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Paper: Lesson Learned -- Exploring Hermeneutic Injustice (diversity)

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Introduction

Hermeneutic injustice is a situation when someone's experience is not well understood by themselves or by others. This moment can occur to any individual who has a different experience than the status quo and in such an experience doesn't have the words to understand or describe their experience (Fricker, 2007). In this lessons learned paper I present how my contribution in a larger, user experience based, research project led to a pivot on the concept of hermeneutic injustice. As part of an existing project, my team and I have been exploring mechanisms for learning about s*tudent experiences* with reflection activities. We created a reaction protocol to understand students' experience, or reactions, with exam wrappers, a common reflection activity given in relation to an exam in engineering education (Kaplan et al., 2013). The reaction protocol is a structured, interactive interviewing tool. We were able to conduct eight interviews with undergraduate engineering students using the reaction protocol.

While the purpose of the reaction protocol was to learn about the student experience in order to understand and redesign reflection activities, I became interested in the student participants' comments regarding feeling gaslit by the wording of a question on the exam wrapper or being able to consider the "hard lines of their experience" versus "spitballing" their feelings. I then began to wonder if students have spaces or tools that allow them to notice and name moments of injustice in their educational experience. Sharing these thoughts with my PhD advisor led to the concept of hermeneutic injustice.

My interest in the student experience is more broadly aligned with my interest in justice in (higher) education. In chapter 3 of *Towards What Justice?: Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education* (2018)*,* Sandy Grande reminds us two things -- one, institutions of higher education are an arm of the settler state, and two, students often fall under the trap of seeing themselves as victims rather than agents. Thus my paper does two things: (1) introduces the concept of hermeneutic injustice to the field of engineering education and (2) explores how knowing about hermeneutic injustice as current students can help us become agents of our own education and help disrupt moments of injustice.

Background

To establish common ground for this paper I begin by defining exam wrappers and their general use. Then I provide a brief context on user experience (UX) to explain where the larger project is situated. I end by introducing the concept this paper explores - hermeneutic injustice in addition to its significance to justice in higher education.

Exam wrappers are reflection activities given in relation to an exam, an idea originally conceived by Lovett (2013). An exam wrapper can be designed to be given before or after an exam. While all exam wrappers are designed differently, the purpose of them is to engage students to think

about their study habits and hopefully promote self-reflection on improvement (Swalve et al., 2021). Lastly, exam wrappers are a common form of reflection in engineering education.

User experience (UX) is a concept popular in the space of human computer interaction (HCI). Research in UX is often guided by an interest in user affect, sensation, and interaction with products, systems, or spaces (Law et al., 2009). It is common to design new methods or tools to explore the particular experiences we are interested in, similar to what we did with the work presented in this paper. However, it has been my experience that while UX can support social justice it is not necessarily oriented to social justice.

The focus of this paper is on the phenomenon identified by Miranda Fricker as hermeneutic injustice. Hermeneutic injustice is a situation when someone's experience is not well understood by themselves or by others. This moment can occur to any individual who has a different experience than the status quo and in such an experience doesn't have the words to understand or describe their experience (Fricker, 2009). It is important to note that hermeneutic injustice is not about the actual experience but rather the failure to be able to describe the said experience. Moreover, Beeby (2011) shares, " [Hermeneutic injustice] is a purely structural notion, dependent on the power relations present in our social structures and not on any one agent." (p. 483). While no one can be blamed for the hermeneutic injustice at hand, it is necessary for the person in power to be willing and open in listening to the person who has experienced a hermeneutic injustice, referred by Friker (2007) as the hearer and speaker respectively. The exchange between the hearer and the speaker results in justice.

There are a couple of things to be said about social justice in higher education. First, many of the questions surrounding justice in higher education relate to representation and participation (Baber, 2015; Brennan and Naidoo, 2008; Kant et al., 2015). Several scholars critique this approach for working as a performative rhetoric and in fact benefitting only the institution's ability to claim a label (such as diversity, equity, and inclusion) valuable to the workforce (Baber, 2015; Tuck and Yang, 2018). Second, as Grande reminds us, higher education institutions serve as an arm to the settler state having "...histories of dispossession,enslavement, exclusion, forced assimilation and integration" (p. 48) that have resulted in the institutions' structure and systems of domination. In other words, institutions of higher education have norms and values that have not changed since their creation. These norms and values harm the belonging of students/staff/faculty with underrepresented identities. Students specifically, tend to slip into thinking themselves as victims and objects rather than agents (Tuck and Yang, 2018). Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the scholarship of social justice in education is vast and diverse. As a result of the different projects in this space, the term "justice" takes on varying and sometimes contradictory meanings (Tuck and Yang, 2016). For the purpose of this paper, I will not define "justice" but instead draw on Tuck and Yang's (2018) suggestion of "justice" being a signal to other scholars, therefore I align my project to justice in higher education to signal the inequity

produced by higher education and the need to notice students' experiences. Accordingly, this project contributes information that may be useful for students to act as agents of their own education when they encounter hermeneutic injustice in higher education.

The Case -- Creating the Reaction Protocol

The story for this paper begins in creating the Reaction Protocol, essentially a highly structured interview developed as a result of a four-year research project on engineering student reflection activities that allows researchers (or anyone who is interested) to understand the user experience of students with a reflection activity. After several iterations, the final Reaction Protocol exists on the platform, Miro, and consists of three parts, as seen in **Image 1**.

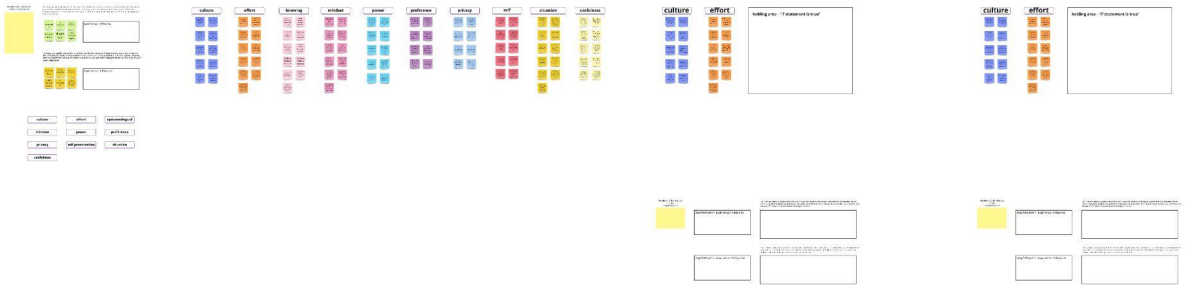

Image 1: The image is of the reaction protocol. On the left is the "Overall Assessment" stage. In the center are the ten categories with their corresponding descriptors. On the top right is the "Characterization" stage. The bottom right is the "Modeling" stage.

A primary intention of the Reaction Protocol is to learn from students' experiences in order to design better exam wrappers thus fostering better student experiences. In the first part of the Protocol, known as the "Overall Assessment", students write some descriptive notes about the exam wrapper they are about to reflect on (ex. the name of the reflection activity, the class they did it for, how much time they spent completing the activity, etc.). The student is then prompted to gauge their positiveness and negativeness towards the rexam wrapper through the use of twelve statements - six positive and six negative. The second part is "Characterization" which has the student engage with a total of four out of ten bases -- culture, effort, knowing, mindset, power, preference, privacy, self, situation, and usefulness. Each category has its own set of descriptors that help the students describe their experience -- if the descriptor is true to the student's experience they move it to the holding area. The final part is "Modeling" which has the student re-engage with the descriptors that were true to their experience in relation to the positiveness and negativeness they described in part one. Through the Reaction Protocol, the student has the opportunity to share details that are true to their experience (via the characterization) and how it contributed to their feeling of the experience.

Despite intentionally seeking for the students' experience my team and I were not expecting some of the responses. For example, one of our eight participants commented feeling gaslit (their choice of word) by questions on their exam wrapper. The participant shared,

> "I appreciated [the exam wrapper] but I'm not so sure that I enjoyed it because there were a few like sort of curveball questions on the exam that we didn't think were coming and then in the exam rapper that we were given, basically on the exam rapper questions were raised in a way that made it feel like it was my fault for not preparing for those particularly challenging questions."

While we were expecting students to share negative reactions we were still surprised by the gaslit comment. I could not let go of this comment or the more subtle comments made by other student participants describing their appreciation of the Reaction Protocol for helping them consider the "hard lines of their experiences" versus "spitballing their feelings" (phrases used by participants during the interviews). At this moment, I pivoted my focus with the Reaction Protocol to be on the concept of hermeneutic injustice. Here I present not the low-level details of the Reaction Protocol but instead the significance of knowing about hermeneutic injustice as students.

Lessons Learned from this Case

In this section I provide what I learned from pivoting my focus from the reaction protocol to the concept of hermeneutic injustice as it relates to higher education. I provide personal examples as both a student and as an educator.

As a student

Prior to my experience in working with the reaction protocol, I had not stumbled upon the concept of hermeneutic injustice. While I was unfamiliar with the term, I was familiar with the feeling of not being able to describe or understand an experience that had left me unnerved, anxious, or confused. So as I came to learn about the concept of hermeneutic injustice it made sense. To relate it back to higher education, I will share my own recent encounter with hermeneutic injustice while taking a course.

> I am taking my first ethnic studies course this winter quarter. It is a new course being co-instructed by two professors and it follows contract grading. During the first course session, the instructors clarify that contract grading means all the students are given a 3.4 GPA and can expect that grade if we successfully complete and submit six of the seven weekly exercises in addition to successfully completing and submitting three assignments. The weekly assignments are graded based on having two keywords defined, answering two questions from a list the professors create, and citing each definition and response. The exercise seemed simple enough until I received an incomplete on my first submission. I was upset I had received an incomplete and there seemed to be no explanation for why. I decided that I would attend the professor's office hours which were on the day after receiving my grade, but before going to their office hours I talked

> with my PhD advisor. Before talking with my advisor, I recalled P5's comment about being gaslit by the question on the exam wrapper and I decided to spend 10-minutes to write down why I was upset. During my reflection/rant, I realized that not knowing why I had received an incomplete when I had followed the instructions was upsetting. It was also upsetting that as a PhD student who stopped caring about grades it still had an affect on me. And it was also a moment that surfaced my imposter syndrome. When I met with my advisor I had them read the exercise instructions, then read my submission, and then look at the professor's feedback. My advisor validated my feelings which was a big relief and unknowingly settled my imposter syndrome. But from our conversation I also realized that the use of "informal" in the exercise's description had influenced my approach to completing the assignment. Meeting with the two professors leading the ethnic study course confirmed that their "informal" was not the same as my "informal".

I acknowledge that the experience I described would not be considered as hermeneutic injustice by Fricker's definition because I was able to describe my experience of injustice to my PhD advisor. However, I was only able to understand and describe this experience because I was already aware of hermeneutic injustice and as an engineering PhD student interested in education I have come across literature regarding injustices in higher education. But that may not be the case for other students. Therefore, I chose to give my personal experience to highlight what could have been a moment of hermeneutic injustice to other students in the class or what hermeneutic injustice can look like in higher education.

As an educator

As students we are at a power imbalance with our educators making us susceptible to moments of hermeneutic injustice. Even while we are students (either undergraduate or graduate), we sometimes have the opportunity to additionally serve in educator roles (course assistants, teaching assistants, section leaders, etc.). In such educational roles, the power shifts, and we have the opportunity to correct moments that can lead our students to experiencing hermeneutic injustice. The opportunity to simultaneously be a student in one space and an educator in another really lends itself for us to stop moments of injustice. I highlight this through another personal experience.

> While I had experienced my moment of injustice in my ethnic studies course, I was also co-leading a research group. My colleague and I were creating the slides for our research group's session. As we worked on the slide for "what to do before next week," I added a section titled "optional readings". My colleague changed "optional" to "(optional)". I asked why they added the parenthesis and their response was they had just learned from a professor that parenthesis signal the readings as being less optional and more on the verge of highly recommended. I asked why not just write "highly recommended readings." They responded saying that "(optional)" was less words to communicate the same thing.

> Due to my experience with the ethnic studies course, I told my colleague I preferred being direct and explicit in our expectations of the students thus preferring "highly recommended reading."

Again, my example may not line up precisely with Fricker's definition of hermeneutic injustice but you can imagine a situation in which an instructor might give misleading instructions that cause moments of hermeneutic injustice to any student. The instructor is not intentionally giving misleading instructions but as an individual in an already unjust system (i.e., higher education), it is easy for the instructor to enact norms that have gone unquestioned and also can potentially contribute to an injustice. To elaborate, noticing across both of my examples, I recognize the moment of injustice could be pinpointed in the miscommunication, on the educators end, or misinterpretation, on the student end, of a particular term. In my student example the term was "informal" and in my educator example the term was "(optional)". Both instances were miniscule causing me to wonder if I would have agreed with my colleague in using "(optional)" had I not experienced a misinterpretation as a student.

Closing Remarks

I began working on the Reaction Protocol as a user experience researcher focused on creating an approach (the reaction protocol with its interview focus) that could give insight on the user (i.e., the student's) experience of engagement with a reflection activity. I knew my work was important in making visible the student experience but I was not expecting the pivot in my work that more closely aligns with my interest in giving students more agency in their educational experience. I presented the concept of hermeneutic injustice so students can know that the feeling of being unable to describe their experience is a real thing. Now knowing the concept can support a shift towards justice. Before ending, I recognize that hermeneutic injustice is not perfect, and I encourage you to read Beeby's (2011) critique of Fricker's framework. Moreover, the idea of "justice" is considered by some scholars as insufficient for correcting wrongs, thus challenging us to think beyond "justice" (Tuck and Yang, 2018). However, I hope readers walk away knowing hermeneutic injustice is a stepping stone for students to notice and be able to describe their experiences and no longer be victims of the structures of higher education.

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