

# Intersectionality at German Universities: Empowering Teaching Staff as Change Agents With Higher Education Didactic Workshops

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## Abstract

The increasing diversity at German universities has been accompanied by the demand to widen participation among all groups of students. This challenges higher education teaching, requiring learning environments that acknowledge diverse experiences and needs. While diversity-sensitive approaches have been the dominant response, they often address single diversity dimensions in isolation, neglecting intersectional interdependencies and structural power relations. An intersectional perspective, however, shifts the focus to power dynamics, knowledge production, and inclusive educational practices. This article argues that such an approach has a good potential to enable lecturers and students to become change agents by fostering critical thinking, reflective agency, and ethical commitment to dismantling systemic inequalities. This is particularly challenging in the German higher education system, where critical, antidiscriminatory pedagogical perspectives are mostly limited to certain disciplines. At the same time, the teaching staff enjoy extensive teaching autonomy, which provides them with freedom for individual engagement in this area. Therefore, implementing intersectional approaches in teaching requires targeted educational interventions that support teaching staff. Building on the concept of intersectional pedagogy, we introduce a case study of a higher education didactic workshop that was designed to raise awareness of intersectional perspectives in teaching. The findings highlight the potential of such workshops to influence teaching practices and promote the engagement of disciplinary teaching communities with intersectionality. This article concludes by discussing the implications for further developing workshop concepts and empowering teaching staff and students as agents of change within the German higher education system.

## Keywords

change agents; German higher education; intersectionality; teaching students; university didactics

## 1. Introduction

Alongside the massification of higher education (HE), the German HE system has experienced not only a quantitative expansion of student numbers but also a diversification of the students' educational backgrounds, motivations, interests, and prerequisites (Bosse, 2015; Mergner et al., 2019; Wolter, 2013). This diversification is not only limited to students but also extends to teaching staff (Auferkorte-Michaelis & Linde, 2022). While these developments have broadened access to HE, they have also brought new debates on how institutions and teaching staff engage with an increasingly diverse student body (Mergner, 2024). In Germany, diversity in HE has primarily been addressed through policy measures aimed at widening participation, yet this often remains at the level of demographic representation rather than deeper structural or pedagogical change (Gaisch & Aichinger, 2016; Walgenbach, 2014). Diversity initiatives in German HE often operate within predefined categories, such as gender or migration (Frierson, 2022). While such classifications offer valuable insights, they risk oversimplifying the complex realities of students and teaching staff. This perspective often remains single-categorical, addressing specific diversity dimensions in isolation rather than considering intersectional interdependencies and structural power relations, overlooking how multiple dimensions, such as gender and disability, interact to shape access and participation (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). This limitation is particularly relevant in teaching contexts, where standardized curricula and institutional structures may not adequately account for the varying needs, expectations, and challenges of an increasingly heterogeneous student body (Auferkorte-Michaelis & Linde, 2018).

From a critical perspective, an intersectional approach to teaching introduces a differently nuanced discourse on "participation" by placing power relations and the inclusion of the individual's experiences at the center. Such an intersectional perspective calls for a broader reflection on how knowledge is produced, whose perspectives are valued, and how educational practice can become more inclusive. This article explores how an intersectional approach to HE teaching can be implemented through didactics. We argue that integrating intersectional perspectives into HE teaching can empower teaching staff to critically engage with power relations and privileges while fostering strategies to develop an intersectionality-sensitive learning environment. In doing so, it is important to consider the specific characteristics of the German HE system. While critical perspectives on HE teaching exist, they are limited to certain disciplines. At the same time, German teaching staff have a high degree of autonomy and a low degree of external control (Stichweh, 2016). This combination offers both challenges and opportunities for institutional change. Here, HE didactic workshops can empower teaching staff to take an active role as change agents to innovate their teaching approaches. These workshops are widely recognized as effective mechanisms for fostering the competencies and skills of the teaching staff to respond to diverse student needs (Hoffmann et al., 2024; Johannes et al., 2013; Kröber, 2011; Stes et al., 2010).

To examine these dynamics, this article addresses the following research questions: How can HE didactic workshops support teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practices? And what are the key components of didactic workshops that promote an intersectional approach to HE teaching?

To address these research questions, this article begins by outlining the specific context of HE in Germany and HE didactics before defining intersectionality and the concept of intersectional pedagogy (IP). Drawing on the principles of IP, a case study of a pilot workshop designed for teaching staff is presented, aiming to raise awareness towards intersectionality in HE teaching. The methodology section details the workshop's

evaluation design, followed by a comprehensive description of the workshop's design and implementation. The evaluation findings are then presented to assess the workshop's effectiveness, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Need for a Critical Perspective of Diversity in German HE

Over the last few decades, German HE has undergone significant transformation thanks to widening participation policies, demographic changes, and internationalization (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). These developments have led to a more diverse student and teaching staff population, which necessitates a shift in pedagogical approaches (Wild & Esdar, 2014; Zervakis & Mooraj, 2014). While diversity-sensitive teaching has gained prominence, these approaches often focus on accommodating different student backgrounds without critically examining the intersecting power structures that shape educational experiences (Archer, 2007; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). This limitation calls for an intersectional perspective, which moves beyond a single-dimensional understanding of diversity and instead considers how various social categories, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, interact and create unique experiences of privilege and marginalization (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989).

Despite the growing attention to diversity in German HE, the integration of more critical pedagogical approaches to HE teaching remains limited. Unlike in the USA and the UK, where critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and social justice education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) are more institutionalized, the German HE system has traditionally prioritized knowledge production over pedagogical innovation. More precisely, social justice-oriented teaching in Germany tends to be confined to specific disciplines, such as sociology and gender studies, rather than integrated into the curricula across all disciplines. Additionally, the prevalent notions of "objective," "value-free," and "merit-based" education (Münch, 2007) reinforce the perception that critical pedagogies are ideological rather than academic (Harris & González, 2012; Wånggren & Milatovic, 2014). While issues such as racism and gender inequality are acknowledged in policy frameworks, they are often treated as administrative concerns rather than pedagogical imperatives, influenced by Germany's legalistic approach to antidiscrimination (Mecheril & Castro Varela, 2010).

However, recent national and European initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ programs, have contributed to a growing discussion on intersectionality in teacher training, the social sciences, and the humanities, particularly among early career faculty members (Pietzonka, 2016; Wild & Esdar, 2014). As a result, several didactic handbooks and toolkits have been developed to support diversity-sensitive teaching (Hörr et al., 2020), including projects such as JoinMe2, which focuses on fostering diversity-sensitive competencies among teaching staff. However, a critical review of these initiatives reveals that they primarily emphasize diversity-sensitive rather than intersectional approaches. This conceptual distinction is crucial—while diversity-sensitive teaching acknowledges student differences, intersectional approaches actively examine how power structures shape educational inclusion and exclusion (Walgenbach, 2021).

A further structural challenge in implementing intersectionality in German HE teaching is the principle of *Lehrfreiheit* (teaching autonomy), which grants faculty members full discretion over their pedagogical approaches and is constitutionally protected (Stichweh, 2016; Teichler et al., 2013). Here, university

management has limited control over teaching practices due to traditional governance structures (Krücken et al., 2013; Leišytė, 2016; Leišytė & Dee, 2012; Leišytė & Wilkesmann, 2016). At the same time, unlike in other educational sectors, university lecturers are not required to undergo formal pedagogical training; instead, they often develop teaching skills informally through experience (Wildt, 2009). This combination of high teaching autonomy and minimal institutional control mechanisms allows faculty members to decide independently whether or not to engage with innovations in university teaching and curriculum development (Wilkesmann, 2016).

In summary, this system provides both opportunities and challenges: On the one hand, autonomy allows faculty to engage with intersectional perspectives voluntarily; on the other hand, it means that such approaches remain dependent on individual initiative rather than institutionalized structures. Moreover, the predominance of mid-level academic staff in teaching positions, many of whom hold fixed-term contracts, further complicates the implementation of long-term pedagogical innovations (Krücken et al., 2013; Leišytė & Dee, 2012).

In response to these challenges, HE didactics (*Hochschuldidaktik*) has gained importance in Germany, particularly following the Bologna Process reforms, which introduced bachelor's and master's programs to align with European HE standards (Hüther & Krücken, 2018; Peksen & Zeeman, 2019). Emerging in the 1960s as a response to student movements demanding better teaching conditions, HE didactics has since played a central role in promoting pedagogical innovation in German HE (Wildt, 2009, 2013). Didactic centers offer workshops and consulting formats that encourage reflective teaching practices and student-centered approaches, with research indicating that such training enhances teaching competencies and self-efficacy (Hoffmann et al., 2024; Stes et al., 2010). Importantly, HE didactics highlight the impact of the instructors' beliefs on their pedagogical behavior, emphasizing the need for systemic support structures alongside individual competence development (Kröber, 2011).

These developments present an opportunity to integrate intersectionality into HE teaching. While voluntary engagement remains a key driver of innovation, didactic workshops provide a promising avenue for fostering awareness of intersectionality, particularly among intrinsically motivated lecturers seeking institutional support. In order to explore how the concept of intersectionality can be integrated into HE teaching, the following section introduces the theoretical foundations of intersectionality and its implications for HE didactics.

## **2.2. Intersectionality as a Critical Framework in HE**

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that examines how multiple social identities (e.g., such as race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality) intersect to shape privilege and oppression. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality moves beyond single-axis analyses (e.g., racism or sexism) by introducing matrix thinking, highlighting how different forms of discrimination are interconnected and embedded in societal structures (Crenshaw, 1989; see also Sim & Bierema, 2023). Unlike traditional diversity approaches that treat identity markers separately, intersectionality emphasizes the role of structural power dynamics and institutional mechanisms (e.g., education, law, or labor markets) in maintaining social hierarchies (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This perspective not only serves as an analytical tool but also has normative implications, advocating for systemic change to address inequities in policies and practices (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 2011; Walgenbach, 2014).

In the context of HE, although intersectionality is often used to critique exclusionary structures, curricula, and teaching practices, concrete applications remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Some scholars argue that it has become an academic buzzword rather than a driver of substantive institutional change (Ahmed, 2012; Davis, 2008). Others point to a lack of concrete methodologies for its integration into curricula and teaching practices (Case, 2016; Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). Although universities increasingly incorporate intersectional language into diversity policies, these commitments often remain at the rhetorical level rather than influencing pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, or institutional structures (Ahmed, 2012). For example, while syllabi may include diverse perspectives, classroom power dynamics and teaching approaches frequently remain unchanged, thereby perpetuating inequalities (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). These challenges highlight the need to move beyond theoretical discussions and establish structured approaches for embedding intersectionality into HE teaching (Sim & Bierema, 2023).

Despite these difficulties, research suggests that integrating intersectionality into teaching fosters equity, cognitive diversity, engagement, and learning outcomes, benefiting both students and lecturers (Case, 2016). First, research demonstrates that students with intersecting marginalized identities often face compounded academic disadvantages, such as implicit biases, stereotype threats, and institutional barriers (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Addressing these issues through intersectional teaching can mitigate such barriers and create more equitable learning conditions. Second, empirical studies indicate that exposure to diverse perspectives enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Antonio et al., 2004). When intersectional experiences are considered in course content and teaching methods, students engage with richer, more nuanced discussions that enhance their cognitive flexibility, which is an essential skill for the twenty-first century. Moreover, research on student engagement shows that curricula reflecting students' identities lead to higher persistence and academic success (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

In conclusion, research strongly supports the claim that integrating intersectionality into HE teaching is not just an ethical imperative but a pedagogically effective strategy. To make intersectionality more practically relevant, lecturers must move beyond theoretical discussions and actively transform curricula, pedagogies, and institutional cultures to ensure meaningful inclusion and equity. But how can we do this? Here, the concept of IP is of special interest because it can serve as a bridge between theory and practices, offering concrete strategies for fostering more intersectionality-sensitive teaching.

### **2.3. IP: A Framework for HE Teaching**

IP is an educational approach that fosters critical awareness of how interlocking systems of oppression shape experiences at individual, group, and societal levels (Sim & Bierema, 2023). Rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), IP emphasizes structural inequalities rather than focusing solely on individual differences (Case, 2016).

Unlike traditional diversity approaches that emphasize representation and inclusion (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2008), IP critically analyzes power structures, knowledge production, and dominant narratives (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). It moves beyond additive perspectives that treat social categories in isolation, instead examining the simultaneous interaction of power relations. Furthermore, rather than merely celebrating diversity, IP critiques dominant knowledge structures and amplifies marginalized perspectives (hooks, 1994).

Based on hooks' (1994) notion that the "classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12) to actively engage with radical critique and social change, an intersectional approach equips lecturers and students with critical frameworks that acknowledge marginalized knowledge, expose power dynamics, explore the complexity of identity, and foster strategies for empowerment (Sim & Bierema, 2023). Here, intersectional awareness is positively associated with openness to new experiences, the ability to adopt others' perspectives, intentions to drive social change, and engagement in rights-based activism (Case, 2016). In fact, research confirms that IP enhances the student's ability to address inequalities in professional settings, contributing to diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in their later workplaces (Ong et al., 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, institutions that implement intersectional curricula report increased student engagement and trust, particularly among marginalized groups (Museus et al., 2017).

To integrate intersectionality into HE teaching, professional development programs must be grounded in key pedagogical principles. Based on a literature review, we identify seven core principles that are essential for fostering intersectional awareness among teaching staff:

1. Creating safe spaces: Encouraging open dialogue and vulnerability fosters an inclusive learning environment where students and lecturers can critically discuss power dynamics (hooks, 1994; Sim & Bierema, 2023).
2. Building a strong theoretical foundation: Understanding how intersecting social categories shape privilege and oppression is essential for implementing intersectional teaching (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).
3. Self-reflection on positionality: Lecturers must critically examine their own identities and biases to develop more equitable teaching practices (Ahmed, 2012; Case, 2016).
4. Considering the student's lived experiences: Acknowledging and integrating the student's diverse backgrounds enhances engagement and learning outcomes (Sim & Bierema, 2023; Tinto, 1993).
5. Reviewing teaching content and methods: Assessing curricula, teaching materials, and assessments helps dismantle exclusionary practices (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).
6. Developing intersectionality-sensitive teaching concepts: Encouraging the integration of diverse perspectives fosters transformative learning experiences (Case & Rios, 2016).
7. Promoting community building and sustainability: Institutional commitment, peer exchange, and collaborative learning are crucial for embedding intersectionality into long-term teaching practices (Sim & Bierema, 2023).

These principles provide a holistic framework for equipping teaching staff with the tools to create inclusive and critically reflexive teaching environments. Effective training should go beyond theoretical instruction to focus on critical reflection, structural analysis, and practical change.

### 3. Methodology

Building on the above-mentioned IP principles, a pilot professional development workshop for HE staff was developed as a case study. This workshop aims to equip teaching staff from all disciplines at one regional university with concrete strategies for implementing intersectional teaching practices, fostering a more inclusive and transformative academic environment. The workshop was accompanied by a mixed-methods convergent evaluation design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), which served two main purposes. First, due to the

workshop's pilot nature, it aimed to identify potential for further development by gathering feedback on areas that could be improved or expanded. This ensured that future iterations of the workshop would remain responsive to the participant's needs and evolving pedagogical challenges. Second, the evaluation sought to determine how the workshop had supported teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practice.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the evaluation design assessed the participant's awareness, attitudes, and behavioral changes related to integrating intersectionality in teaching. Participation in the workshop, follow-up, and evaluation was voluntary for all participants.

Data collection occurred at two key points in time: before the workshop in July 2024 and after the workshop in December 2024. The pre-workshop phase included a structured survey of the participants' prior knowledge, motivation, and interest ( $n = 11$ ). At the end of the workshop day, a focus group discussion was executed using the five-finger feedback method (Gibbs, 1997). Here, participants were encouraged to reflect on key aspects of the workshop through questions about their key takeaways, enjoyment, challenges, areas for further exploration, and suggestions for improvement ( $n = 11$ ). The postworkshop phase used a follow-up survey to measure changes, followed by a reflection session one week later to explore the participants' application of intersectionality in their teaching practices ( $n = 4$ ).

## 4. Case Study: Workshop Design and Implementation

As a case study, a pilot workshop that was titled "Intersectionality in Higher Education Teaching" was developed as part of the workshop program of a HE didactics department as a voluntary offer for teaching staff from all disciplines at a research university in Germany. The workshop was held at the beginning of July 2024 with 11 participants and two workshop leaders.

### 4.1. Workshop Objectives and Structure

Based on the previously mentioned literature on IP, the primary objective of the workshop was to support the participants in integrating intersectional approaches into their teaching to foster safe and intersectionality-sensitive learning environments. This was achieved by raising awareness of intersectionality's importance in HE teaching, reflecting on power and privilege dynamics in teaching contexts, critically assessing the participants' learning environments in terms of who is privileged and oppressed, and analyzing the integration of intersectionality into teaching practice.

The workshop comprised five sessions, combining online and in-person components. Three sessions were conducted in a single day, covering (a) theoretical foundations of intersectionality (definitions and approaches), (b) reflection on intersectionality among participants and their students, and (c) an assessment of intersectionality in learning environments, teaching materials, methods, and assignments. The fourth session was a self-learning phase, where the participants developed an intersectionality-sensitive teaching concept. The final session was an online follow-up meeting where the participants shared their experiences of implementing their concepts. In the following subsections, the implementation of the workshop will be described in more detail according to the previously identified principles of IP that were covered by the pilot concept.

#### 4.1.1. Principle 1: Providing Safe Spaces

Given the potentially emotional and controversial nature of intersectionality, the workshop prioritized creating a safe and welcoming environment. It began with the “net of similarities” activity, in which participants identified commonalities beyond appearances. They recorded these on a shared poster, visually connecting their names. This activity was conducted informally before the official start of the workshop and fostered initial interactions in a relaxed setting.

The workshop then formally began with a short questionnaire of the participants’ expectations, followed by introductions, an overview of the objectives and agenda, and a discussion of the rules of communication. A reflection on the “net of similarities” activity highlighted the key message of intersectionality, which is that meaningful communication is essential for recognizing shared experiences.

#### 4.1.2. Principle 2: Theoretical Foundations of Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was introduced through the animated video *Two Blue Crocodiles and the Gap in the System*, which illustrates the concept of intersectionality with the help of a metaphorical example. This was followed by a guided discussion in which the participants were invited to share their impressions and interpretations. This led to a brief theoretical introduction that covered the main definitions, approaches, and axes of intersectionality, and emphasized its relevance in HE teaching.

#### 4.1.3. Principle 3: Self-Reflection of Privileges and Position as a Lecturer

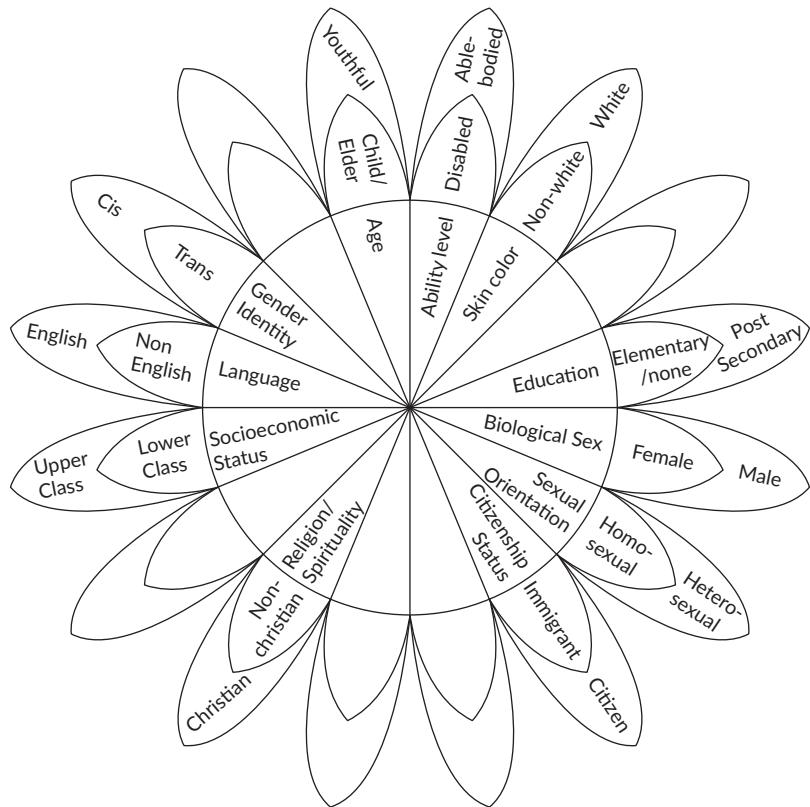
Teaching through an intersectional lens requires self-awareness of privilege, inequality, and bias. To facilitate this, the participants engaged in the Power Flower activity, which is a tool from antidiscrimination pedagogy (Figure 1). They completed a worksheet with petals representing different social categories, with the inner petals representing privileged groups and the outer petals representing marginalized groups. Small-group discussions followed, exploring how it felt to belong to different categories. Finally, a plenary discussion linked privilege to teaching practices, prompting reflection on how the instructors’ positions influence their students’ perceptions and experiences.

#### 4.1.4. Principle 4: Analysis of Axes of Intersectionality Among Students

After reflecting on their own positions, the participants considered the diverse identities of their students. In small groups, they discussed the axes of intersectionality that they had observed and shared classroom situations where these dynamics became visible. Their insights were documented on moderation cards, which were then presented and discussed in a plenary session. This sharing facilitated peer learning about creating intersectionality-sensitive learning environments.

#### 4.1.5. Principle 5: Reflection of the Participants’ Teaching Practices

The next session focused on critically examining learning environments, materials, methods, and assignments for intersectionality. The participants first defined “learning environment” and then discussed the factors that contribute to inclusivity. Small groups evaluated their own courses, identifying strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement. They then considered challenges and opportunities for implementing changes.



**Figure 1.** Power Flower worksheet. Source: Toolkit from WeRise (n.d.).

The second session focused on teaching methods and materials. The participants grouped themselves according to commonly used methods (e.g., text-based discussions) and assessed their sensitivity to intersectionality using an eight-question framework (e.g.: “For whom is this method easy or difficult?”). The results were shared in a plenary session, which sparked further discussion and sharing of intersectionality-sensitive teaching strategies.

The final component examined the student assignments. The participants formed groups based on common assessment formats (e.g., written exams) and discussed strategies for making them more inclusive, considering factors such as material selection, diversity of learning paths, flexibility, and accessibility. Their findings were documented and shared in a final plenary discussion.

#### 4.1.6. Principle 6: Developing Intersectionality-Sensitive Teaching Concepts

After analyzing their teaching practices, the participants were introduced to good practice examples from a literature review of intersectionality in HE teaching to inspire new approaches. They were then asked to develop an intersectionality-sensitive teaching concept in a following self-learning phase based on their reflections and the examples presented. The participants were invited to submit their concepts before the next semester to receive individual feedback from the workshop facilitators. At the end of the day, the participants provided feedback on their key takeaways, challenges, most valuable insights, and areas for further exploration.

#### 4.1.7. Principle 7: Community and Network Building

A follow-up online meeting in December 2024 provided an opportunity for the participants and facilitators to reconvene and discuss the implementation of intersectionality-sensitive teaching innovations. They shared successes, challenges, and strategies for further refinement, fostering an ongoing exchange of ideas and professional support.

### 5. Evaluation Findings

Given the small number of participants, the triangulation of evaluation data provides a richer understanding of the participants' learning experiences. To systematically assess the effectiveness of the workshop, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) is applied, which provides a four-level approach to measuring reaction, learning, behavior, and results. However, to gain a better understanding of our participants, this section will start with a short overview of the respondents' characteristics.

#### 5.1. Overview of the Respondents

The gender distribution among the participants was relatively balanced, with 54.5% identifying as female, 36.4% as male, and 9.1% preferring not to disclose their gender. Teaching experience varied, with 54.5% having one to three years, 27.3% over five years, and others reporting less than one year or three to five years. Consequently, all of the participants belonged to the status group of mid-level academic staff. All of the participants were from the social sciences and humanities, highlighting the relevance of intersectionality in these fields. Participants had a moderate understanding of intersectionality, with 36.4% rating their prior knowledge as "low," another 36.4% as "neutral," and 27.3% as "high." Most had no prior workshop experience on the topic, with only one participant (9.1%) having previously attended one on intersectionality. This highlights a foundational gap in understanding and presents a significant opportunity for professional development in this field. Concerning motivation, the workshop participants primarily aimed to improve their teaching skills (45.5%), reflecting a practical interest in addressing intersectionality. Additionally, 36.4% valued learning about intersectionality and obtaining a certificate, while 18.2% were interested in its theoretical foundations for research. Regarding specific interests, 36.4% focused on integrating intersectionality into teaching, 27.3% on understanding its theoretical approaches, and 18.2% on addressing diverse student needs and exploring various aspects of the concept.

#### 5.2. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 1: Reaction

The feedback collected during the focus group discussion at the end of the workshop provided insights into the participants' experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The participants shared several key takeaways from the workshop, focusing on practical inspiration for integrating intersectionality into their teaching. Many found the workshop valuable for generating concrete ideas on promoting intersectionality and addressing diverse student needs. The most appreciated aspect was the opportunity to share experiences and learn from peers, fostering camaraderie and collective insight. The participants also valued the "net of similarities" that emerged across disciplines, highlighting common challenges and strategies. The Power Flower activity further enriched this experience by creating a supportive and reflective environment, particularly when discussing privilege.

The participants also identified challenges, especially in understanding and applying intersectionality in their teaching. Combining group work on diverse topics, such as learning environments and exam practices, sometimes made it difficult to maintain focus. Some also found that the Power Flower activity required deeper reflection to fully grasp their privileges.

Several participants expressed interest in further exploring intersectionality, particularly through practical examples and additional resources. They suggested incorporating more hands-on exercises to illustrate different levels of intersectionality in teaching scenarios. There was also a strong interest in preworkshop readings to build foundational knowledge and facilitate in-depth discussions. The participants proposed the creation of a shared Moodle space for ongoing resource sharing and discussion.

Constructive feedback on the workshop structure included suggestions for improving session flow and effectiveness. One recommendation was to schedule practical methods presentations after lunch, followed by group work on learning environments and assessments. The participants felt that this reorganization would better support the application of intersectionality in real-life teaching. Additionally, they advocated for a stronger focus on specific scenarios and practical methods to deepen their understanding and implementation of intersectionality.

### **5.3. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 2: Learning**

All of the participants agreed that the workshop provided a strong foundation for understanding intersectionality. However, the complexity of the concept made it challenging to translate theoretical insights into concrete teaching strategies. The tools introduced encouraged self-reflection and critical engagement, but their impact varied. While some activities facilitated meaningful discussions, others felt too abstract or needed clearer guidance on integrating intersectionality into HE teaching. Notably, all of the respondents reported having implemented or are planning to implement intersectionality in their teaching, indicating that the workshop successfully motivated the participants beyond the training session.

The participants suggested a more structured learning model to enhance the workshop's impact. They recommended introducing a preparatory phase with pre-readings, short videos, and guiding questions to build foundational knowledge before the workshop, which would allow the sessions to focus more closely on practical application. However, ensuring that the preparatory workload remains manageable is essential. Additionally, ongoing support beyond the workshop was emphasized. A shared digital platform, such as a Moodle forum, could facilitate further discussion, resource sharing, and peer support.

### **5.4. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 3: Behavior**

One workshop participant successfully integrated the concept of intersectionality into their teaching and shared their experiences and reflections. This implementation took place in an elective academic writing course for bachelor's students ( $n = 20$ ). This participant introduced the concept in the third session through the Power Flower exercise. To facilitate reflection, the students engaged in two structured activities. First, they examined how their personal experiences and social positioning influenced their choice of seminar paper topics, considering whether personal experiences or biases played a role. Second, the exercise aimed to raise awareness of diversity in teamwork, prompting the students to reflect on their strengths and challenges in group work and how different backgrounds and perspectives shape collaboration.

This workshop participant observed notable differences in student engagement compared to previous semesters. According to this lecturer, after the Power Flower exercise, the students demonstrated a heightened awareness of how their identities influenced their academic work and engaged more critically with their topic choices. Additionally, discussions of the group dynamics revealed increased sensitivity to diverse perspectives and potential power imbalances in collaboration.

According to this workshop participant, the Power Flower exercise fostered deeper self-awareness, enabling the students to make more informed and reflective academic choices. It also promoted a more inclusive and considerate approach to teamwork, reducing conflicts stemming from differing expectations or working styles. However, challenges remained. For example, some of the students initially struggled to articulate how their intersectional identities affected their academic work, requiring additional guidance and scaffolding. Others felt uncomfortable openly sharing their responses. Furthermore, integrating this approach into the broader curriculum was difficult because the students were unaccustomed to structured self-reflection in academic settings. Looking ahead, this participant expressed interest in refining this approach by providing more structured prompts to guide student reflection and incorporating similar exercises across multiple sessions rather than limiting them to a single session.

### **5.5. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 4: Results**

Although all of the participants who responded to the postworkshop survey had either implemented or planned to implement intersectionality, this was driven by individual commitment rather than institutional support. The low participation rate suggests that intersectionality may not be a priority for many beyond the workshop setting, which underscores the need for a systematic follow-up. Without institutional mechanisms to support long-term engagement, there is a risk that intersectionality will remain a temporary focus rather than a sustainable teaching principle.

For intersectionality to become a sustainable teaching principle rather than an isolated individual effort, institutional embedding at both the departmental and university levels is essential. Without structural support, such as department-wide initiatives, integration into teaching guidelines, or incentives for IP, individual efforts risk fading over time. A more systematic follow-up mechanism, including ongoing peer exchange, dedicated institutional resources, and formal recognition of intersectionality in teaching frameworks, is needed to ensure a long-term impact.

## **6. Discussion**

German HE teaching is an interesting case for understanding the agency of teaching staff in fostering intersectionality in teaching and learning due to the country's unique academic structures and historical approach to diversity. German HE has traditionally emphasized academic autonomy, with teaching staff enjoying significant freedom over their curricula and pedagogical choices (Stichweh, 2016). This *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of teaching) provides opportunities for lecturers to integrate intersectional perspectives into their teaching. However, it also presents challenges because there is limited institutional oversight or incentive to do so, while at the same time, didactic training for university teaching staff is obligatory (Wildt, 2009). Furthermore, unlike in the Anglo-American context, where critical pedagogy and social justice education are

more established (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), critical pedagogical perspectives of HE teaching are rather limited to certain disciplines.

Consequently, intersectional teaching approaches are not yet widely institutionalized and rely heavily on the personal commitment of individual lecturers. These characteristics underscore the importance of professional development programs, such as HE didactic workshops, to support teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practices.

The findings from the case study of a pilot workshop on intersectionality in HE teaching highlight both the potential and challenges of integrating intersectionality into HE teaching. The evaluation results indicate that while the participants found the workshop to be an insightful introduction to IP, its implementation in teaching practice remains contingent on individual motivation and institutional support. The workshop succeeded in raising awareness, fostering self-reflection, and equipping participants with conceptual and methodological tools for intersectionality-sensitive teaching. However, the limited postworkshop engagement suggests that further measures are needed to sustain long-term impact.

One of the main strengths of the workshop was its participatory design, which allowed for the exchange of experiences among teaching staff from different disciplines in a protected space that was characterized by appreciation and mutual understanding. The use of interactive exercises, such as the Power Flower and case discussions, facilitated an embodied understanding of intersectionality beyond theoretical abstraction. Furthermore, the follow-up phase provided a crucial opportunity for the participants to reflect on their application of intersectionality in their teaching, demonstrating that at least some of the participants were able to translate workshop insights into practice.

Nevertheless, several challenges emerged. First, the abstract nature of intersectionality made it difficult for some participants to immediately see how to integrate it into their specific teaching contexts. This aligns with critiques of intersectionality as a concept that, while powerful in theory, lacks clear guidelines for practical implementation in HE (Case, 2016; Sim & Bierema, 2023). Second, the participants highlighted the need for additional structural support, such as institutional incentives, curricular frameworks, and continuous professional development opportunities. Without these elements, the integration of intersectionality risks being left to individual initiative, which can limit its sustainability and impact.

Nevertheless, the workshop participants acknowledged their influence in shaping, changing, and developing curricula and teaching practices within their departments, highlighting the potential of such professional development workshops to foster institutional change towards intersectionality. However, they also voiced the need for further institutional and didactic support (e.g., follow-up sessions or digital resources) for the implementation phase. Overall, we observe that the cultural value of *Lehrfreiheit* in our case can give both opportunities and barriers to implementing intersectional practices in teaching (Hüther & Krücken, 2018; Stichweh, 2016), emphasizing the importance of voluntary didactics workshops (Wilkesmann & Schmid, 2014; Wildt, 2013) given that high intrinsic motivation of those who attend such training (note that this could be different if they were “forced” to do so).

## 7. Conclusion

Concerning our research questions, this article underscores the importance of didactic workshops as a means of introducing intersectionality into HE teaching. The case study of a pilot workshop demonstrated that intersectionality can be introduced as a reflective and critical framework in HE teaching, fostering increased awareness and self-reflection among lecturers. The evaluation highlights that such training enhances the participants' awareness, fosters critical reflection, and inspires changes in teaching practices. However, for these efforts to translate into lasting institutional change, additional measures are necessary.

Future iterations of the workshop should incorporate a more structured learning model, including preparatory readings, extended peer support networks, and institutional recognition of intersectional teaching practices. Additionally, fostering a broader commitment at the departmental and university levels through policy frameworks, interdisciplinary collaborations, and incentives for intersectionality-sensitive teaching would strengthen the impact of IP.

In line with the two sides of academic freedom in teaching (Stichweh, 2016), this workshop recognized the opportunities and challenges that the academic staff face and empowered them to experiment with innovative teaching tools. However, for the longer-term impact and sustainability of intersectional approaches in the participants' teaching practices, institutional support (Böhm et al., 2018) would be needed. Thus, by combining professional development initiatives with structural reforms, universities can move beyond diversity rhetoric toward meaningful and lasting intersectionality in HE teaching.

However, there are several limitations when it comes to transferring our evaluation findings of the case study to other settings. First, the didactic workshop is only a small-scale pilot that was implemented in one university in Germany. We by no means aim to generalize our findings regarding the empowerment effect, as well as the agency of academic staff to promote intersectionality in teaching and learning in universities overall. More case studies are required to account for the differences in the participants' prior experiences, academic status groups, as well as disciplinary backgrounds. At the same time, this example from the German HE context illustrates the importance of raising awareness of intersectional approaches in one's own teaching, which brings to light the reflection of one's own teaching situation, as well as the way of approaching the students' needs from a completely new perspective that sheds light on the privilege and oppression in one's own class.

This evaluation has faced limitations in terms of the self-perceptions of the participants and the definition of pre- and post-test scales to measure changes in the lecturers' attitudes, competencies, teaching concepts, and knowledge. We need to further examine to what extent the participants have shared their knowledge and experience within their disciplinary communities, and hence serve as change agents for their departments and faculties. An important aspect for future research in this regard is the academic status of the participants given that they might have different opportunities to impact developments at their faculties. Thus, further research is required to uncover the impact of such workshops and the extent to which the agency of the teaching staff is used to influence processes and structures going beyond the concrete courses that they teach. It would also be interesting to understand the impact of intersectionality training workshops on teaching practices and student outcomes. Finally, to increase the power and the generalizability of the findings, a comparative analysis across different disciplinary cultures and different types of universities and HE systems would be desirable.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

## Data Availability

The data has not been made publicly accessible in order to protect the respondents' anonymity.

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