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“A Two-Way Street”: Adjunct Faculty’s Learning from and with Students about Subject Matter

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ABSTRACT

Within the work of teaching, college faculty can develop stronger understandings of both their subject matter and their students’ socio-cultural understandings of that subject matter. Such learning is particularly important for faculty that teach today’s students, who bring unprecedented racial, ethnic, socio-economic and age diversity to higher education. By engaging their students’ diverse identities and life experiences, faculty can potentially deepen both their students’ understanding of subject matter and their own. To better understand this learning for adjunct faculty, who are the majority of faculty in higher education today, this study examines how and what adjunct faculty can learn about their students and subject matter within their work as teachers. Drawing on interviews and classroom observations of 19 adjunct instructors of general education courses at two institutions that serve a diverse student population, it yields insights into the ways in which adjunct faculty may learn about their students’ lives and identities, the subject matter of their courses, and the potential connections between that subject matter and their students.

KEYWORDS

Adjunct faculty; faculty development; teaching; higher education; learning

There is strong concern about college and university’s ability to serve today’s college students, who bring unprecedented racial, ethnic, socio-economic and age diversity to higher education (Auld, Fox, and Kewal 2010). Researchers, policymakers, and the public are concerned about the nature and quality of the education these students’ are gaining access to (Arum and Roksa 2011; Mayhew et al. 2016) and whether faculty members are creating inclusive learning environments that support these students’ learning (Bolitzer, Castillo-Montoya, and Williams 2016; Delima 2019; Hurtado, Alvarez, et al. 2012; Ives and Castillo-Montoya 2020). To respond to these questions and concerns, the higher education community is increasingly focused on college faculty, asking what do faculty members know about teaching? How do faculty learn to teach? And how might faculty learn to engage in inclusive practices that support their students’ learning? (see Pallas and Neumann 2019; Terosky and Conway 2020; Trinidad et al. 2020). This paper aims to contribute to that growing body of research on faculty and their learning to teach by focusing one segment of college faculty today: non-tenure track, adjunct faculty.

In the past 40 years, there has been a radical restructuring of the professoriate with adjunct faculty, who have limited, fixed-term non-tenure track positions, becoming the majority of teachers in higher education (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016; Kezar and Maxey 2016). By 2013, 75% of all faculty were off the tenure-track, with 43% of the faculty overall teaching in part-time positions (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016). Historically the hiring of adjuncts was concentrated in community colleges (Schuster and Finkelstein 2006), but there is new evidence that the majority of these faculty members are now working at public and private 4-year institutions (Kezar and Sam 2010; American Federation of Teachers 2010).

The current research on adjunct faculty largely focuses on the well documented inequity of their working conditions as compared to full-time, tenure track faculty (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019). Adjuncts face limited salaries and job insecurity (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019; Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012), threats to academic freedom (Nelson 2007; Thedwall 2008), and limited participation in governance and collective bargaining (Hutchens 2011; Rhoades 1998). Given these

conditions, there is wide concern about them as teachers (see Schuster 2003). And yet there is only limited empirical research on adjunct faculty as teachers at 4-year institutions, and the research that does exist presents divergent findings (Boltizer 2019a).

Studies of adjunct faculty's qualifications to teach show that adjuncts are less likely to hold a doctorate than full-time faculty (Benjamin 2002, 2003) but raises questions about whether the doctorate is necessary to be an effective teacher (Gappa and Leslie 1993). The research on adjunct faculty's effectiveness also presents contradictory findings on how effective adjuncts are as teachers, with some finding them less effective than full-time tenure-track faculty (Benjamin 2003; Umbach 2007) and other researchers finding adjuncts to be fairly similar to their full-time colleagues (Cross and Goldenberg 2011; Leslie and Conley 2002), especially within academic disciplines (Lowther et al. 1990). The one area of unambiguous research is on institutional supports for teaching: adjuncts have limited access to basic resources (office space, email, mailboxes, etc.), faculty development (Kezar 2013; Meixner, Kruck, and Madden 2010; Muncaster 2011) and are largely undercompensated for their work (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019). While this research provides insights into the challenging work conditions of adjunct faculty, it provides little insight into how adjuncts learn to teach within such conditions, or what they learn about teaching.

Questions about adjunct faculty as teachers are all the more pressing when we consider who they are charged with educating. In the last 15–20 years there has been a dramatic increase in access to undergraduate education. By 2016, 20.5 million students attended college, an increase of about 5.2 million since fall 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), resulting in unprecedented racial, socio-economic, and age diversity (Auld, Fox, and Kewal 2010). These “new” college students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, are concentrated in the same institutions in which adjunct faculty teach: public 4 years and community colleges (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). When students arrive at these institutions their first teachers are likely to be adjunct faculty teaching general education courses in the sciences, social sciences and humanities (Baldwin 2003; Thompson 2003; Hurtado, Eagan, et al. 2012).

General education courses are widely recognized as essential sites of students' transition to college (Mayhew et al. 2016; Tinto 1993). They are one of the starting points for the intellectual and emotional development that students can experience during the

college years (Patton et al. 2016; Perry 1970). Yet, our understanding of the adjunct instructors who teach these courses is largely limited to broad demographic descriptions: Similar to tenure-track faculty, adjunct faculty are overwhelmingly white with an underrepresentation of native-born, underrepresented minorities (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016). Unlike tenure-track faculty, in 2013 the majority of adjuncts (56.1%) were women (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016, 67). Even within these broad generalizations we can see that that adjuncts, like faculty overall, do not reflect the growing racial and ethnic diversity of today's students. But we know little about how adjuncts might make sense of these differences between their students and themselves. How do adjuncts learn about their students, who likely have very different lives and experiences from their own? And how might they seek to apply what they learn about their students within their work as teachers?

To address the questions above, I present the following paper on adjunct faculty's learning within teaching general education courses at bachelors-granting institutions that serve students of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background and life stages. In focusing on adjunct faculty, I do not assume that adjuncts' learning is distinct from that of tenure-track faculty. While there are well-documented and significant differences in the support and compensation between faculty types (Boltizer 2019a), we cannot assume that such differences lead to differences in faculty's learning about teaching. I also do not assume that there are differences in faculty's learning about teaching depending on their student population or the type of institution in which they teach. There are likely broad principles of teaching that remain constant between populations and institutions. However, we can only identify such broad principles if we are inclusive in the populations that we study. Currently, there is limited research on adjunct faculty as teachers at 4-year colleges, and particularly adjuncts that teach a diverse student population (Boltizer 2019a). The objective of this paper is, therefore, to contribute to the growing body of research on teaching, and learning about teaching, by providing insights into one segment of the population: adjunct faculty at bachelors-granting institutions.

There are a variety of terms used to describe adjunct, non-tenure track faculty, including instructors, lecturers, contingent faculty, or part-time college teachers (Boltizer 2019a). Some of these terms serve to differentiate between part-time and full-time adjuncts or between adjuncts working at single or

multiple institutions. Other terms such as freeway flyers or contingent workers highlight the larger working conditions of non-tenure track faculty. Other terms are used to describe the additional roles or accomplishments of non-tenure track faculty, such as visiting instructor, teaching artist or graduate student instructor. The variety of these terms highlights an essential question: Who qualifies as an adjunct? Are adjuncts everyone working off the tenure track? Or does it describe a particular segment of non-tenure track faculty, who share a certain set of working conditions? And if so, what are those conditions? Recognizing this larger set of questions, I use the term adjunct to describe non-tenure track faculty who are hired on a semester or yearly basis in nonpermanent part- or full-time positions. This excludes semi-permanent non-tenure track faculty working on extended multi-year contracts (Kezar and Maxey 2016; Kezar and Sam 2010). All of the participants in this study regarded their positions as limited to the terms of their contracts. There was still, however, variety in their positions. As detailed in the methods section, some participants teach full-time at a single institution, while others teach at multiple institutions. Some are in graduate school, while others have completed terminal degrees. This variation in participants allowed me to probe potential differences in learning about teaching between sub-groups of adjuncts. However, as I detail in the findings, I did not find significant differences between these participant groups. Future research may reveal such differences.

An additional limitation of this paper is that it focuses on adjunct faculty's learning within the specific context of their interactions with students. The larger study that this paper draws from examined a wider range of spaces and ways in which adjunct faculty may learn to teach, (see Bolitzer 2017). As that study, and the wider body of research on learning to teach demonstrates (see Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Shulman 1986), learning from students likely occurs concurrently, and in conversation with, a larger set of activities, including professional development and interactions with colleagues. Yet, even within that larger set of contexts and activities, interactions with students remained a central point of inquiry. For example, faculty bring their stories of student-based interactions into faculty development programs, and likewise bring what they learn in faculty development to their classroom teaching (Beach et al. 2016). This paper, therefore, focuses specifically on adjuncts' learning within their interactions with students because of the centrality of those interactions to

faculty's learning about teaching. To focus my analysis on this particular "location" of learning for study participants, I drew from the following analytic framework.

Analytic framework: Learning within teaching

This study is anchored in the extant research on adjunct faculty, summarized above, and models of professional learning for teachers. The question of how teachers learn the craft of teaching has been a major focus of k-12 educational research, resulting in strong models of professional learning. This research has demonstrated that while teachers may learn about teaching in a variety of contexts, such as graduate programs or through professional development activities, a central way teachers learn how to teach is within the work of teaching itself. Within the day to day work of engaging with their students, subject matter(s), and the various contexts (social, academic, economic, political, etc.) that shape the learning environment (Schwab 1983), teachers engage in the "practical experiments that occur as part of a professional practice" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, 191). These experiments at times result in new or altered understandings of how best to connect their students to subject matter, which they then can continue to develop within their practice of teaching (Shulman 2004a, 2004b). There are four key knowledge areas that teachers develop within the "practical experiments" of teaching: General pedagogical knowledge, subject matter knowledge, knowledge of students' lives, and knowledge of the contexts.

General pedagogical knowledge (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Shulman 1986, 2004a, 2004b), consists of "those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter" (Shulman 2004a, 92). This knowledge includes basic strategies for teachers like how to write a lesson plan or organize a class discussion, regardless of the subject matter (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). Such knowledge may be initially developed through instructional development workshops or programs (Beach et al. 2016; Bosman and Voglewede 2019; Sorcinelli et al. 2006), but it is likely within applying this knowledge within their own classrooms that faculty learn what "works" for their particular students and academic subject matter (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

A second area of knowledge, *subject matter knowledge* (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Dewey 1902; Neumann 2009; Palmer 1998), describes

teachers understandings of the material at the center of education: the set of ideas, concepts, and knowledge which they aim to teach students. Knowledge of the subject matter they are teaching “provides [teachers] with the cognitive roadmaps that guide the assignments they give students, the assessments they use to gauge students’ progress, and the questions they ask in the give and take of classroom life” (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, 155). While it is common to recognize faculty’s learning of subject matter within their work as scholars (Boyer 1990; Huber 2004; Neumann 2006), an additional location for such learning of subject matter is teaching. Faculty can develop new insights into their subject matter as they seek to represent it to their students (Martinez, Castillo-Montoya, and Boltizer 2019).

A third area of potential learning for teachers, *knowledge of students’ lives*, refers to a teacher gaining glimmers of—or ideally grasping—the dimensions and content of students’ lives inside and outside of their academic learning experiences, as well as what may surface from their lives as they learn subject matter (Dewey 1902; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Ladson-Billings 1995; Castillo-Montoya 2019). There have been many different terms for what it means for teachers to have knowledge of students’ lives. John Dewey (1902) refers to it as gaining knowledge of the world of the child, while Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006), drawing on anthropologists and critical theorists, describes it as the cultural identity of students. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) describes teachers’ understanding of students as including the “knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting” (133). Across all of these descriptions is the recognition that continually learning about students’ lives, and how their lives shape their subject-matter learning, is essential to good teaching (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Dewey 1902; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Ladson-Billings 1995, 2006).

The fourth and final potential area of learning for teachers is *knowledge of the contexts*, in which pedagogy, subject matter, and students are situated (Schwab 1983). The contexts in which learning occur are almost infinite, beginning with the immediate spaces of learning (the classroom or school) and widening out to include the community in which the school is situated and the communities that students come from, as well as the nation and world in which each of these are situated (Schwab 1983). These contexts are not only physical places, such as classrooms or communities, but also the materials or ideas of

those external spaces that students and teachers bring into the learning process. Further, the contexts that matter in teaching are not only those of immediacy, but also those of the past, or of the present (yet at a distance)—the cultures of home, neighborhood, community, and so on (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). Thus, multiple contexts, and the unique knowledge they incorporate, can intermingle in class, enriching but also complicating teaching and learning. Considerations of context echo, greatly, considerations of students’ lives as all these inform learning and teaching.

It is important to note that the four areas of knowledge detailed above are highly dependent, developing together within the practice of teaching. In seeking to represent this comingling of knowledge areas, Lee Shulman described teachers’ development of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which “represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction” (Shulman 2004a, 93). He describes PCK as continually developed as teachers strive to discern “that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (Shulman 2004a, 92). Recognizing the importance of students’ identities, and the marginalization of Black students, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006) expanded on Shulman’s model of PCK by asking how the cultures of students and teachers can shape the objectives and processes of teaching. She advocates for teachers to develop a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) that is rooted in, and affirms, students’ identities and presents CRP as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement, but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings 1995, 469). Ladson-Billings (1995), therefore, expands on PCK and identifies two additional objectives for teaching beyond academic achievement: “cultural competence” and “the ability to understand and critique the existing social order” (474). She further details how for teachers to teach toward such goals requires them to engage in a deep learning about their students and the worlds in which they live, and then to seek to apply this learning in their teaching practice.

The model of professional learning detailed above highlights the importance of teachers learning about multiple aspects of students and their lives, including students’ potential relationships and insights into

subject matter (Castillo-Montoya 2019). While more common in k-12 education, this is relatively new idea in higher education (Pallas and Neumann 2019; Martinez, Castillo-Montoya, and Boltzter 2019), and presents multiple questions about college teaching. For example, how might college faculty learn about students? Are there particular pedagogical strategies for identifying and engaging students' prior knowledge? How might faculty's selection and representation of subject matter be shaped by what they learn about their students and their lives? Given the large number of college faculty, the range of academic appointments, as well as the diversity of students and institutions, all of which are likely to shape teaching and learning in distinct ways, it is impossible to address all these questions in a broad sense. I, therefore, will focus on one segment of college faculty in this paper: adjunct instructors of general education courses at 4-year institutions that serve a diverse student population.

Drawing on the proceeding analytic framework, as well as the research literature on adjunct faculty, this paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How can adjunct instructors of general education courses at institutions that serve a diverse student population learn about their students and subject matter within their work as teachers?
2. What might adjunct instructors of general education courses at institutions that serve a diverse student population come to believe about their students and subject matter within their work as teachers?
3. How can adjunct instructors of general education courses at institutions that serve a diverse student population apply what they have learned about their students and subject matter within their work as teachers?

Study design and method

This paper draws from a study which examined how 19 adjunct instructors, working at two highly diverse public institutions of higher education, learned to teach while teaching general education courses in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to students who have historically been underrepresented in American higher education. It was designed within a constructivist paradigm which views people's beliefs, and their actions based on those beliefs, as negotiated with others in specific contexts, thus as socially constructed (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). Through

interviewing participants, observing their teaching, and analyzing professional and course documents, I was able to access participants' beliefs and to observe the way they applied those beliefs within their classroom teaching. As detailed below, this paper focuses on the study findings, drawn from all 19 participants, that speak to how adjunct faculty may learn from their students, and how they can apply such learning as classroom teachers.

A purposeful criterion-based selection approach (Maxwell 2012, 2013) was used for selecting two urban, public 4-year undergraduate institutions that (1) have a diverse student population in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economics, language and age (2) have a required general education curriculum and (3) employ at least 50% adjunct faculty, defined as non-tenure track faculty who are hired on a semester or yearly basis in part- or full-time positions.

The two participating institutions are designated by the Carnegie classification system as selective master's colleges and universities with high undergraduate profiles. Students at both colleges are primarily nonresidential with 25%–35% studying part-time. Both institutions are classified by the federal government as minority serving: one is an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and the second is both an AANAPISI and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). In addition to these designations, participating institutions have between 25% and 35% white students, between 10% and 20% Black/African-American students and between 25% and 35% students over the age of 25 years.

Study participants were 19 part and full-time non-tenure track, adjunct faculty members teaching general education courses in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. I purposefully selected participants to yield insights into how adjunct faculty can learn within teaching by asking supervisors to identify adjuncts in their department who demonstrated a commitment to their teaching and were, thus, likely to yield insights into learning. Participants varied in their prior teaching experience, academic discipline, type of adjunct appointment, educational status, race, ethnicity, and gender, as detailed in Table 1. The sample of study participants largely reflects the current demographics of adjunct faculty teaching in higher education today (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016); only 15% of participants are people of color, and the majority (63%) are female.

After receiving the approval of the institutional review board of each participating institution, I began

Table 1. Characteristics of primary participants across institutions.

Primary study participants: adjunct faculty	Institution #1 (n = 11)	Institution #2 (n = 8)	Total (n = 19)
Teaching experience			
Less experienced (2–5 classes)	3	3	6
More experienced (6+ classes)	8	5	13
Academic discipline			
Natural sciences	4	2	6
Social sciences	4	3	7
Humanities	3	3	6
Type of adjunct appointment			
Part-time at study site (1–3 classes)	6	4	10
Part-time at multiple institutions (4+ classes)	3	4	7
Full-time at study site (4+ classes)	2	0	2
Educational status			
Currently enrolled in graduate program	3	3	6
Completed graduate program	8	5	13
Race/ethnicity			
American Indian/Native American	0	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	1	1
Black	0	0	0
LatinX	2	0	2
White	9	7	16
Gender			
Male	4	3	7
Female	7	5	12

data collection by contacting the department chairs of all programs that offer general education courses in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences and requested that they nominate adjunct faculty for participation in this study. I then contacted all nominated individuals by email and invited them to participate.

For the 19 adjunct faculty who agreed to participate, data collection was an iterative process of interviewing (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; LeCompte and Schensul 2010; Seidman 2006) and observing the classroom teaching (Erikson 1986; Wolcott 2001) of the study participants. This included for all participants: *an initial semi-structured interview* guided by a common interview protocol; 2–3 classroom observations, accompanied by *informal, field-based interviews* immediately prior to, or after, observations of participants' classroom teaching; and a *closing semi-structured interview*, guided by an interview protocol drafted uniquely for each participant. Institutional documents (course catalogs, curriculum descriptions, etc.), course documents (syllabi, assignments, course readings, etc.) and participants' curriculum vitae were also collected during data collection. Variations in data collection were dependent on course structure and participants availability, but all participants classroom teaching was observed for a minimum of four hours and were interviewed at least two times.

Data collected across the 19 participants included 47 interviews and 44 classroom observations, in addition to the collection of institutional documents, course documents and participants' curriculum vitae. All institutions and participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure participants' confidentiality.

Data analysis began within data collection by moving between interviews and observations, to build an understanding of participants as individual cases (Bazeley 2013). After completing data collection, I identified key patterns of similarity and difference between participants (Bazeley 2013; LeCompte and Schensul 2013) through posing analytic questions to the study data, which enabled me to move from person-specific data elements to sample-based themes (Neumann and Pallas 2015). I sought to verify these emerging findings by presenting study data to knowledgeable peers and experts, and by seeking counterexamples within the study data (Bazeley 2013; LeCompte and Schensul 2013). As a final step in data analysis, I then moved from themes to propositions. These propositions draw from both the study data and the analytic framework, to present avenues for future inquiry. This paper draws from the full corpus of data collected to present those propositions in the form of findings that speak to how participants learned about their students and subject matter, and how they applied that learning within their classroom teaching.

Trustworthiness

Throughout data collection and analysis, I worked to establish trustworthiness through building credibility and confirmability into the research process (Guba 1981; Shenton 2004). By using the appropriate design and method (interview-based qualitative inquiry paired with classroom observation) for the topic (adjunct faculty's learning within teaching), I fostered

the credibility of the findings (Guba 1981; LeCompte and Schensul 2010; Shenton 2004). These efforts were further supported by engaging in triangulation (Bazeley 2013) where I worked iteratively within data collection and analysis between the different forms of data (interviews, observations, and document analysis). I further worked toward confirmability by presenting select findings to knowledgeable peers who were able to help me interrogate my findings (Shenton 2004).

Toward further establishing the trustworthiness of the findings, I also purposefully engaged my own standpoint as a researcher (Peshkin 1988; Shenton 2004). I have previously taught introductory, general education classes as an adjunct faculty member to a diverse student population and have strong feelings about the importance of that work. Prior to beginning data collection, I reflected on my views on adjuncts, teaching, and the importance of introductory courses, and wrote about my beliefs and expectations of adjunct faculty members. I, then, purposefully held up these beliefs up to the existing research literature on adjunct faculty, which helped me to recognize the potential uniqueness of my experience. I also engaged in this same kind of reflection in data collection and analysis. For example, I purposefully looked for ways that participants' experiences and outlooks differed from my own. I shared these reflections with knowledgeable colleagues, who helped me to further interrogate the data. In addition to helping me recognize potential bias, engaging my standpoint helped me, as a researcher, to more deeply understand and engage with the study participants. For example, as a former adjunct faculty member, I was aware of aspects of the work and the lived experience that have not yet emerged in the higher education research literature.

Limitations

In this study I do not aim to generalize to a larger population of adjunct faculty members, or to draw conclusions about faculty learning more generally. Instead I have developed a set of findings that portrays how this group of 19 adjunct faculty members learned about their students, subject matter, and the relationship of those students to that subject matter, within their work as teachers. These findings, therefore, depict what is possible for adjunct faculty who wish to learn about their students, and how such learning might shape adjuncts' practices as teachers, but in no way assumes that such learning occurs for the majority of adjunct faculty.

Findings

I begin with a key study finding: *all 19 of the adjunct faculty participating in this study stated that they learned to teach through the work of teaching*. Echoing the experience of k-12 educators, study participants described themselves as the engine or motivator of their own learning and identified their classroom teaching as the space in which this learning occurred. For example, one participant depicted himself as learning “by trial and error” in the classroom. Another shared that, “[n]o one taught me how to teach. So, I guess I taught myself while teaching.” While brief and to the point, such statements cover up the more expansive and complex story of how participants gained insights into key areas of teaching.

Within their teaching, study participants described three key areas of learning. One, they learned about students' lives and cultures, thereby discovering the richness and range of student identities. Two, they described how through seeking to represent the subject matter to students, and by hearing students' own representations of that subject matter, they came to see that subject matter in new ways, thereby gaining new insight into the subject matter itself. And, third, some participants learned even more: they came to see connections between their subject matter and their students' lives, thus unearthing students' sociocultural ways of knowing. These findings reveal the possibility of college classrooms being a place of growth in which both adjunct faculty and their students are learners.

Finding 1: Learning about students

This study was situated at two highly diverse public bachelor's-granting institutions, which are located in cities with some of the most diverse populations in the world in terms of culture, language, religion, race and ethnicity. While the students in higher education in the United States are, overall, becoming increasingly diverse (Auld, Fox, and Kewal 2010), according to institutional documents and the institutions' profiles on the National Center for Educational Statistics, the student bodies at the two study institutions are more diverse than national averages. All the study participants (19/19) were keenly aware and proud of the diversity of their students. As one participant from the natural sciences stated:

[w]e have the [United Nations] of students essentially. [In terms of] culture, background, socioeconomic, and cultural background. Age differences ... Some have a science background, and some don't. We have a huge variety ... Students who work full-time and come to class in the evenings. Students who work part-time.

Another participant, who teaches in the social sciences, described her students as follows:

... [The students are] diverse in all aspects that a student body can be diverse ... I have students, you know, who are 35 and returning to finish their bachelor's. And I have high school students that are sitting in a college class. I've had students that this is their first semester learning in the U.S. I have students that ... you know, live a few blocks away from [the] college.

Participants depicted their student body as being so diverse that it was hard for them to fully describe. Yet within their descriptions, participants shared what they viewed as four key features of their students' identities.

First, participants described their students as varying by race, ethnicity, countries of origin, religion, and home language. Second, participants shared how students varied in their preparation for college work, with some students struggling with writing and basic math, while others excelling in these areas. Third, participants described students' socioeconomic diversity, with some students having significant work obligations and limited financial resources, while others are fully supported by their families. Fourth, participants also spoke of variance in their students' life stages in terms of students' ages, family configurations and caregiving responsibilities.

In describing their students, all the study participants consistently returned to these four features, emphasizing the great diversity within the student body. Participants also described wanting to learn about their students as individuals, beyond these four aspects of identity. For example, Sila Terzic (pseudonym) shared: "I want to know their universe ... I want to know what is happening in their lives so that I can learn from them ... It always is a two-way street." Similarly, Elizabeth Sanders (pseudonym), a teacher in the natural sciences, described how she welcomes learning about students' "personal experiences ... of what's going on in their life." Participants described learning about their students "universel[s]" in three central ways.

One, all the study participants described learning about their students within classroom-based exchanges. For example, Charles Harris, a teacher of classics, described learning about students' interest in Harry Potter during a discussion of Greek mythology. Similarly, Sanders described how within studying water resources, a student shared how they "collect rainwater and have a small garden outside their house [and] how different their life in a suburban part of China was to living in the city here, [since in China] were a lot closer to their food source." Students sharing of such details—of their lives and interests—

provided participants with windows into students' lives, and the connection they saw to the course material.

Two, all the participants also described learning about their students through exchanges outside the classroom. Within one-on-one conversations, participants described learning about barriers students experience, such as caregiving and work responsibilities. They described such one-on-one exchanges as limited, however, by their resources as adjuncts. Only half of the study participants had an office with a computer that they could use privately. The other half of participants, with the exception of two, had the use of shared office spaces which they shared with between four and fifteen other adjunct faculty colleagues. Many of these participants described using nearby classrooms and departmental meeting rooms if students wanted to speak. Two study participants had no designated space on campus to meet with students. One of these participants held office hours on the quad or in the dining hall. Another met with students directly after class in the classroom in which he taught. Since another class met in the classroom 20 minutes after his ended, and his class met twice a week, this limited his potential meeting time with students to a maximum of 40 minutes a week.

The third, and final way, that some participants described learning about their students' lives was by observing the connections and disconnections to their own personal stories. Seven of the 19 study participants (37%) portrayed themselves as sharing significant experiences with students – for example, attending a community college, immigrating to the United States, struggling with limited resources. For example, Sanders shared how she worked full-time as an undergraduate and continues to do so in graduate school. She described how this enables her to identify with her own students, many of whom work full or part-time. In class, she makes a point of sharing her struggles about what she has had to do to "make time for her studies." And tells her students "if you need help making time let me know and I will try to help with that."

Laura Rossi, a professor in the humanities, related a similar story of connection. Rossi immigrated to the United States just as she started college and worked as an undergraduate. When asked to describe her students, she stated: "I ... see myself through them [...] I am one of them. They are me because I too worked fulltime and went to school part-time like them [...] or sometimes full-time too. So I struggled as a student the same way they're struggling." Rossi then continued by describing how knowing what it was like to be

her students made her “passionate about them” and want to give them every opportunity to learn. She explained that this why she “takes the time to make [...] notes [on their papers] because I want them to learn. I want them to learn about their abilities to write or to analyze the text. Because if I just give them a grade that doesn’t say anything.” She then showed me a copy of a student paper and the copious notes that she had written. In showing me this paper, Rossi stressed that because she knows what it was like to be one of her students, she wants to do everything she can as a teacher to help them.

In contrast to Saunders and Rossi, other participants described how their personal histories differed from those of their students. 5 participants (26%) reported significant differences between themselves and their students. Anthony Thomas, an instructor in the social sciences, is a case in point. When he needed to write his very first syllabus, Thomas sought the advice of a family friend, a tenured professor at the same institution where he was teaching, who advised him to pick readings that students “would actually read” rather than those that he viewed as “theoretically compelling or [...] cutting edge ethnograph[ies].” Thomas said that this advice keyed him into realizing that the students he would be teaching might be different from himself and also from the other students at the elite institutions he attended. Yet as he taught, Thomas came to see an additional difference between himself, as a one-time student, and his own students today: His students were able to much more readily understand some social science concepts than he had been as an undergraduate:

A lot of students [are] able to talk about social hierarchy in a much more personal way. [...] There are certain things that are going to be more intuitive than like a white student from [the middle of the United States]. Like what policing means for an underserved community in Brazil. Even though it is in Brazil, it’s going to be easier to get their head around for a lot of these students [...] than it is for a student from [the middle of the United States].

Thomas described how he quickly learned that students’ lived experiences gave them insights into concepts that had taken him much longer to understand. By recognizing the differences between himself and his students, Thomas came to recognize the importance of drawing out students’ lived experiences – to see and hear them – as part of his teaching of social science concepts. He described how his students’ sharing of their stories in the classroom created a “certain dynamism of experience” which could “be really productive” for all students, beyond those

speaking. Thomas said that by his second semester of teaching, he had begun make a point of drawing out multiple students’ experiences in class.

As the above examples begin to illustrate, participants described learning a great deal on “two-way street” with their students. As I detail in the next finding, learning about their students and their lives helped 16 of the 19 participants learn more: they gained insight into the very subjects they teach. The majority of participants learned from and with their students about the subject matter itself—including students’ varying conceptions of it. As detailed in the third finding, some participants (8/19) learned even more. They developed insights into students’ socio-cultural and personal experiences of subject-matter, and how they may engage such experiences within their classrooms.

Finding 2: Learning about subject matter

A substantial majority (16/19) of study participants described learning about their academic subject matter through their interactions with students. For example, Christina Hall (pseudonym), a teacher in the humanities, stated that teaching general education classes that enroll students from a variety of academic backgrounds exposes her to new perspectives about her subject. Her students have “looked at things [...] and have given] different insights. You know, you’re so used to ... the way you perceive things because of your field, you don’t get that different viewpoint.” Other participants similarly valued being exposed to new ways of seeing their subject matters; many actively created opportunities for this to happen. Arjun Tseung (pseudonym), who teaches in the social sciences, stated that “some [students] have extensive background in certain careers, certain fields, different areas of expertise than I have.... So it is good to learn about... things [from them].” To learn from his students, and to have them learn from each other, Tseung sets up class discussions so that students “challenge” the ideas that he presents: “I think students here at [institution] are very capable, very intelligent, they’re sharp. So it is very fun to ... ask them to challenge me.” As these examples suggest, participants describe valuing and enjoying learning about their subject matter through their interactions with students.

Within participants’ descriptions of learning from and with students, they describe learning about three key aspects of subject matter: One, they learn about the subject matter itself. Two, they gain insight into students’ understandings of that subject matter. And

three, they discern new ways of representing their subject matter to future students.

Participants reported gaining new understandings of the subject matters they teach when students bring concrete examples—of theories, concepts, principles, and the like—to class. For example, students describe movies, subway advertisements, or current events that relate in some way to their course subject matter. Speaking with students about these materials helped participants to see their subjects in ways that are new to them. For example, Edward Scott (pseudonym), an environmental science teacher, described how a student came to him with a YouTube clip that helped him think about “phase change” in a new way. Phase change describes the means whereby substances on earth transition among solid, liquid, and gas. The class had just completed a lab session on “what happens to water when you change the temperature.” After class, a student approached Scott with a YouTube video in which a person “had a bucket of boiling water and took it outside into the freezing cold and threw the bucket [of water].” The water turned into snow “almost instantaneously.” The student asked Scott why this occurred, and the two of them then sat down “and tried to figure out what happened and why.” In our interview, Scott noted that this exchange turned into “a really fun exercise,” leading him “to think about phase change in a way that [he] hadn’t before.” Scott and his student figured out that “temperature is not everything . . . It’s pressure as well. [I]f you have boiling water [and] it’s still in the bucket it’s not the same as [when] you throw it. [It is] different.” Prior to working this through with his student, Scott had not thought about phase change in this way. Interacting with his student, around a YouTube video, created an opportunity for Scott to develop a new understanding of the topic—phase change—that he was teaching.

In addition to enlarging their knowledge of the subject matter, participants sometimes gained insights into how students understand ideas that they, as individuals with very different levels of expertise and experiences, may see differently. For example, Laura Delgado (pseudonym), a humanities teacher described learning from her students about the contemporary meaning of the word “pity,” a term whose meaning she had long taken for granted, intellectually and personally. In interviews, Delgado offered me background on the meaning of pity and contrasted its use in Christian literature and contemporary American society. Delgado explained that in Christian literature pity is a “moral and political value,” and that “to feel pity

for people who are suffering, it’s a great thing to do,” and that “you feel the same emotion so deeply to the point of doing something about it.” Yet, in reading Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* with her students, Delgado learned that her students did not share in this view of pity. In Delgado’s words, “Boccaccio says, it is the human thing to do to feel pity for those who are suffering . . . It is a duty as a human being and as a citizen . . . to help those who are in need of help.” Delgado continued: “Some students found objection to that because they only saw the word pity from their point of view . . . They didn’t understand what Boccaccio was saying.” Realizing that her students were not accepting Boccaccio’s portrayal of pity prompted Delgado to ask her students what the term pity means to them. She learned that her students viewed pity as feeling sorry for, or looking down on, another person. Having grown up in a Catholic country, where she was only exposed to pity in Boccaccio’s terms, Delgado was surprised by her students’ interpretation.

What became of Delgado’s learning? Having gained this insight about pity, and her students’ understandings of it, Delgado changed her classroom practice in teaching Boccaccio’s text. As I observed, and she later described in an interview, Delgado now begins classes on *The Decameron* by “[drawing] attention to [the word pity].” She said to her students that today, in the United States, pity has a different meaning than it did when Boccaccio was writing. She then contrasted the two meanings of the word—the contemporary American and Boccaccio’s—and then gave her own personal understanding of pity as a Catholic. In a class I observed, students then responded by offering their own understandings of pity. One woman, also Catholic, shared with the class the tension she sometimes feels, in her life, between these two meanings; how it is difficult to reconcile pity as a virtue with her American lifestyle of looking out for herself. Delgado echoed back the student’s claim that efforts to balance the two visions of pity could turn into a personal struggle, then turned the students’ attention back to Boccaccio, focusing on his use of pity, and its importance in the text.

As the example of Delgado illustrates, as participants learned about a subject matter, and about students’ conceptions of core subject matter ideas, participants also sometimes gleaned new ways to represent those ideas to future students. As noted earlier, students often brought examples—of theories, concepts, and principles—to class; their examples enlarged instructors’ understandings of the academic ideas at

issue. Some instructors went still further, using students' examples in presenting concepts in later classes.

Stephanie Tucker (pseudonym), a sociology teacher, described how her students "constantly" brought her examples of sociological concepts from popular culture or news media. She said that students' examples rarely contributed to her own "technical knowledge" of sociology, but rather helped her see new "application[s]" and ways to "illuminate facets" of complex theories. Tucker described an instance of a student bringing one such example—a news story of a ferry that sank in South Korea—as helpful in illustrating the concept of "deviance." Deviance speaks to the means whereby people break from the norms and expectations of a social group. As Tucker explained, contrasting representations of adherence to those norms can help explain the concept. The student said to Tucker that "the captain told all the kids [to] stay in your room, and those that stayed, died." Tucker saw this example as "the ultimate obedience": as people adhering to norms rather than daring to deviate from them. Tucker was struck by this example because it illustrates palpably the potential danger of obeying the rules and customs of society, thus of failure to deviate. Tucker noted this example in her lecture notes so that she could share it with students the next time she taught the concept of deviance. She described this practice, of noting examples from students, as a key way that she built her list of examples to draw from in future classes.

In summary, adjuncts' interactions with students can lead them to broaden their understandings of disciplinary ideas, to enlarge their grasp of students' conceptions of those ideas, and to identify new representations of them. As I detail in the next section, a smaller sub-section of instructors learned even more: they gained insights into students' socio-cultural and emotional understandings of the subject matter they were teaching, and how to engage that understanding within teaching.

Finding 3: Learning about students' understandings of subject matter

In addition to learning the content of disciplinary ideas, and gleaning their students' understanding of that content, all amid their teaching, participants sometimes gained insight into what learning felt like for students and how students might connect the subject matter to their personal and cultural knowledge. About half the study participants (8/19) spoke to such

learning, among them, Elias Silva (pseudonym) and Amanda Turner (pseudonym).

Silva, a geology teacher, makes a point to learn about his students, especially the countries and regions of the world that they are from:

We have people from many difficult backgrounds here, and we have people from Russia, China, Haiti, you know, a lot of South Americans. So I always love to ask them, where are they from? And once they tell me I know something geological about them. For example, someone might say, I am from Ecuador. So I say, oh yeah, I know the Tungurahua volcano is exploding. And I see that immediately they make a connection. [The students say] you know this is me, my life, my country ... My lecture ... is full of examples from all over the world and I put those [in] for a reason, because I do want to make a connection with them.

Silva melds this knowledge, of his students' countries of origin, with his own knowledge of geology as he invites his students into the study of geology. He does this, in part, by speaking with students about their experiences of geological phenomena. For example, he learned that some students are very interested in earthquakes: "We have people from Iran, Pakistan, [Haiti], places that are prone to earthquakes." He, therefore, begins the section of the course on earthquakes by asking "How many people were in [an] earthquake?" What typically happens then is that a few students will share their experiences of earthquakes. Drawing on students' words, Silva then moves into his lesson:

[Then] I start talking about the S and P waves, those are the two types of waves that are produced by earthquakes ... I ask the ... student to describe the earthquake and did they feel a difference? First the arrival of the P wave and then you had a little lapse and then you have the S wave and the difference in shock, you know one is convection and expansion ... do you experience that? She [the student] says yeah, now I know what it is. ... And then everybody is like you know [leaning forward]. They really got it and so, like, [the students] gravitate towards that.

Silva describes moving back and forth between the students' personal experiences of earthquakes and scientific knowledge of them. He sees doing this as a way capture the students' attention, making them "gravitate" toward a scientific understanding of what happens geologically in an earthquake.

In addition to learning from students about their personal experiences of geology, Silva also learned from them what he termed the "cultural" aspect of geology. During an interview, Silva described learning from an Indonesian student about folk tales of

tsunamis, and how those tales may have saved lives in the massive tsunami of 2004. The student said that there is an Indonesian folk tale that teaches that “whenever you see the sea recede into the water, just make sure you fly the other way.” That student added that people who knew this folk tale knew to run inland when they saw the sea recede. But people who did not know the folk tale drowned. Similarly, Silva learned from a Japanese student that, in Japan, “the walls are very thin and made of paper ... because if something falls down you don’t want something heavy to fall.” Silva said he draws from examples like these in his lectures to engage students and give them a sense of how geology can shape people’s lives and the ways in which different cultures understand geological phenomena.

Silva noted that such discussions of students’ direct experience of geology have the power to draw students into the subject. But they also can take an emotional toll:

I have students that cry describing earthquakes ... It’s a lot of emotion, you know ... how they lost ... how they saw dead people. Any time you see somebody dying, it is a really traumatic event.

When I asked what he does in class when this happens, Silva said that he “let[s] them express themselves.” He then added:

I say this is one of the consequences of earthquakes. It’s economics, it’s the structure, and it’s the pain. All these hurricanes, all these natural phenomena happen. This is the human side. And then we continue. I think that [such discussion] even makes the students try to go deeper.

Silva says that recognizing the emotional and very “human side” of geology can bring students even more deeply into subject-matter study. This belief in the value of the links between students’ lives and geology leads Silva to explore, in his classes, the ways in which geology shapes students’ lives.

Amanda Turner offers a related story – this time in the context of the social science course focused on contemporary issues in economic and cultural development. I observed how in Turner’s course students often made reference to their “home countries,” as a way of making sense of the topics being discussed. When I asked Turner about this, she shared that many of her students are from, as she termed them, “so-called developing nations.” Turner shared how these countries have received economic incentives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to encourage them to produce a single variety of raw material (such as cotton or cane) or to process those

materials (such as producing cloth or sugar). Turner shared that since many of her students have first-hand knowledge of life under these policies, they understand and share with their classmates the “more personal side” of these policies. They know, for example, first-hand the way in which IMF policies can destabilize countries, or what can happen when there is collapse in the market for the single good a country produces.

Like Silva, Turner values these connections between the subject matter and her students’ lives and recognized that exploring these connections can be an emotional process for students. Furthermore, she expressed concern about her own ability to take care of students in such exchanges. For example, during one class session, I observed the students as they watched excerpts from a film about political conflicts in a Caribbean country in the 1990s. A student from that country became visibly upset during the film and promptly left the class before dismissal. Turner later shared with me how at the beginning of the next class session, she spoke to this student and had learned what had made the film personally difficult for him. Turner said that she did not know that the student was from the country portrayed in the video and wished she had known prior to showing the film. When she learned of the students’ connection, she encouraged the student to share his perspective with his classmates, but also stressed that he was in no way obligated to do this. In our debriefing interview, Turner shared how she feels conflicted about inviting students to share their experiences and personal connections to course topics. She worries it places an undue burden on students. Over time she has become increasingly aware and sensitive to the great variety of experiences that her students bring to class—as well as the emotional responses that such connections can invoke. As a teacher, she moves between wanting to respect students’ privacy, and trying to engage the connections between their lives and course concepts.

Silva and Turner, along with others in the study, sought to forge connections between students’ cultural and emotional lives and each subject matter, and used those connections to guide students’ learning. While all the study participants described learning about their students, and the majority also described learning about subject matter, only this smaller subsection described learning about students’ socio-cultural and emotional understandings of that subject matter. What makes these instructors distinct? This was a central question I explored in both the final interviews and in data analysis. No clear answer emerged. These

8 participants did not describe receiving any training in how to teach in this way. They also expressed similar levels of interest in their students' and the subject matter they teach as other participants. Furthermore, they did not describe any key event or single moment when they began to recognize the importance of teaching in this way. None used terms such as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) or culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), or indicated an awareness of the educational research that supports their practices. Yet for this group the "practical experiments" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, p.191) of teaching, their interest in students and subject matter converged into something more: They developed insights into students' lived experiences of the course's subject matter and how that can be engaged to support students' learning. Perhaps other participants will also reach such insights as they continue to seek new ways of connecting their students to subject matter. But it is also possible that they will not. Some adjunct instructors may need direct instruction in how to connect their subject matter with students' lives. Interventions might hasten or deepen what they have already learned. While beyond the scope of this study, this is a promising area for future inquiry.

Discussion

This study indicates just how much adjunct faculty can learn from their students about their students and their lives, subject matter, and students' socio-cultural and emotional understandings of that subject matter. It also shows how adjunct faculty might seek to use what they learn from their students—about the subject matter and its meaning to students—in their teaching. Yet, it is important to recognize that the participants in this study were purposefully selected to be likely to be engaging in such learning. They are examples of what is possible. And yet, even for these selected adjuncts, these gains in understandings of their students and subject matter were hard-won; they emerged over time through their persistent effort to improve their teaching. And, furthermore, while all participants expressed a strong desire to be good teachers, only a subsection learned about students' socio-cultural and emotional understandings of subject matter and how to apply that learning in their classroom teachings.

The study findings raise important questions about the developmental process of learning to teach for faculty. The first two findings of this paper present what the majority of participants learned from their

students, about their students' lives and insights into subject matter. Such learning is likely a necessary condition for the final finding, which presents participants' learning about how to engage students' socio-cultural and emotional insights in the classroom. This study does not, however, reveal what developmental process led to this smaller subsection of participants' realizations. Did they arrive at teaching with an innate sense of the pedagogical value of engaging students' lives? Or did they develop their insights in stages, first learning about students and their connection to subject matter, and then developing deeper insights into applications to classroom practice? This is an important topic for future research. It also leads to a larger, essential question: How common might the learning depicted in this paper be for adjunct faculty, or college faculty more generally? And furthermore, what may colleges and universities do to support such learning?

The learning described in this paper is only possible if adjunct faculty have, or make, opportunities to hear from their students about their lives and the connection between those lives and subject matter. For adjunct faculty to learn in this way, therefore, necessitates them having the time and space for such exchanges with students. They likely need access to a physical space on campus, where they would be able to mine more deeply connections between subject matter and their students. For example, all of the study participants had access to an office space or described using other campus spaces (library, café, etc.) to meet with students. Furthermore, faculty also must be interested in, and just as importantly know how to facilitate, classroom discussions in which students share their understandings of subject matter and connections between that subject matter and their lives. The study participants were all able to do this to varying degrees. We cannot assume that is true of all adjuncts.

This study points to an additional question: Would adjuncts benefit from instructional development that shows them how to unearth and engage their students' socio-cultural understandings of subject matter? None of the study participants received such training, yet roughly half were enacting aspects of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2006), without even being aware of the term. What if they were exposed to these concepts within faculty development? How might that further, or deepen, the practices they are already engaging? These questions of how to engage adjuncts learning within teaching through faculty development are ripe areas for future inquiry (Bolitzer 2019b).

There is also a larger set of questions, which are beyond the scope of this study: are institutions willing to invest in their adjunct faculty? And, if so, what might that investment look like? Currently adjuncts receive limited support in terms of compensation, basic resources (office space, computers, etc.) or faculty development (Bojarczyk 2008; Bolitzer 2019a, 2019b; Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019; Meixner, Kruck, and Madden 2010; Muncaster 2011). Future research may build on this study's findings—which speak to how adjuncts can learn from and with their students and what they may do with that learning—by identifying institutional policies and instructional development models and activities that may enhance such learning. Future research could also address how such learning may differ for other types of adjunct faculty members. For example, those teaching at other types of institutions (e.g., private colleges and universities, community colleges, or graduate schools) or at institutions with different populations of students in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or age. Lastly, future research could also inquire into how, if at all, these findings, about adjunct instructors, apply to tenure-track faculty. Yet all such research would remain theoretical, or wishful thinking, if institutions are unwilling to invest in the learning of their faculty.

Conclusion

This study findings speak to the ways in which adjunct faculty can learn about their students and their lives, about the subject matter they are teaching, and about connections between students and that subject matter. It also identified teaching as a key context for such learning: as a space in which faculty may enlarge their understandings of their subject matter and discover students' ways of knowing those subjects. While limited to 19 participants teaching general education course, these findings speak to possibility. Imagine, for example, what might happen if these adjuncts' willingness to learn was matched by institutional investment in that learning: What might that mean for both adjunct faculty and the students they are responsible for educating? This question of reciprocity between institutions and adjunct faculty is a critical one for the field higher education.

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