

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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## Understanding Privilege

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## UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

*Sophia Abbot, Bryn Mawr College, 2015*

In the Fall-2012 semester I was a student in a 360° Program course cluster at Bryn Mawr College called Women in Walled Communities. This 360 looked at the connection between education in universities and in prisons through the three lenses of silence, voice, and vision. Our classes involved a number of different thresholds — or troublesome, extensive, and transformative learning periods — for each of us, and my own particular experience in this 360 has become a source of my understanding around the notion of threshold concepts.

Having a high level of thresholds is characteristic of the intense emotional and academic experience of 360s in general, but our 360 in particular included a number of thresholds due to the emotionality of the courses' content. Talking about inequality is always difficult, but our racially and economically diverse class as well as the relatively safe space our professors worked to create meant that many of us hit and were then able to work through different thresholds throughout the semester. It was in this context that I came to experience and understand privilege as a threshold concept for me.

During one of our classes, we participated in an activity in which we discussed different experiences of the classroom based on white and class privilege. This topic was one that I had thought about before in other education classes, but this was the first time it really hit me personally. A fellow student framed her ease in the classroom environment around her identity as a white student from a well-educated family. Another student who did not share the same privileges then spoke to the comparative discomfort she felt in the classroom. In this moment, because of the contrast between their experiences and my realization of where I was located in relation to each of my classmates, my own comfort in the classroom was called into question and I felt shocked and upset. After class, I was not sure whether I wanted to cry or scream. I did not know how to face the privileged existence I have had, and I felt utterly helpless in terms of how to move forward.

I had read about white and class privilege before. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew what it meant, at least definition-wise. A year before, I had read a zine called "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1990) for an education class that explained "white privilege" and how it manifests itself in our society. In that class I had connected white privilege with male privilege in an attempt to better understand what exactly this kind of privilege entailed, and I had argued in a debate for the importance of acknowledging the existence of this privilege. However, I had never thought about white privilege (or class privilege) in the context of my classroom interactions. I had spent my entire life attributing my sense of comfort in the classroom to personality. To have it re-attributed to an entitlement stemming from privilege, to have it re-attributed to an assumption that I will add to the classroom and that my addition will be valued because I have shared it in the *right* way, was paralyzing for me.

Part of what made this experience such a threshold, and such a difficult one, was the fact that I could not change the aspects of my identity that informed my experience of the classroom. My whiteness is something I will always have. It is immediately visible. It would be impossible to lie

about or hide. In this way, I cannot escape from the fact that this privilege exists. My class privilege, as well, is something I cannot hide from, because even as I can hide the truth about my socio-economic background, I cannot escape the social benefits that background has given me. I have a knowledge and understanding of “socially acceptable” or “socially encouraged” writing and communicating. I know what is expected of me in the classroom and so do not generally need the structure of skills-based learning to support me. I have been raised with all of these things together as a part of me and as a part of my personality, but to know that they are more socially constructed than that, and in fact stem from privilege, is something that shook me deeply and was very difficult to acknowledge.

After this class session, I met with professors, talked with friends, did more reading and writing, and tried to figure out how to continue to interact in the classroom with this new awareness of my privilege. I was helped along the way by the incredible support of my professors who had gone through this very process (though perhaps not in quite the same circumstances) and who encouraged me to be aware of my presence in the classroom without allowing this awareness to silence me completely. I struggled all semester to figure out how much vocal space I should take up, and it is something I continue to think about. This very process was my process of working through my threshold.

Though it is easy for me in narration to define this singular classroom moment as a threshold, I want to emphasize that part of the difficulty and impact of this experience was and is that it does not end. That is why this is absolutely a threshold concept for me. Though I no longer feel paralyzed, I can never re-enter the classroom in the same way. My awareness of my privilege affects completely the way I interact with others and think about my presence, particularly in classroom situations. The way I interact with my peers and the way I view classroom interactions and dynamics has completely shifted. I find myself stepping back more frequently to welcome other voices.

For me, a threshold is not defined by a moment in which everything previously understood changes. It could never be so fast or so easy as that. Instead, a threshold is a more extensive period. It is first categorized by an intense difficulty to understand — in this case, an emotional as well as theoretical difficulty — followed by a period of understanding, but inability to apply that understanding to one’s own situation. My period of paralysis, for example, was categorized by a new understanding of this privilege but an inability to move forward from that. The third aspect of the threshold, for me, is a period of working through and moving forward with the idea. This was my period of testing different forms of participation and continuing to question and think critically about my presence and contribution in the class.

I ended last semester by working with a friend on a video explaining privilege. We thought through different metaphors in an attempt to show others what privilege meant and how it played out in the context of Bryn Mawr College and the wider community. This new ability to teach others is, I think, the final aspect of the threshold concept in which the student has reached a point at which she can share her knowledge and understanding with others. This does not mean the thinking or struggling is done — on the contrary, I do not think I could ever finish thinking and working through ideas of privilege — but it does mean I have learned something significant and can hopefully help others pass through this difficult period. In addition, I will never be able

to return to the level of understanding I had before this threshold. Now that I have passed over it, I cannot interact with the world in the same way. I cannot become unconscious of my privilege, and for me that is the truest sign of the threshold experience.

Hyperlinks:

<http://www.brynmawr.edu/360/previous/walledwomen.html>

<http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>