Using Dialogue to Interrupt Legacies of Exclusion, Incite Hope, Invite Change, and Increase Levels of Awareness at Predominantly White Institutions with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Rhetoric

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Using Dialogue to Interrupt Legacies of Exclusion, Incite Hope, Invite Change, and Increase Levels of Awareness at Predominantly White Institutions with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Rhetoric

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the School of Social Sciences
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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation questions how a predominantly white institution (PWI) could infuse dialogue to aid the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and invite institutional change. There has been an increased spotlight on racial tensions permeating predominantly white campuses with DEI initiatives; higher education scholars have identified several factors that prevent institutions from fostering inclusive spaces.

This research addresses three specific hurdles for PWIs implementing DEI initiatives: (1) social amnesia characterized by romanticized versions of history; (2) a discontinuity between professed values and the goals of DEI initiatives with policy, structure, and experience; and (3) low awareness of privilege and oppression coupled with a lack of dialogic skills to engage across difference. Analysis focused on how dialogue could potentially disrupt these roadblocks. Through the research tools of critical rhetorical ethnography, intersectionality, and critical whiteness, this dissertation examines the following pieces of inclusive excellence (IE) rhetoric at the University of Denver (DU): historical legacies, documents, and the researcher’s experiences and observations as a student, teacher, activist, and scholar.
Analysis showed dissonance within the rhetoric of IE and hope in a newly implemented dialogue initiative. This dissertation considers the usefulness of dialogue for inviting positive change at PWIs that implement DEI initiatives while also responding to a need for more research to understand how to teach students to dialogue. Further, results showed that an undergraduate course that gives students space to develop and build skills necessary to dialogue will increase IE efforts on campus, prepare students to navigate a conflict-ridden culture and workplace, and create opportunities for students to become change agents in the world. The researcher advocates that institutions begin teaching students the communicative skills necessary to dialogue about privilege and oppression in order to motivate and prepare change agents within our nation’s institutions and throughout the world, within a cultural moment shaped by polarization, confusion, and frustration.
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CHAPTER 1: RECLAIMING WHITENESS AMIDST CALLS FOR EQUITY

Introduction

In August 2017, the nation bore witness to one of the largest white nationalist rallies in our country in decades. The University of Virginia (UVA) had been in the process of addressing intimate links to racial inequity, which fueled debates in the UVA community (Stein, 2016). Efforts to make the campus a more inclusive space were met with efforts of white reclamation. Neo-Nazis and members of the Alt-Right, Ku Klux Klan, and other “White Nationalists” gathered at UVA to allegedly protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. A large group of mainly white men and a small percentage of white women descend upon the campus with blazing tiki torches (see Figure 1). Slurs such as “Jews will not replace us,” “White lives matter,” and “Fuck you faggots!” were heard. The next day, a car sped into a counter-protest crowd, killing one and injuring several.
My stomach was in knots, my hands were sweaty, and my heart was heavy. I took a deep breath and wondered to myself, “Just what will it take for people to acknowledge racism is still present in our country?” I wondered what it must have felt like to be a student at the University of Virginia. I was immediately sucked down a rabbit hole of videos that reported, critiqued, and supported the event. Anger, frustration, and sorrow bubbled up through my veins; I pulsed from head to toe.

I saw young, angry white faces lit up by fire, a fire that seemed to represent their fueling hate for anyone different from them.

I saw courageous warriors stand up against Nazi flags and hateful rhetoric.

I saw a car tear through a crowd and bodies fly through the air.

Then I got on Facebook looking for a sign of hope that these views weren’t representative of my white friends, colleagues, and family. Simultaneous feelings of encouragement, disappointment, anger, rage, and frustration filled my body. There

Figure 1. “Unite the Right,” University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia (Park, 2017)
were a handful of white people amongst my 750 friends whom showed solidarity with those affected during the event. There were even more who posted things like “BLM is just as bad,” “Slavery ended. Get over it,” or “This is just the liberal left agenda.” Most of my white friends on Facebook posted images of their kids going back to school, their dog, their dinner, their shopping spree, their work-out, their recipes...It was as if they were numb—completely aloof to what was happening. Their ignorance and privilege allowed them to continue with life as usual.

***

While many people want to claim that we are post-race, this event and the several events leading up to it expose the roots of white supremacy that still haunts our country and incites violence towards all people marked as “other.” We are not post-race; we are amidst a moment of division, confusion, and fear. White supremacy is ever pervasive—certainly not a thing left in the past. It knows no bounds. It is rooted in US soil, oozes up and pollutes the air, and infects all as it is absorbed in the sky and cycled back down through rain clouds. White supremacy specifically attacks those whose bodies do not conform to its standards. This protest at UVA is symbolic of different orientations to history that are racially shaped. The failure to understand the need to explore institutional links to oppression is often overlooked by white students, often because they believe that racism is a thing of the past. The tension and violence of the protesting reflects the hostile racial climate that permeates campuses, communities, and the nation.
Division, Dismissal, Denial

This current cultural moment is characterized by apathy or arduous debate and increasingly polarized discourses. The racial divide in the United States has been present since the nation’s inception, but it has morphed in manifestation. As a culture, we are in a moment of great social turmoil rooted in oppression, which is amplified by a lack of communicative skills to engage across different perspectives and raise levels of awareness. Many of the Facebook posts in the aftermath of UVA further identified patterns of white social amnesia, dismissal, denial, and apathy. This event exemplified the need for dialogue in our culture and on our campuses. The incident at UVA also illuminates some of the barriers to successfully implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at predominantly white institutions (PWIs); more specifically, a lack of skills to effectively, ethically, and appropriately communicate across different perspectives and experiences.

There has been an influx in cultural discourses about racism and DEI initiatives at PWIs. A recently released documentary turned television series project, entitled Dear White People explicitly names a common dissonance created between predominantly white and racial minority communities on campus. As a time post-Civil Rights Movement, there has been a rise of DEI practices at institutions of higher education—practices most commonly motivated by legal compliance, a desire to compete in the academic economy, and as a means to foster social justice (Ahmed, 2012; Berrey, 2011; Gates, 2014; Giroux, 2014; Stein, 2016). Further, this has often led to implementing policies to create compositional
diversity and heavily marketed inclusivity without actually addressing the structural problems that created the need for such policies to start with (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2015).

Following the 2003 Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, academic institutions have been called to “connect their educational quality and inclusion efforts more fundamentally and comprehensively than ever before” (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005, p. iii). This has also led to an increase in implementing DEI initiatives, and there is a need to explore ways that institutions can work towards cohesion in their DEI rhetoric. I define rhetoric as a collection of factors including, but not limited to, words, material, structures, history, and experiences that merge to shape overall engagement within a given site. In this dissertation, the site is IE rhetoric used at the University of Denver (DU), with specific attention paid to the following: historical legacies, statements, plans, campus climate, community engagement, and dialogue initiatives. This dissertation considers how dialogue and IE could come together to aid in implementing DEI initiatives and provide skills to students to navigate the polarized, political turmoil permeating our campus and culture. I question how the infusion of dialogue could enhance the cohesion of the IE rhetoric at PWIs. Now I will move to briefly outline the remaining chapters of this study.

Conclusion

This introduction served to identify the issues of division, apathy, hate, and violence towards bodied marked as “other.” Communication scholars have
knowledge that could provide our community with dialogic skills that could potentially increase awareness and engagement with DEI rhetoric. This study intended to explore IE rhetoric at DU while also considering how dialogue could be used to invite institutional change. More specifically, I consider three main hurdles that arise for PWIs that implement DEI initiatives.

In Chapter 2, I outline the three common barriers to implementing DEI initiatives at PWIs, which are: social amnesia, discontinuity within DEI rhetoric, and low levels of awareness. I review the literature on these specific topics within IE research and provide examples of how I witnessed their manifestation at DU. Finally, I explain how communication courses featuring dialogue could enhance the implementation of DEI initiatives by equipping the community with the necessary communicative skills to foster an inclusive climate. Then, I lay out the research questions.

In Chapter 3, I explain the methodological and theoretical tools used in this study. I explain the usefulness of critical rhetorical ethnography for this dissertation, which is combined with critical whiteness studies and intersectionality as theoretical lenses. These methods and lenses are especially beneficial given my experience within the community and engagement with IE. The critical rhetorical ethnographic analysis explores texts pertaining to IE and the structures, practices, experiences, and observations from my perspective as an IE activist, liaison, educator, and student on campus. This method enables an examination of multiple factors that shape IE rhetoric including, but not limited to: statements, plans,
campus climate, social amnesia, WIP, and low levels of awareness. Before moving to analysis, critical rhetorical ethnography calls for researchers to acknowledge their relationship to the research and their role in advocating for change; as such, I share my ongoing journey toward racial awareness and how it led me to see dialogue as a crucial area for communication scholars to engage, especially at a PWI implementing DEI initiatives.

In Chapter 4, I consider how dialogue could reconcile tensions within the rhetoric of IE at DU. This chapter provides a basis to consider the goals of IE rhetoric and how dialogue initiatives within the rhetoric of IE could invite positive institutional change. Research has shown a dissonance between what DEI initiatives say and what they actually do (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2016). Chapter 4 provides a foundation to consider how the rhetoric of IE manifests in order to further consider how to bring IE closer to reaching its proclaimed goals and values. The chapter also introduces the DU dialogue initiative, which is the focal site of analysis for Chapter 5.

Dialogue has been shown to increase levels of awareness of privilege and oppression; it has also shown to be effective at engaging in difficult conversations (Ahmed, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Reason & Evans, 2007; Sue, 2015). However, little work has been done to nail down the specifics of how professors should teach students to dialogue (Black, 2005; Boyd & Markarian, 2011; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Skidmore, 2006). In Chapter 5, I analyze my experiences teaching dialogue as part of an IE initiative at DU. This provides insight to consider how dialogue could work to invite institutional change, improve campus climate, and increase the
functionality of IE rhetoric. I share my experiences, observations, and research on teaching dialogue about privilege and oppression. Since the research is limited on concrete practices used to teach these skills, I attempt to provide a roadmap to the activities, practices, and assignments I used to help students increase dialogic skills while also illuminating how the course has the potential to bridge the gaps between the professed goals, values, structures, and practices within IE rhetoric at DU.

The final chapter enmeshes critiques from my experience, textual analysis, and current research to attempt to bridge the tension within IE rhetoric; it considers how equipping the community with dialogic skills could enhance the embodiment of IE on campus while inviting positive institutional and cultural change. The aim of this dissertation is to open a discussion in our field about how we might come together to consider how interpersonal, intercultural, and critical rhetoric communication scholars can join the research discussions of IE, find ways to teach students dialogic skills to better prepare them to work towards the professed goals of IE in campus communities, and provide the tools to navigate the cultural moment, one shaped by polarization and political turmoil. This dissertation considers how dialogue can combat several hurdles to implementing DEI initiatives on PWIs while also questioning how communication scholars can intercede to this polarized cultural moment to combat the dissonance. To better understand the context of the problem and how scholars can intervene, I now move to reviewing literature and outlining the research questions that guide this study.
CHAPTER 2: WHEN TENSIONS ARE HIGH AND SKILLS ARE LOW: AN EXAMINATION OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PRACTICES IN UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which IE manifests at PWIs and identify some roadblocks to creating inclusive campuses. I first review literature about three specific hurdles to implementing IE at PWIs and show how these hurdles have manifested in the DU campus community. The first hurdle discussed is a form of social amnesia that silences the violent reality of how institutions of higher education in the United States came to exist. The second issue is the often empty rhetoric of DEI policies, practices, and statements that does little to change a campus into an inclusive space and, instead, creates a false hope of security in a plan, statement, or policy. The final area explored is a lack of skills to engage with privilege and oppression across different perspectives, experiences, and orientations. I review the literature to increase understanding of the hurdles that arise between higher education institutions in the United States and DEI initiatives at PWIs while showing the usefulness of dialogue as an intervention. I come to the conclusion that communication scholars can intervene in IE research by considering
ways to increase communicative skills in order to create an inclusive campus climate. Finally, I explain my research questions.

**White Lies: The Historical Legacy of Higher Education in the United States**

The history of higher education in the United States is intimately bound with white supremacy; it is a history that has strategically been talked over, left out, and ignored by many institutions. White supremacy is a complex system used to create racial (dis)advantage; it functions through laws, ideologies, practices, and institutions to maintain positions of white dominance. Rather than illuminate political ties to white supremacy, HIStory is whitewashed and the power structures that governed its construction and maintenance are rarely named. Wilder (2013) stated:

> The founding, financing, and development of higher education in the colonies were thoroughly intertwined with the economic and social forces that transformed West and Central Africa through the slave trade and devastated indigenous nations in the Americas. The academy was a beneficiary and defender of these processes. (pp. 1-2)

Through historical research, Wilder (2013) revealed numerous records, receipts, journals, and other documentation that clearly links universities in the United States to several ideas, ideologies, policies, and practices that are rooted in white supremacy. While many believe the academy to be a place of intellectual growth and progress, the academy is also bound to a history of slavery, genocide, and unity of the church and state—as a tool of bondage (Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013). To move closer to equity and inclusion, as a nation we must be willing to take a long, hard
look in the mirror to disrupt our bleached perceptions, regardless of how uncomfortable and disturbing.

**Education in the Colonies**

The first five colleges—Harvard, William & Mary, Yale, Codrington, and New Jersey—were largely funded by the African slave trade and were used as tools of Christian expansionism to exert power and dominance over indigenous people (Wilder, 2013, p. 17). Puritan ministers boasted about their ability to spread the Gospel and save the “Indians” from disease and damnation through “converting” them, which often included assimilation into European beliefs, customs, and attire (p. 23). Schools were initially founded using funds from slavery and the British imperial desire to expand. As such, colonial universities were used to exert power over indigenous populations, relying on a perceived power granted to white men through Christianity (Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013).

Early US schools were motivated by a desire to teach Native Americans how to assimilate into white, Christian culture in order to save them from their “savage” ways. In order to get indigenous people into school, “Administrators encouraged the college officers to get as many Indian children as possible, from friendly or enemy nations, by invitation, purchase, or kidnapping” (Wilder, 2013, p. 44). Right away, a racial hierarchy manifested. One chaplain from Virginia claimed that indigenous people showed hope and an ability for intelligence; however, he believed that black people had no “divine light” and “were naturally meant for hard labor and physical
work” (Wilder, 2013, p. 43). This perceived ability of indigenous people was short-lived, but the oppressive view of African people continued.

Eventually, the relationship between the colonies and Britain began to sever, which shifted motivations significantly; the capital gains from slavery enabled colonists to fund universities without Britain. As Britain lost control over the colonies, the wealthy beneficiaries of slavery became the guardians of education and no longer focused their attention on Native American students (Wilder, 2013). The function of universities shifted from “civilizing savages” to uniting the colonies (Wilder, 2013, p. 156). A fear arose that wealthy, young white men may travel back to Europe for education; schools began orienting themselves to be attractive to the wealthy sons of colonists (p. 77). Enslaved people were used to fund, build, and serve wealthy students, faculty, and administrators on campuses—they were an intricate part of the school's financial system. To save money, many universities hired, borrowed, and leased people who were enslaved; indeed, they were given as part of endowments and were leased by trustees, chaplains, and administrators raise money for the school (Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013, p. 109).Slave-owning colonists shifted school agendas to justify territorial expansion, which “transformed the people of the new nation from revolutionaries to imperialists” (Wilder, 2013, p. 182).

As a desire for expansion increased, so did the expansive movements of genocide. Settler colonialism, as defined by Rowe and Tuck (2017), is:

The specific formation of colonialism in which people come to a land inhabited by (Indigenous) people and declare that land to be their new home.
Settler colonialism is about the pursuit of land, not just labor or resources. Settler colonialism is a persistent societal structure, not just an historical event or origin story for a nation-state. Settler colonialism has meant genocide of Indigenous peoples, the reconfiguring of Indigenous land into settler property. In the United States and other slave estates, it has also meant the theft of people from their homelands (in Africa) to become property of settlers to labor on stolen land. (p. 5)

Patel (2016) argued that settler colonialism attempts to validate genocide and the seizing of indigenous peoples and lands (p. 37). Colonists clung to their self-conceptions as moral Christians while brutally murdering indigenous people and seizing their lands.

The dissonance between the Christian ideals of universal humanity and slavery/genocide began to disrupt the “divine” self-image of wealthy white colonists. This led to an insistence on claiming divine superiority over Native Americans and Africans, which were miraged into universal “truth” (Wilder, 2013, p. 178). To legitimize claims of superiority, science was used to justify slavery and white superiority over native people (Patel, 2016; Stein, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Generally speaking, investments in science also helped legitimate schools, as science and medical programs were indicators of prestige. The merit of a school was measured by “its collection of human remains, a good catalogue of skulls, skeletons, and skins being a considerable advantage in a competitive academic market” (Wilder, 2013, p. 193). Scientific claims made by schools bolstered and attempted to legitimate egos—claims made through access, mutilation, and terror to “non-white bodies” as they “redefined the truth.” (Wilder, 2013, p. 182). Wilder (2013) stated “human tissue was the currency of medical science” (p. 203). Science was a vehicle
that helped attempts to reconcile the disconnect between violent actions of the colonists and their beliefs based on Christian identities.

Scholars scrambled to find any sort of evidence that proved they were superior to people of color in order to justify their behavior (Wilder, 2013, p. 190). The wealth of slavery funded the rise of scientific racism and, further, created competition amongst schools to identify some sort of evidence that people of color were naturally inferior; they encouraged the mutilation of black and brown corpses to reinforce their beliefs of primitivism (p. 209). Previously, it was believed that indigenous people could be assimilated; however, this was made through the link of “savagery” as “cultural flaw” and new scientific claims suggesting that the “flaw” was biological and indefinitely fixed (p. 249). The constructed argument that people of color were inherently inferior eased the consciousness of wealthy, white, slave-owning colonists.

Alongside their desire to prove that people of color were naturally inferior, the colonies struggled to create unity; as a result, a large divide began to unfold between the Antebellum south and the north. For the first time, college officials and professors were asked to consider how to reconcile the opposing views (Wilder, 2013, p. 243). The tension of justifying slavery was still not accepted by all colonists, and efforts were made to monitor and disrupt the “dangerous” anti-slavery organizations that were associated with attempting to create a “multicultural future” in the colonies (Wilder, 2013, p. 266). Scholars responded with two ideological avenues: defense of slavery through history, religion, and economics and
through the use of science to suggest that people of color were morally inferior and therefore should be used for hard labor (Wilder, 2013, p. 239). Neither option addressed the inequity inherent in slavery; rather, they both looked for ways to justify slavery. Since slavery was used to fund academies, it is likely that this economic conflict of interest tainted institutional representatives could say. People of color were perceived as a threat to the future of the colonies, and scientific racism turned into social policy that relegated people of color to have a subhuman status (Wilder, 2013, p. 273). Some had economic interests in slavery, while others were invested in preserving the “purity” of the white colonists; racism endured.

Eventually, slavery was over-turned and many people (especially in the north) began opposing racist claims made through the facade of scientific fact. Many white folks did not know how to reconcile their involvement with or witness of slavery, which led to a nation-wide denial of the violence of slavery and its links to the founding of the United States. Some scholars attempted to remove the “stain of human slavery” from stories of prosperity from the colonies (Wilder, 2013, p. 280). This was most often done through the negation of slavery from memories and stories; scholars found alternative ways to explain their wealth while revising, romanticizing, and sanitizing their relationship to human bondage (Wilder, 2013, p. 280-284). A key component of settler colonialism is “erasing to replace” (Patel, 2016, p. 37). Rather than identify that the US was formed on the violence of slavery, History was retold to minimize or negate links to slavery and genocide. Universities push(ed) an agenda of colonization and white superiority and utilized their power
to “produce proper subjects of the empire” (Bascara, 2014, p. 55). Universities in the United States were created as a tool of the colonizer to establish Western ideas, values, beliefs, and practices as normative. Slavery was overturned, overlooked, and forgotten, which led to new motives for education.

**Education Post Slavery**

Post-slavery educational movements for black folks emerged, and liberal and progressive white folks positioned themselves against extreme racism; however, many whites still advocated for practices that maintained white dominance (Dennis, 2001). White liberals advocated for an industrial-based education to train black people to do agricultural work, discouraging liberal arts or critical thinking. The image of “black beast” was rejected by racial moderates and replaced with a paternalistic image of black folks as “dependent children” (Dennis, 2001, p. 115). The “black beast” image suggested that men of color were dangerous and wild; the new perception was that they were still unruly and in need of a white savior, but held a new, child-like dependence. Dennis (2001) argued that liberal whites and racial moderates were no less invested in maintaining white dominance—they advocated education over “repression as a more effective method for accomplishing the same objective” (Dennis, 2001, p. 117). While university progressives “advocated for social improvement they did it through a pedagogical scheme that fit conveniently into a scheme for racial submission” (Dennis, 2001, p. 115). This scheme was pitched as an attempt to make black people more “productive” citizens by means of agricultural education and maintaining their positions in the fields;
therefore, leaving factory jobs and other work considered more nuanced for white folks.

Education was perceived as a means to “reduce black crime and disease while encouraging ‘better service’ to whites ‘on the farm or in the shop’” (Dennis, 2001, p. 117). Educational programs were segregated in order to guide black folks into a position that was subservient to white folks while emboldening “the belief that the preservation of social order and white supremacy demanded it” (Dennis, 2001, p. 116). University progressives served as “advertising agents” for an industrial education movement that: “joined sharecropping, the crop lien, low wage extractive manufacturing, illiteracy and disfranchisement as pillars of an impoverished and racially stratified New South” (Dennis, 2001, p. 123). Although people of color began to be included in education, it was only through being prevented access to more prestigious jobs.

After this movement occurred a slow inclusion of more people with minoritized identities to areas of academia, which is discussed at greater length in the next section of this chapter. However, the inclusion is not authentic; as people with minoritized identities attempt to navigating these spaces, they are often reminded that they are visitors and/or do not belong (Dace, 2012; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Ledesma & Solorzano, 2013: Lee & Rice, 2007; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009). It is often the case that individuals are included only to be excluded, that minoritized individuals are
“allowed” to enter a space only to become the “other” in a way that makes them both visible and invisible, present and silenced.

White supremacy was a driving force in the foundation of academies in the United States. Universities were sites of forced education and the (re)production of oppressive beliefs, ideologies, policies, and practices. The roots of these institutions continue to knot and tangle as academies grow and evolve alongside the shifting motives of elites in power—both church and state. These trends continue to shape our interactions, environments, ideologies, and practices. Stein (2016) stated:

If in fact universities were not only built by enslaved persons and funded through a plantation economy, if they not only offered courses and produced research in support of racial hierarchies, but were also and continue to be premised on to the reproduction of Man and his purportedly universal (and thereby, racialized) order of knowledge and modern/colonial grammar of existence, then any institutional account of racial subjugation may continue to be organized by that anti-Black grammar. (p. 181)

If possible, how do we contest the inherent violence that has been the foundation of our alleged intellectual institutions, which shape the way we think and act (Stein, 2016)? How do we reconcile failed efforts to do so? How might we illuminate (mis)information about our institutions that we have clung to for centuries? If all intellectual possibility has been governed by the lies we have told ourselves about our history, then possibilities are limited and exclusionary at best (Stein, 2016, p. 182). The implementation of DEI initiatives has been used by some to attempt to reconcile the past; however, DEI initiatives have also been used to create competition and compliance without attending to violent histories. Every institution has a unique historical formation, policies, and practices that must be
exposed to move toward creating an institution that is dedicated to intellectual growth and social justice.

The stains of exclusion and oppression manifest in an array of ways. Were enslaved people forced to build the campus? Was money from the Atlantic slave trade used to fund the university? Does the university sit on land stolen from native people (though, arguably, doesn’t all land in the United States)? Are buildings named after slave owners? Is the center for multiculturalism located on the edge of campus, signaling that IE is not as important as, say, a fraternity located in the center of the campus? Does the institution celebrate individuals involved in slavery, genocide, the KKK, etc? Does the institution continue practices and policies that are inequitable? To create an inclusive campus community, we must explore such questions.

An Identity Crisis: Lingering Trauma

The stains of slavery and colonization, and the mainstreaming of whiteness, permeate each level of US institutions of higher education. Without being addressed, these stains perpetuate exclusion, oppression, and false narratives that create an adverse campus climate. There has been an increase in the amount of institutions that have begun publicly grappling with their relationship to a history of slavery, colonization, and violence (Stein, 2016). Institutional efforts have “included the commissioning of archival research, physical memorialization, and exploration of these issues through courses and conferences” (Stein, 2016, p. 170). One of the most challenging aspects of institutional attempts to address their relationship to slavery and genocide is maintaining cohesion of the university identity and mission. The
identity of a university is shaped by its legacy, memories, and achievements—all of which are often honest about violent histories that enabled their founding. Disrupting these narratives and beliefs can cause an identity crisis for universities. For example, DU currently feels the pains of such an identity crisis.

DU sits on land stolen from Arapahoe and Cheyenne people; in other words, DU was founded through an act of settler colonialism. Further, the founder of DU has direct links to the Sandcreek Massacre. In 2014, DU released a report on John Evans (the school’s founder) that illuminated his ties to the massacre of indigenous people (Clemmer-Smith et al., 2014). The findings noted:

A century and a half later, as an educational community that has inherited Evans’s positive legacies along with his deadly decisions, we have the opportunity to face this history honestly. It is impossible now to celebrate the founder with the amnesia we have shown in the past, but we can see him—and perhaps ourselves—more accurately situated in the complexity of history. The Massacre changed the course of existence for Arapahos, Cheyennes, and many other people who lived in what we self-referentially call Colorado, but which was just one part of a beloved landscape that stretched from New Mexico all the way to southern Canada, that other human beings knew as home. (pp. 95)

The report highlighted inexplicable links between Evans and the brutal slaughter that ensued on indigenous people in the Sandcreek Massacre.

*Figure 2: Screenshot from the DU homepage. Retrieved March 20, 2018.*

We are the University of Denver. We are Denver Pioneers.
The geographical location of DU and the lingering links to white supremacy are deeply embedded in the campus climate. The homepage (https://www.du.edu) greets visitors with a reminder of the links to such atrocities (see Figure 2). The school celebrates this piece of history through the institutional nickname, “Pioneers.” The term “pioneer” holds a somewhat positive, explorative, or generative meaning for many students; however, the term is also strongly tied to the genocide of Native American people. Pioneers are a tribute to white, Christian men who murdered Native Americans and stole their land. White ascendancy is “thinking and behavior that arise from White mainstream authority and advantage, which in turn are generated from Whiteness’s historical position of power and domination,” which often manifests in the form of mascots (Gusa, 2010, p. 472). The term pioneer is a white-washed way of saying settler/colonizer; it means someone who is “first” to explore or settle on territory. This whole concept violently erases the fact that this action meant genocide to the indigenous people that already lived on the land they were allegedly discovering.

When institutions address the historical legacies of violence, it can cause white community members to become defensive; they often do not understand or feel the urgency to address such legacies. White folks are not negatively experiencing oppression or exclusion because of their race; they have little education about the way people of color experience racism. DU also had a mascot called “Boone” representing, the pioneer Daniel Boone (see Figure 3).
“Boone” was eventually changed to an unofficial mascot and was no longer allowed to attend events. This caused unrest with some alumni and sports fans. In fact, a webpage (http://www.letsgodu.com) allows supporters to voice their love for DU sports as well as their anger over the removal of Boone. On campus, the Native Student Alliance (NSA) began a hashtag movement, #NoMorePios. Administration continues to face pressure from the tension between dedicated activists on campus and angry alumni donors that love the school’s nickname and want Boone back.

How can an institution dedicated to IE hold a nickname akin to “Settler Colonizer?”

When we describe the formation of our country through bleached language like “pioneers,” we assume that white Europeans “discovered” this country and concealed the violence of settler colonialism. Similarly, ties to settler colonialism at DU have been whitewashed and celebrated by reframing pioneer to mean “leader” or “innovator” and by refusing to change the institutional name. As mentioned earlier, DU administration is caught in the crossfire of institutional growing pains
and has tried to maintain some stability amidst the instability of uprooting legacies that perpetuate exclusion. DU should not ignore its history, but recognize that it is something to be healed, not celebrated. Combatting the institutional lies told to ourselves is a crucial step in implementing DEI initiatives. Specifically, implementing DEI initiatives at PWIs means that historical formations and legacies of exclusion must be confronted in a vulnerable, authentic, and courageous way and supported by active statements, plans, and policies that reach for inclusion.

**The Rise and Lull of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies**

There are multiple forms of DEI policies, practices, and methodologies; however, this dissertation focuses on IE. IE is a set of principles established by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) that calls for a multi-pronged effort to create more inclusive environments at academic institutions. Harris, Barone, and Patton Davis (2015) described IE as a culmination of past attempts to implement DEI initiatives, such as compositional diversity and multiculturalism. IE advocates a holistic approach to DEI that penetrates every level of an institution; it is never fixed and requires continuous growth. IE looks different from institution to institution and from scholar to scholar.

Williams, Berger, and McLendon (2005) identified four dimension of IE: the first is “Access and Equity,” which considers the number of institutional members from minoritized groups. The second is the “Institutional Climate,” which considers the environment on campus that the structures, traditions, and beliefs of the institution create. The third is “Curriculum and Pedagogy,” which considers the
inclusivity of programs, services, readings assigned, and pedagogical practices. The fourth is “Learning and Development,” which considers if students benefitted from the institution and were prepared for success. While each approach may be a little different, IE seeks to create an environment where every member of the institution feels acknowledged, engaged, and affirmed. IE must be continuously monitored and measured by individuals at every institutional level, creating numerous accountability measures and action-oriented goals. IE and all DEI practices can still fall into an empty commitment when it is not properly implemented, monitored, and updated for improvement.

Motivation Matters

The post-civil rights movement saw an increase in DEI initiatives. Now DEI practices and rhetoric have become commonplace in organizations. Managing DEI practices is a billion-dollar industry that is present in the mission statements of most organizations (Gates, 2014). Berrey (2011) found that the University of Michigan “adopted diversity discourse and programs in response to law, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism, amid isomorphic pressures from peer institutions and professionals” (p. 578). Indeed, a racially heterogeneous population has become a mark of prestige and is seen as a strength for universities in the competitive market of higher education. This has led to universities using “discourse on diversity, excellence, leadership, learning and skills” as key areas of recruitment and marketing for schools (p. 586). Since the 1970s, academies have altered their institutions to cater to the marketplace (p. 586-588). Schools now focus on
relationships to capitalism, business, and the exchange of money. The infiltration of neoliberalism into education has created even more hurdles to the implementation of DEI initiatives.

Neoliberalism has multiple definitions, depending on the context and discipline in which researchers are using the term. Hanan (2010) argued that neoliberalism presumes “markets are composed of rational agents acting purely out of self-interests,” assuming autonomy and centering of market interests (p. 193). Foust (2010) defined neoliberalism as “an ideology that seeks to free trade, deregulate and expand markets, in the interest of global prosperity, peace, and profit” (p. 1). The term is associated with practices that work in the interest of accumulating wealth in free markets as an alleged attempt to create equity and prosperity. Further, neoliberal ideology shapes the ways in which many higher education institutions engage in DEI initiatives; it also shapes the ways individual members of the community falsely equate financial prosperity with peace and equity. Harvey (2007) explained that neoliberalism has become hegemonic “to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p. 3). Our culture is “organized on the basis of market mentalities and moralities that cancel out all modes of social responsibility, commitment, and action” (Giroux, 2014, p. 47). Many academic institutions are now most concerned with “economic growth, instrumental rationality, and the narrow civically deprived task of preparing students strictly for the workforce” (Giroux, 2014, p. 86-87). This causes the conflation of education with
training and treats intellectual growth as a product to be consumed by students (Giroux, 2014). The neoliberal aftermath leads to a disassociation with critical thinking and an obsessive focus on the individual (Giroux, 2014). Institutional change requires combatting neoliberal practices and centuries of internalized white superiority.

Neoliberalism has shaped the implementation and the manifestation of DEI initiatives through ideologically infused neoliberalism while simultaneously professing DEI rhetoric. McChesney (1998) argued “at their most eloquent, proponents of neoliberalism sound as if they are doing poor people, the environment, and everybody else a tremendous service as they enact policies on behalf of the wealthy few” (p. 8). The penetration of consumerism alongside indifference to the oppression of others created “a politics of disengagement and a culture of moral irresponsibility” (Giroux, 2014, p. 6). Neoliberalism cultivates an uncritical, zombie-like audience that passively consumes its principles, values, and relations, resulting in the death of social and civic life (Giroux, 2014, p. 13). The excessive neoliberal emphasis on individuals makes it more difficult to create moments for coalition and solidarity; it also makes it more challenging to explicate or acknowledge structural inequity (Giroux, 2014). Giroux (2014) argued that the neoliberalism bred in academic institutions manifests as an economic Darwinism and “thrives on a kind of social amnesia that eases critical thought, historical analysis, and any understanding of broader systemic relations” (p. 2). Emphasis on responsibility has eroded to exclusively be concerned with individual matters and to
ignore larger social structures. This leaves problems isolated to individuals and with an inability to conceive of ways “larger forces control or constrain our choices and the lives we are destined to lead” (p. 3). Neglect of macro understandings of society perpetuates the ingrained doubts that many white folks have been trained to believe about inequity. Since DEI initiatives have been consumed in institutions infected with neoliberal beliefs linked to white supremacy, it is clear to see where policies are at a high risk of failure. If these are the motivations to implement DEI initiatives, how will strides towards equity be made?

Critical race scholars have argued that strides towards equity occur only when the interests of whites and people of color overlap, and often fail to make structural change (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This is similar to the ways in which the white liberals who are invested in the education of people of color; however, only within a structure secured by white dominance. The interest of people of color was freedom; the interest of the white liberals was maintaining dominance. A shift occurred that allowed a small, incremental step towards access to education; however, it continued to perpetuate inequitable practices. Interest convergence is the argument made by critical race theory (CRT) scholars, who allege that many goals met by civil rights activists have actually served white interests, at the cost of sacrificing the needs of people of color (Bell, 1980). The root of the problem (racial inequality, specifically) was not addressed at a systemic level, and racism continued. Interest convergence provided a band-aid solution to a slit throat. Guinier (2004) argued that in order “to address the full
range of racialized inequities in this country, racial justice advocates need to move beyond the early tenets of racial liberalism to treat the disease and not just its symptoms” (p. 100). There are several ways that interest convergence manifests in the implementation of DEI initiatives.

Since the desire change inequitable policies is often motivated by a competitive market or legal compliance, rather than social justice activism, the outcome is often a passive or “non-performative” commitment (Ahmed, 2012, p. 116; Patel, 2015). Diversity often arises in a reactionary fashion that fails to address systemic racism and lacks action; instead, PWIs often seek to “effect as little structural change as possible, preserving institutional settler culture” (Patel, 2015, p. 671). Patel takes a radical approach; however, when considering the dominant discourses circulating, it seems clear that equity and social justice are not a main motivator. While these attempts could be motivated by more than just market competition, the trend seems to be a desire to check a box without actually creating substantive healing, change, or transformation (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2015, Stein, 2016).

**White Institutional Presence and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives**

PWIs mark one vulnerable space where DEI initiatives to fail. These institutions “have a much longer history of exclusion than they do of inclusion and that history continues to shape racial dynamics on our campuses” (Milem et al., 2005, p. 16). Since these spaces have been historically exclusionary, their policies, practices, and legacies are likely to continue to reverberate white supremacy. Gusa
(2010) argued “unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to remain racialized” (p. 465). Campus climates are haunted by the ghouls of slavery and colonization, along with the mainstreaming of white traditions, values, and practices. Gusa (2010) described this historical legacy as white institutional presence (WIP), as “customary ideologies and practices rooted in the institution's design and the organization of its environment and activities” (p. 467). When this is coupled with a university more invested in market competition than social justice and critical thinking, efforts to create a more positive climate appear superfluous. This legacy of exclusion is often left untouched, as DEI initiatives often remain in a rhetorical phase with no real action behind it, which creates dissonance.

This dissonance has caused an increased number of microaggressions to occur against minoritized populations in our community. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. p. 273). People of color in PWIs often report feeling excluded, tokenized, and exhausted from dealing with several forms of aggression from white community members (Dace, 2012; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Ledesma & Solorzano, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Tuitt et al., 2009). Ahmed (2012) explained that people of color on predominantly white campuses with DEI rhetoric are “treated as guests,
temporary residents in someone else’s home” (p. 43). The question becomes, how
do we disrupt notions of white ownership of campus? How do we create spaces
where no one feels like a guest; rather, we all feel united as a community?

Campus climates at PWIs tend to be exclusionary, have passive goals for DEI,
and further minoritize students, creating a dissonance between the professed
rhetoric and the actions of the university. Harper and Hurtado (2007) examined that
racial climates at five PWIs. They conducted interviews with racially homogenous
focus groups and found that both students of color and white students were
frustrated with the lack of congruency between stated institutional values and
university actions (p. 16). They found that almost all of the students interviewed
indicated that their institution was “negligent in the educational processes leading
to racial understanding, both inside and outside the classroom” (p. 16). The
researcher noted that in fifteen years of research on racial campus climate, they
continued to find “themes of exclusion, institutional rhetoric rather than action, and
marginality continue to emerge from student voices” (p. 21). This illuminates a lack
of knowledge, resources, tools, and institutional congruency to create positive
institutional change. Thus, when community members are faced with situations that
clearly do not align with university goals in DEI statements, there is often no clear
structure to turn to, making IE nothing more than a rhetorical word cloud that does
not align with or is grounded in the community.

30
No Policies. No Action.

I sat in a small conference room waiting on an administrator to meet with me about a student conduct issue I had filed. I had a student (who I will call Austin) who grew extremely combative towards me and students of color in the class during discussions of racism. On two separate instances, Austin expressed aggressive non-verbals towards students of color after class. On the first occasion, he was upset with a student who he disagreed with about capitalism. He confronted a woman of color student (who I will call Tara) in the hall. He leaned towards her and, puffing his chest and demanded to talk. Tara responded that they didn’t, and I immediately placed my body between the two of them and de-escalated the situation. A week later, he grew frustrated with another student of color (who I will call Samir) for allegedly shaking his head while Austin disrupted a class discussion about whiteness. He confronted Samir immediately after class, hovering over Samir’s desk. He puffed his chest and requested to talk. I asked the student to please come sit down and talk with me. I again put my body between the two of them. Austin got mad and left, which I felt left me no choice but to file a student conduct report and have him removed from the class.

A couple students told me that they did not feel safe. I also felt uncomfortable. As the quarter progressed, he had gotten increasingly hostile and combative. I noted several concerning behavioral patterns, such as disrespect for my authority, an attitude of superiority and excessive entitlement, poor anger management, low tolerance for frustration, attempts to control the classroom, lack of empathy, and a tendency to externalize blame. I was sure that with a clear list of concerning behaviors
and a detailed list of class interactions that were not cohesive with institutional missions of IE that the student would be removed from class. Much to my dismay, he was not. This clearly seemed to be an issue of discrimination towards students of color because, for example, when his white peers similarly challenged racism, he did not lash out at them.

Despite the fact that I voiced concerns of physical safety and jeopardized learning outcomes for the entire class, Austin was allowed to stay. In this moment, my only option was to continue teaching the course despite the uncomfortable feelings that arose for me as the instructor, trying to ensure that everyone’s safety and best learning outcomes while also dealing with a student who clearly did not respect me or his peers of color. When I raised the issue, university administration explained that I could file a complaint with the Office of Equal Opportunity; however, they felt that behavior did not warrant removal from class. There was no clear chain of command for how to handle the situation. The only thing I could offer to support my students was to file an EO complaint, which only put more onus on students to attend meetings to prove that his behavior was motivated by racial discrimination.

I was outraged. It seemed that the safety, comfort, and inclusion of students of color in the class were not as important as ensuring that Austin be allowed to continue disrupting class and showing aggression. My first thought was that his behavior violated our the university's IE policy, but I realized that there was no IE policy. What good is an initiative that has been around the institution for more than ten years but has no policy in place? What is the intention of DU to implement IE? Was it
neoliberalism? Was it a desire to compete, since they claim to want to prepare students to work in a “global market?” Even if the motivation is neoliberal, do these actions prepare Austin for anything outside of white privilege?

I struggled daily to teach Austin ethically; further, I felt that I and DU had failed the students of color in the class. Worse, I felt that we had also failed Austin. No employer would allow him to speak to his colleagues or supervisors the way he did to myself or other students in the class. Even if the goal is simply to produce capitalists, Austin must learn a basic level of civil engagement. Instead, we submitted to his desire to disrespect myself and students of color, but why? Every time I taught class, a sense of panic ran through my body. Austin was eventually removed from class, but only because he made a deal with the university to only speak when called on in class. He lasted two weeks. This behavior is not acceptable of any student, and it certainly does not align with the professed ideals in the university’s documents pertaining to IE, which call for inclusive environments.

Tara ended up leaving DU. This incident was one of many that caused her to feel bamboozled by promises of inclusion. Interestingly enough, Tara had been forced to complete a restorative justice action plan for calling another student of color a “coon” on Facebook. The student she name called was part of a conservative group on campus that held an event and professed how white privilege was false and that people of color are their own worst enemies: They professed so many racist stereotypes. While I acknowledge that Tara’s behavior on Facebook was inappropriate, I find it quite telling that she was reprimanded for a comment made on
her personal Facebook and that the young man who espoused racist rhetoric on campus was perceived as the victim. It is ironic that Tara was required to put forth efforts of restorative justice for her personal behaviors, outside of the university, while Austin could disrespect myself and his peers while disregarding institutional commitments to inclusion in the classroom! Although, without a policy, can we even call IE a commitment in our campus community?

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This interaction haunts me. From my racially privileged experiences of higher education, I did not think that Austin’s behavior would be tolerated. Though I received an abundance of support from my department, there were no institutional structures to support me and my students. There was no clear place to go. I was referred to a Biased Incident Reporting Team (or EO) which required more work and emotional stress for the students of color involved and myself, with no promise of recourse. This lack of clear policies, guidelines, and procedures for addressing issues of exclusion and inequity in the classroom serves to magnify a hostile campus climate. The only avenue we had was concerned with legal compliance. For a school that espouses so much rhetoric on IE, I assumed this would be common sense. Further, I was quite bothered by the fact that this student was given so much power; neoliberal ideologies clearly prevailed over our institutional dedication to IE. This incident illuminates the discontinuity between perceived commitments to inclusion and the realities of white supremacy, class privilege, and the neoliberal hijacking of
higher education. The student was no longer viewed as a student; rather, a very rich customer whose mother was an attorney.

Since the rhetoric is passive, it only serves as an ornamental comfort and facade of false security, which further enables the school to appear competitive in the market of higher education. DU is a very expensive private institution; the projected average cost of attendance for undergraduate students during the 2018-2019 school year is $67,727, and tuition is $49,392 (DU, “Cost of Attendance,” 2018). The school is largely comprised of predominantly privileged students (white/upper-middle class). However, in recent years, the university has made great efforts to market itself as an “inclusive space” that “values diversity.” The result has been increased compositional diversity without increased understanding and curriculum to prepare its predominately white and privileged students to dialogue about privilege and oppression. There is a cognitive dissonance between the mission statement of the university and its professed ideals—ideals that are held by a large portion of the student body—which amplifies a hostile campus climate. In Chapter 3, I utilize critical rhetorical analysis to examine the multiple factors that shape the rhetoric of IE and identify spaces where tension resides.

**When Tensions are High and Skills are Low**

The dissonance between rhetoric and action trickles down to create a tension between privileged and oppressed identities in the community, and often creates violence for minoritized students who feel they joined the community under false pretenses. Inequity also bleeds from the structural into the interpersonal
interactions on campus; for example: a faculty member who is disciplined for perceived aggression when discussing personal experiences of racism; the student who sits in class and is asked to speak on behalf of all people of color; the black student who is told by a professor to “Go back to Africa;” the students of color that have eggs hurled at them while walking across campus; the administrative staff member who was hired and used as a token to prove that the campus is diverse. These are all aggressions towards minoritized persons, and they happen way too often.

White folks enter college communities with prolonged exposure to ideologies, institutions, and practices that maintain white racial dominance. People of color enter college communities with prolonged exposure to those same ideologies, institutions, and practices that work to oppress them. Sue (2015) contended “whiteness is transparent precisely because of its everyday occurrence, its institutionalized normative features in U.S. culture, and because whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, average and ideal” (p. 153). People of color have been forced to find survival strategies to navigate spaces that were not intended for them. They have often been forced to perform grit, speak for an entire community, and overcome structural obstacles to their success. People of color have reported tokenism, micro-aggressions, and exclusion (Dace, 2012; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Ledesma & Solorzano, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Tuitt et al., 2009). While people of color have intuitively developed skills to survive these spaces, they can also internalize whiteness.
Harper and Hurtado (2007) conducted a campus climate study and found that many white students believed they had never been exposed to racism prior to entering college (p. 12). I would argue, alongside DiAngelo (2011), that this is a false understanding: The racially segregated neighborhood they grew up in exposed them to multiple forms of systemic racism. One reason that white folks live in all-white neighborhoods is wrapped up in racism, classism, and unfair networks, policies, and practices that maintain this racial divide. While these white students may have had limited exposure to the oppressive side of racism, they have undoubtedly benefited from its privilege side.

Many white folks have been enculturated to believe that race does not matter and is something that should not be discussed (Moon, 1996; Reason & Evans, 2007). DiAngelo and Sensoy (2014) argued that “very little—if anything—about mainstream discourse will support them [white people] to grow intellectually, or to practice seeing through an antiracism lens” (p. 198). White students whom have experienced self-segregation are not often cognizant of systemic oppression that insidiously haunts people of color on a daily basis. The self-segregation of white folks leads to a lack of “understanding and tools to navigate a multicultural environment” as well as “racial ignorance, reliance on stereotypes, tension and avoidance” (Gusa, 2010, p. 479). Since many white folks rarely interact with people of color, it is not surprising that they may remain ignorant to issues of racism. However, it is naive at best to assume that remaining ignorant is not also part of racism (DiAngelo, 2011). This racial (mis)understanding is largely shaped by low
levels of white racial and emotional awareness. Hostile campus climates are shaped by legacies of white exclusion and discontinuity between rhetoric and the actions of DEI initiatives. This division is magnified by a racial (mis)understanding that arises from low levels of white racial awareness and a failure to authentically engage emotions.

**Racial Awareness**

It is very difficult to get a white person to be aware that they are raced, let alone that their racial identity is comprised through a system of white superiority. Often, attempts to raise racial awareness result in an unproductive discussion that seems to be rooted in proving a point and preserving ego, rarely do discussions attempt to broaden perspectives. Raising racial awareness for white folks includes an exhaustive process of (re)learning history, confronting false beliefs and ideologies of white supremacy, and confronting the ugly realities of their complicity within systems of oppression. White folks often fear: appearing racist, realizing their racism, confronting white privilege, and taking responsibility to end racism (Sue, 2015). Since white folks confront all of these fears and experience disruptions to their perceived reality, they are often reluctant to engage in racial dialogues. People of color are often exhausted from combatting racism every day and understandably do not always have the emotional energy to educate white folks about how their complicity in structures of oppression is violent. It is also not the responsibility of people of color to teach white people about racism (Dace, 2012). When racial dialogues emerge, the result often turns into an unproductive, heated debate where
white folks (with varying levels of racial awareness may re-center themselves) may become agitated and defensive or call-out one another.

White students need the space and tools necessary “to help develop a better understanding of their racial/ethnic identities, race relations, speaker series,” creating balanced “classroom curriculum and pedagogy” (Gusa, 2010, p. 481). Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin (2016) noted that the learning process for whites is difficult because it includes disrupting their state of ignorant bliss and comfort and awakening to the tumultuous, violent realities of racism (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 129). The process is uncomfortable and turbulent; however, it is necessary to raise racial awareness for white students (Cabrera et al., 2016; Reason & Evans, 2007). Cabrera et al. (2016) encouraged university professionals to “support students becoming maladjusted when it comes to the subject of racial injustice” (p. 129).

Improving racial climate and raising awareness requires more than space and support. The limited exposure due to the upbringing of white students often leads to racial apathy and results in “little concern for the issues facing members of other racial groups” (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 69). Reason and Evans (2007) explained that a diverse student body is not enough to foster racial cognizance; rather, they argued, “development of racially cognizant White students requires student affairs professionals to intentionally create spaces for White students to reflect on the meaning of race in their daily lives” (p. 71). The move for white students toward racial cognizance requires intentional spaces and white role models who are critically engaged in examining and exposing Whiteness (p. 72).
Critical whiteness studies (CWS) has identified a lack of racial awareness and a failure to engage white emotions as obstacles to creating, implementing, and striving for equity and inclusion (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Moon, 1996; Sue, 2015).

**Feeling White**

Whiteness scholars have noted that when white folks begin to grapple with racism, a range of emotions arise that work as defense mechanisms to prevent racial awareness (Cabrera et al., 2016; DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Moon, 1996). Since white people have limited exposure to authentic dialogues about racism, they may be triggered by having race attributed to their identity, a challenge to white solidarity, challenges to meritocracy or individualism, and many more events (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). DiAngelo (2011) coined the term “white fragility” to describe the range of emotions that arise due to the inability of white people to discuss race. White fragility functions through intolerance, outward displays of anger, fear, and guilt, argumentation, silence, and exiting rooms and dialogues. The high frequency of enactments of white fragility create hurdles for white people to identify the realities of racial politics that leave them to (re)produce whiteness as normative and universal (p. 66). The anger, frustration, defensiveness, and guilt that arise in white fragility must be addressed in order for white people to grow.

The repression of raced emotions like guilt, disgust, and shame hinder deep investment to antiracism (Matias, 2016, p. 39). Emotions in dialogue signal growth and/or some sort of investment. Stone, Patton, and Heen (2010) identified
confronting emotions and listening as the hardest and most critical communicative skills for engaging in conversations deemed difficult (p. 89). When feelings are left unexamined and unexposed, it makes listening to one another very difficult (p. 89). In order to actively listen, people must have an “open and honest curiosity” about the other perspectives being shared (p. 89). The researchers explain that many assume they know how they feel; however, feelings are often more complex than we know and remain undiscovered in “the tangle of back streets where the real action is” (p. 91). Further, feelings often disguise themselves as emotions that we are more equipped to handle: “feelings transform themselves into judgments, accusations, and attributions” (p. 91). Our ability to handle certain emotions is based on an array of characteristics that create our orientation towards certain emotions. This is characterized by factors such as how a family expresses and represses emotions as a child (Stone et al., 2010, p. 91). Stone et al. (2010) advocated that we engage our emotions and make space for them in discussions. The researchers also cautioned that we should negotiate with emotions prior to sharing them because they are shaped by multiple things, including perceptions that are not static (p. 100). To raise racial awareness, white people must be willing to identify and negotiate emotions in order to learn what they mean and where they come from.

The most common emotions that arise for white people in dialogues about race are anxiety, fear, anger, defensiveness, guilt, regret, and remorse (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Sue, 2015). To move past these emotions, they must not only be named, but we need to understand their entanglements so that we can negotiate
and/or process them productively. Anxiety and fear normally arise due to a
disruption in a white person’s perceived identity and reality. According to Sue
(2015), naming race—more specifically, white supremacy—causes an “awareness
that is painful and fearful because it directly challenges White people’s self-image of
themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who do not discriminate” (p.
139) Anger, most commonly followed by defensiveness, commonly comes about
because white people feel unfairly accused of racism and/or are angry that someone
disagrees with their perspective (p. 141). Guilt, regret, and remorse arise most
commonly due to a realization that their perspective is wrong and that they are tied
to the oppression of others (p. 141). White guilt refers to “the individual and
collective feelings of culpability experienced by some Whites for the racist
treatment of people of color” (pp. 141-142). Asumah (2014) asserted that if whites
continue to feel guilty about their racial identity, they will likely avoid or deny the
power and resources available to them to combat racism (p. 115). Lorde (1984)
declared that guilt is an unproductive “response to one’s own actions or lack of
action” (p. 130). Sue (2015) argued “as long as emotions are left untouched,
unacknowledged, and unexplored, they will serve as emotional roadblocks to
successful race talk” (p. 145). Emotions are both difficult and essential to further
personal relationships to discussions of privilege and oppression. Lorde (2015)
asked us to: “Reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch
that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.
Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all of our choices (p. 97)"
The task becomes creating a space where white people can identify and face their emotions in order to expose the entangled roots of racial experiences.

The task of uncovering entangled roots is like driving down a dark, unknown road with no headlights; it is uncomfortable, scary, and anxiety-laden because it cues us in to our own ignorance and compliance in systems of privilege and oppression. Assumah (2014) called for scholars to find ways to push through this uncomfortability to more effectively reconcile the racial divide in the United States (p. 115). Matias (2016) advocated for a “pedagogy of discomfort” that uses discomforting emotions to challenge some dominant ideologies that reify racism (p. 40). Matias (2016) cautioned us to be aware of the ways in which culture (i.e., white supremacy) has manipulated our emotions. We must dig deep and not merely acknowledge emotions, but consider the root of them and how they could be confused by systems of power. Am I angry or am I guilty? Am I offended or am I ashamed? Matias argued “unless we have the emotional ovaries to confront that which we fear most and allow ourselves the latitude to explore deeper into our feelings, we are nothing but zombies, devoid of true heart and connection” (p. 179).

We have been disciplined by academia, masculinity, white supremacy, and other governing powers to suppress emotion at the expense of connections to one another and the world. To grow with and toward one another, we must confront emotion—no matter how ugly, nasty, or humiliating they are. Further, we must learn to communicate with and not at one another. A hostile campus climate is saturated with tension and confusion; such an environment could be improved by
raising levels of racial and emotional awareness. Currently, the failure to do so creates a hostile environment and a divided community.

**Talking at Not With**

In the fall of 2016, racial tension on campus was made public by a message written by students of color on a free speech wall that read, “white silence = violence” and “white people do something #blacklivesmatter.” Later, white students returned to the wall and painted over the words “white” and “black” (see Figure 4). This was considered “defacement” because the new message changed an existing message rather than completely covering and rewriting. One regulations governing the free speech wall has been that when writing on the wall, students should completely paint over an old message before writing another message. A white woman student later returned to the wall and wrote: “I’m sorry for something I didn’t do. Lynched somebody but I didn’t know who” and “GUilty OF BEING WHITE, GUilty OF BEING RIGHT” (see Figure 5). Due to the fear this message evoked for students of color and the classification by some of this message as hate speech, university administration painted over the message and covered the wall with a cloth, indicating it was not open at that time for more community messages.
Figure 4. Photograph of the University of Denver free speech wall defacement in fall 2016.

Figure 5: Photograph of the University of Denver free speech wall in fall 2016.
I remember walking through the middle of campus. I felt a chill in the air that was symbolic of the chill in the atmosphere of campus. A large cement block sat in the middle of the quad, covered with a cloth lightly flapping in the wind. The tensions in the air seemed to pierce my body. The cement block had been a visual representation of the ideologies that divide our campus, our culture, and our world. I wondered in what ways am I complicit in the pain? As air whip around me, I wondered what would happen if we actually had a dialogue? What would happen if we decided to engage each other in an ethical and accountable way? In what ways can I intervene in the debate to “deepen our perspective” (Collins, 2009, p. 99)?

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This “interaction” between students of color and white students on campus ignited a racial debate where there were two common stances. I use quotes around “interaction” because of the specific ways in which students engaged with one another—it seemed to be at, not between, one another. Many students of color argued that they are continuously silenced, minoritized, and unwelcome on the DU campus, while many privileged, white students argued that their right to free speech was infringed upon by an excessively liberal agenda that, they felt, silenced their beliefs, ideas, and perspectives.

In reflecting on the ways I have witnessed and experienced anger, aggression, denial, dismissal, and guilt—both in myself and from other white folks—in discussions of racism, I notice a general lack to authentically engage across different perspectives. This lack of ability was magnified as I became involved in IE
efforts to make my campus a more equitable space. On my college campus, I witnessed multiple acts of aggression to people of color in the community by white students, faculty, and staff. Many people of color continue to plea for understanding, empathy, inclusion, and authentic visibility. Some white community members continue to ignore minimize, and deny or erase such a plea. Communication scholars can identify and equip the community with the necessary communicative skills to practice dialogue, overcome such hurdles, and strive for equity.

**We Need Dialogue**

Dialogue has been identified as a tool with the potential to raise awareness of privilege and oppression to increase the functionality of DEI initiatives. There is a body of literature on the importance of dialogue in raising critical consciousness, and thus awareness of privilege and oppression across differing perspectives and experiences (Freirie, 2000; hooks, 2014; Sue, 2015; Di Angelo, 2011). Dialogue in conjunction with IE policies, statements, and missions could help address the dissonance and move campus communities closer to becoming the inclusively excellent place. Discussions of race and IE have shown to be a crucial piece to bring awareness to the community and to raise engagement with IE (Ahmed, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Reason & Evans, 2007; Sue, 2015). Communication scholars have primarily studied dialogue as it pertains to dialogic teaching styles (Black, 2005; Boyd & Markarian, 2011; Skidmore, 2006). Less research has been done to consider how to teach the process of dialogue.
Dialogue is a loaded term with several different definitions. The commonality amongst differing uses is that dialogue is a specific type of communicative interaction that occurs between individuals. Dialogue has been most commonly discussed in relation to teaching as a way of knowing (Freire, 2000). Buber (1987) articulated dialogue as an interaction between two people with genuine intentions characterized by elements of presence, openness, mutuality, and voice. Dialogue has been described as “a non-polarized discourse” and “as a way of being with another person” (Hyde & Bineham, 2000, p. 211). Hyde and Bineham (2000) argued dialogue “is characterized by openness, trust, presence, and an understanding of the other that arises not from psychological compatibility but from shared humanity” (p. 212). Dulabaum (2011) argued that intercultural dialogue must include a focus on critical thinking, emotion intelligence, social intelligence, democratic citizenship, language, and history. I specifically discuss dialogue in regards to “difficult conversations” that pertain to privilege and oppression. I conceptualize dialogue as a specific way of engaging in talk with people that seeks understanding multiple positions, across different perspectives.

In order to address a racial campus climate, we must do more to equip our community with the tools, resources, and skills necessary to implement DEI initiatives. It is common for universities to emphasize cultural competence in the “increasingly globalized” workforce; however, less attention is given to how we actually equip students with this competence outside of interacting with individuals whom have different cultural identities (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007, pp. 414-
Some universities have begun implementing intergroup dialogue (IGD) as a means to foster more competence and better communication skills across difference (Simons, Montgomery, Fine, & Noguera, 2013).

IGD is a specific way of engaging dialogue that seeks to facilitate conversations between people with different identities. This form of dialogue was largely influenced by intergroup education efforts that arose after World War II to reduce prejudice (Banks, 1993; Simons et al., 2013). Since the 1980s, IGD emerged on college campuses to address oppression (Simon et al., 2013; Zúñiga, 2003). IGD was created at the University of Michigan, specifically for higher education settings (Simons et al., 2013; Zuñiga, 2003). Research on the impact of IGD has shown increased abilities to collaborate, engage intergroup relations and conflict, and comprehend identity and structures (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen & Zúñiga, 2009; Zuñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007; Alimo, Kelly, & Clark, 2002).

Dialogic models should be malleable in order to address the specific hurdles to DEI that manifest on each campus. In the instance of PWIs with IE initiatives in the United States, we must acknowledge an array of hurdles including, but not limited to: white supremacy, social amnesia, neoliberalism, non-performative commitments to DEI, low levels of racial awareness, and white fragility with explicit attention to white emotions. We must move “difficult conversations” past contempt and towards empathy, understanding, accountability, and humility. In the United States, the K-12 education system does not systematically include curricula designed to equip students with the communicative skills necessary to dialogue. It is
thus not surprising that dialogues about privilege and oppression at universities have been difficult to illicit. I acknowledge that dialogue will not solve all of our problems; however, I believe the practice of dialogue can be a tool to propel us towards the goals of IE while simultaneously providing life skills to students that encourage ethical, effective, and appropriate communication.

**Research Questions and Sub-Questions**

Can IE initiatives ever truly create “inclusive” spaces within academia (an institution many deem a white supremacist regime)? While I acknowledge the validity of this question, I am more invested in exploring the communicative ways in which PWIs can make more inclusive spaces. As a tempered radical, I believe that IE also has the potential to transform institutions into more socially just spaces. A tempered radical is an individual who identifies with and is committed to an organization while simultaneously being committed to a cause or ideology that is fundamentally at odds with the organization (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586). I acknowledge that academia is intimately tied to oppression and needs to be transformed at its roots. I also acknowledge the magnitude for positive change and growth within the institution of higher education. I identify with the institution of higher education that has immediate ties to exclusion and oppression; I am also committed to equity and inclusion. Since our country was founded by and through white supremacy, I do not believe that there is any institution that can completely absolve itself from white supremacy. I used to be much more radical; however, I think my role in disrupting oppression is more in the middle.
I identify as a critical scholar who is attentive to power and reaches for social justice. Dialogue about privilege and oppression will not make inequity obsolete; however, it could disrupt power from the bottom up. If community members are equipped with the dialogic practices of empathy, intersectional reflexivity, active listening, and emotional awareness, the community will likely have more respect and understanding for one another across differences. This will likely foster a campus climate that is more aligned with the goals professed by IE and other DEI initiatives.

Research has identified that DEI initiatives at PWIs need more work to disrupt white institutional presence (WIP) and a need for dialogue to aid in raising awareness of privilege and oppression. The literature identified some common hurdles: social amnesia, lack of community cohesion, and white fragility. However, more work needs to be done to consider how to implement dialogue to aid DEI initiatives. In this dissertation, I examine the following research question: How can a PWI infuse dialogue to aid the implementation of DEI initiatives and invite institutional change?

I also examine the following sub-questions:

- What ideological barriers, like those at DU, must be addressed and how might a dialogue course work at a PWI like DU?
- In what ways can dialogue reconcile the tension between university structure and rhetoric of DEI initiatives?
What are the communicative skills and dispositions that students and instructors should practice to realize the potential of dialogue coursework for institutional transformation? How do we teach these skills?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the ways in which IE manifests at PWIs and highlighted some of the major roadblocks to creating inclusive campuses. I explored literature on three specific hurdles to the implementation of IE at PWIs and provided examples of how I have witnessed these hurdles manifest in my campus community. The first hurdle was a form of social amnesia that silences the violent reality of how institutions of higher education in the United States came to exist through oppression. The second issue was the often empty promises of DEI initiatives, which do little to change the campus into an inclusive space and instead create a false hope and security in a plan or statement that has no bearing. The final obstacle was a lack of skills to engage across different perspectives, experiences, and orientations towards privilege and oppression. I illuminated these hurdles that arise between higher education institutions in the United States and DEI initiatives at PWIs while showing the potential of dialogue as an intervention. I argued that communication scholars could intervene in IE research by considering ways to increase the communicative skills necessary to create an inclusive campus climate.

I ended the chapter by outlining the questions this research aims to explore. Many DEI initiatives advocate for dialogue and inclusion; however, less work has
been done to consider how organizations might better equip their community with the communicative practices necessary to elicit the kind of dialogues that DEI initiatives demand. Dialogue has been discussed as a pedagogical tool and practice that has been proven to increase understanding across difference; however, less work has been done to nail down the specific ways in which dialogue as a process can be taught and implemented (Heisey, 2011; Hyde & Bineham, 2000). Dialogue about privilege and oppression is a logical way to increase the functionality of DEI initiatives, and has the potential to push back against the three hurdles identified in this chapter.

The next chapter unpacks my decisions to apply the research tools of critical rhetorical ethnography, critical whiteness studies, and intersectionality. Collectively, these tools enable me to explore multiple factors that shape the rhetoric of DEI initiatives at PWIs. Chapter 3 outlines the methods and theories used to identify the benefits of these tools. The tools I use acknowledge the interconnected complexities of experiences, perceptions, and identities and the need for researchers to critically assess their relationship to research. The chapter ends with a researcher positionality statement that illuminates my orientation towards the research and how I came to view the need and potential for this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: DISRUPTING THE IGNORANT BLISS AND REACHING FOR EXCELLENT INCLUSIVITY

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the methods and theories used to guide this research. First, I explain the decision to utilize the method of critical rhetorical ethnography, which is an innovative rhetorical tool that combines critical rhetorical analysis and ethnography for a more robust understanding of the ways in which rhetoric manifests. This method provides a tool to illuminate the multiple factors that shape the way IE rhetoric manifests at PWIs while also calling for action to improve the implementation of DEI initiatives. I then briefly explicate how the theoretical lenses of critical whiteness and intersectionality inform the analysis. Finally, the method employed in this dissertation demands self-reflection from the researcher; thus, I explicate my orientation towards the research and walk through my journey to discovering the need for this project.

This dissertation advocates for more ways to address the empty promises of many DEI initiatives. I consider ways in which institutions might use dialogue as a tool to reach for inclusivity, arguing that curriculum centering on dialogue could better prepare the community to embody/engage DEI while also aligning the professed goals of DEI with actions and structure. It is my hope that this research
can provide insight to the university on the usefulness of dialogue as an initiative to further the goals of IE. Additionally, this dissertation has the potential to illuminate new ways for communication educators to create classroom experiences and curriculum to prepare students to dialogue by enhancing their ability to practice dialogic skills. This dissertation considers how communication scholars can contribute to a more prosperous and embodied commitment to IE by the campus community through infusing dialogic skills into that community.

**Methodological Tools**

Critical rhetorical ethnography enables a nuanced understanding of the ways in which DEI rhetoric manifests at multiple layers within the institution. This method accounts for the ways in which several factors entangle to co-create a campus climate, institution, culture, and world. It allows for the interrogation of texts, bodies, practices, and structures that work collectively to shape DEI initiatives. This method arose from the merging of two qualitative forms of inquiry (critical rhetoric and ethnography). I now move to briefly explain how these methods work together to identify the tension between the professed goals and institutional practices and structures of DEI initiatives in order to lay a foundation to best understand the ways in which dialogue courses could be an important intervention to further the goals of IE.

Critical rhetorical analysis emerged as a tool to complicate the ways rhetoric was previously understood. Hess (2011) argued that rhetoric has traditionally been “understood as judgment upon texts for their ability to persuade, narrative prowess,
or ideological positioning” (pp. 127-128). Initially, rhetoric was characterized as “words” (spoken or written) and often centered on dominant perspectives. McKerrow (1989) explained that the goal of critical rhetoric is to “understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to elect social change” (p. 91). Ono and Sloop (1992) further argued that critical rhetoric is a project that critiques oppressive discourses that and those that espouse freedom or empowerment, as they can be just as oppressive. Thus, critical rhetoric is a good tool to interrogate the discourses of IE and how they may continue to manifest in oppressive ways.

Critical rhetoric emphasizes the expansion of rhetoric to include both self-reflection and cultural analysis (Ono & Sloop, 1992). Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres (2011) argued:

Rhetoric is not constituted simply by texts or textual fragments, but through a combination of material contexts, social relationships, identities, consciousnesses, and (interrelated) rhetorical acts that produce meanings and that are co-constructed between rhetor, audience, and particular contexts. (p. 391)

Thus, critical rhetorical analysis must attend to the text, materiality, relationality, identities, and contexts that impact DEI initiatives, which shape the campus climate. Critical rhetoric provides a strong foundation to explore problems that arise in DEI initiatives at PWIs; however, my lived experiences engaging IE on campus position me to include additional knowledge I have experienced, making critical rhetorical ethnography a more fruitful method. Hess (2011) noted:
Critical-rhetorical ethnographers may (and should) engage in textual examinations that assemble fragments of discourse and analyze the extant discursive field of invention. However, *ethnographic* rhetorical invention is the direct participation in advocacy within the scene of research as well as in the collection, preparation, and representation of data. In this way, the researcher learns of invention through enactment. (pp. 136-137)

Thus, I engage in examining the textual rhetoric of IE alongside my enactments of IE advocacy on campus. Following Calafell (2010) and Hess (2011), this research incorporates critical rhetoric with embodied experiences. I utilize critical rhetorical ethnography to tap into these embodied experiences, which provide additional insight into the ways that IE rhetoric manifests.

Specifically, I engage autoethnography within my use of critical rhetorical ethnography. Autoethnography involves merging autobiographical and ethnographic research. Autobiographies typically utilize narrative writing to describe high-impact life experiences (epiphanies, life changes, deaths, illness, etc.), which are often documented after the incident (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3). Ethnographic research involves becoming a participant observer within a culture to explore cultural practices, beliefs, values, and common experiences in order to better understand the culture (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 3). Autoethnographic research involves “retrospectively and selectively” writing about high-impact experiences that give the researcher an insight into a specific phenomenon, experience, or perspective while also analyzing these experiences through academic research standards (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4). It involves merging data from the self (auto) and culture (ethno) to illuminate the relationship between the two (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis, 2004; Merrigan & Huston, 2015). Jones (2005) stated:
Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis. Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement — between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change. (p. 764)

This process always works to create new meanings and understandings of a given topic and/or experience. The process includes an oscillation between the macro culture level and how it interplays with the micro experiences of culture to blur the lines between the two, “sometimes beyond distinct recognition” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). It involves looking in and out to expose “a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) and is attentive to “history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The process includes deeply considering the ways in which several factors come together to shape experiences of the world.

The autoethnographic research process includes drafting a story and/or “making retrospective field notes” that will be used to shape the research. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752). Next, patterns in the notes are identified as the researcher attempts to “make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging” while also making the writing accessible to a wider audience by discussing the research in a more palatable way to those within and outside of academia (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 5). Researchers must consider why the story is useful and how it might be used (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 10).
I acknowledge the ethical stakes of utilizing autoethnography in this dissertation. I shared my autoethnographic writing with one of my teaching assistants from the pilot dialogue course I was privileged to teach at DU and also with some students who have since graduated the university. Autoethnographic research is attentive to the fact that stories are always entwined with others. This means that ethical questions arise during the storying process: “[W]hen we conduct and write research, we implicate others in our work” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 8). Often, autoethnographers ask those implicated in the text to review and respond in order to assess their perceptions and feelings of the work. To protect the privacy of those involved in this story, identifying characteristics are altered to without compromising the data.

This critical rhetorical ethnographic analysis considers the interplay between published statements and plans pertaining IE, a campus climate report that includes student perspectives of IE, and lived experiences from involvement with IE on campus. I explore the professed values and goals present in several documents pertaining to IE, searching for factors that entangle to shape the rhetoric of IE and its impact at the institution. I employ autoethnographic tools to share my experiences, including: teaching courses that center dialogue on privilege and oppression, working as a graduate student government IE liaison, and researching IE. Hess (2011) explained that within “critical-rhetorical ethnography, rhetoric offers a collaborative mapping for participants and the ethnographer who work together to advocate the position of the vernacular in accordance with the virtues of
that community” (p. 135). This method accounts for the ways in which several factors entangle to co-create a campus climate, institution, culture, and world while offering a space to map, explore, and advocate for change within institutions implementing DEI initiatives.

I examine the dialectical relationship between the professed goals of IE and the structures and actions of IE initiatives. Middleton et al. (2011) claimed that there is a dialectical relationship between “rhetorical texts and the lived experiences through which those texts are encountered and come to have significant meanings” (p. 392). This dialectical relationship illustrates the need to reconsider what concrete actions universities can take to better align their professed goals with their actions. Hess (2011) noted, “embodied advocacy, as performed and witnessed under ethnographic conditions, provides critical rhetoricians with an opportunity to not only maintain a critical attitude toward discourse but also connect research practices with activism” (p. 129). Thus, my experiences, coupled with critical rhetorical analysis, offer an opportunity for activist-based research that considers the usefulness of dialogue about privilege and oppression at a PWI implementing IE, while seeking ways to push for positive change. Hess calls for this method to “advocate for change by supporting the vernacular organization and its conception of a (new) political reality” (p. 136). Critical rhetorical ethnography enables a more robust engagement with the way IE is discussed, understood, and performed (or not) on campus, while offering solutions for ways to push for change. This method
combined with the lenses of intersectionality and critical whiteness to provide a framework to understand how IE rhetoric manifests at a PWI.

**Theoretical Lenses**

In order to consider how to best equip college communities with dialogic skills, I turn to the lens of critical whiteness and intersectional feminism to illuminate the complex context of privilege and oppression in higher education. Higher education is intimately linked to racial violence. As such, a critical focus on race must be used to illuminate the racist underpinnings of the university in an attempt to reconcile that violence. More specifically, this research considers the manifestation of DEI initiatives at PWIs, making critical whiteness a necessary consideration. Critical whiteness studies (CWS) operates from the “premise that racism and white privilege exist in both traditional and modern forms, and rather than work to prove its existence, work to reveal it” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56).

“Whiteness” has become a common term in discourses about equity and inclusion. The term “whiteness” is ambiguous and difficult to define because it is broad, systemic, and alters to maintain dominance. The term is often falsely understood to mean white skin. Shome (1999) argued that “whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric worldviews” (p. 108). While white norms are centered, they also go unmarked; the white race is conflated to the “human race” (Dyer, 2012, p. 11). Thus depictions, understandings, and ideologies of humanity are
premised on white (masculine) norms. Since whiteness goes unmarked and is conflated as a human norm, it is difficult for white folks to acknowledge the violence this creates for people of color.

Whiteness is pervasive, ever-moving, and constantly evading identification. It is a system ingrained at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in ways that make it normalized and unchallenged. White folks are taught at every level to not see, notice, or believe that racism exists. This makes disrupting racial ignorance very difficult. A large part of the dissonance at PWIs with DEI initiatives is a tension between predominantly privileged and minoritized students. There is a lack of communication, understanding, and appreciation amongst social identity groups. To attempt to reconcile this dissonance and systemic oppression, attention to race and all forms of oppression must be noted. This kind of analysis demands an intersectional approach.

Further, rather than view social identities as flat, independent pieces or oppression as limited to a single axis, I take an intersectional feminist approach to this research. An intersectional approach to feminism was created by black feminists to advocate for the understanding of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity as “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins, 1993, pp. 536-538; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality provides a lens that considers multiple factors that shape experience. The location of individuals within interlocking systems of privilege and oppression affects the ways they experience and co-create a campus climate. Intersectionality provides a lens to explore the
rhetoric of IE and the discourses surrounding privilege and oppression that account for both the differences and similarities of experiences.

This research uses intersectional feminism to identify the ways in which particular voices have been privileged and oppressed and to consider how to create moments for understanding across these differences (Abdi, 2014; Calafell, 2013; Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Ghabra, 2015). Dialogue of privilege and oppression in higher education at a PWI requires paying attention to multiple identity factors and, following CWS, a central focus on race to combat the legacies of racial inequity. Critical rhetorical ethnography, coupled with CWS and intersectionality, allows me to access multiple factors that contribute to a campus climate. Critical rhetorical ethnography calls for self-reflection and to be actively involved in the research topic concretely; it asks us to “to build wisdom through continued engagement with the practices, politics, and policies of the campaign and its advocacy” (Hess, 2011, p. 147). In other words, multiple spaces, iterations, and branches of the institution must be examined to consider how several factors work together to shape the rhetoric of DEI, while also looking for new ways to overcome old hurdles. Part of this process requires rejecting objectivity, assumed researcher neutrality, or detachment to become “personally involved with the contextual and local advocacy” (Hess, 2011, p. 138). Therefore, I now discuss my positionality and the wisdom I learned from my own experiences in coming to find the need for dialogue about privilege and oppression within DEI initiatives on PWIs. There are many pivotal moments I could use to describe the epiphanies that led me to this dissertation;
however, many of them would implicate other members of the community in ways that blur ethical lines of ethnographic research. In such a small department, it would be impossible to share my experiences with anonymity to other folks implicated. Thus, I have highlighted the most salient experiences on my journey that offer the most anonymity to my community, peers, faculty, and students.

Researcher Positionality: From Cornfields to the Battlefield

Cornfield Community

I was born in central Illinois in 1985. My mother was barely 16 years old when she gave birth to me. My mother had endured abuse from her stepfather and ran away at a young age. She survived through sex work. My mother did not know who my father was; however, she had a boyfriend who was black at the time, and my family did not approve. My mom told me that when I came out white, my family rejoiced in the hall. When I was two years old, my great grandparents offered to adopt me—the same great grandparents who wanted nothing to do with me if I was black, or so my mom and aunts tell me. I remember pondering how different my life would have been if I were black. Would my great grandparents have still loved me? They never mentioned race to me that I recall. Race just wasn’t something we talked about. My mom said she knew they would be able to give me a better life and that she always felt like I helped change their perception on race because they loved me so much. I lived in my great grandparents’ home until I graduated high school.

My great grandmother was born in 1928. She fit the archetype of the good white lady. She went to church every Sunday always dressed nice. She wore pearls,
never cussed, and always told me to act like a lady. She survived the depression and spent much of her free time polishing her silver while singing Patsy Cline. Sometimes I see an ad from the 1950s and think, *That looks like my great grandma.* My great grandfather was born in 1926; he survived WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. He lied about his age to fight in WWII and often told me stories from the war when I was kid. I now see that those bedtime war stories were quite racist depictions of Asian opponents. He belonged to the Masons, the Moose Club, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and he loved his guns. He had a swag about him—everybody loved to be around him. He always taught me to “stand up for what is right, even if you are standing alone.” I often think of the irony that a racist man instilled this message in me, a message that has led me to do research to disrupt racism. I lost both of my great grandparents when I was young; I am quite certain that we would not get along well today. They had a huge influence on my life, how I understood myself in the world, and they always (unintentionally) caused me to question my race. Racism was a constant in my hometown, and my great grandparents weren’t much different.

My hometown has 650 residents tucked back in cornfields, was filled with dusty roads and was populated by sameness. My village was all white until two biracial families moved in during junior high. I heard people make racist comments my entire life. I also had family members tell me that this was wrong. I was deeply shaped by this specific type of white isolation and limited exposure. DiAngelo (2011) described white isolation as the strategic moves that are made to keep white
people in separate spaces (e.g., housing and schools). In all white spaces, white supremacy is ignored through denial, naturalization of racism, and a complete lack of exposure to people of color. This caused me to believe that I was liberal and excused from involvement with racism because I did not espouse racist rhetoric and did not have many interactions with people of color. For me, racism was a problem for Republicans and people in “the South” who say hateful things.

**Undergraduate Years: But I am Not Racist!**

I went to a private university in my home state after high school, a school very similar to DU and largely comprised of affluent white students. I remember rushing up four flights of stairs to my dorm room and thinking, *This is it!* I always loved education, and I could not wait to finally be in college. My family left and I began unpacking my room. I danced around aimlessly and imagined all of the cool classes I would take and the people I would meet. Then I saw it: a black bug crawling on the floor. I panicked; I had never seen a bug like this before. I grabbed my tape and secured the bug to the floor. What if this is a cockroach? I ran into the hall panicked. There was no one else there. I needed someone to tell! Finally, a young woman walked around the corner. "Oh, I am so glad I found someone. I found this bug on the floor and I think that it might be a cockroach. Can you come see if you think it is? If there is one in my room, it could crawl to yours!"

She looked mortified and quickly responded, “You think because I am black I know what a cockroach looks like!”
I was shocked. I quickly responded, “Of course not! You are the first person I saw to ask!” I left so confused. *How could she think I was racist? I have yelled at my friends for saying racist things.* Then I pondered, *Why would she think that of me?* I thought harder and realized most of the white people I knew were racist. I realized that my lack of interactions with people of color made it extremely difficult for me to understand how race impacted their experiences. This interaction sparked curiosity; I knew that race largely shapes the way we all view the world, from witnessing the loathing of any person with an identity, beliefs, or behaviors that fall outside of dominant norms, especially regarding race. However, I had no clue how to talk about it, what it meant, or if I had a race. I just knew I was not racist. I felt misunderstood the whole time I was at this institution.

I was there on scholarship amidst a sea of people from Chicago and St. Louis who had significantly more money than me. I had never realized that I was, well, poor. My peers had designer everything and access to what seemed like an unlimited amount of financial resources. I made regular visits to the financial aid office and worked several food service jobs to afford books. On top of all of that, I spoke slowly. I remember people stating around me that I had a cute “hick accent.” I never really felt like I fit in there; the whole place felt foreign. The first time I interacted with a person who was Latinx was also at this university. She worked in janitorial services. I remember the first time we met. I walked into the bathroom and saw her cleaning the mirrors. When I said hello, she looked quite puzzled and confused. We became great friends, and I remember getting angry with the way my
peers acted like she did not exist. Sometimes it felt like I was seeing a ghost no one else could see. The atmosphere at the school was largely shaped by white, upper-class norms, values, and beliefs. Most of my peers saw her as “the help.”

My final breaking straw with this school occurred during a Western Civilization course. I never had the language to discuss feminism, but I always got annoyed by my second class status. During every lecture, the professor indicated that women were only good for sexual reproduction. Every time, I felt the hairs on my neck stand up, my leg start to fidget, and my heart raced. I looked around the room but, to my dismay, I seemed to be the only person who cared. My female peers with uniform, blonde ponytails aimlessly wrote his sexist slur in their notes every time. I left the school after this course because I could not handle the regurgitative model of education. That, and I wanted more from my peers.

I left and went to a state school instead. There I felt much more comfortable; I was now amongst students that came from a similar class status and my peers were excited to be in school. The school was very small; most everyone was white and working class. We were not there to go through the motions; we were there riding the high of promise of possibility and growth. When I think back to my educational experiences, I had mostly white faculty and peers. My teachers looked like me and could often mirror my identity. Textbooks included experiences that often mirrored my experience or family stories. My teachers challenged me and I always did my best to rise to the occasion. It was here that I found community and an identify as a feminist.
Social Amnesia: But that is NOT What My Family and Teachers Said!

My first experience realizing that I was complicit in racism occurred as an undergraduate. It was 2008. I sat in the front row of my Communication and Race undergraduate course. The petite, white, woman professor stood in front of class and picked up a marker. She wrote “Andrew Jackson” on the board. She turned to us and asked what we knew about him. My hand shot up with excitement. She smiled, calling on me.

I quickly responded, “Well, he was a US President and he came from Tennessee. I went to his house once, I am actually a direct descendent of him!” My professor looked confused by my excitement. She went on to explain the gruesome truths of his involvement with the Trail of Tears. I felt blood rush through my body. I thought my lunch might jump out onto the table. She discussed the orders he gave, his direct role in settler colonialism, and native genocide. I was confused. My family was liberal—we believed in justice and equity. Why did they lie to me? The feeling seemed antithetical to everything my family had ever taught me…or does it? I was raised to always stand up for what is right, even if I stood alone. I was raised to never judge others and always be kind. My jaw began to tighten as my head began to spin. I responded, “Why the fuck am I junior in college and just now hearing about this?!” I remember being so angry. I knew that power functioned to mirage the truth through indoctrination into fantastical illusions of how our country was formed. The violence to indigenous people was always skipped over, but how did I not see it? I started thinking of terms I could associate with “native” that were dominant
depictions of the word. I realized that the dominant discourses I had been exposed to were naive (in that they needed our help) and downright dehumanizing (savage, wild, violent). I was angry that my ignorance and lack of critical thinking had been believing the bleached stories I was told. White Europeans did not discover “America;” rather, they stole it. We murdered almost everyone who lived there and claimed it as our own. I couldn’t help but wonder, What is true? What else had people lied to me about? Who could I trust, if not my family and school?

We live in a culture that whitewashes history. At that point, I didn’t have the language or critical tools to identify that this was caused by white ownership of knowledge. These dominant narratives we are taught in school shape our orientation towards understanding the violent realities of our country’s foundation. Further, if we believe the fairy tale versions of US history, it makes it difficult to engage the experiences of those who have been silenced and pushed to the margins, as well as those who continue to directly suffer based on the inherent violence and oppression of our structures, systems, and ideologies. When we hear the same story over and over (i.e., “We were explorers invested in freedom and liberty and justice for all”), we lose sight of the cost. Thus, if people believe that white Europeans came here to “explore” and settle on “new” land, they will have a hard time empathizing with experiences of Native Americans. A shift away from this bleached narrative, towards a more critical interrogation of our past and how it continues to (re)produce inequity, must occur. However, a shift cannot occur without making
space for real talk, which will be the most effective at combatting oppression as we learn the skills to dialogue.

In another class, I read Angela Davis’s work on sexual violence. I remember being outraged when she suggest that women of color experience sexual violence differently. I couldn’t wait to get to class and tell my teacher all about it. When she asked for our response to the reading, I quickly responded, “Rape is just rape! I didn’t get justice either and I am a white woman. I mean who really cares, let’s just agree rape is wrong and fight together to end it.”

My teacher quickly responded that I had sounded racist and to read the text over again. About one year and countless re-reads later, I began to understand what Angela Davis and my teacher were saying. While I thought I was being critical, I was continuously falling into a white feminist trope, guilty of not interrogating race. I was also guilty of conflating feminist goals to the issues my white body faced. I assumed that all bodies experienced rape the same way my white body did and/or that any differences were irrelevant. I placed my white experience at the center and negated violent realities in service of my own pursuit of justice.

I realized how white experiences had been lumped as human experiences. I also began to see how experiences shape our entire orientation towards the world. I always loved education and I knew that I wanted to be a professor. I wanted to give students the tools my teachers gave me. I wanted to help open minds and make the world a better place. As naive as that sounds, it is truly how I felt. I had been to a talk by a woman who had three different degrees. I was fascinated by her
transdisciplinary background and wanted to follow suit. I applied to a couple interdisciplinary graduate programs and left Illinois to move in with my partner in Louisiana.

**Southern “Hospitality” and Suburban Isolation**

I traded in Illinois cornfields for the swamps just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana after graduating with an undergraduate degree. This was truly a bizarre experience. When I first got there I was in love: The warm moist air was intoxicating and everyone was so nice. I remember telling my partner, “I think we should stay here forever.” I found a job working at a law office, where I was called a “Damn Yankee” and where I often had to tell clients not to use the “n-word” around me. At first I felt a little confused being called a “yankee” and I didn’t like it. After a couple weeks, I even called myself one. I remember taking a trip with my partner to Bourbon Street. It was July 4th, and it was hot and crowded. A young black man fell into me. I turned around to see what was going on behind me, and he looked terrified. He looked down at the ground and apologized, adding “Miss” at the end of his sentence. I was confused. He looked so scared. I couldn’t help but wonder why. When I lived in the Midwest people bumped me all the time, but no one ever looked scared. Gender functioned differently in New Orleans, too. I remember a woman once touched my breast and told me that I should get a “boob job.” I was so confused. I remember calling an old professor and saying, “I feel like I stepped in a time machine where most everyone is racist and women come equipped with fake
breasts and hand guns.” I was happy to leave and a little shook by what I had experienced.

When I was accepted to the interdisciplinary program I wanted to attend, I moved from the swamps to the foothills just outside Denver. I found myself again almost all white, working or lower-middle class people. I declared my areas of specialization to be philosophy and gender studies. While the presence of gender studies was miniscule, in philosophy I was treated as less worthy than my male peers. I only read philosophy written by a woman in one class, and none of them were women of color. I spent these years immersed in Kant, Hegel, and Marx, which provided a strong foundation, but my focus was gone and I felt unsure about what I needed to do. Suburb living provided blinders that prevented me from engaging in racial dialogues or discussions of privilege and oppression. I knew I needed to keep working on this, which led me to pursue a PhD in intercultural communication.

**PhD: Wait, but I am Still Racist?**

I remember starting my PhD program and saying many things that reiterated colorblind racism. I still operated from the premise that humans were all the same. It was the first quarter of my doctorate program and I was excited to be taking intercultural communication from a leading scholar in the field. The class sat in a circle and someone mentioned that Raven Symoné had said: “I am an American; I’m not an African-American” (as cited in Hare, 2014, para. 8). I responded, “So, I don’t say I am German American, I just say American. What is wrong with that?” I read some of the non-verbal effects the second line caused as the phrase left my tongue. I
was so confused. What did I do? I felt misunderstood. Another student jumped in and indicated that the statement was colorblind racism. Put off by the use of the word racism, I quickly responded that I was simply extending to her the same privileges granted to me, to be seen as an American. I was not the one being racist.

*Why are they all holding her to a different standard?* I wondered. I was confused and asked for further clarification. In this moment, my professor and peers embodied critical love (hooks, 2000) and asked probing questions that I answered (without defensiveness or negative emotions). They did not get angry and held me accountable to what I had said. Students and my professor shared with me their experiences with race and all of the ways that American identity is not granted to them based on their nationality, class, and race. We dove-tailed into intersectionality and fleshed out the ways that Symoné’s class privilege granted her a different experience with race that allowed her to also adopt a colorblind perspective. I came to see how I was wrong and reiterated colorblind racism. I became invested in critical race studies after several peers made efforts to raise my levels of racial awareness.

**The Battlefield: Trying to Call Myself and Others In**

As I continued to try to raise my own level of racial awareness, I started trying to also help others. Though, I ran into several problems that I was not sure how to overcome. One pivotal moment occurred during a service-learning course I attended. The class was working with an organization that provided an after-school
program to transitionally homeless students. I wrote about an interaction I observed in my journal on April 13, 2015:

The children were sitting, some slouched, some fidgeting, and some lying on their stomachs; the white male employee, Eric, grew increasingly frustrated by the apparent lack of uniformity. He kept saying, “Everyone should be sitting in their seat, not moving, not making noise.” He started saying, “three people are doing what they are supposed to, five people...and so on.” Eventually, Eric just began speaking. There were a few boys who continued to be loud and energetic (some moving around); he found this disruptive. I understand his desire for an attentive audience and control of a classroom; however, his frustration was very outward. Eric continuously said: “Do the right thing,” and I just thought to myself what is the “right” thing? After this exercise, the children were dismissed one-by-one. He did not dismiss the three boys who he was frustrated with. As the three boys sat there around him, he addressed the only white boy in the group. He said something to the effect of, you are new here and you don’t want to hang out with these two, they are trouble. He then dismissed the white child. My jaw nearly hit the ground! Talk about whiteness, oh my! I tried to contain myself and just listen to the interaction and what was going on. He then discussed moving the remaining two children of color down this board they have that is blue, yellow, and red. If they get to red they cannot return the next day. He looked up and told my peer, Allison, and I to go into the other area.

After this incident, I found it pertinent to share my observation with Rachel, the leader of this organization. For a period of time, Rachel was homeless; therefore, she felt a deep connection with the children in her after-school program. I admire and respect the work that she and her organization does. She tasked us with advising on how to implement “best informed trauma practices.” As a critical race scholar, it seemed evident that a huge area to consider is how race informs a child's trauma. The organization almost exclusively served children of color and had an all-white staff. During my next meeting with Rachel, I brought up the interaction I observed. I explained that from my perspective as a critical race scholar, I thought it would be helpful to consider the ways in which race impacts their trauma, adding
that I had also observed some racialized interactions during my time there. Rachel became visibly upset. I offered her the example of my observation of Eric and how he had showed differential treatment to a white boy, yet marked the children of color doing the same thing as troublesome. Rachel got really angry. She seemed appalled that I said “race.” She shouted back, “This has nothing to do with race!” I looked around the room; Allison looked equally as baffled as I did. Rachel looked as though her head might explode. I looked around again and my other peers just stared at the ground. One of my peers changed the topic and moved on to other suggestions and observations. I sat there dismayed, I thought Rachel would want to know that this was happening.

When the meeting was over, the other students got up and left abruptly, which left just Allison, Rachel, and myself. Allison and I were both uncomfortable by her response, so we stood up and started to walk off. Rachel still looked visibly upset. I said: “I’m really sorry if I offended you, that was not my intention.” She shouted back that she was not racist, leaning her body near mine. Allison and I started to slowly back up. I responded, “I am not calling you racist, it is just from my researcher paradigm, I view trauma in an intersectional way, which acknowledges how race and class are coming together to shape many of the children’s trauma. I know that you and your employees pour your hearts into this program. I am just trying to share with you what I observed. I know that this job is very demanding, and you are all doing the best you can.” The apology seemed to make things worse. She shouted back with her upper body almost at a 45 degree angle that she had read
Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Allison and I looked at each other quite confused and, by this point, we were both almost backed against a wall, quite literally. Around that time, our professor came and had us to return to class. Rachel left and our teacher looked at us and indicated that she would talk about the incident later. I could tell we were in trouble.

A couple days later, I received a phone call from my professor (who I will call Kathy). She explained that Rachel was really upset and that I could have jeopardized her partnership with the organization. I explained that I wished that interaction had gone differently and that I was not trying to be mean. I apologized several times, but felt a growing frustration inside me. My professor continued on that my behavior was inappropriate and tried to listen empathetically. I paused, “Ok, but at what point do you acknowledge how unacceptable her behavior was? I wasn’t making these things up. These were my observations.” She explained that Rachel thought I was calling her racist. I explained that I never called her racist; I simply tried to consider how to better understand the trauma of the community she serves. I asked her my professor, “Who are we supposed to serve in this project? The kids or the organization?” I realized that Kathy may have a strong reaction, but she indicated that it was for the kids. I added that I have grown to love the kids, hat my heart breaks for the kids generally, and that watching them get punished for such minuscule things has worn on me. “If you think I need to apologize again, I will,” I added. She responded with words that have haunted me for years, asking how a communication scholar justifies having conversations with people I know are
uncomfortable. I quickly responded, "Well, Kathy, it depends on whose uncomfortable you are privileging. Perhaps Rachel felt uncomfortable in that moment, but what about the uncomfortability that the children in her program experience every day from living in a racist world and, in some instances, the organization is perpetuating that trauma?" We both grew silent.

The quarter ended awkwardly; neither of us really knew how to navigate this situation. Kathy and I worked it out the best we could; however, this was a memorable experience because it solidified that we did not have the tools to ethically, effectively, and appropriately negotiate the multiple tensions. She pushed me to question how, as a communication scholar, I can navigate white fragility in discussions of racism without shutting the other person down. I continued to do training sessions with several organizations in the Denver area and saw several patterns emerge in dialogues about race. For starters, the second I utter "race," many white people shut down. Further, emotions arise and people often do not know how to process those emotions. It is not uncommon to see a white student with a red face, furrowed brow, crossed arms, and a blank stare. The anger and frustration is obviously there; however, it is not engaged or processed. There is a lack of empathy for experiences that differ from white norms.

**There is No Winner or Loser: Moving Towards Dialogue**

A conservative group on campus led by an undergraduate student organized a "dialogue" about IE. I was advised not to attend the event; however, as a Graduate Student Government IE liaison, I felt I needed to be there. I sat in a filled auditorium
and watched one young, white, undergraduate male speak at a room full of mostly people of color about how white privilege was a myth. The student, who was far from an expert, espoused overtly racist rhetoric that reinforced ideologies that naturalized racism and placed blame on people of color. I watched in dismay as people of color began crying and leaving the room. I felt pain and hurt in the room. I watched him in awe. He did not hide behind a keyboard—he said to people of color that any negative things they experienced were their own fault. At one point, he argued the problem with black people was the lack of father figures in their families and the multiple children black women carried alone. I felt my body tighten harder. A white woman faculty acted as the alleged moderator by protecting the speaker’s white masculinity. She interjected when anyone questioned his knowledge, experiences, or perspectives. She sat in silence when he spouted rhetoric that brought people to tears, silenced their experiences, and undermined their lived realities. It was clear that she was on a side. I observed his logic for quite some time before jumping in. I explained to him that at moments he pointed to structural racism; however, he also stated that white privilege did not exist. Before I could move on to the rest of my point, he cut me off to tell me I was disgusting and the reason racism existed. I angrily shouted at me to not speak over him, and I pointed out that his intentions were to have a dialogue but did not allow authentic engagement from anyone with a perspective different than his own. The woman moderator interrupted and told me to let him talk. I shouted back, “Why don’t you let anyone talk? Your role seems to be to protect this student with absolutely no
expertise on race in the US to espouse hate and hurt to our community without even the consequence of hearing perspectives different than his own! This is ridiculous!” The speaker went on to regurgitate rhetoric that people who discuss race are the ones who are really racist. I wanted to dialogue, but this was not a dialogue. This was a lecture—a lecture where a young, white, male, undergraduate student was given space and protected by the university to say whatever he wanted, regardless of consequences. It was a space that was always only structured for him to win in an alleged dialogue, one in which he never intended to hear other arguments about the topic. His “win” was the perpetuation of oppression and the protection of white masculinity on campus at the cost of silencing minoritized voices. I left in a rage, only to see a group of students crying and holding each other outside the door.

A follow-up event was hosted by the DU student government and the Office of Campus Life and Inclusion. I attended this event as well. Again, the room was comprised of predominantly students of color. People from the group that hosted the alleged dialogue were also invited; however, none attended. There was never a true desire for dialogue. Further, it became clear that the communicative skills for a productive or generative talk were simply not present. I did not see empathy, emotional awareness, intersectional reflexivity, active listening, or critical thinking. I saw a regurgitation of racist rhetoric under the guise of the political freedom of expression. I did not embody the skills to dialogue either; I couldn’t translate my emotions into a desirable outcome. Initially, I was angry with the situation; however, it took time for me to realize that I was not embodying the skills I wished
to see in the speaker, either. I, too, was shut down. It is easy to point the finger at those who oppose you, but we must be attentive of our own behavior and truly question if that behavior pushes closer to equity. Mine did not.

During this interaction, I wondered, *What would happen if this really were a dialogue? What messages did the audience receive as the student was given space and protection to espouse his beliefs?* Further, I noted that those invested in changing the campus climate are overwhelmingly people of color. Most white students, faculty, and staff do not attend racial campus climate meetings, IE initiatives, or protests. The racial tension on campus is painfully obvious; however, it will never change if the people perpetuating racism on campus are not involved. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) explained that few white people are involved or understand the urgency to combat racism (p. 13). White orientations towards racism are often shaped by ignorance, false narratives of history, and investment in beliefs and practices that perpetuate the oppression of minoritized groups. King explained that given the violent, everyday realities for people of color, white people should understand the “unavoidable impatience” (p. 7) of people of color. How do you get white people to understand such urgency when their bodies are not at risk? White people can go wherever they want without hearing a racial slur, be stereotyped because of their race, told to “go back to your country,” or beaten and killed by a police officer because they are black or brown. This statement generally holds true for most privileged identities. Since we/they do not feel the DISadvantage of our/their
privilege, it is hard to understand the urgency, violence, and pain inherent in our/their privilege—most people do not even know it is there.

Several things must happen to create positive change in a campus climate. First, we must acknowledge that there is a problem with racial tension in our culture and on campus. Then we must acknowledge that we will never grow closer to understanding until we can authentically dialogue across different experiences, perspectives, and beliefs. We live in a culture that encourages debate or competitive argumentation or persuasion, coupled with a demonization of emotions. This demonization has led to more conversations in order to suppress emotions instead of learning to identify and engage them. Further, we are all deeply invested in our beliefs, attitudes, and values; therefore, it only makes sense that we would argue to defend them. When racist ideologies are espoused, I have observed several different mediums from which I have received this message. I think back to how I learned to be white and my on-going struggle to critically interrogate this position. I think back to which skills I learned that really make a difference and I ponder how to teach these skills in the classroom. Shortly after the follow-up event, I considered how to take the communicative skills I gained and translate them to action. I thought back to how I responded during the event and realized that I needed more opportunities to practice the skills. I knew all the terms, but I lacked the practice of employing them. The next year, I was asked to teach a pilot dialogue course in as a part of the DU Dialogues initiative. This was a very exciting experience, and it left me inspired by the power of dialogue.
After witnessing several attempts by myself and others to raise levels of racial awareness, I identified a lack of several skills that needed to be taught and practiced: empathy, intersectional reflexivity, active listening, and emotional awareness. How can we understand experiences different from our own without some semblance of empathy? Further, how can we understand the complex nuances of those different experiences and perspectives without applying intersectional reflexivity? How can we ever hear other perspectives if we are taught to listen and respond rather than listen and learn? How can we overcome the emotional roadblocks to strong emotions like defensiveness, anger, and guilt without an emotional awareness to help identify what we feel and why, and how to process it generatively? How can we do any of these things without critical thought? My work has continued to grapple with all of these questions. How do we teach and practice these skills so that people might develop the critical consciousness necessary to genuinely reach for inclusion? Finally, how might an intellectual institution like DU use the classroom to teach and practice these skills so that IE efforts contain the communicative skills necessary to create change from the ground up? If we had these skills as a community, how might that reverberate back through the institution to push for positive change?

**Conclusion**

I had several conversations with colleagues, mentors, and students about this vision. Some seemed genuinely invested in seeing the power of these skills to make positive, institutional change. For many privileged persons, this feels like extra
work; as such, they fail to see a need to dialogue about privilege and oppression. While a discussion of skills sounds nice and relatively uncontroversial, the implications of embodying these skills shatters one’s perspective. These skills all shape the way we engage one another and how we understand ourselves. It is a rollercoaster of emotions and epiphanies that often leaves one upside down, shaken, and sometimes nauseous. Empathy is not easy; it means to try and understand experiences different from one’s own and it is sometimes antithetical to the ideologies that inform attitudes, beliefs, and values. Jones (2010) noted that intersectional reflexivity “cuts to the bone,” as it forces us to grapple with the implications of our own actions, structures, and systems (p. 124). When truly listening, we are vulnerable to hearing experiences that disrupt our perspectives and, further, to considering how we may be implicated in the experiences of oppression. When we learn to identify and engage our emotions in a healthy way, we may be shocked to see the things that live inside us. When we think critically about all of these things together, we might encounter a paradigmatic shift that crumbles our foundations. None of this is easy work, but the cost of living without these skills is a loss of human connection and the perpetuation of oppression.

These skills are not the only factor that perpetuates oppression, of course. I naively assumed that higher education was a place of opportunity, intellectual growth, and possibility. I was sold the rhetoric of the “American Dream,” complete with a husband who comes from money, a house in the suburbs, and a baby. This dream was made possible for me by structures that benefit white people. This is not
to say that I have not worked hard to get where I am but, without my white skin and stereotypical appearance, I would not have had access to an undergraduate education. Further, without marrying wealth, it would have been significantly more difficult to afford any graduate education. I remember discussing my research to a faculty member that identifies theoretically as a black radical. I told him my project and he chuckled. He asked me why I believed in IE because, if it worked, it would blow itself up. I was confused and unsure what he meant. He seemed to be suggesting that higher education was inherently linked to white supremacy; thus, it could never be a space of equity. I began researching for my comprehensive exams and I quickly learned that he was right. It was a space used to justify white supremacy through research that was produced to alleviate white guilt for the enslavement and genocide of native peoples (Wilder, 2013). This history was bleached and replaced with narratives of hard work, success, and opportunity for all. How then, if it is possible, do we reconcile this tension? It is imperative that we do not let institutional failures cause us to flounder in guilt or become incapacitated by the violent realities of our ties to systemic violence. There is no DEI initiative that can magically absolve our intimate ties to slavery and colonization. IE will also not solve all such problems, but it has the opportunity to provide us with tools to which we can use to generate action and the institution better.

The key to all DEI initiatives is putting them into *action*. Creating a positive campus climate that embodies the intelligence, humility, accountability, and resources to combat exclusion is not easy. A common critique in research on DEI
initiatives is a failure to align the professed goals of the institution with its actions (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2016). The next chapter addresses this general concern with DEI initiatives and explores DU’s statements and plans regarding IE. My critical rhetorical ethnographic analysis is informed by text and experiences working with IE at DU, in the following capacities: researcher, participant in official IE initiatives, and activist. I consider how the rhetoric is actualized through the entanglements of multiple factors including (but not limited to): text in documents pertaining to IE, lived experiences, historical context, and structures of oppression. This chapter explores how IE rhetoric manifests at DU in order to identify potential dissonance within the rhetoric and consider the usefulness of dialogue as an intervention. Dialogue builds a necessary framework to assess the promises made that many feel have been broken; further, it provides a space to consider how we might work to better align our goals and actions.
CHAPTER 4: I KNOW WHAT YOU SAY, BUT WHAT DO YOU DO?: EXPLORING INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE RHETORIC AND ACTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to explore the relationship between the professed goals and praxis surrounding IE at a PWI while also considering how dialogue can propel us closer to its goals. This chapter provides an overview of the stated goals and values of the institution in order to better understand how the textual commitments, structures, and experiences and then to work collectively to shape DEI rhetoric. I question how more work to prepare the community to have dialogues could invite positive institutional change. Through critical rhetorical ethnography, I weave my experiences and observations of IE to illuminate dissonance and consider dialogue as one intervention to a hostile campus climate. This discusses the ways that IE rhetoric has manifested at DU.

DU does not exist in a bubble; the issues present on campus are representative of larger systems of domination and long legacies of white supremacy, as discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. The point of this critique is not to attack DU—an institution that equipped me with the knowledge and tools I use to explore IE, racism, and dialogue. Rather, the point is to be humble and acknowledge
the ongoing need to push the university and society to do more to identify, disrupt, and fight against oppression. I begin by exploring the dialectical relationship between the rhetorical text present in the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011 and the experiences of the DU community found in the Campus Climate 2012 Report, which illuminates (dis)continuity between rhetoric and experiences. The Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011 is not the most recent document that engages IE; however, it engages the most explicitly with IE and most closely aligns with the Campus Climate 2012 Report. I engage the rhetorical text present in “The Chancellor’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” and the DU IMPACT 2025 report. Finally, I analyze the rhetorical texts and structures of a dialogue initiative at DU.

Inclusive Excellence at the University of Denver

DU published a written dedication to IE in several articles of literature: the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011, “The Chancellor’s Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusive Excellence,” DU IMPACT 2025, and in several places on the web. A written commitment to IE is an important step; however, too often these commitments do not manifest, leaving only empty promises. When searching the DU web page for IE, browsers are most often directed to the Center for Multicultural Excellence (CME) page. On the CME page, users find that DU was introduced to IE in 2006, when Dr. Alma Clayton Pedersen of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) gave a keynote speech at the DU Diversity Summit. Afterwards, it was decided by Chancellor Coombe and Provost
Kvistad to have senior leadership at DU begin working with CME to implement IE at DU. The fact that we have a chancellor willing to engage in dialogue about IE and wonderful staff members running IE initiatives demonstrates an institutional desire to engage IE. However, the concept of IE demands continually interrogating practices, policies, and the overall campus climate to ensure that the institution continually reaches for inclusivity.

After spending time at DU, it is clear that many community members are unaware of what IE actually means or how to act accordingly. As an instructor at DU, I often ask my students what they think IE is. When I first came to DU, IE was a common term I heard, yet I had no interactions with IE rhetoric outside the vision and dedication to IE in most of my department’s graduate-level courses. The level of engagement varies from school to school and department to department at DU. Undergraduate students seem less familiar with what it means; students often respond that IE means “diversity,” “equity,” or “everyone is welcome.” When I ask why they think DU has an IE initiative, privileged students often seem puzzled, unclear as to why IE matters and, therefore, feel no need to engage. Further, many students of color share experiences that illuminate the university’s failure to create an inclusive space. My attendance at campus climate meetings has made it abundantly clear that at DU and many students, faculty, and staff are not engaged in embodying the community’s shared dedication to IE; nor are they intellectually equipped to have dialogues about “ist” ideologies that plague the campus community, culture, and society at large. In 2016, at the DU Diversity Summit, Dr.
Lilliana Rodriguez, then the Vice Chancellor for Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence at DU, explained that the ey have heard pain. Many students in the community have deep wounds that are not being addressed. Thus, there is dissonance between the goals, recognition, engagement, and outcomes of IE. So that the institution can come closer to eliminating oppression, it must continue to strive to assume responsibility, identify weaknesses, and implement action-oriented plans that make the institution better. I acknowledge that the roots of higher education institutions are entangled with several oppressive structures, values, and practices that are embedded in culture. Thus, there is no DEI initiative that can completely eradicate oppressive practices. However, as a tempered radical, I aim to find ways to push for equity driven progress in my institution. IE has the potential to create positive institutional change, but it does not have the power to end oppression. From my tempered radical perspective, I know that the institution is inherently violent and situated within larger structures of power and domination (as detailed in Chapter 2). As a tempered radical, I also acknowledge the potential to create change within a system that has not yet been dismantled and remains a pillar of (dominant) US culture (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

**Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011 and the Campus Climate 2012 Report**

In 2011, a strategic plan was released to the DU community for how IE would be incorporated. This plan outlined how DU will focus on the following:

1. Increasing compositional diversity, with a particular emphasis on historically underrepresented groups;
(2) Creating a positive campus climate where all persons are treated with respect; and

(3) Embedding the first two within University policies and practices so that they become part of the very fabric of the University. (University of Denver, 2011, p. 1)

The plan goes on to illustrate several goals, as follows:

(1) Recruit and retain a diverse community;

(2) Create a supportive climate by monitoring diversity, expanding awareness, and infusing curricula with IE;

(3) Advocate for structural change with clear accountability measures; and

(4) Serve the public good beyond DU by creating and maintaining community relationships. (p. 3)

The language shows a desire to increase compositional diversity, create an inclusive climate, push for structural changes and accountability, and serve the community beyond DU.

Overall, the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011 included clear, actionable goals, including: increased funding, diversity training, dialogue, diverse curricula, and infused teaching evaluations with questions related to IE. The statement acknowledges that this is an initiative the university must continue to work at and must include involvement at every level of the community. Following Ahmed (2012), I explore how these statements reverberate back to the institution. Since the statement, the university has increased compositional diversity, yet the climate has continued to be infected by white supremacy, in some instances having manifested in hateful rhetoric on campus free speech walls (see Chapter 2) and micro-aggressions from peers and faculty. The Campus Climate Report 2012 noted
an inconsistency in the professed goals and values of IE and experiences with IE on campus.

In 2012, the CME released a report on the campus climate that surveyed faculty, staff, and students about IE. Findings indicated that faculty overwhelmingly agreed that they were dedicated to IE. The faculty almost unanimously responded that IE is reflected in teaching practices (96.9%), they are conscious of the cultural references they make in class (99.5%), and that they intervene when racially charged comments are made in class (98.2%) (University of Denver Center for Multicultural Excellence [DU CME], 2013). Student responses did not mirror these results. Nearly one-third of student respondents felt their department did not support their development and competence of IE. This estimate was consistent among graduate and undergraduate populations, at 32.4% and 30%, respectively (DU CME, 2013). Students had different perceptions of instructor competence at incorporating IE into the classroom. Some students noted “incidents of tokenism, stereotyping, and indifference within the classroom setting” (DU CME, 2013, p. 13). Students of color and students who identify as LGBTQ (both graduate and undergraduate) were less likely to report feeling welcome and more likely to witness or experience discrimination (pp. 9-11). The study illuminated a need to identify and explore ways to “develop the cross-cultural competencies needed to successfully navigate an increasingly diverse campus society” (p. 15). These findings show that while faculty believe they embody IE, their perception of inclusion is not uniform.
A strength and a weakness of IE is the ambiguity of the term, which does not have a universal meaning or an end point. The ambiguity lends itself well to the acknowledgement that each institution will incorporate a unique plan to address the things in that specific community that reverberate oppression. It also avoids naively asserting a one-size-fits-all solution to inequity. This ambiguity becomes problematic in a space that does not understand the importance or need for inclusion, which can adversely work to soften DEI rhetoric through what Ahmed (2012) called “happyspeak.” Ahmed (2012) explained that this occurs as anti-racist efforts continue shifting away from race to language that evokes happier affect like “inclusion,” “diversity,” and “multicultural.” These terms certainly pull attention away from addressing systemic oppression and towards creating inclusion within an exclusive system. Further, the lack of a clear definition of IE leaves itself vulnerable to being implemented in ways that do not foster inclusion but instead exploit the textual rhetoric of IE that is consistent with neoliberal desires to be competitive in the commodified market of higher education, as discussed at length in Chapter 2.

Scholars have noted that it is often the case that DEI manifests as empty promises on college campuses (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2015). The textual rhetoric in the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011 has the potential to create positive institutional change. However, as it notes, this requires dedicated engagement at every institutional level, which is not truly present given the Campus Climate 2012 Report. Survey respondents identified an inconsistency in the way that IE is
conceptualized and a campus that fosters exclusion toward its minoritized community members. This is further complicated by the lack of a clear DEI policy. There still is no IE policy at DU. DU has statements and plans, but there is yet to be a central definition of IE for the institution or clear parameters for routine measures, violations, etc. IE has not entered the fabric of the institution; it has become a rhetorical abstract wordcloud that looms over the campus. It is seen but not felt. It is present but unreachable. The question then becomes, how do we ground it? The closest thing the school has to a university-wide policy is “The Chancellor’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence.” The Chancellor’s statement sets the tone for the entire university’s commitment to IE.

“The Chancellor’s Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusive Excellence”

The Chancellor’s statement opened by indicating that DU is “its people” (Chopp, n.d., para. 1) This begs the question, which people feel valued, engaged, affirmed, and authentically seen and heard by the institution? Chopp (n.d.) articulated a vision of DEI that is supported by every branch of the institution and community. She argued that the creation of a “diverse and inclusive community” is “critical to the successful implementation of the mission,” necessary to engage the complex challenges of the time through collaboration and innovation, and preparatory for students in “an increasingly globalized and connected world” (Chopp, n.d., para. 2). Thus, she acknowledges that the community is what comprises DU’s institutional identity. She stands firmly to acknowledge multiple reasons why the school need a diverse, collaborative environment. Thus, the
statement asks that everyone be included, and yet the varying levels of awareness of privilege and oppression can incite collision rather than collaborative community that is consistent with IE. What she envisions requires a complete restructuring of the university to eliminate oppressive structures, policies, and practices, while providing access to skills that have the potential to disrupt oppressive ideologies present in the community. This is one place to consider taking action to ground the wordcloud.

One of the more troubling pieces of the statement is the way in which difference is marked: Akin to the critiques of IE, Chopp (n.d.) does this in a way that decenters race and gender while marking other identities (like political affiliation) as equally important in notions of diversity. She explained that her conception of diversity “extends to identities beyond just race and gender — including sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, socioeconomic status, religion, political and ideological viewpoints, and more” (Chopp, n.a., para. 2). The association of political ideology to race is insensitive, naive, and offensive. Political affiliation is something people choose to disclose and identify with. Note also the violence of not considering ability within an educational institution. While inclusion should include multiple layers of privilege and oppression, this rhetoric decenters race and gender which, within a predominantly white, higher education context, is extremely problematic. As explained earlier, the history of higher education is intimately linked to white supremacy. Thus, if we are to create an inclusive environment, we must find ways to combat this WIP (Gusa, 2010). Additionally, DEI language has
been critiqued for its ambiguity of language and the loopholes it creates to avoid race (Ahmed, 2012). This rhetoric explicitly de-signifies race and gender in ways that oversimplify the impact they have on day-to-day life. Chopp (n.d.) discussed a call in 2006 by the previous DU chancellor and provost for senior leaders to embrace IE and work towards its vision. She acknowledged that there has been progress, but she also explicitly stated that there is more work to be done that would be the responsibility of the entire community. The guiding principles of IE note the importance of incorporating IE into every aspect of the institution. This is a continuous process that, when implemented properly, will always be unfinished (Williams et al., 2005). The creation of an official IE policy by senior leadership would help make IE more reachable, as the current lack of structure for members to engage IE leaves little room for progress.

Chopp (n.d.) closed with excitement at preparing “to meet the exciting challenges of the growing, thriving, and remarkably diverse city in which we live as well as the needs of a changing nation” (para. 4). She asserted that we will continue to be led by the principles of IE and maintained that we must keep striving for an inclusive community where all members are embraced, heard, respected, and given equal opportunities to succeed. The last line stated: “An inclusive community celebrates different cultures, engages in clamorous debates and cultivates the individual and collective flourishing of all of us” (Chopp, n.d., para. 4). Her call for clamorous debate—which can foster a zero-sum mentality with winners and losers—fails to harbor humility, accountability, and growth that is consistent with
dialogue. It also does not account for entanglement and the multiple factors that shape the institution, society, and world. I argue that one of the largest cultural roadblocks to inclusion and collaboration in this country is an excessive emphasis on debate and argumentation as being the most valued form of address to conflict. Debate is certainly an important tool; however, if we take the charges from the Chancellor seriously, we must ask, “How?” How do we strive to foster an inclusive community? Does clamorous debate do this? Clamorous is associated with aggressive terms like “loud” and “vehement.” Is it possible to create an inclusive space where everyone is heard and valued while encouraging people to ferociously debate their perspectives? Can “clamorous debate” ever foster a community where all are heard, respected, and embraced? I will return to this call for “clamorous debate,” but first I explore DU Impact 2025, which is the latest plan that involves IE for the university.

**DU Impact 2025**

*DU Impact 2025* is composed of four “transformative directions.” The first is “Students Learning and Leading in a Diverse and Global 21st Century” (University of Denver, 2016, p. 5). This direction is characterized by five strategic initiatives:

1. Financial support;
2. Enhancing and expanding learning environment;
3. Supporting students holistically;
4. Learning, living, and leading in community; and
5. Preparing for careers and lives of purpose. (University of Denver, 2016, pp. 5-11)
Initiative 3 and Initiative 4 directly mention cultural competency. Initiative 3 mentions working on “emotional intelligence, cultural competency and team problem solving” (University of Denver, 2016, p. 9). Initiative 4 directly mentions the creation of DU Dialogues and a desire to “encourage authentic engagement with diverse perspectives and worldview” (University of Denver, 2016, p 10). A dialogue program was created and is currently offering pilot dialogue courses through the Department of Communication Studies. I discuss this program at length later in this chapter but, for now, this direction is key to identifying a need to develop tools to engage one another in a more inclusive and engaged way. This is explored further the next section.

The second direction is “Discovery and Design in an Age of Collaboration.”

This direction is characterized by six initiatives:

(1) Faculty Talent, Excellence, and Diversity;
(2) Supporting Research, Scholarship, and Creative Expression;
(3) International Impact;
(4) Knowledge Bridges;
(5) Initiative on Social Policy Research; and
(6) Project for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Technology (XCITE). (University of Denver, 2016, pp. 13-17)

This direction focuses on retaining a more diverse faculty, better supporting research and collaboration, extending the school’s impact internationally, doing interdisciplinary work, and engaging the community. IE is most present in this direction in the first initiative. Creating an inclusive environment means that
diversity must be present and the environment should be structured to support and engage every community member. However, what structures have been put in place to support people of color in the community?

The third direction is “Engagement and Empowerment in Denver and Rocky Mountain West.” This direction is shaped by four initiatives:

(1) Collaboration for the Public Good;
(2) DU as an Anchor Institute;
(3) DU as an Open Door to Engagement and Vitality;
(4) Partner as Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Denver. (University of Denver, 2016, pp. 18-21)

This direction focuses on the DU vision to be an institution that is dedicated to the public good. Each initiative in this direction centers engaging the Denver and larger Rocky Mountain community. DU has created partnerships with several businesses and organizations in Colorado. How can we as a community engage and empower others when we are struggling and divided?

The final direction is “One DU.” This direction has four initiatives:

(1) Advance and Celebrate One DU;
(2) A Community of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence;
(3) Sustainable DU; and
(4) Engaging Alumni and Friends. (University of Denver, 2016, pp. 22-25)

This direction has been the most highlighted within discussions of IE at DU, most notably in Strategic Initiative 2. This initiative explicitly centers the need to build a strong foundation and plan for diversity and inclusion. Further, it advocates that DU
become “a national leader in culture, practices, and structures that encourage inclusivity” (University of Denver, 2016, pp. 23). This direction also notes the need for cultural competence. How can DU ever become a national leader in inclusivity without an existing policy? Further, this goal feels more akin to neo-liberal competition than justice and equity. If DU is to become a leader, the community must move our policies from empty wordclouds to grounded plans to policies.

The *DU Impact 2025* is not solely based on increasing engagement with IE, but the values and principals of IE are woven throughout. As discussed previously, I follow Ahmed (2012) and assert that we must be sure to not just look at what DEI rhetoric says but also what it does. In reviewing all of these documents pertaining to IE and based on my experiences and observations, it seems that DU is much better at abstract rhetorical text than praxis. There are several things that occur behind the scenes that the general DU community is not privy to. DU created several initiatives, but the problem is that these initiatives often lack structural support and consist of the same, small pockets of community members invested in IE. The labor falls back to primarily people of color already who are exhausted from being in a community many describe an institution that was never intended for them. There are people trying and working unhealthy hours, often with low pay. Regardless, the same few continue carrying the weight of the institution’s shortcomings to keep pushing and propel the community towards its goals. I am proud to report that the institution has implemented the DU Dialogues program mentioned in the fourth initiative of transformative directive. This initiative has the potential to equip community
members with the communicative skills necessary to combat the oppressive structures, policies, and practices of the institution while creating opportunities for personal growth and reflexivity. I now move to discuss the DU Dialogues program.

**DU Dialogues**

The “DU Dialogues” initiative from *DU Impact 2025* has begun to be implemented through the Office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence, within their Inclusion and Equity Education program. The initiative is made possible through their collaboration with the DU Conflict Resolution Institute, Department of Communication Studies, Graduate School of Social Work, Sustained Dialogue Institute, and Housing and Residential Education (University of Denver Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence, 2017). On DU Dialogues webpage (https://www.du.edu/studentlife/ie-education/), a stated goal is as follows: “Focal areas from 2016-17 forward is on dialogue: meaningful exchange to increase mutual understanding and create positive social change” (para. 6). The rationale for the program stems from the: divisive politico-cultural moment, international tension, and tensions on campus, including the racialized encounters on the wall discussed in Chapter 2 (University of Denver Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence, 2017). Additionally, the initiative is cohesive with the emphasis in the *DU Impact 2025* for community building, leadership, and engaging critical conflicts (University of Denver, 2016).

The initiative has already held two sustained dialogue trainings, pilot intergroup dialogue courses, multiple single dialogue sessions, a student retreat,
and hired a program manager. Sustained dialogue training is open to any members of the DU community and includes multiple training sessions (often over a weekend), where people are taught the structure of sustained dialogue. These trainings, coupled with the hiring of graduate assistants, a program manager, and courses offered on dialogue, are meant to spread such skills throughout campus by sharing dialogic models with the community that can be employed during conflict. This initiative is too large to explore every aspect. Rather, I focus on how dialogue coalesces with IE at PWIs. I question how communication scholars can join the conversation of IE research. As a communication scholar that studies IE and dialogue, I join the conversation by exploring how we might teach students the communicative skills necessary to create an inclusive campus climate consistent with the goals of IE. In the next chapter, I explore my experiences teaching the pilot dialogue course through this initiative.

I taught two sections of the pilot dialogue course. Each section was assigned one graduate student instructor from the Communication Studies Department, in the School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science (AHSS), and two teaching assistants/dialogue facilitators. The teaching assistant/dialogue facilitators were graduate students from Communication Studies in the school of AHSS and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, with the exception of one person, who was an alumni of DU and a current employee who worked with education initiatives on campus.
Due to equal representation being structured through intergroup dialogue from the oppressed and privileged members of given identity groups, the class required a special admittance process. The course required the inclusion of different identities as close to equal representation as possible. The first year the pilot series ran, the emphasis was on gender: the course was overlapped with a pre-existing “Voice and Gender” course in the Department of Communication Studies. Traditionally, this would have meant having equal representation of women and men; however, the nuances and fluidity of gender are not limited to the binary of man or woman. Thus, the pilot course sought representation from a range of gender identities across different sections. The chair of Communication Studies and a representative from the office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence created a survey to initially assess student identities and attitudes, and a post survey after to examine learning outcomes. Students completed the initial survey and were then specially selected to take the course to ensure that a range of gender identities was present to meet the goals of IGD in the most intersectional way possible. A pilot dialogue committee met weekly to share how the class was going and to seek advice for issues that arose. The committee consisted of instructors from both sections, four teaching assistants, the department chair of Communication Studies, and a representative from the office of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence. Teaching assistants and students were the only people allowed in the room during pilot dialogue sessions. Because the course featured gender in intergroup dialogue, there was a male and female identified teaching assistant for each section of the course.
Conclusion

DU was first introduced to IE in 2006. In 2018, the school still does not have an official IE policy. The *Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011* laid out good starting points to begin implementing IE at DU. In fact, there are clearer and concise measures than in *DU Impact 2025*. There continues to be ambiguity around IE and confusion on how to embody IE. Chopp’s (n.d.) statement provides a message to the community that leadership is talking about inclusion even though she offers no clear guidelines, definitions, or parameters for how to move forward.

DU has yet to address the structures of oppression within the institution. The school’s nickname, the “pioneers,” alongside excessive emphasis on non-performative IE rhetoric is one clear example of whitewashing DEI initiatives to do the “happy” work of diversity without the hard work necessary to push for structural change in the institution, which combats oppression. An institution where its Board of Trustees clings to a name that is overtly connected to genocide and the theft of land from native people can never genuinely believe itself to be working towards IE, let alone become “leaders on inclusion.” From a more radical perspective, there is a hopelessness in any DEI policy because it cannot fix the root of the problem. However, as a tempered radical I can use IE to push for positive changes that can slowly start building less oppressive spaces (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). I can use the rhetorical text promoted by the institution to push for actionable changes that have the potential to reverberate throughout the community and culture and disrupt white supremacy. The DU Dialogues program
does not radically remove white supremacy, but it has the potential to infuse the community with the skills necessary to disrupt it.

I acknowledge that the DU community is not isolated from its cultural moment, which is largely shaped by racial tension and backlash. White supremacy infects every vein of our culture and, by proxy, our institutions, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Few white folks possess the necessary skills to identify or combat the ways in which we are enculturated into whiteness (Moon, 1996). Based on my experiences at DU and after examining the Campus Climate 2012 Report illuminate some of the work yet to be done to create conditions that are conducive to an inclusive community on campus. There is dissonance between the perceived ability of faculty to align with IE and student perspectives on the success of teachers to embody IE (University of Denver Center for Multicultural Excellence, 2013). This dissonance is shaped by the ramifications of rhetoric without a structure.

While many view their beliefs as opposing white supremacy, many also lack the critical skills necessary to acknowledge how whiteness functions to create (dis)advantage. Further, I argue that the skills necessary to authentically engage and learn across difference are not present. The DU Dialogues program has the potential to enhance and practice the dialogic skills of the community to aid in communicating across different perspectives, experiences, and identities. Yet, IE will never end all oppression in the institution, but it can be a tool to create pockets of positive institutional change—if applied correctly. This initiative is one important step to better equip the DU community to have the dialogues that IE demands. The program
could help equip the community to dialogue about the “ist” ideologies that plague campus, culture, and society at large. While IE is not a magic wand that can absolve all oppression, we can never know what it will do if we do not attempt to actualize the rhetorical text we profess.

The DU Dialogues initiative is one way in which the professed rhetoric of IE and actions align; it has potential to shape the community in ways that are cohesive with the university’s professed rhetorical goals of IE, as presented in the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence 2011, which calls for dialogue and promotes a more inclusive community. Further, this initiative responds to the issues raised in the Campus Climate 2012 Report by addressing the need to raise cross-cultural competencies in support of a diverse community. For the most part, the “Chancellor’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence” aligns with this initiative. Dialogue provides a means to achieve many of the goals set forth by the chancellor, such as: continuing to strive for a community that includes everyone; equipping the community to create a desired inclusive space; and teaching people the communicative skills necessary to embrace, hear, respect, and value difference. Thus, this initiative has promise to work towards the goal of inclusion and positive institutional change.

The lack of policy in support of IE feeds the dissonance within IE rhetoric. Ideally, an IE policy would be put in place to hold our community accountable to the goals we have proposed for ourselves. At a minimum, existing policies could be modified to align with IE rhetoric. For example, if the existing student conduct policy
was modified to adhere to IE rhetoric, when I encountered Austin as discussed in Chapter 2 there would have been a policy in place to acknowledge that his behavior was incongruent with our professed ideals of excellent inclusion. This chapter identified some of the discontinuity between what is said and what is done as an institution. The DU Dialogues initiative was identified as one that has begun to be actualized on campus. The initiative has the potential to ground some of the promises made by preparing the community with dialogic skills to increase awareness and engage with the values and professed goals of IE.

In the next chapter, I discuss my personal experiences teaching courses in this program. I share my experiences as an instructor of dialogue courses to attempt to nail down some specific approaches I used to teach students how to dialogue. Research has shown that dialogue is a useful approach to raise levels of awareness and increase efforts of inclusion. However, there is a need for more research that considers the specific ways in which dialogue as a process can be taught and implemented (Heisey, 2011; Hyde & Bineham, 2000). Dulabaum (2011) argued “though the theory may appear simple, practical application is complex” (p. 104). I share how I navigated using dialogue as a tool of IE and the practices I found helpful in attempting to teach students dialogic skills.
CHAPTER 5: LEARNING TO DIALOGUE

Introduction

In reviewing the critical rhetoric of DEI initiatives, it is apparent that there is a need for more cohesion between the professed goals, experiences, and structures. PWIs implementing DEI initiatives face the hurdles of social amnesia, lack of congruency between words and actions, and low levels of awareness of privilege and oppression. Critical rhetorical ethnography demands that the researcher be embedded in the community they are researching (Hess, 2011). The experiences I have had within DEI rhetoric have ranged from student, educator, activist, and liaison. This chapter provides a detailed account of my experiences teaching within an IE initiative, in intercultural communications courses at DU.

Research has identified the need to study how we teach dialogic skills, which are often assumed to occur naturally in interactions (Dulabaum, 2011). This chapter offers an account of how DEI rhetoric and dialogue amalgamate in the classroom, and how I attempted to equip students with dialogic skills to raise awareness of privilege and oppression while also providing tools to navigate tensions within a polarized, cultural moment. I first detail the specifics of the courses I taught and review my pedagogical approach to teaching them. I then explicate the specific dialogic skills I emphasized for use in dialogues of privilege and oppression. Since
these skills are not independent of one another, I organized the analysis chronologically according to the academic units I used to organize the courses. The three units provide a snapshot of how I attempted to equip students with these skills. The first unit includes creating a necessary environment for vulnerability and co-creating space with students. The second unit includes teaching students to apply critical thinking skills and interrogate their perspectives and what shaped them. This unit is focused on exploring self, including attitudes, values, and beliefs, with specific attention to intersectional reflexivity and emotional awareness. The third unit emphasized teaching students to be open to hearing other perspectives and engaging them authentically by utilizing empathy, intersectional reflexivity, emotional awareness, and active listening. These units are not a one-size-fits-all solution; they are intended to serve as an example of how I have tried to create curriculum to strengthen these skills.

This chapter illuminates the complexity of teaching students how to dialogue. Many professors employ a form of pedagogy that centers dialogic teaching styles; however, a gap exists in the research for how to teach students to dialogue. This was a challenging road, one I continue to navigate. I have learned to work reflexively through my failures and to celebrate the positive impacts I see when teaching these skills. Through my experiences as a student, instructor, and activist at DU, I have noted a lack of these skills in myself and the community. Further, I have noticed the lack of a means to foster these skills in the community, city, and country. It seems to me that educators and administrators often assume that dialogic skills are present,
but that the lack of these skills and continual requests for dialogues about privilege and oppression has the potential to address the dissonance. None of this will occur without the skills necessary to dialogue.

**Teaching Dialogue**

The experiences highlighted in this chapter stem from teaching two sections of the Intercultural Communication course about dialogue and two sections of the Pilot Dialogue course. The Intercultural Communication was preassigned a textbook by Sorrells (2016) titled *Intercultural Communication: Globalization and Social Justice*. However, I was given the freedom to supplement course readings with any relevant texts. Alongside the primary textbook, the class read several articles pertaining to intercultural communication and conflict. I was the instructor of record for both courses, and had no other people in a teaching team. I wrote my own syllabus and assignments. Intercultural Communication Section A (ICA) had 29 students; Intercultural Communication Section B (ICB) had 25 students. Both sections were predominantly composed of white students. The courses had a diverse group of student majors including, but not limited to, business, international studies, communication, philosophy, anthropology, and gender studies.

I taught two sections of the Pilot Dialogue course. As discussed in the previous chapter, the course was part of the DU Dialogues initiative. I selected all assigned readings for the course and chose all assignments. I was the instructor of record and completed all course grading. Since the course featured gender in intergroup dialogue, the classroom included one male and female teaching assistant
for each section of the course. The teaching assistants and students were the only ones allowed in the room during Pilot Dialogue sessions. The gender identity of students in InterGroup Dialogue Section A (IGDA) was: 3 male identified, 4 female identified, and 2 trans* identified. IGDA had all white identified students. The gender identity of students in InterGroup Dialogue Section B (IGDB) was: 8 male identified, 10 female identified, and 1 trans* identified. IGDB was predominantly white students, with three students that identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and two students that identified as Latinx. I have found that the outcomes of these courses are heavily dependent upon the diversity of lived experiences present in the classroom. Since DU is a very small university with a small percentage of minoritized students, I decided not to include course identifiers and social identifiers in my narratives in order to do my best to ensure anonymity of my students.

The course was created with two distinct types of learning in mind. The DU Dialogues initiative requested half of class time in dialogue sessions (students and teaching assistants only) and the other half the time in the classroom with the instructor. This was one of the most challenging aspects of teaching the course: As an instructor, it is very difficult to send students off to dialogue about complex and personal topics without being there to moderate. As a teacher invested in co-creating space with students, this felt very difficult. I often felt a little disconnected, and at times it felt difficult to give feedback on the application of dialogic skills because I was not present when the class had these sessions. They had an
assignment to reflect on this experience, and I received some accounts of sessions from students. Their perspectives varied. One student could say they did not feel engaged or emotional, while another student indicated they would cry after class. Sometimes, it was very difficult to discern what actually happened. One teaching assistant consistently updated me with how sessions went but, due to the fact that my presence during actual dialogue sessions was limited, my knowledge of how the space was created for students to practice dialogic skills was limited. Further, I learned that the course should first build skills before jumping to dialogue.

**Pedagogy: Inclusive Communal Critical Embodied Knowledge**

It is important to detail how I approach teaching these courses to identify the ways in which my pedagogy informs classroom decisions. Pedagogy provides an outline to inform decisions made about readings, assignments, activities, and skills that are emphasized within the course. I describe my pedagogy as “Inclusive Communal Critical Embodied Knowledge.” My pedagogy is largely shaped by my mentors. I was first inspired by Dr. Heather Dell to disrupt dominance and hierarchies and to create genuine community in the classroom. During my Master’s program, I remember Dr. Brenda J. Allen opening her class with a disclaimer that she was: “here to open minds, not change minds” (B.J. Allen, personal communication, 2011). This quote stuck with me forever. This is also largely where my love for dialogue emerged. Dr. Allen taught us to engage ethically, be empathetic, listen, and be open. During my doctorate program, I have been shaped by Dr. Joshua Hanan’s teaching style, which emphasizes application and praxis. His teaching
always left me with new theories and practical ways to apply those theories to my research and professional goals. I was also inspired by Dr. Frank Tuitt's research on pedagogy and his embodiment of it in the classroom. He taught me to embrace the tension, not externalize but empathize, meet people where they are, and authentically engage and relate to students. When I asked Dell and Tuitt who informed their pedagogy, both attributed the same two texts: hooks’s (2014) *Teaching to Transgress*, and Freire’s (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I have read these texts and they inform my work, as well as hooks’s (2000) *All About Love*. The three main principles that guide my pedagogy are inclusion, collaborative community, and embodied critical thinking.

**Principle 1: Inclusion**

As an instructor, I take many steps to create an inclusive classroom environment. First, I always look for new literature to provide an array of perspectives and keep with current events. I always ensure that my syllabus has a diverse set of perspectives shared, and I choose topics that speak to a number of different experiences regarding a topic. Second, in the classroom, I do my best to facilitate diverse discussions that give all students a chance to share their unique experiences and perspectives. Third, I consider the ways in which all students do not learn the same ways and employ a number of different teaching tools to accommodate (e.g., films, short TED talks, dialogue, presentations, reflective journals, in-class activities, group projects, research papers, etc.). I always attempt to engage my students with honesty, empathy, critical love, respect, and humility. I
always hope they will treat their peers the same. I do my best to create environments where every student feels valued, engaged, and represented in the course material.

**Principal 2: Collaborative Community**

I encourage a collaborative learning environment that works collectively to explore ideas, perspectives, experiences, and concepts. One way I do this is by including activities to engage every person of the classroom community, which further enables students to get to know one another and feel more comfortable engaging in class. I invite students to participate proactively in the course. One way I ensure this is through a rigorous participation rubric. The participation rubric assesses the following areas:

- Engagement;
- Preparation;
- Reflexivity;
- Active Listening; and
- Attendance

In the classroom I co-create a space with my students where we can learn with and from one another with an open mind and heart.

**Principle 3: Embodied Critical Thinking**

I emphasize creative and critical thinking in all of my courses by promoting discussion opportunities that encourage students to apply course material to their own lived experiences, perspectives, and observations. I encourage students to be
attentive to the ways in which power functions by emphasizing critical reasoning over instrumental reasons. I urge students to continuously question and creatively reconsider solutions to social problems. I create opportunities for students to develop communicative skills through engagement. I develop activities and assignments that prepare students to apply what they have learned outside the classroom into their everyday lives. I initiate activities to simulate potential experiences where the need to use a communicative skill is necessary. I utilize various performative modalities in the classroom to aid in a more embodied understanding of how to utilize a communicative skill. I believe that the classroom should be an active space, one where students are able to leave embodying the skills they learned. I aim to foster a co-created, affirming space where to explore complex issues as a collective, aiming to open minds and reverberate innovative equitable practices back to the world.

**Dialoguing Privilege and Oppression**

The classes were taught with specific attention to the following communicative skills: empathy, intersectional reflexivity, active listening, and emotional awareness. These terms all vary in how they are perceived. For clarity, I define what each term means for me within the context of dialogue as a tool to engage topics of privilege and oppression. Dialogue can be used as a form of talk in an array of experiences. My courses guide students through using dialogue generally as a means to address conflict, which is then extended to help prepare students to use dialogue as a tool to respond to conflicts pertaining to privilege and oppression.
Empathy means being able and willing to attempt to understand the way that multiple factors come together to create different lived experiences. Many people understand empathy as “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes,” but I have found that empathy in difficult conversations pertaining to privilege and oppression can feel more like being put into someone else’s life raft (oppressed) or yacht (privileged). Duncan (2010), following the notion of “false empathy” (p. 137) proposed by Delgado (1996), explained that white folks often attempt to empathize with people of color and then make assumptions about how to “help.” Many DEI initiatives fall into the trap of “false empathy” when white leaders assume that they know how to create inclusive spaces, which often also leads to a failure to engage structural problems. Empathy cannot occur without the ability to actively listen and conceptualize the nuanced details of experiences that differ from one’s own.

Active listening means listening to learn (Stone et al., 2010) rather than listening to respond. In our fast-moving, individualistic culture in the US, it is common for people to listen to respond. It is then difficult to listen without bias towards experiences that are considered different. It is easier for to tune out information that disrupts our own perspective than to truly listen to better understand. In order to actively listen, people must have an “open and honest curiosity” about the other perspectives being shared (Stone et al., 2010, p. 89). Further, to have an honest curiosity and truly be present to actively listen, empathize, and engage with an open mind, individuals must have emotional awareness.
Emotional awareness is characterized by an ability to identify and contextualize emotions. Stone et al. (2010) identified emotions and listening as the hardest and most critical communicative skills for engaging in conversations deemed difficult (p. 89). When feelings are left unexamined and unexposed, it makes listening to one another very difficult (p. 89). They explain that many assume they know how someone feels; yet, personal feelings are often more complex than we know and remain undiscovered in “the tangle of back streets where the real action is” (p. 91). Feelings often disguise themselves as emotions we are more equipped to handle: “[F]eelings transform themselves into judgments, accusations, and attributions” (p. 91). Our ability to handle certain emotions is based on an array of characteristics that create our orientation towards certain emotions, which is further characterized by factors such as how one’s family expressed and/or repressed emotions as a child (p. 91). Stone et al. (2010) advocated that we engage our emotions and make space for them in discussions. Yet, the researchers also cautioned that emotions should be navigated prior to sharing them because they are shaped by multiple things, including perceptions, that are not static (p. 100). In dialogues pertaining to privilege and oppression, emotions have been identified as a key blockade to raising levels of awareness (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Sue, 2015). Reflexivity is a common practice utilized to contextualize the multitude of factors that shape our emotions.

Reflexivity is characterized by an ability to look in, out, and back again at one’s self in order to contextualize the ways in which positionality, lived
experiences, and beliefs shape a personal orientation towards a topic, incident, or utterance. I am invested in intersectional reflexivity (Calafell, 2013; Jones, 2010) for dialogues centering on privilege and oppression. Jones (2010) explained:

   Not reflection, not just light going back and forth all neatly contained within the laws of physics, but light hitting surfaces and refracting in new directions. Reflexivity is the ceaseless process of reflection and refraction. Self-reflection might scratch the surface, but self-reflexivity cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression. (p. 124)

This form of reflexivity requires a labor of love. Calafell (2013) further explicated that it involves a “vulnerability driven by love, driven by relationality, and an ethic of care” (p. 11). Dialogues about difference demand that engaging in all of the above practices in order to move through discomfort, misunderstanding, and disdain for perspectives different than our own.

I emphasize these skills with specific account to intercultural conflict to explore the possibility of how these skills help our ability to enhance campus climate and DEI initiatives at PWIs. This set of skills is not obsolete, static, or fixed; more specifically (and mirroring the ambiguity of IE), they should always be flexible to align with the specific needs of an institution. In writing this autoethnography, I debated on using specific skills as an organization, but this seemed to falsely assume that the skills were somehow independent of one another. While the skills can be discussed independently to a degree, practicing and/or embodying these skills demands a complex interplay of them all.

Figure 6 presents a diagram that illustrates this model of the skills emphasized for Dialogues on privilege and oppression (DPO). Each skill is linked in
some ways to the other skills and work together to create a combination of variables for a generative DPO. Dialogue is a complex equation that only works when multiple skills manifest collectively, as illustrated by the overlapping of skills and double-sided arrows placed between each skill in the Model of Dialogues of Privilege and Oppression. Each skill is connected to others; the arrows represent this movement and interdependence.

![Model of Dialogues of Privilege and Oppression](image)

**Figure 6: Model of Dialogues of Privilege and Oppression**

Since the skills are interconnected and best taught in conjunction, the following analysis is organized according to the three units of learning implemented in the class: creating community and expectations, self-exploration and skill building for DPO, and engaging difference. Each unit details attempts to foster opportunities to practice dialogic skills. The sections are organized through a brief description of each unit and then reflections on specific concepts, readings, tools, and activities used to guide the unit.
Unit 1: Creating Community and Expectations

DPO creates anxiety for many educators because it means inviting controversial topics and opposing perspectives as part of the classroom experience. DPO requires intense classroom management and mediation skills. This is a very difficult thing to navigate when teaching. As a new teacher, when someone said something that was problematic, my instinct was to question and immediately engage. During my time in graduate school engaging critical research, I often found myself falling victim to unethically calling out my peers, and they did to me as well. Cornel West recently visited DU and said something close to “Be critical, don’t criticize” (C. West, personal communication, January 11, 2018). These words seemed to reverberate to my soul. I thought back to several discussions I had with peers about feeling quite uncomfortable during our learning. Recurring phrases included “walking on egg shells” and “someone waiting to shove us off a cliff.” Many of us were invested in a call-out culture while we pushed others and ourselves to raise our levels of awareness. DPO is not the space for this kind of engagement. Calling people out is not inherently wrong but, in a dialogic setting, doing so is toxic and counter-intuitive to dialoguing. As Dr. Allen says, “The goal is always to open minds, not change minds” (B. J. Allen, personal communication, 2011). Students must be ready to really engage with one another authentically to learn with and from one another. When we attack people instead of the structures that shaped the ideology, we miss the opportunity to grow with each other and make change.
I realize that this is very controversial, and it just may “cut to the bone” for the reader (Jones, 2010, p. 124). Most teachers have had a class where a student makes a problematic statement, and the teacher wasn’t prepared to handle the situation. The teacher may ponder the incident for days, weeks, and maybe even months about how it should have been handled differently (even better). Maybe worse, the teacher may realize he or she did not catch the problem and a student calls the teacher out for not knowing how to handle it. The truth is, at some point, every instructor has found themselves in a moment of panic, not knowing how to handle an offensive comment. Part of teaching DPO requires the educator to continue to deeply engage these skills, and part of that means acknowledging how to fail. This thought is, of course, terrifying. A class cannot be taught without the humility to know how to effectively acknowledge and address failures. For me, this meant facing a deep-seated fear that, beneath it all, I would lose control and re-center my privilege. I did once, and I will again. The new skill becomes learning how to embody failure reflexively. Every failure is a learning opportunity, for teachers and students. Further, I find that by admitting my failures, students feel more comfortable to admit theirs as well.

A large concern I had in teaching the Dialogues course was how to teach DPO without creating moments that harm minoritized students for the sake of the learning of privileged students. I constantly question how to best support minoritized students from offensive rhetoric that emerges in engaging DPO. For example, as a white person engaging race work, I often find myself wanting to shield
people of color from offensive comments. As a woman, I have also come to see that men can never shield me from sexist comments. Oppression exists; it is unavoidable in our cultural moment for all bodies marked as “other.” Part of teaching the Dialogues course meant understanding that oppression exists and that, following critical whiteness scholars, we should acknowledge that privilege and oppression “exist in both traditional and modern forms, and rather than work to prove its existence, work to reveal it” (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 56). Thus, entering a DPO space means walking in acknowledging that the world is saturated with systems of power that create (dis)advantage and that those problems are always present in the classroom.

Since we operate from a position that acknowledges systems of privilege and oppression, we must be willing to own the impact that privilege and oppression have had on our own teaching. In my process of gaining comfortability in the uncomfortable, I needed to realize that the way my whiteness has impacted my perspectives on classroom environments. I remember talking to a Latino colleague about multiple interactions that seemed absurd, as in extremely and overtly hateful. The colleague simply remarked, yeah, it is Tuesday. Something that for me felt extreme, was a daily occurrence for him. As a white woman, I knew I would never fully understand the experiences of my colleague. However, I noted the way that white fragility raced through my body after hearing his comment. I had a low tolerance for racial stress. The reality is that the campus climate at DU is a hostile racial space (as is our country). We cannot ignore the racial tension; rather, we must
work together to engage the dissonance. The goal of DPO is to find ways to
generatively move students from closed perspectives and unexamined biases
towards an increased awareness of how privilege and oppression manifest to
become change agents within our university, community, and world. This process is
not easy, and teaching it requires an instructor who is unafraid to create a
playground where people will awkwardly engage, are sometimes hurt, and grow
with one another. In this chapter, I emphasize three focal steps I take to co-create
classroom spaces with students. The three frames are brave spaces, reflexive failure,
and calling-in.

**Brave Spaces**

Teaching DPO means learning to become comfortable in uncomfortability. In
studying IE, I quickly learned that there was no such thing as a “safe space.” This
means that an initial step in implementing a DPO framework is dispelling any beliefs
that classrooms are a safe space. The notion of a “safe space” has been contested
because, for people with minoritized identities, safety is not a guarantee due to
dominant discourses functioning to create macro-, mezzo-, and micro-aggressions.
Often, people with privileged identities conflate comfort with safety (Arao &
Clemmens, 2013; DiAngelo, 2011). I have conflated the two several times, especially
in discussions of race. It is necessary that the instructor and the students take time
to note the difference. Arao and Clemmens (2013) advocated a shift from safe to
brave spaces that are shaped by courage. I always begin by explaining to students
the need to learn how to dialogue across difference and navigate “difficult
conversations” in our campus and culture. I explain that the most growth for students is shown when they become uncomfortable and they need to be brave to receive the most from class. Since material is sensitive and tensions are high, ground rules are a necessary first step to foster the right space to practice dialogue while also creating an initial space for students to start shaping the classroom community they need in order to practice DPO. I typically include readings on conflict and brave spaces to start the term and follow-up with a group activity to create ground rules. I now share how this has manifested in the Dialogues classroom.

*This course will ask you to apply dialogue to topics of privilege and oppression. This is deeply personal and impacts our day to day lives in several ways. We all have different backgrounds and orientations towards the topics that we will discuss in class. Disagreement is sure to arise; we must reframe the way we perceive disagreement. Further, we must learn to better understand intercultural conflict surrounding privilege and oppression. This classroom is a co-created space, and the participation of each student contributes to the overall atmosphere we make. We read Arao and Clemmens (2013) and their call for brave spaces. Let’s talk that out… Students often express a mix of concern and excitement to dive deep into DPO. After hearing students share their perspectives on the article, I pass around a sheet of paper that says:

My hopes for this class are: ___________________

My fears for this class are: ___________________

My expectations for Amanda are: ________________

My expectations for my peers are: ________________
Ok, please take a moment to complete this form. Do NOT put any name identifiers on the form... Once the forms are complete, I mix them all up and read them aloud, asking students to take note of the responses and look for themes. Let's use these hopes, fears, and expectations to create an agreed upon list of ground rules that will support our specific learning community on our brave journey of DPO.

The class has now created a beginning list of ground rules that provide everyone, especially more introverted students, a chance to say how they envision a successful atmosphere. Responses often have common threads of respect, preparedness, and open-mindedness. Many students state similar expectations; here is an example:

Be aware of non-verbals and delivery of messages.

Be engaged when peers are speaking.

Be ready to discuss readings.

Be receptive to new ideas, viewpoints, and perspectives/Open Mind.

Be aware and mindful of your own attitudes, values, and perspectives and others.

Respect each other.

Argue the argument, not the person, and speak from the "I" perspective.

If you offend someone, be accountable.

Don’t interrupt.

When personal information is disclosed, please keep it here.
After reviewing the list, the class considers other rules to add. The list is then posted online and I bring it with me to each class. If I feel that ground rules are not followed, I raise it as an issue to the class. I most often do this by asking the class to look at the list and think of one ground rule that could be improved. This list becomes a very important aspect of how the dialogues will function. Each group requires a different set of expectations to accelerate in practicing DPO skills.

These ground rules serve as a step in constructing a unique classroom community that the students helped create and therefore feel more accountable to. It is significantly easier to be honest and authentic in a space that feels communal. The emphasis on brave spaces is vital because, without courage, we cannot unpack our relationships to privilege and oppression. Scholars have noted that in order for awareness of privilege and oppression to occur, we must be willing to get uncomfortable (Assumah, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias, 2016, Reason & Evans, 2007). This realization comes with a call for humility. At times, every educator and student has made a comment in class that has negatively impacted someone else. Rather than ignore this, we must practice reflexive failure to push through this and use it as a teachable moment.

**Reflexive Failure**

The academy tries to enforce objectivity, certainty, and perfection, and we must combat these messages. We must accept that we will never have it completely figured out, which means we will fail. When I am reflexive with my failures and vulnerable to sharing and changing with the classroom, I am able to move on from
failures. McIntosh and Hobson (2013) argued that authentic alliances across
difference cannot be made “without vulnerably embracing the moments of our
reflexive failures” (p. 13). They clarify that this does not mean that we “accept it
without change,” as that would be “hurtful and unreflexive” (p. 19). As a white
woman who studies and teaches about privilege and oppression, I fail often. Of
course this is embarrassing and my failures feel bad. However, if I do not face a
failure head on and work to change my behavior, I will continue to be complicit in
systems of oppression. McIntosh and Hobson (2013) remind me that as a white
woman I must not wallow in my failures; instead, I must use reflexive failure as a
tool. I failed in that moment. McIntosh and Hobson stated:

I did nothing, but agreed in my complicity. Out of love, you forgave me. Out of
love, we had dialogue. Out of love, you raised my consciousness, so that I
might have a better understanding — something you did not have to do. I
now know love is political. (9)

I cannot read this passage without having a strong bodily and emotional
reaction to it. I think of all of the people who so graciously shared their stories with
me and I realize that this was love. I realize that these were gifts they gave me in
their patience and willingness to be vulnerable and that they shared their
experiences so that I could come closer to understanding. My list of failures is long,
but I have learned to push through guilt and move to the shame that is necessary to
change that behavior. I have humbled myself to share my failures with others so that
they, too, can better understand. In my experience, this practice has been very
fruitful when discussing race with other white folks. Let me share an example of
how I have tried to generatively navigate my failures.
I had a student (whom I will call Jim) who said that he didn’t think it was appropriate to discuss race and that he thought it actually perpetuated racism by discussing it. A group of feminist students chimed back that is really problematic. We live in a world structured by racism, they indicated. Jim grew visibly uncomfortable and other students began jumping in explaining that he was wrong. I asked the room to quiet down and focus. “Thank you, Jim, for your honesty in where you are coming from. I can relate to what you are saying. I was raised to never talk about race. I was told that if I saw race, that meant that I wasn’t viewing everyone the same. Raise your hand if your parents talked to you about race.” I looked out and saw two hands pop up, both were students of color. “As we can see in the classroom, most white families do not discuss race with their children. Moon (1996) argued that discussions of race are considered impolite to many white people...” I went on to explain the way that this pattern of avoiding race by white folks is a social reverberation of larger systems and structures of oppression.

Jim’s comment had created tension in the class, but by calmly relating to him and unpacking where that belief came from, we moved on to new understandings. When someone says something that will not be popular or may even be hurtful, I always try to pause and redirect it before other students have a chance to keep pouncing, which could potentially shut the student down for the remainder of the course. Further, some other white students who feel the same way start to feel more comfortable talking and gain new insight into themselves and social structures also.
I had previously held that same colorblind racism. I had failed and I worked through it to understand better.

Further, I use that past experience to relate to my students. Modeling what some of my peers and faculty had done for me during my confusion around colorblindness, I attempted to call Jack in. Calling-in is an activist embodied form of dialogue pertaining to privilege and oppression that encourages the exploration of new perspectives. It has shown to be more productive than calling-out. Jack eventually came around in the quarter and admitted that his perspectives had been opened through engagement with his peers. He confronted and worked through his failure reflexivity after being called-in.

**Calling-In**

There has been a growing discussion in mainstream feminist activism about "calling-in" versus "calling-out" (Ferguson, 2015). Calling-out occurs when people, often aggressively, name the ways in which privileged folks perpetuate oppression, often in front of others. Calling-out typically leads to increased hostility and defensiveness on the part of the privileged person. Calling-in also attempts to mark the perpetuation of oppression, but it does it with empathy and compassion in the hopes of working together to identify ways in which we all perpetuate oppression from time to time.

Calling-in enables students to learn and grow from reflexive failures. In contrast, when we call-out, we often shut a student down and perpetuate a closed-minded path. For example, Jim had actually signed up for my class on day two, after
having a heated interaction in another course. Jim claimed that he was in another
course and used the word “crazy” in class and the teacher yelled at him and called
him ableist. This is an example of calling-out: the offensive comment is called
attention to with little to no explanation, often in a hostile tone. As the teacher in a
classroom with conflict that reiterates oppression, it can be easy to just call
someone out. However, my pedagogy demands that I meet that student with the
same radical and political love I was been shown. Further, as an instructor, I feel it is
my job to patiently meet people where they are and call them in, never out. Calling
in occurs in relation to a failure; as discussed above, we do not dismiss failure—we
work through it. This is not an easy process, especially when the topic hits home
personally. For example, as a survivor of sexual violence, when students say things
about sexual assault that reinforce victim blaming, my instinct is to silence them.
This, though, misses the opportunity to bring them closer to understanding. I
encourage all of my students to call one another in as we attempt to create
opportunities to practice dialogic skills. Students often read something without fully
grasping how the concept, theory, skill, or practice manifests, and teaching these
things using my pedagogy and a DPO model requires that creating moments for
students to see how they are put to action. I now explain an instance when I
attempted to introduce students to the practice of calling-in.

There was a sexual assault on campus. We all got “the email,” the one letting us
know that somewhere on our campus, someone was raped. A student brought up how
disheartening it was to hear of another instance. It wasn’t on the syllabus, but, I believe
in letting the class lead where it needs to go. I also believe in creating a space where students can discuss events that undoubtedly impact our campus climate and thus their learning at DU. I asked the class if they wanted to take some time to discuss. They agreed almost unanimously. A few women students began asking questions: Why does it happen all the time? Why is it always women who get assaulted? The men in the room started shifting in their desks, asking, what can I do to stop it? Another student, Dan, shared that he wasn’t a rapist, but always felt blamed in discussions of sexual violence, which deters him from getting involved. He felt that people viewed all men in fraternities as rapists.

I began to respond when another student, Cory, added that he thought women bring it on themselves. Many of the women in the class started to turn their chairs towards him with disgust and pain in their eyes. I, too, am a survivor of sexual assault and was feeling pretty nervous for what would come out of his mouth next. Then he said it, something like: I have a friend who was falsely accused of...

I interjected immediately. Ok. Let’s pause for a moment. We read about ‘calling-in’ for today. How might we as a class call one another in? Right now there are a lot of things that need to be unpacked and explored. First, let’s take a couple minutes to write about the way we are feeling about what happened on campus and our discussion of it. What emotions do you have and why? Are you offended right now? If so, why? How might we ethically engage one another to bring each other closer to understanding? How might we call-in? Can we distance ourselves from attacking a person and move towards critiquing the social crisis of sexual violence? What themes
are manifesting? How do they work to shape the way we conceptualize sexual violence?

I paused for them to process for a few minutes. Ok, let’s start. First, I asked you some questions about the ways you were feeling. You have taken the time to identify these emotions and interrogate where they come from. As we move on, keep these emotions and their motivators in mind. Let’s start by discussing what themes have emerged in our discussion of sexual violence.” The women began to randomly share themes such as: Sexual assault is a common thing that happens to women and that happens to women at fraternities. I scanned the room and noticed that almost all of the men in the class had closed non-verbals: Arms crossed. Head down. My heart began to race and another student added with disgust and terror the myth that women falsely accuse men of rape to get them in trouble. At this point, I knew that I had to take back control to get the attention off of the male student, and push the discussion back to the structures that shaped these comments, rather than the individuals. In these moments, I cautiously take the reins of the discussion and try to push us towards a better understanding. Ok, let’s pause for a moment. First, we should consider the facts. What do we know? We know that, statistically speaking, we do not have an exact picture of the prevalence of sexual violence due to underreporting. The last time I checked the quantitative research, it was estimated that about 15% report, then one in twelve make it to trial, and less than 3% get a conviction. The numbers change often; however, the estimate is about two in five women experience sexual violence at some point in their life. That is a lot. The work of Jackson Katz details the way that, of the
majority of the sexual assaults we are aware of, more than 90%, are committed by men. So, this is most likely what informs our belief that it happens to women by men.

We should not discount the ways that sexual violence also occurs for men, and the barriers of masculine conceptions of strength and power make it more difficult for men to talk about their experiences. Further, let’s think about the common narrative we hear about sexual violence in a fraternity, or on campus more generally speaking. I would argue that we place too much emphasis on space; the facts are that sexual violence occurs everywhere (home, work, vacation, school, military, etc.). However, we typically discuss rape within a specific institution as if it isn’t a cultural crisis, but an institutional one. The problem does not exist isolated in one rapist; it exists culturally.

We all need to pause here; it is never ok to make blanket statements about an entire group of people. Surely not every fraternity member is sexually assaulting people. However, it does happen there. So, it is important to step back in this moment and consider how our identities shape the way we perceive the crisis. When we feel attacked by a comment, we should ask for ourselves why we feel attacked. I am a survivor of sexual violence, and there was a time when I felt that every man I saw was going to rape me. Was this reasonable, no…but it was rational. I have been sexually assaulted by three different men. My experiences led me to fear; so, for men in fraternities, if you feel attacked, please pause and consider why someone may feel uncomfortable. We never have the full picture. Rather than getting caught up in finger-pointing groups, we should look at structures and find ways to disrupt rape culture. This is a moment where we need to pause and consider for ourselves why we
hold the strong beliefs, attitudes, and feelings we do towards a topic. For example, to
the point of false accusation, several people questioned the veracity of my experience
through suggesting that I was lying or that it was somehow my fault that I got raped.
That makes me extra sensitive to comments like ‘We bring it on’ or ‘Falsely accuse.’
Maybe some women lie about it; however, this is such an endemic crisis that the reality
is that most likely someone discussing sexual violence is telling the truth. My identity as
a white woman shapes my response, too, and the implications. There is a long history
of white women accusing men of color of rape. Additionally, women of color in the US
have a historical legacy of being viewed as hyper sexual and property of white men.
Thus, our identities and experiences shape the way we perceive the phenomena of
sexual violence. Now that I had modeled how I was aware of the way my experiences
impacted my reaction and established that we all have different orientations, it is time
to bring us back together.

Further, I think we all agree that it is wrong and want to change it. All of the
comments made in this discussion are shaped by dominant cultural narratives of
sexual violence. The practice of victim blaming, for example, conditions us to always
question the veracity of women’s sexually violent experiences. We hear this often
through questions such as: ‘What were you wearing?’; ‘Were you drinking?’; ‘Were
you a virgin?’; ‘Why didn’t you run away?’; ‘Why didn’t you defend yourself?’ The onus
always comes back to the person who endured sexual violence, rather than the
perpetrator. In these discussions, we are all sharing pieces of our own perspectives
that are mediated through dominant narratives that circulate in society. Does that make sense?"

My male students’ hands shot up. Dan responded that he knows it happens lots of places but that he felt he couldn’t help because he always got attacked. He just wants to help, but always feels attacked. Cory added that he would kill someone if they touched his sisters, and he shouldn’t have said that. He explained that he was frustrated because he sees his friend struggling and really doesn’t think he did it. He then apologized and said that he was unaware how often it occurred and didn’t mean to offend anyone. The women in the class settled and the turbulence in the class seemed to dissipate as students saw the power of calling-in.

In this moment, I needed to model calling-in for my students. The initial pause enabled them to sit with their thoughts and interrogate why they were feeling what they were feeling, practicing emotional awareness. It also gave them a private space to consider how society impacts the way we understand a social crisis like sexual violence by applying critical thinking. More than anything, we needed a time-out. I have learned that I must know when to pause. It is as if I am on a battlefield filled with unprocessed emotions, starkly different experiences and perspectives, and with that difference being in tension. I advocate that educators strategically navigate these moments by embodying the skills of DPO first. I review what we know about a topic to be true and how we now it so that we can critique structures, not people. The person is not the author of these oppressive ideologies; rather, they have been indoctrinated into them. Next, I address the ways in which the room is
polarized through blanket generalizations. Then, I model the ways our identities and experiences shape our perceptions, and thus how we hear and respond to certain statements. This is an effort to explore emotional awareness and intersectional reflexivity while calling for active listening and empathy. Finally, I look for commonality. Dan stated from the beginning that he wanted to help but did not know how. The person is most often not trying to be offensive; instead, their lack of awareness of a given topic stems from their privilege and causes frustration and anger to minoritized groups that face the given challenge, quite often daily and in many ways.

People believe and say extremely hurtful and violent things; however, if no one takes the time to explain why they are violent and hurtful, the person will likely never change their perspective. Further, our communicative approach to raising awareness matters. In some ways, dialogue is the opposite of calling-out. When calling-out occurs, problems are not addressed or people are not called to action. Conversations shut down that could have led to better understanding, if people were to have the courage and patience to go there. Collins (2009) noted:

> At the end of the day, does it really matter that you have won a debate about the benefits of assimilation or multiculturalism, or that you have convinced your opponent that personal responsibility is more important than structural change? The practices that come from those beliefs are what is at stake, and in this terrain, issues of conscience and personal responsibility can be measured only by what people actually do, not what they think other people should do, or what they themselves might do if someone would only let them. (p. 81)

Collins (2009) reminded us to consider not just what is said, but instead the power of talk to inform future actions. If we shut someone down in a DPO, they will
most likely continue to hold their belief and the debate or calling-out that occurred only further polarized the discourse. The dialogue did not move closer to disrupting oppression. We must move DPOs past contempt and towards empathy, understanding, accountability, and humility in order to raise levels of awareness and create environments more conducive to fostering inclusivity.

**Unit 2: Self-Exploration and Skill Building for DPO**

This unit is intends to prepare students for DPO by better understanding their selves. In this unit, the focus is on orientations towards conflict, emotional awareness, and intersectional reflexivity. To better implement IE, students must to be able to critically examine the perspectives, beliefs, and practices they hold that may foster social amnesia, perpetuation of WIP, and a lack of important communication skills. Students must learn more about themselves before they are ready to practice skills in DPO. In this unit, students are provided foundational knowledge of the skills they will explore in the next unit. Ironically, I failed to do this with IGDA. Regardless of the fact that I had already noted the lack of skills, I jumped right in to creating spaces to practice the skills without providing foundational knowledge of the skills to begin with. In IGDB, ICA, and ICB, I altered the structure of my class to teach the skills first, then move to application. This unit is shaped by several modalities of self-exploration that move between the personal and structural. The first section details the initial, exploratory phase of interpersonal communication patterns; it is vital that students understand their communicative patterns and learn more about others to become more effective in engaging across
different communication styles. The second section entails starting to distinguish what dialogue is and the skills necessary to practice it. The third section includes delving deep into the relationship between the individual self and social identities. The ability to understand the micro and macro impacts of social identities prepares students to practice skills of empathy and intersectional reflexivity. The final section considers ways to help students both differentiate and view the interdependence of personal and social identities. Throughout all of these explorative stages, I provide students with readings, clips, and individual exercises to familiarize themselves with course concepts and their self.

**Exploring Interpersonal Skills**

During this unit, I utilize several self-tests that progress outward from interpersonal to intercultural communication. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. I make this distinction because I want students to first consider the communicative patterns they exhibit in order to better understand how to constructively encounter conflict. These skills are typically discussed in interpersonal communication research. Since I center communication and conflict, I always have students take self-tests to determine their orientation towards conflict (e.g., levels of avoidance, conflict styles, and communication patterns they use during conflict). There are several different online tests available for these activities. Many assume that others communicate the same way they do. Especially in conflict, it is important to understand and respect different communication styles and orientations towards conflict. For example, someone who prefers direct
communication and does not avoid conflict, when interacting with a person who communicates indirectly and avoids conflict, will likely experience difficulty expressing their point or deciphering what the other person has said. This difference in communication style, when not contextualized, can lead to misunderstanding and, thus, increase conflict. I have found this to be a helpful tool in teaching students to look at their communicative patterns to better understand their self as well as the person that they are in conflict with. Students must learn to navigate any dissonance that may exist in different communicative behaviors.

**Difficult Dialogue**

“Dialogue” is a term that people often conceptualize as discussion or talk between two people. It is assumed that the term is another word for “talk.” To begin a course on dialogue, I establish what dialogue means and how it differs from other forms of talk. In applying the DPO model, we explicitly explore how to dialogue about topics deemed controversial and deeply personal as they pertain to structures of privilege and oppression. Our social identities impact the way we move through the world, and therefore, all of our experiences, which creates our relationship to privilege and oppression. Before diving into the aspects of privilege and oppression, I always begin by explaining the fundamentals of “difficult conversations” and dialogue. Stone et al. (2010) argued that every “difficult conversation” can be broken down into three conversations: the what happened, the feelings, and the identity. This provides students with a framework to interrogate their engagement in difficult dialogues to come. I couple this framework with a general discussion of
how the goals of dialogue and debate differ. I do not believe that debate should be discounted or viewed as a lesser form of communication. Rather, I think dialogue and debate have very different functions that are both necessary, effective, ethical, and appropriate communicative skills in different situations. Here is an example of how I begin teaching students how communication in conflict in shaped.

*Ok class, let’s get started. The goal in this class is to help you understand how communicative practices may be employed to more confidently and mindfully engage in dialogues on privilege and oppression. Before we get to those topics, let’s start by exploring the ways in which conflict in dialogues occur. For today, you read Stone, Patton, and Heen (2010). They argued that each “difficult conversation” has three key components.*

*The first is the “What Happened Conversation” discussion, which involves identifying where the disagreement is. So, when you find yourself in a disagreement, you should stop to consider how you may be perceiving the interaction differently. Stone et al. (2010) advocated that we guard against the blame game here. Instead, we should work together to understand the root of the disagreement and towards a better understanding. This means we must take time to really listen to how another person/s perceive the disagreement.*

*The second is the “Feelings Conversation” and includes questions of feelings with particular attention to questions of validity and appropriateness. It is common for people to feel that their feelings are inappropriate. Further, as a culture, we often associate emotions and feelings as invalid, inappropriate, or irrelevant. This is*
especially true for men because, in many ways, masculinity is structured through discourses of power and strength. Men who show emotions often get told things like, “Don’t be a pussy,” or “Stop acting like a girl.” These comments start very early in children’s lives and have a lasting impact. Women are often depicted as overly emotional and thus irrational. Stone et al. (2010) argued “engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music. You’ll get the plot but miss the point” (p. 13). They argued that feelings are at the core of difficult dialogues and are intrinsic to the conflict (p. 13). Thus, we must learn to break down the ways in which we tend to deny, minimize, or bury feelings in difficult conversation. They are there and having an impact; we cannot dismiss this variable from the equation.

The third is the “Identity Conversation,” which involves participants questioning what a disagreement means to them personally. This means pausing to consider our investment in a conflict. What does the conflict mean to us? How does our ego, or the way we feel others may be perceiving us, impact our behavior?

Difficult conversations are likely to turn into debate, Stone et al. (2010) advocated that we make conscious efforts to shift from a battling perspective to a learning perspective (pp. 17-19). So, when we find ourselves in disagreement, we must practice shifting from listening to respond to listening to learn. We must not try to talk to prove a point but to explain our perspective and learn more about a different perspective. Does this make sense?
Ok, great. Let’s move on. First, I would like you all to get out something to write on/with. Think of a time when you encountered conflict. In the next five minutes, analyze the conflict through the readings. Think back to the three pieces. Some key questions might be: How did you perceive the disagreement? How do you think the other person/s perceived the disagreement? What emotions/feelings did you have? Did you engage your emotions/feelings? How do you perceive this conflict to have impacted your identity? How might an outsider have perceived you in this conflict?

Ok, I’d like to split you into groups of four. In groups, please discuss what you noticed in the process of exploring a “difficult conversation” you have encountered. Pick someone’s difficult conversation, or collectively create a scenario and analyze how the three parts played into it. Then you will be asked to create two performances of the conflict. The first performance should explore how the conflict you chose played out. The second one should show how the conflict might play out if you analyzed it from the three components of difficult conversations and used some of the skills laid out in the reading. As you do the performance, be mindful of the ways in which you are communicating and how it feels when you embody this form of communication. Consider how these guiding questions may lead you to engage in the disagreement differently. You have 20 minutes.

I have given this lecture four times, and three of those times I included a performance activity. I often utilize performance activities as a way to explore how ideologies, experiences, and perspectives manifest in the body. The performances students create vary widely, from parental conflict, romantic conflict, friend conflict,
and roommate conflict. Every once in a while, one group chooses a conflict that centers on issues of privilege and oppression, but this is rare. That is ok though, students should be allowed to slowly get their feet wet and not be thrown into a deep sea full of obstacles and with the potential to cause serious damage to the process of building the community necessary for DPO. The performance activity gives students a chance to start thinking about how to apply these guiding questions when they encounter disagreement in a small group setting. Students are given the opportunity to both feel how these communicative practices are embodied while also having time to think critically about how they engage in conflict. This specific reading introduces students to concepts that are consistent with the skills of active listening, emotional awareness, and reflexivity. First, students are asked to shift their perspective to a learning stance while considering the perceptions of others—they are taught to resist assumptions. Next, students are asked to explore their emotions as they pertain to disagreements, as this aides in the process of identifying emotions. Students are then asked to interrogate their emotions to better understand where they come from and how to productively move through them. Finally, students practice reflexivity by considering how they are oriented towards the conflict, with specific regards to identity. In doing this performance activity, students begin to bond with one another, often through the uncomfortability of doing performance activities.
Social Identities and Structures

Here students begin examining how social identities create different relationships to privilege and oppression. As students explore their identities and how they are impacted by society, I have found that a journal assignment titled, “Who Are You?” is useful to help students nail down the specific ways in which social identities shape their orientation towards privilege and oppression. I wrote the following prompt for this assignment:

It is important for you to understand your identity, the way it shapes your life experiences, and the way it shapes communicative interactions and perceptions. In 2-3 pages, explore how you see culture shaping your communication. Who do you communicate with? How does race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, nationality, etc. shape your day-to-day interactions? It is very important to be aware of your positionally when writing and speaking. Some key questions might be: What aspects of your personal identity do you identify as key factors in your day-to-day life? What aspects of your identity go (un)noted? Why are some aspects of your identity heavily weighted and others ignored? This assignment will be worth 50 points. Your grade will be based on the following questions:

1. Did you consider the impact of social identity on communication? Did you consider how your social identity shapes who, how, when, and why you communicate? (15 points)
2. Did you consider the way that your identityshapes your day-to-day experiences? (15 points)

3. Did you exemplify a deep engagement with course materials? Did you use the theories presented in the course to analyze your identity? (15 points)

4. Did you proofread? (5 points)

This journal assignment offers students an opportunity to start considering the ways in which social identities impact their day-to-day lives so that they may practice the skills of active listening, intersectional reflexivity, empathy, and emotional awareness when engaging in DPO.

I follow this assignment with more quizzes that are aimed at exploring social identities, such as the Implicit Bias Test and Intersectionality Bingo. The Implicit Bias test was created by several researchers to assess implicit social cognition; or, the subconscious thoughts and feelings in response to different social identities such as race, gender, ability, age, etc. This test elicits strong emotions and identifies potential biases that students may be unaware they had. However, this provides a more private avenue for students to see how social discourses have impacted the way they perceive. As students explore inwards to how their identity is impacted by society, they should also start to grasp how social identities impact day-to-day life to better understand privilege and oppression.
Depending on the specific topic of the course and number of students, I ask students to check in at the beginning of class by describing a way they saw privilege and oppression function since the last class. In IGDA and IGDB, the focus was on gender: Each class session, students shared how they saw gender functioning. Initially, students often struggle to find examples; however, by the end of the term, students typically cannot wait to share the things they observed regarding gender since the last class. Students go around the room and share one way they saw gender function. This was a practice that Dr. Heather Dell used, and I recall it leaving me shocked by all the little things I had missed. As the quarter ends, students often share feeling shocked by the multitude of ways that gender functions in nearly every interaction they have. In the beginning of the quarter, students are very quiet about how they saw gender function. Some are unsure of what to discuss. My mentor, Dr. Frank Tuitt, taught me that inclusive and ethical teaching includes never asking students to do something you wouldn’t. Following his lead, I model things for my students. Now I share one way I engage with my students in a daily activity to help raise awareness of structural oppression.

\[I\ text{will\ start\ us\ off\ with\ check-ins\ today!\ Yesterday,\ I\ was\ at\ the\ zoo\ with\ my\ son,\ Luke.\ He\ was\ wearing\ a\ yellow\ and\ blue\ outfit\ and\ carrying\ a\ pink\ food\ cup.\ A\ little\ girl\ asked\ her\ mother,\ is\ that\ a\ boy\ or\ a\ girl?\ The\ mother\ scolded\ the\ child\ and\ said\ she\ was\ being\ rude.\ The\ little\ girl\ walked\ off\ and\ mumbled\ something\ about\ not\ being\ able\ to\ have\ both\ pink\ and\ blue\ and\ that\ one\ is\ for\ girls\ and\ one\ is\ for\ boys.\ I\ went\ on\ to\ explain\ how\ this\ young\ girl,\ probably\ only\ three\ or\ four\ years\ old,\ had\ already}\]
internalized gender binaries. She was utterly baffled by the fact that a child could have something marked masculine and feminine and her mother did not attempt to explain this.

It was about mid-quarter. I asked the class for volunteers to start check-ins. A student, who I will call Tom, shot his hand up in the air, and immediately began explaining that someone in his fraternity used the expression, “That’s gay.” He paused and looked down, continuing to explain that he didn’t do anything in the moment, that he had messed up, but went back to say something later. The class started to perk up a bit. Tom was popular and charismatic; his involvement undoubtedly contributed to the increase in the participation of other men in the class. He explained how he saw gender functioning in a lot of negative ways in his fraternity and that he took the initiative to make them better.

My goal is for students to understand how systemic oppression manifests in day-to-day life in an effort to better prepare them with the knowledge and skills to have DPO. As identified in Chapter 2, low levels of awareness create a hurdle to implementing DEI initiatives. Thus, preparing for this model should find ways to raise awareness of privilege and oppression prior to starting to practice dialogue. As students become aware of their relationship to privilege and oppression, it becomes easier to see how their perspectives are shaped by those relationships and other factors.
Understanding Your Lenses

It is not uncommon to never interrogate personal perspectives, especially when one lives in a space that subscribes to similar attitudes, values, and beliefs. For example, when religion comes up in class discussions, atheist students often know more about the Bible than I do as a Christian. When one is aligned with the dominant perspective, they are most often surrounded by people with the same perspective, a perspective that is “normal,” “neutral,” or an assumed “truth.” We must work to show students the need to complicate our perspectives by better understanding what informs them. As someone who grew up in an all-white community, I rarely questioned the different, lived experiences of people of color. People of color were not present in my day-to-day life; I failed to see myself as raced or to understand how my white identity shape my perspectives. Perspective is a necessary consideration for DPO, especially in order to practice empathy and intersectional reflexivity. Through dialogue, I attempted to create a way for students to examine the way they view the world. I most commonly use DiAngelo’s (2016) discussion of socialization and “frames of reference” (pp. 24-42). DiAngelo (2016) explained that the way someone views the world is shaped by their frames (social structures) and lenses (personal characteristics and experiences). She created a visual representation; it shows frames shaped by citizenship, age, religion, sexuality, race, class, ability, and gender. This composes the structural system within which we view the world. Lenses are shaped by personal factors such as communication patterns, hobbies, and beliefs and are held in place by the structures.
(or frames) of our glasses. After doing this reading, students are given paper, markers, and colored pencils to create their own frames. Students are given class time to create a visual representation of the things that filter their view of the world. This activity enables students to consider the relationship of self to society by weaving together personal and structural factors that shape their view of the world.

This step can be used to directly address the hurdles of white institutional legacies and low levels of awareness. The romanticized versions of history, as discussed in Chapter 2, cause many folks to see the world through rose-colored glasses; thus, we need a tool to consider the pink tint we see through was and is created through the bleaching of the often bloody stains of history. Raising awareness about privilege and oppression can also aid in reconciling WIP by uncovering some of the problematic assumptions made within the institutions that work to (re)produce privilege and oppression (Gusa, 2010). This unit works to help students better understand themselves and their relationships to privilege and oppression in order to prepare students to practice dialogic skills.

**Talking Back to Oppression**

The whole point of this unit is to prepare students to move from theory to praxis. How can we help students to apply the things they learned to better understand themselves and others? In an effort to create such a space for my students, I created a journal titled “Talking Back to Oppression.” This assignment enables students to reflect on the way privilege and oppression manifest in their
lives while focusing on ways to speak back and combat oppression. I wrote the following assignment prompt:

For this journal entry you will be given the opportunity to speak back to an instance or a specific way in which you have been oppressed or the oppressor. In this course we have identified the ways in which multiple forms of oppression function collectively to silence bodies deemed “other.” This course may have shed light to forms of oppression you experienced, but never knew how to identify. You could speak back to patriarchy, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ethnocentrism, or all of the above. This assignment can be done in numerous different ways: a poem, a piece of art, a general reflection, a letter written to someone, an institution, or an overarching system of domination. Or, perhaps you want to reconcile a moment when you were the oppressor, and consider how you could have responded differently, been more empathetic or stood by someone you witnessed being oppressed. If you chose a method outside of the general reflection you should take a little time to explain artistic choices and unpack your experience of the assignment. Was it empowering? Was it healing? Was it difficult? What obstacles came up? What new insights, if any, did you discover about the instance(s)? Your grade will be based on the following questions:

1. Did you think creatively about how to complete the assignment? Did you explain why you chose the method you did? (15 points)
2. Did you speak back to oppression? Did you make clear connections from personal experiences to larger systems of domination? Did you critically reflect upon what this says about our cultural relationships to privilege and oppression? (30 points)

3. Did you exemplify a deep understanding of privilege and oppression? Did you clearly identify your experience to gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexuality, etc? (30 points)

This assignment can be liberating for minoritized students, who face oppression daily and are given an academic space to push back. It is a bit more difficult for students with several privileged identities. Students with a lot of privilege have noted that this assignment raises their levels of awareness simply because they are forced to stop and search for a time when they were oppressed. These students often shift to view their complicity in systems of oppression; however, they do so in a way that is constructive and seeks to disrupt dominance. Students are allowed to use a number of mediums to complete the assignment, which gives them more agency in what the assignment will teach them. Students have performed songs and written performances, created artistic representations of their experience, written letters to their oppressors and past selves, etc. The assignment has proven effective prior to stepping into practicing dialogic skills because it enables students to see the necessity of accountability and the possibility of empowerment.
Now that a classroom community has been established and students have begun to explore themselves, it is time for them to start engaging one another. The focus shifts to active listening alongside the other three skills. I first like to give students an opportunity to understand how debate and dialogue work differently. My point is not to discredit debate, which is a very important communicative style in certain situations. However, debate in DPO quickly escalates to what has been coined “oppression Olympics,” where students battle over who has it the worst. Further, debate is characterized by proving a point or winning an argument. Instead, DPO is about engaging one another to better understand our relationships towards privilege and oppression. In this section, I share three activities I often utilize to help students apply and practice the skills learned in class. Much of this unit includes performance activities and dialogue sessions.

**Debating vs. Dialoguing**

Following performance methodologies, I believe in giving students opportunities to embody different communications styles to see and feel the ways communication patterns manifest in their bodies. For this in-class activity, I choose a current event that centers controversy around privilege and oppression. I begin class with a brief overview of the event and then assess student orientations towards the conflict. I then place students into three groups, with students who hold multiple perspectives on the topic in each group. Students are asked to debate the topic with one another in three rounds. In each round, one group will argue for, one
against, and one will mediate. Each group moves through all three roles. We then move to a group a dialogue. This activity enables students to empathize with multiple perspectives of a disagreement and explore how debate and dialogue differ. I now move to an example of how this activity has played out in the classroom.

The topic of cultural appropriation was a common theme that students wanted to explore. In one class, students were quite polarized on the topic. Many students failed to understand what appropriation was, while other students failed to understand how it could be so confusing. Ok, class. Is anyone familiar with the conversations about cultural appropriation with the NBA player Jeremy Lin? A couple students grumbled. Jeremy Lin, a NBA player that identifies as Taiwanese-American, recently got dreads and was criticized by some members of the black community for appropriating a black hairstyle. Then a counter-point arose discussing the frequency of Asian-inspired tattoos. I gathered a few quick clips that outlined the progression of events. After showing the students the clips, I asked them to place their heads down on their desks and to close their eyes. I ask students to raise their hands if they thought that Lin’s hair is an example of appropriation, is not an example of appropriation, or to indicate if they are unsure. I ask the students to raise their heads. I quickly make three groups of students, ensuring that each group contained students that represented all three perspectives. I had an activity planned to help us discern dialogue from debate. I ask students to be mindful of what they have learned about the skills of empathy, intersectional reflexivity, active listening, and emotional awareness. In this activity the students debate both sides of this argument and moderate while peers
debate the argument. Group A moderates first, Group B argues that Lin is culturally appropriating. Group C argue that Lin is not culturally appropriating. As the session went on, I could see each student feeling considerably more comfortable arguing one position over the other. I could also see the way students empathized with a perspective different than their own in order to do the activity. With a chance to engage the conflict from several perspectives, I ask students to identify what they learned. A white male student quickly raised his hand, indicating that he found it very difficult to argue a point he disagreed with. Another white male student chimed in, sharing that he realized that he felt the most productive when he was mediating. A white woman student responded, telling the class that it felt very different to embody skills like empathy than it was to talk about them. Another white male student added that he also realized that it was difficult to be open-minded when debating, because he found himself busy trying to prove a point. I shift to a dialogue about Lin’s behavior and if it was appropriation, asking students to be mindful of the differences between dialogue and debate, to try and bring themselves back to the skills of active listening, emotional awareness, empathy, and intersectional reflexivity. We move on to discuss this as a large group. Eventually, students agreed that they were unable to discern if Lin’s situation was appropriation or not; however, they all seemed to walk away with a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of appropriation. When asked to reflect upon the differences they experienced between debate and dialogue, several students highlighted the ways they felt more comfortable debating because it is a more common form of talk in our culture. A student, who I will call Christina, noted that the
activity gave her the opportunity to actually practice intersectional reflexivity. I could see the way several identities shaped the orientation to understanding arguments over appropriation in others and myself.

The main goal of this unit is to provide students with an opportunity to practice the skills they learned. I have learned about intersectional reflexivity in several settings; however, it is easier to regurgitate it than it is to actively engage and embody. Students are often accustomed to transactional models of learning. Thus, they often seek to memorize and regurgitate rather than actually considering how to embody the skills they are learning. This class acts as an instructional course and advanced lab, where students practice embodying dialogic skills. Further, different perspectives are necessary for the lab to function properly. If the classroom community becomes an echo chamber, students will not be allowed the same experiences to embody such skills. Thus, the course and instructor must be prepared to find ways to invite and engage several different perspectives.

**Disrupting the Echo Chamber**

A common theme in class reflections was learning from peers as they shared differing perspectives. The DPO practice lab is only effective if students are willing to engage one another, but a common hurdle is the “echo chamber.” An echo chamber classroom entails sharing only one perspective on a topic. Following intersectionality, we all have a unique orientation to privilege and oppression. We can view aspects of our experiences as simultaneously similar and different from one another (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991). Further, we cannot dialogue about
privilege and oppression if only one perspective is shared. There is no opportunity to practice embodying the skills. For example, active listening within DPO means tuning in to really hear what someone with a different perspective is saying. The motivation for this can come from several factors: I find that some students show a reluctance to engage because they generally avoid conflict, perceive themselves to be the only person that shares their perspective, or fear that their perspective will not be validated or engaged by the class. It is much easier to remain comfortable and not engage across difference, but this does not provide students opportunities to move from theory to praxis. In the last dialogue course I taught, there seemed to be the worst case of an echo chamber I had ever encountered. I was not sure how to address it, but I could tell that it was impacting ability to practice skills, raise awareness, and create moments for authentic engagement. An activity I created to attempt to disrupt the echo chamber is described below, including an account of how I attempted to implement it into the classroom community.

I encountered an echo chamber, and did not know what to do. I could tell by reading journal assignments that students had a wide range of orientations towards the topics discussed in class, but they just would not engage each other. The end of the quarter was nearing, and I questioned if I could effectively rock the boat myself. There were only three minutes before class ended, I wasn’t sure how I could do that just yet. Perhaps there were some commonalities amongst the topics that my students felt passionate about. I paused on a reading and asked the class to come in ready to talk about a topic they felt passionately about and that pertains to intercultural conflict for
next class. I told them to think hard about their experiences that inform their passion and to have at least three reasons that inform that passion. I went home and thought long and hard about how I could disrupt the echo chamber. I felt I had to step in as the instructor to help foster a space for students to engage dialogic skills such as active listening, critical thinking, emotional awareness, intersectional reflexivity, and empathy. I hoped that the students would prepare for the discussion by beginning to interrogate what informs perceptions, emotional processing, and critical reflection.

We all came back to class, and I felt nervous about the topics the students might have picked. I wondered if this plan would actually work. I said last class, “I am changing up today’s agenda. Let’s go around the room and share an intercultural conflict that we feel passionate about.” The students went around the room and I searched for themes, patterns, and commonalities. Much to my dismay, not one of the twenty-something students present that day had the same topic, overlap in topics, or response to topics from their peers. Now I was even more perplexed. I had spent so much time planning out the dialogic piece of the exercise that I did not foresee this hurdle. One student brought up trigger warnings, and this seemed to evoke the most (though mixed) response from the class. Aside from this, there was little engagement with what their peers said.

I sat completely flabbergasted, attempting to contain my non-verbals. I paused. “Well, I feel passionately about guns. I do not believe that people should have access to automatic weapons. However, I grew up in a farm village, where hunting was embedded in my town’s cultural rituals, beliefs, and practices.” My students looked
shocked. A conservative student who had been silent most of the quarter perked his head up and shouted, seemingly shocked, “Really?!” The whole class was in shock. I was a little uncomfortable to put my own opinion directly into the discussion, but it seemed to foster a space for some of the conservative, white male students to speak with comfort and authenticity. It evoked a level of engagement from the entire class I had not seen all quarter.

“As you all can see with this one topic, there are a range of different perspectives,” I said. “This activity we are about to engage is intended to create a brave space where you can practice the dialogic skills we have been studying all quarter. It is easy to regurgitate a definition, but it is much more difficult to practice the skill. As we engage in these dialogues, I would like to return to a few mantras that remind us of the steps we need to take to foster a dialogic environment. First, the goal is not to change anyone’s mind or prove a point. The goal is to learn. Second, we will try to listen to learn, not respond! Third, there is no right or wrong. Finally, we should be mindful of the course ground rules we created at the beginning of the quarter.”

After asking for questions, I paused to ask which two topics the class wanted to explore. The students chose trigger warnings and gun laws. I first created a visual representation of the different perspectives from the class on the given topic. The students then stood, and I pointed assigned each corner of the room to “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly disagree.” I told the class that, after I made a definitive statement, they should move to the space in the classroom that best represents their perspective on the statement. When the class understood, I said, “All
guns should be banned in the country.” Students quickly moved to a space. I went with guns first because it seemed to be the least direct at implicating specific bodies in the room; the topic also seemed to elicit the most engagement with the whole class. Students quickly shuffled into an almost equal representation in each corner of the room. I then asked students to pause and look at the visual representation of the number of multiple perspectives on the topic. I asked them to sit. A few students began expressing disdain for guns. One student (I will call him Todd) noted how ignorant it was to have multiple guns. Another student (I will call him Adam), quickly responded that the first student understood little about guns because, according to Adam, he is a hunter and doesn’t use the same kind of gun to hunt birds, deer, turkey, duck, etc. Instead, unique types of guns are required. Half of the class looked dumbfounded and Todd looked stunned; his head was turned slightly to the side and he agreed. Adam continued, indicating that he felt people should have access to AK-47s and all types of guns. Todd, and the rest of the class who had starkly disagreed with Adam earlier, seemed startled. Another student (I will call him Dan) added that he owns a gun and that there are serious issues with the how the NRA has so much power, adding that the gun registration process is seriously flawed. The dialogue continued for about 35 minutes. Several students shared several different perspectives, and it was clear that not only had the echo chamber been disrupted, but students displayed non-verbal communication that showed great interest, engagement, and learning from their peers. The class had effectively shared a wide range of perspectives and embodied skills of active listening. Other skills were present in some ways, but to varying degrees.
I felt the topic would help the class feel comfortable enough to start sharing before shifting to discuss trigger warnings. Trigger warnings are such a deeply personal topic that I did not know how discussion would turn out. I had not initially planned to have students return to the four corners, but it seemed that many perspectives had shifted to some degree. I hoped it might be powerful for students to see the power of dialogue to open minds before moving on to discuss triggers.

I asked the students to again stand and move to the corner of the room that best represented their response to the same definitive statement. I repeated the statement, “All guns should be banned in the country.” When I said it the second time, students weren’t so quick to move about. Eventually they moved to their corner, but almost the entire class put themselves closer to the middle of the spectrum. I asked them again to pause and note positioning. I asked the class if they wanted to go to the next topic or pause here to debrief. They indicated they wanted to keep dialoguing. I moved on to the next definitive statement, “I believe that trigger warnings are important.” Students moved around the room and placed themselves almost evenly amongst the four positions. I knew that this particular topic needed a little more interception from me as the instructor to ensure that all students were aware of what trigger warnings are.

I asked students to share their definition of trigger warnings and what purpose they view them as filling. Before students answered, I applauded them for their authentic engagement in the last dialogue and requested that they remember to listen to learn, empathize, and hope for increased understanding. A student (I will call him
Paul) who raised the topic to begin with, started the dialogue by saying that he understood trigger warnings to be a legal liability and that, for him, they seemed to be the result of an overly sensitive culture that is too easily offended. I saw a few students cringe, and felt a few people were becoming visibly uncomfortable. A woman raised her hand and explained that she felt trigger warnings were “extra” and that people could be triggered by a blue pen. She continued that people needed to toughen up. Before I could get a word in, another student, who I will call Jordan, interjected to explain that they have trauma for several reasons and if they see something really violent they might have a panic attack. Their voice started to crack at the end of the comment and I saw pain rushing through their body. I always try to be a moderator more than a participant; however, teaching this course means that I must jump in and get my feet wet, too. As a survivor of sexual trauma with post-traumatic stress disorder, I interjected. I explained that, for me, the sound of leaves crunching, someone leaning over my shoulder at a particular angle, seeing a calendar date, hearing the song that was playing, etc. can incite a panic attack. I can also be triggered by feeling in danger. I explained to them an experience running into someone associated with my trial and how I experienced an array of side-effect, including heart palpitations, sweaty palms, numb and tingling fingers and lips, tunnel vision, nausea, and excessive saliva. My students looked shocked. Dan added that his uncle is a firefighter in New York City and was there during 9/11; he, too, has triggers around certain movie depictions or imagery of the event. Another student, who I will call Niel, added that he was once addicted to pills and almost died from an overdose. He related that if he sees
show where someone overdoses, it negatively impacts him, too. The room was silent, yet was also fully present and seemed genuinely concerned, apologetic, and transformed by hearing the experiences of their peers. Paul began to mumble, got a little choked up, and looked completely shaken. He explained that he was so sorry if he had offended anyone. He explained that he just really did not understand. Jordan quickly added how thankful they were for their peers actually listening to what everyone was saying. The rest of the students began thanking each other for being present and for authentically engaging one another. It was clear that the discussion was over, and we only had 15 minutes to debrief. Again, I asked the class to stand and move to the space in the room that most aligns with their perspective on the declarative statement, “I believe that trigger warnings are important.” Almost in sync, the students moved towards “Agree.” Some even switched from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Most moved one position closer to “Agree.” The students returned to their seats before I could instruct them to do so. Before I could prompt them to start talking, Christina, said that she was shocked to see how effective dialogue was, and was changed by it. The rest of the students chimed in and detailed the way that they were fascinated by the overlaps in experiences, and many commented on how their awareness was raised significantly by the discussion.

This activity was mentioned on several comments on course teaching evaluations. The students loved this activity for the community it fostered and for the experience practicing dialogic skills. More social justice oriented students described the experience as hopeful and powerful because they saw how their
dialogic skills made a positive difference and helped to better understand others. More conservative students that tended to perform liberal ideologies reported that they could be more authentic; several left with different perspectives.

Over the past couple years, I have noted a growing trend in conservative white male students that perform liberalism, refusing to authentically engage, because they claim to feel punished and scrutinized for their beliefs. This cry of conservative victimhood has become an increasingly popular rhetoric in our cultural moment. Debates have broken out about “free speech” in campuses across the United States. The hard truth is, many instructors fear these students, and many also fear discussing privilege and oppression—especially racial privilege and oppression—and often silence the experiences of students with minoritized identities. This class demands that students and instructors work together to engage every student in the class, especially those who have a different perspective to offer.

I do not argue that we ignore offensive rhetoric, but I do ask that we call-in, use reflexive failure, and brave ourselves enough to engage comments in classes that are offensive in a productive way. Teaching this course meant that I be willing to engage every student and constantly remind myself of the possibility of these difficult moments to cultivate a space of learning with the potential to generatively engage dissonance within our campus and culture. If students feel shut down in the beginning of class, they will likely remain silent the rest of the course; as a result, other students may also feel silenced. This shutting down happens on both sides of polarized debates in our current society. It is easier to disengage discomfort in order
to push through and “play it safe.” However, it is currently only “safe” for people with privileged identities. Scholars have noted that in order for awareness of privilege and oppression to occur, we must be willing to get uncomfortable. Thus, we must find ways to encourage our students and ourselves to “go there” (Assumah, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias, 2016, Reason & Evans, 2007). Students who have taken classes in the DPO framework consistently comment on the rewards of their discomfort.

**Wordsharing**

An additional activity I employ is “wordshare.” In the last five minutes of class, I ask students to pause and think of one word that sums up how they feel about class. In one course, after a discussion about reflexive engagement and at the beginning of class, I asked students to share one word to describe the day’s discussion. Students shared a range of perspectives. Some terms that arose included: “influenced,” “frustrated,” “intrigued,” “blamed,” and “surprised.” This exercise provides a space for students to say what they are feeling, without inquiry or explanation. It also enables the classroom community to better understand how people can experience the same discussion and perceive it in both oppositional and complimentary ways. I have also used this “wordshare” activity to move into a group project if the questions are more specific to a topic, reading, or event. I will ask students to first write a word down. I then place students into groups and create a performance that encapsulates all of the perspectives present in the group. They
engage and enmesh their experiences to create a unique embodiment of that shared perspective. Below is an example of how this activity played out.

On the last day of class, I wanted students to reflect on their perceptions of class both when entering and when leaving. I first asked students to wordshare how they felt about their experience in the class. Students used oppositional and complimentary terms to one another, including: “raw,” “uncomfortable,” “challenging,” “new,” and “complex.” I split students into groups of four or five and asked them to create two performances: the first performance to demonstrate how they felt in the beginning of class and the second to demonstrate how they felt in the end of class. I often let students self-select groups, unless I intentionally place them in groups to ensure that each group has multiple perspectives and communication styles. This class included a student that escalated tensions and undoubtedly added to a sense of fear amongst classmates that he may explode at any moment. Thus, for this specific course, I often have students group themselves in order to soothe fears of doing performance activities. Yet, this time, students organized themselves in a more racially diverse way. In the beginning of the course, there was a lot of tension between the students of color and white students. This section had eight people of color, out of 29 (this is unusual for DU).

The performances picked up on different moments in the class, but the themes were the same. Students noted a raised level of racial awareness, and a majority of the performances included an explicit identification of white fragility they enacted in the beginning of the course and how they learned to confront and overcome the tendency
to shut down in discussions of race by using dialogic skills. For example, one group of four students (whom I will call Ryan, David, Sai, and Peter) opened their performance with a day we discussed affirmative action during class. Ryan opened, espousing statements about racism being over. David leaned to Ryan and indicated that he was not David Duke! Sai explained that he knew people were admitted into schools because they were black. They paused scene and flipped to the end of class. The four of them looked confused for a moment and then began to say phrases indicating reception and engagement, such as, “Ohh, I see. I didn’t know.” They ended the scene and explained that they weren’t hearing what I or their peers were saying when we discussed racism because they stopped listening whenever race was brought up. They noted that they needed to shift their listening to seek knowledge. They also noted the differences in their perspective based on their number of different positionalities, demonstrating the need for intersectional reflexivity. Ryan and David commented that they were very angry in the beginning of the course; however, they didn’t know how to contextualize that anger. They noted that, through the course, they were able to start identifying their behavior and seeing how it was often motivated by an emotive response shaped by their lack of experience in having racial dialogues.

This activity was one of the most rewarding moments teaching DPO. Again, I could actually see my students applying the skills I had hoped they would learn. Further, they were all authentic, honest, and raw. For me, the beauty of teaching this course is learning with my students while we all walk towards increased understanding. No two classes are ever the same, and the ways in which the
students engaged the material sets the path the class walks down. This class should never be taught the same way; rather, I advocate that, as instructors, we tap into our intuition and intellect to help provide a space where our students can explore DPO. Just as we ask our students to be mindful of how perceptions shape the way we experience things, we must also acknowledge that perceptions present in the class shape how to create the best learning outcomes. For example, in a class full of gender studies students alongside students who took the class for an “easy A” the course should be structured differently than a class with an echo chamber and low engagement. Teaching DPO has taught me the importance of adaptability, vulnerability, and authenticity in the classroom.

**Conclusion: Teaching to Open Minds**

For other educators, I hope that this chapter illuminates possibilities present in all classrooms. If we create intentional spaces with our students that foster authentic engagement with one another, we can work to customize the classroom to invite the best learning outcomes. If we take the time to teach students to look out and in through reflection and the introduction to DPO skills, the positive effects can reverberate into several different realms of their lives. Finally, if we provide students with a space to practice the skills, they are more likely to use those skills outside of the classroom. Thus, if we equip students with a space to practice dialogic skills, they return to the community, raise awareness of privilege and oppression, and work to overcome complicit behaviors they may have in a hostile campus climate. In our IGD meetings, we often discussed the possibility for students to
become leaders and change agents in the campus community. It is my hope that by reviewing my experiences teaching DPO, the reader can understand the complexities of teaching how to dialogue.

Teaching DPO helps disrupt social amnesia, WIP (Gusa, 2010), and a common lack of skills to engage across difference. Social amnesia is disrupted by practicing skills in understanding multiple perspectives, experiences, and subjectivity. Critical thinking is necessary to overcome the romanticized lies we have told ourselves. The process of interrogating what shapes attitudes, values, and beliefs provides moments to scrub the romanticized lenses we often wear during discussions of our country's history. Practicing these skills helps move students from theorizing to action, which disrupts WIP at a grassroots level, which has potential to better support administration’s statements on IE by moving from abstract wordcoudls to grounded practices. If this type of engagement could trickle upward, there might be more concrete actions and authentic engagement within the campus community. Finally, the course offered students a space to explore DPO, which has been shown to create stronger relationships amongst peers, who have gained confidence in engaging DPO. One could hope that institutions of higher education will start using the classroom as a space to better prepare students to have the necessary dialogues to foster a more inclusive community that is coherent with the professed goals of IE in order to prepare students for an increasingly polarized and hostile cultural climate.
CHAPTER 6: GROUNDING INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE RHETORICAL WORDCLOUDS

Introduction

It is undeniable that the US is currently amidst a moment of polarization, confusion, and frustration. I opened this dissertation with a narrative about protests at UVA in the summer of 2017. Issues of racial tension are nothing specific to college campuses; rather, tension permeates every aspect of our culture. College campuses were the focus of this dissertation in order to consider how dialogue might be used as a tool to aid in implementing DEI initiatives and creating positive change by equipping students with skills to navigate the tension percolating on campuses and the nation. This dissertation aimed to answer how a PWI could infuse dialogue to aid in implementing DEI initiatives and inviting institutional change.

Chapter 2 outlined three common barriers to implementing IE at PWIs. The first is a social amnesia that stems from romanticized versions of our nation’s history. This presents a hurdle because, without a more nuanced understanding of history, it makes it more difficult to understand the root of exclusionary actions. I used the example of DU’s institutional nickname, the “Pioneers,” to show one way this manifests on PWIs with DEI initiatives. The second hurdle arises structurally from a discontinuity between the professed goals and actions of DEI initiatives. This is commonly shaped by conflicting motivations of implementing DEI initiatives and
a general lack of congruency within such initiatives. This manifests through heavily marketed diversity without a campus community that values the textual rhetoric professed by universities. I used the example of DU having no clear IE policy or guidelines to hold people accountable. Finally, I addressed the hurdle of low levels of awareness and a lack of skills to engage across difference. I used the example of the “Free Speech Wall” to show how students with different social identities lacked opportunities to engage in authentic dialogue with each other. This leads to further confusion, polarization, and a hostile campus climate. I later show the ways I saw dialogue work as an intervention to all three of these hurdles, which invites institutional change.

Chapter 3 explains the necessity of using critical rhetorical ethnography for this dissertation, which was very useful in exploring the dialectical relationships, dissonance, and tension present in IE rhetoric on campus. Dialogue has shown to increase levels of awareness and to improve the effectiveness of engaging in difficult conversations (Ahmed, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Reason & Evans, 2007; Sue, 2015). However, little work has been done to nail down the specifics of how professors should teach students to dialogue (Black, 2005; Boyd & Markarian, 2011; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Skidmore, 2006). Thus, the analysis examined how IE rhetoric has manifested at DU by engaging texts pertaining to IE, structures, practices, experiences, and observations from my perspective as an IE activist, liaison, educator, and student on campus. Critical rhetorical ethnography provided opportunities to examine the multiple factors that shape IE rhetoric including, but
not limited to: statements, plans, campus climate, social amnesia, WIP, and low levels of awareness. Before moving into analysis, critical rhetorical ethnography calls for researchers to acknowledge their relationship to the research and their role in advocating for change. As such, I shared my own continued journey of racial awareness and how it led me to see DPO as a crucial area for communication scholars to engage, especially at a PWIs implementing a DEI initiative.

Chapter 4 explored how dialogue could reconcile tensions within the rhetoric of IE at DU. This provided a basis to consider how dialogue could also reconcile dissonance within the rhetoric of IE. Research has shown that there is often a dissonance between what DEI initiatives say and what actually happens (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2016). My analysis showed that there has been a lag between the goals of IE and the actions of the university. This chapter laid a foundation to consider how the rhetoric of IE manifests in order to also consider how we might bring IE closer to reaching its proclaimed goals and values. No institution is perfect, and I believe a true sign of intelligence is acknowledging that there is always more to learn. Thus, I believe that a true sign of a leader at an academic institution is the ability to acknowledge that the academic culture is always unfinished. I was proud and relieved to find that DU Dialogues was one initiative that is structurally supported, in a myriad of ways, by DU. If DU wants to be a thought leader on inclusion, DU Dialogues is a step in the right direction. Dialogue initiatives are a way to create change from the ground up in the community and, further, in the world. The incorporation of a course that gives students the space to develop and build the
skills necessary to dialogue increases efforts of IE on campus, prepares students to navigate a conflict-ridden culture and workplace, and creates opportunities for students to become change agents in the world. Dialogue as an intervention has the potential to respond to a hostile campus climates and provide the cultural need for better communication skills. This chapter set up the groundwork to consider the usefulness of the inclusion of dialogue in IE initiatives.

In Chapter 5, I analyzed my experiences teaching dialogue as part of an IE initiative at DU. This provided insight to consider how dialogue could work to invite institutional change and improve the campus climate and the functionality of IE rhetoric. I shared my experiences, observations, and research on teaching dialogue about privilege and oppression. Since research is limited on how to tangibly teach these skills, I tried providing a roadmap on how I attempted to equip students with dialogic skills while also illuminating how the course has the potential to bridge the gaps between the professed goals, values, structures, and practices within IE rhetoric at DU. The list of classroom experiences shared served to consider some ways of equipping students with the skills of dialogue; though I realize that this list is not exhaustive or complete. I hope that this dissertation acts as a call to other communication educators to consider how to teach students dialogic skills in order to better prepare them to work towards the professed goals of IE in our campus community while providing tools to navigate our cultural moment, which is shaped by polarization and political turmoil.
This dissertation considers how dialogue can combat several hurdles to implementing DEI initiatives on PWIs while also questioning how communication scholars can intercede into our polarized, cultural moment to combat dissonance. While the intentions of DEI initiatives may be good, the impact of these practices at PWIs is the bringing together students from contradistinctive backgrounds without equipping them with the communicative skills necessary to co-exist as a united student population. There is currently dissonance amongst those who have been oppressed and those who do not empathize or understand that oppression. To create an inclusive atmosphere, institutions must make more changes to support IE. Further, low levels of awareness often impact the ability of community members to understand the need for DEI initiatives or to foster inclusivity. This dissonance creates hostile campus climates that are characterized by multiple, tumultuous exchanges between privileged and oppressed groups. We must humble ourselves as students, faculty, administrators, and humans to open our minds and hearts to work collectively to make our campus and world a more inclusive space consistent with the goals of IE. The problems our society faces are complex and multi-faceted and will only ever be solved through a multi-pronged approach. We all have a different role to play in that incredibly complex and necessary call to action. Teaching is my home space. It is a co-created, affirming space to explore complex issues together, aiming to open minds and reverberate innovative and equitable practices back to the world. Teaching DPO has the potential to motivate and prepare change agents within our institution and world at large.
Specifically, dialogue can address the hurdles present in Chapter 2 (social amnesia, inability to ground DEI initiatives, and a general lack of awareness and skills to engage across difference in a generative way that is also cohesive with the professed goals of IE). As I wrote this dissertation, I continued to teach at DU; however, I was assigned to teach Interpersonal Communication as my last two teaching assignments. I ended up having eight repeat students from Dialogues in the first section. It was interesting to watch where they had been and how far they had come since we first met. I had a very special interaction with the students on the last day of our interpersonal course that illustrates the ways dialogue can address the above hurdles and invite institutional change.

**A Well of Hope**

*It was the last day of class and I could literally feel the exhaustion of my dissertation oozing from my body. I was in the process of storying my fifth chapter, and I pondered, “How will I wrap all of this up?” Six of my repeat students all hung out around my desk talking to me and each other as I packed up supplies from our end-of-quarter reflection party. Christina stood next to her close friend, Mallory munching on apples and cookies. Alia sat leaning forward in a chair, facing us. Jack, Dan, and Tyson all stood towards the door. The students were reminiscing on the courses they had taken with me. They had all been part of the courses I was writing about, some of them in an IGD and Intercultural course. I chuckled; it had been a pleasure learning with these wonderful students. I told them I was in the process of reflecting on how I taught the course we had shared.*

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I love my students, and was quite impressed that they were not running for the door on the last day, especially with this one ending at 4:00 PM on a Thursday. Normally students are out the door the minute after class ends. I also couldn’t help but notice that Tyson was wearing a shirt that said “Pios” on the front, with a very problematic image on the back. Alia asked Tyson about his shirt. Tyson explained that “Pios” is DU’s name and that he didn’t understand why he shouldn’t be proud of it. Christina described the John Evans report and our institutional links to the Sandcreek Masacre. Dan and Jack noted the aggressive imagery of the “Boone” spin-off on the back of the shirt. Alia added that, as a school, we could do better, explaining that it was wrong to celebrate a violent history. Tyson was still a little lost as to how to reconcile his identity in the moment. He began explaining that white people came here and found this land. It is who we are and we shouldn’t ignore it. “How is acknowledging history different than celebrating history?” I asked. He paused and looked at his peers. He explained that he didn’t want to celebrate that; he just didn’t understand. He went on to explain that the shirts were created through an entrepreneurship course in the business school and that the money went to a non-profit in Africa. We all sighed.

Mallory added that that the things she had learned in class never stayed in the class, and she found herself around campus and at parties having similar discussions. Tyson added that some of the people in in his fraternity really did not get it. He added that he tired to call them in and has started to see some minor improvements in their view of women. The rest of the students agreed and began discussing how they see
people from class and check-in with each other and note the communal aspects of our space together. This moment is what I always hoped would happen when I taught the class. These students filled my nearly lifeless, dissertated corpse into a well of hope.

These students were amazing to teach, and this one interaction illuminates the ways in which DPO has the potential to address hurdles to IE and aid in shifting DEI from a rhetorical wordcloud to a grounded commitment to IE. This curricular change can align with three of the four areas of IE identified by Williams et al., (2005). A dialogue on privilege and oppression course can improve campus climate, better align with calls for inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and enhance learning and development by preparing students to have generative dialogues amidst a culture that is rampant with division, misunderstanding, and aggressive disagreements. I now explain how the three hurdles addressed in Chapter 2 occur and move towards resolution.

**Using Dialogue to Combat Hurdles to Excellent Inclusion**

First, this moment illuminates the need for Tyson to address his social amnesia. Tyson is operating much from the position I showed in Chapter 3, celebrating my relation to Andrew Jackson. Many white folks just don’t know. My students exercised calling-in and helped Tyson understand how the shirt was not in line with inclusion or equitable practices. DPO has the power to give students the tools to help each other understand. I also noted a theme in student reflections, comments, and evaluations that students had learned much from their peers. It is different for students to hear something from a peer than it is to learn it from a
teacher, which can be viewed as dorky or overly sensitive by the “cool kids.” Further, learning from a peer helps students to have conversations where they can authentically engage to awake from their ignorance.

Second, this moment illuminates the success of DU Dialogues as a DEI initiative. As I indicated, it was hoped that students would gain these skills and spread them across campus, creating change in the community. This seems to have worked, at least for students who enrolled in the class. While the student’s t-shirt and the school’s mascot identify an ongoing historical struggle, this dissonance is the aftermath of the identity struggle and discontinuity between rhetorical text and structures at the university. The tension over Tyson’s shirt is symbolic of the ongoing tension between different groups on campus about what the school’s dedication to IE should be, why it matters, and how willing the campus is to make the necessary changes to implement IE. Further, Tyson exercised reflexive failure in the moment described above. He engaged authentically and was willing to actively listen to his peers and practice intersectional reflexivity. This represents a moment of continuity between the textual rhetoric and the structures and actions pertaining to the IE initiative, DU Dialogues.

Dialogue has the potential to make a change from the ground up, and there is a lot going on up in the rhetorical wordcloud. Now the wordcloud should be shared with the community in an embodied way. I acknowledge that the position of any chancellor, president, or administrator is not an easy one. I remember sitting in a meeting with the DU chancellor discussing how to make DU a sanctuary campus. I
wanted to be mad at her. She got up and said something to the effect of, “I know you think I am the enemy, but I am not. In the 1970s I was sitting where you were, fighting for women’s rights.” Wow, I thought. I wondered what it must be like to be pulled between the tension of all stakeholders and to try and recover the identity crisis sure to follow from implementing DEI initiatives. Dialogic intervention has the power to give the community the needed tools to decide who we wish to be as an institution. We need to give our community the tools to work through tension in a generative way; otherwise, the outcome will likely be a continued awkward, sometimes violent, angry, or apathetic dance around each other that will never foster the inclusive environment necessary for IE to flourish.

Finally, dialogue has the power to raise levels of racial awareness. Tyson had a low level of awareness regarding institutional ties to the Sandcreek Massacre and what “Pios” and “Boone” symbolized. His awareness of historical legacy was low, as was his level of racial awareness surrounding the issue. His peers saw that this was problematic, and through dialoguing with one another, they raised his level of awareness. If people have a higher level of awareness and/or are given tools to raise their awareness, it aids in implementing IE initiatives at PWIs. Dialogic curriculum has power to change the campus and the culture. We are in a moment characterized by dissonance, tension, hostility, and polarized debates. This moment desperately needs the intervention of dialogic skills. Dialogue is an easy way to bring the IE wordcloud out of an abstract sky and onto the campus, then out into the world. The course clearly addresses the dissonance created based on the lack of skills to engage
in dialogues that are essential to the functioning of IE. The course speaks specifically
to the point of enhancing the learning and communicative development necessary
for IE and provides students with dialogic tools and opportunities to practice using
them. These six students definitely rose to the challenge, and it seems they are
spreading DPO throughout our campus.

Implications for the Field

This dissertation showed that there is a need for more research on how to
teach dialogic skills, as well as a need for communication scholars to join scholarly
discussions of IE. Our field can help equip the community with skills to enhance
engagement in dialogues of privilege and oppression. We also need more research
that considers the concrete practices of teaching DPO. Research has identified the
usefulness of dialogue about race and IE in raising levels of awareness, inviting
positive institutional change in DEI initiatives (Ahmed, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011;
Reason & Evans, 2007; Sue, 2015). Further, dialogue can help prepare students in a
more nuanced way to work in a global workforce, which is a common mission of
universities. The fields of interpersonal communication, critical rhetoric, and
intercultural communication have an opportunity to collaborate to enhance the
implementation of DEI initiatives.

Communication studies tends to be sectioned off from one another. It is rare
to find engagement between the several sub-disciplines of communication in a given
project. Engagement between these disciplines creates a moment to unite the field
in order to aid in implementing DEI initiatives, which many of in the field are deeply
committed to. In March of 2018, Spectra published a whole issue on "Freedom of Expression on Campus" in response to increasingly polarizing discourses on college campus and because of a growing concern for how colleges can create spaces where voices are authentically engaged, heard, respected, and open amidst cultural turmoil. A majority of the issue focuses on the historical foundations of free speech at universities and the experiences of critical and conservative Christians within the community. After reading the issue, I felt more convinced that dialogue across different perspectives is a viable, critical intervention that could shed light to oppression and provide alternative ways of engaging across difference. The epiphany moment for this project arose from my interactions with Kathy (raised in Chapter 3). Kathy asked how, as a communication scholar, I reconciled having discussions with people about something that makes them uncomfortable. From my critical intercultural perspective, I initially felt frustrated by such a question; to me, it was obvious that I should not cater to white fragility. However, I quickly realized that I had dismissed interpersonal aspects of the dialogues I was having. When I paused to actively listen to my professor, I saw the need for interpersonal and intercultural communication to merge in order to answer this question and to create concrete ways to teach students interpersonal communication skills that would aid in more generative dialogues.

Thus, our field has a large contribution to make in adding to research on DEI. Critical intercultural research can contribute to nuanced understandings of the ways that structures of privilege and oppression manifest on campuses and in culture.
More specifically, interpersonal communication research can identify stronger understandings of how communication styles impact DPO and further how family, social identities, and personalities contribute to the ways DPO is engaged. Thus, it can illuminate how to help students better understand their communicative behavior. Further, critical rhetorical research provides a baseline to explore the already identified lack of congruency between words, bodies, material structures, practices, and systems within DEI initiatives. There is a need for the field to come together and consider how to disrupt dissonance, embrace tension, and reach for excellent inclusion.

Limitations

The first limitation of this research is that it is entirely rooted in a specific PWI, in the specific institutional needs for implementing IE. Further, Chapter 5 is based on my experience attempting to equip students with the DPO skills I identified as important. The skills that initiatives or instructors choose to place in the center could and/or should be unique to the specific hurdles manifesting in that institution. I do not position myself as an expert on teaching dialogic skills; however, I have deeply studied, engaged, and immersed myself in IE rhetoric at DU while advocating for dialogue as an intervention.

Finally, the autoethnography included in this study is rooted in my experience as a white woman attempting to teach these skills at a PWI. This means that what works for me might work differently for a man or a woman of color. Additionally, my social identities impact the way I perceive interactions in class and
the usefulness of dialogue as a skill. Further, my identity impacts the ways students perceive what I say and determine my ability to connect through shared experiences. Further, the experiential and observational knowledge shared here was a limited form of ethnography, as I could not retroactively gain consent from students to share specific outcomes I perceived in course assignments. I noted themes of raised levels of awareness, learning from peers, and increased ability to practice reflexivity. I was also was blown away by how many students mentioned these items. However, the method did not enable me to explore these themes further, from student perspectives. Future research will consider more voice from students and other community members on the implications of dialogue as part of a DEI initiative.

The dialogic approach to conflict can be read as an act of civility that puts more burden on oppressed groups to explain to privileged groups how “-isms” work. This is certainly a valid critique. From my tempered radical perspective, I acknowledge the hateful rhetoric and additional burdens placed on oppressed groups to raise awareness. This burden is arguably always there. Taking steps as an institution to raise awareness of privilege and oppression could potentially work towards alleviating that burden by becoming proactive in their approach to disrupt oppression. I believe in the power of dialogue and IE to disrupt hostile campus climates and to better prepare the community to engage across difference, while also working actively to prevent future aggressions in the community. Some
skeptics may fear that this will be a waste of time and invite more conflict because some are never willing to open their minds or to genuinely engage.

I had hoped that students would leave class with all the skills I taught them, but that is unrealistic. I discussed the experience teaching Dialogues courses at the DU Diversity Summit in 2018. A faculty member asked me what I do when students don’t want to learn. I responded, “We know that one dialogue class does not solve all of the problems. You can’t force every student to be open and embrace the opportunities to practice skills. However, we can’t assume that they won’t be receptive. We don’t know what will happen in these classes.” We all agreed that the old saying, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink!” applies. These courses are certainly not an uncontroversial space, but how will we ever know the possibilities if we are too afraid to give students the tools? Further, institutions implementing DEI initiatives should consider who and what they center during decision-making. Is inclusion being centered or the maintenance of an exclusionary structure? Are minoritized students supported, being invited with the promise of inclusion? Are wealthy donors or students who do not wish to discuss controversial topics being placed in the center? The class could certainly elicit issues with classroom management and potentially disgruntled students. The class could also reduce the number of aggressions that occur on campus and help actualize the IE rhetoric being professed. Of course, some students will not open themselves to learn dialogic skills, but this is not specific to any one topic. In every class, regardless of topic, students participate with varying levels of engagement.
The most common concern I have heard of my work is managing tension. The truth is, I don’t manage the tension, I embrace it. I face tension in all its glory and pain, in the hopes of moving towards something greater. Scholars and students have noted the usefulness of discomfort in learning (Assumah, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias, 2016, Reason & Evans, 2007). No critical work matters without action; the aim of this dissertation was to show the ways that teaching dialogue reverberates into campus to combat the hurdles identified in Chapter 2. Dialogue creates an opportunity to ground some of the theoretical aspects of IE, and this is one move we can make if we are brave enough to elicit the dialogues we claim we want through DEI rhetoric. We must move the rhetoric of possibility past fear and towards hope and learning. Imagine the possibilities, if more institutions actually brought IE out of the clouds and allowed ourselves a space to heal and be comforted by shared growing pains. I advocate that we consider whose discomfort is being centered and humble ourselves to keep striving for excellent inclusivity.

If we succeed without confronting and changing shaky foundations of low self-esteem rooted in contempt and hatred, we will falter along the way. (hooks, 2000, p. 61)

Refusal to stand up for what you believe in weakens individual morality and ethics as well as those of the culture. (hooks, 2000, p. 91)

Fear of radical changes leads many citizens of our nation to betray their minds and hearts. (hooks, 2000, p. 91)
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