Intersectional Genderpedagogy

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Intersectionality has become a key concept in gender research. When gender researchers work intersectionally, it means that they view gender, gender relations and gender identities in interplay with other sociocultural categorizations, norm-creating discourse and power relations such as ethnicity, ‘race’, class, nationality, sexuality, functionality, age, etc.

In order to understand the concept of intersectionality, many gender researchers believe that it is important to view the categorizations and the interplay between these as a *doing*, i.e. as something where meanings are created in intra-human communication and *not* as something with a fixed, eternally valid meaning. Rather than understanding, for example, gender, ethnicity and the intersections between them as something we ‘have’ or ‘are’, many gender researchers understand the categorizations as something we do.

In this chapter, I want to examine what an intersectional understanding of gender can mean for gender pedagogy and for handling learning processes in the classroom. I begin by presenting a working definition of intersectional gender. Thereafter, I discuss the meaning of intersectional gender pedagogy. I conclude with a suggestion of how groups may work with intersectional gender in the classroom.

The aim of an intersectional gender pedagogy is to increase awareness of power relations in interplay; of excluding norms and differences in the classroom. An intersectional gender pedagogy should inspire the development of tools aimed at counteracting processes that create exclusion; tools that treat differences constructively. How can we break, for example, Caucasian and Swedish norms; norms of middle class ideals, heteronormativity and norms of bodily ability? How can we create an “including” rather than “excluding” classroom?

**What is intersectional gender?**

Many gender researchers are currently in agreement that gender should be understood intersectionally. Gender works in connection with many other categorizations. The term “intersectionality” was coined by the American gender researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995). In Sweden, it has been discussed since the beginning of the 2000s (see for example Lykke 2003, 2009; Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Reyes & Martinsson 2005). Intersectionality is about interplay, which means that the specific manner in which an individual “does” gender cannot be separated from the manner in which they “do” ethnicity, class or sexuality, for example. Our identity is not divided into different compartments: gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.

At the same time, many gender researchers agree that the various forms of difference constructions with regard to gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc. should be understood as results of unequal societal dynamics. Inequalities based on gender are founded in different dynamics compared to inequalities based on class, ethnicity or sexuality, for example. The fact that various difference-constructing dynamics and norms are in interplay does not mean that they can simply be reduced to one and the same thing. For example, unequal class relations are not the same thing as
unequal gender relations. Therefore, when gender researchers work with the inter-
sectional understanding of gender, it means that they look at:

- the complex and mutually changing interplay between various difference-
  constructing dynamics and norms concerning categorizations such as gender,
  ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.
- and the complex and mutually changing interplay between the manners in
  which the individual subject does gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.

**The concept of ‘intersectionality’**
The term “intersectionality” comes from the American English word ‘intersection’,
which denotes a type of road junction. The image of a road junction requires that
we pay attention to the interplay that is created when a ‘gender road’ meets, for
example, an ‘ethnicity road’. However, some gender researchers have problematized
the road junction metaphor, because if we consider the consequences of the metap-
hor, the roads separate further on. The road junction can therefore not depict an
interplay which goes on all the time.

In the textbook *Genderforskning* [Gender research] (Lykke 2009), I suggested that
gender research may use the term “intersectionality” analytically, but that we, rather
than imagining a road junction, could use the term ‘intra-action’ – a term coined by
gender researcher Karen Barads (2007) – as a framework for understanding inter-
sectionality. Intra-action deals with the manner in which phenomena without clear
boundaries penetrate and change each other. Imagine, for example, what happens
when paints are mixed to create a new colour. Mixing paints makes it impossible to
recover the ‘clean’ form of the base colour or the mixed-in pigments. In other words,
an intra-active understanding of intersectional gender means that we understand the
manners in which individuals make gender as a mix of the ways in which they make
ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc., and vice versa.

**Intersectional gender pedagogy**
Gender pedagogy examines meanings of gender in the classroom. *Intersectional*
gender pedagogy focuses on differences, power and inequality, which we must ex-
pect to find in the classroom based on an intersectional understanding of gender.
From an intersectional gender perspective, the classroom is populated by individu-
als with a great number of various mixes: individuals doing their (mixes of) gender,
ethnicity, ‘race’, class, nationality, sexuality, functionality, age, etc. in many diffe-
rent ways. An intersectional gender pedagogy asks questions regarding the conse-
quences these differences have for the learning process in the classroom. It reflects
on how knowledge of intersectionality and intersectional gender may be used in or-
der to improve communication in the classroom. Rather than viewing the students
in the classroom as a homogeneous group, an intersectional pedagogy focuses on
critically making differences visible and counteracting norms that create inequality
and exclusion.

Intersectional gender pedagogy may be conducted in many ways. For example,
based on Black feminism, the American gender researcher bell hooks examined how
learning from an intersectional perspective may be critically liberating and may
give rise to difference-constructing processes that challenge hegemonic norms and
power relations (hooks 1994, 2003). A related tool used in gender pedagogy, which
I have personally used in university classrooms, is the creation of “transversal dia-
logues”.

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Transversal dialogues — a tool for intersectional gender pedagogy

Transversality is about crossing boundaries and overcoming differences. Transversal dialogue is the name of a tool created to cross boundaries between members of groups who are in intersectionally different positions. The tool was developed around 1990 by Italian feminist groups working with peace processes together with women from various national groups in conflict (e.g. Israeli and Palestinian women). The tool has later been discussed by several gender researchers, for example by two gender researchers based in Great Britain: Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) and Cynthia Cockburn (1998). They described it as a tool that political groups can use with the intention of creating democratic alliances across intersectional differences and conflicts, i.e. alliances based on acknowledging both what unites and what separates members of a group. I suggest that transversal dialogues may also be used as inspiration for working constructively with intersectionality in the classroom.

The transversal dialogues tool, as it has been defined in relation to political groups, is built on two elements: anchoring and positional change. Rather than allowing intersectional differences to lead to conflict, the goal of transversal dialogue is that all group members work towards moving between different positions. First, everyone must reflect on their intersectional anchoring. What role does their positioning play with regard to gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, class, nationality, sexuality, functionality, age, etc.? But in addition to this, they also try to put themselves in another’s place, i.e. try to see what it is like to identify with the intersectional anchoring of others and reflect on which power relations, hegemonies, norms, inequalities and exclusions may become visible as a result of the positional change. What are gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, class, nationality, sexuality, functionality, age, etc. like based on a positioning other than your own? What does the power and norm landscape look like from another position?

The intention is that the group members will be able to act collectively based on a clear understanding both of that which unites them and that which separates them. The purpose is to find a way to conduct democratic collaboration that does not suppress differences in order to create a false homogeneous identity in the group, and which, at the same time, ensures that the group is not locked into the many individual differences that make cooperation on joint projects and targets impossible.

An exercise in transversal dialogue and intersectional learning processes

I would like to describe an exercise which I have used in university classrooms, but which may also be used in other contexts. The exercise is intended to inspire interested readers and students to work with creating their own exercises in transversal dialogue. It is important to note that the exercise should be understood as a framework: it may be conducted in many different ways. When applying this to concrete practice, the person/s in charge of teaching should consider in advance how the exercise relates to the goals of the specific teaching context; its contents and form.

The exercise is divided into two steps:

1. Anchoring – self-reflection
All group members are asked to reflect on what gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, class, nationality, sexuality, functionality, age, etc. mean for their identity and position inside and outside the classroom. The reflection should be written down and the group members should be encouraged to use examples and mental images. For example, describe a situation you have experienced in which gender played an important role. Consider also if there were other categorizations that played a role in the situation.
2. Positional change.
Thereafter, the group members are asked to form pairs (person A and B) and to read their texts aloud to each other. First, person A reads their text to person B. Person B’s task is to listen attentively and to ask interesting, detailed questions with the intention of reaching a deeper empathetic understanding of what the categories brought up by person A mean to person A. It is important that there is plenty of time for both parties to concentrate on person A’s text and that person B endeavours to try to identify with and understand person A’s premises. After person A has been in focus for a while, A and B switch roles. It is now person B’s text that is in focus. It is important to emphasize that persons A and B should not switch roles indiscriminately. Person B should not bring up their own experiences while listening to person A, but actually try to concentrate on person A – and vice versa.

The exercise may be conducted in large groups. For example, it is possible to let the group members switch and meet new partners until all members have met each other once. It is important to ensure that all group members are given the same amount of time in both roles, both giving and receiving comments. One group member, i.e. the teacher, should therefore work as a timekeeper and not participate in the exercise. However, it is also important that the timekeeper position themself. If the teacher is the timekeeper, they may carry out the exercise in advance; if possible, it could be carried out with a colleague, so that the teacher actually gets to try the positional change together with another person. The teacher could then introduce the exercise to the group members by using their own text on anchoring and positional change as an example.

Conclusion
Transversal dialogues constitute a suggestion of how to use intersectional differences as a basis for constructive learning processes. However, it should be emphasized that a prerequisite for the tool to be able to work is that it is used in a classroom context where the group has a collective ambition to establish a shared project. The shared project may be more or less binding and more or less long-term. But regardless of whether it is a large, joint degree project or a short-term group project, the tool may, in my experience, be used to create constructive group cooperation. It is also important to pay attention to the fact that conflicts based on intersectional differences may be so large that the group cannot agree on a shared project, either in the long-term or in the short-term. In situations of deep conflict in a group, the tool should perhaps be used for re-forming and adjusting the compositions of groups, rather than forcing excessively large compromises on shared project choices. Intersectional gender pedagogy is about observing and raising awareness of differences, power inequalities and excluding norms in the classroom – not about creating new norms through forced consensus.

References


