She is an Ontario Certified Teacher. www.drparkershandal.com

NOTES

1. Research was approved through the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB).
2. This survey asked students to identify how they defined their sex—specifically, the biological sex that they were assigned at birth. It did not ask students to identify their gender identity. Where students shared this information (e.g., sharing their transgender or cisgender identity), it has been included in the analysis.

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