Instructional Design Project Management through Race and Gender: Practice-Based Autoethnographic Study

Harris, C. & Olesova, L.

autoethnography   Ethics of care   Instructional Design

instructional design project management   project management communication competence

This practice-based autoethnography explores how the identity of Constance Harris, a Black woman, has shaped her project management style and communication competencies while leading an Instructional Design (ID) team in delivering the Online Course Development Institute (OCDI). By employing a practice-based autoethnographic approach, we link Constance's project management storytelling to the broader organizational culture, illustrated through the OCDI case and prior project experiences. A critical reanalysis of the narrative data was conducted to examine how race and gender influenced professional interactions and decision-making. The analysis reveals two key themes: (1) an identity-driven project management style, and (2) communication competencies through race and gender, framed within Tronto's ethics of care. These findings provide valuable insights for scholars and students in Learning Design and Technology (LDT) programs, enhancing the understanding of how gender and race intricately

shape managerial style and communication competencies in the management of ID projects in practical contexts.

Introduction

In the field of learning technology and design (LDT), textbooks on project management rarely explore how managerial styles are influenced by a person's gender and race (Romero-Hall, 2022). Existing LDT texts focus on the competencies required for project management, with communication skills frequently cited as one of the essential ones (Kline et al., 2020; Williams van Rooij, 2010). This narrow emphasis on generic competencies may explain a persistent gap between what students learn in LDT programs and what they encounter in professional practice after graduation (Williams van Rooij, 2010).

Our own observations suggest that LDT graduates often lack practical training to develop robust communication and managerial competencies to apply in real-world contexts. The literature is largely gender-neutral, offering few concrete examples or explanations of how managerial identity can shape project outcomes in real-world contexts (Williams van Rooij, 2010). Moreover, practice-based scholarship (PBS) in LDT is under-represented in project management case studies, showing the importance of communication competencies, partly because practicing professionals rarely publish about their work. Institutional priorities and the lack of a requirement for empirical investigation further discourage such scholarship (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025).

We do not wish to diminish the importance of project management communication competencies, especially in an era of rapid technological change, where LDT practitioners at the forefront can dramatically improve learning experiences (McDonald et al., 2021). Instead, we argue that PBS in LDT must examine how subtle factors such as gender and race can create barriers for graduates, even when they possess strong communicative abilities (Romero-Hall, 2022). A deeper inquiry into these nuances would enrich the scholarship produced, sharpen the relevance of research findings, and illuminate the complexities inherent in meaningful practice-based work.

Accordingly, our practice-based autoethnographic study seeks to address this research gap by presenting personal storytelling of how management project style has been shaped by gender and race, which in turn informed nuances of communication competencies and explained through race and gender perspectives. Specifically, we follow a Black woman storytelling managing an Instructional Design (ID) team while overseeing the organization-wide project known as the Online Course Development Institute (OCDI) by reflecting on other previous project experiences. This PBS details how Constance has cultivated her project management style and communication competencies to understand the nuances of gender and race impact while managing ID projects. By reflecting on Constance's identity as a Black woman in ID, the study draws attention to the importance of acknowledging and interrogating one's positionality's impact on style and communication competencies in project management, in line with Bourke's recent work (2024).

Positionality Statement

Understanding Constance's positionality in navigating project management within an ID team was essential to this study, as it provided a practical example through which this PBS was shaped (Bourke, 2024). By identifying how her identity, particularly her class background, professional experience, race, and gender, influenced her management style and communication competencies, Constance was able to reflect on and articulate how these factors shaped her approach and strategies in the

project management process. As a Black woman ID manager and project leader, Constance's lived experience and social identity were central to both the PBS goals and the subsequent coding process, guiding how she perceived, interpreted, and narrated the project management.

To interrogate Constance's positionality, we employed the Framework for Inclusive and Equitable Higher Education Practices (Olesova et al. 2025), which is grounded in Tronto's Ethics of Care principles: (1) caring about, (2) taking care, (3) caregiving, and (4) care receiving (Tronto, 1998). The feminist concept of care, especially its connection to gender, was adopted as Constance's moral position to explain how her project-management competencies, and particularly her communication skills, were informed by her race and gender.

Background

This section brings together scholarship on Black women's experiences in higher education, business leadership, and ID to situate Constance's autoethnographic project management experience. Intersections of race, gender, and professional identity shape distinct constraints and opportunities across these domains. The review also identifies a persistent gap in the literature on Black women's project management in ID, a gap this study directly addresses.

Black Women in Higher Education: Faculty Positions

At predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Black women faculty encounter enduring structural barriers (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021; Perry, 2024). Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens and testimonios, Orelus (2020) documents lived experiences marked by microaggressions and institutional failures in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), underscoring the need for structural reform. Pierce and colleagues introduced "microaggressions" in 1978 to describe subtle, everyday slights aimed at Black Americans (as cited in Sue & Spanierman, 2020). The term now encompasses verbal, nonverbal, and representational acts targeting marginalized groups, often harmful regardless of intent (Berk, 2017a; Smith, 2017b; Sue et al., 2007). These acts operate within and reinforce broader systems of power: racism as unequal or unjust treatment based on race or ethnicity (Feitosa et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2021); sexism as diminished perceived ability and constrained advancement based on gender (Kim & Meister, 2023); and classism as hostility or exclusion on the basis of social class (Cook & O'Hara, 2020). For Black women at PWIs, these biases frequently co-occur as intersectional microaggressions that cannot be understood in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989).

Scholars also describe infantilization, norms that enforce politeness, silence, and gratitude merely for occupying academic spaces (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021; Strong et al., 2017). The disciplining of comportment curbs assertiveness and professional confidence, limiting advancement and reducing contributions (Showunmi, 2023). Such dynamics have implications for leadership in ID, where visible authority, decision-making power, and cross-functional influence are central. Counter-narratives emphasize resilience. Strong et al. (2017) frame Black women professors' experiences around enlightenment, emancipation, and empowerment, and Hester (2020) shows how Black women challenge institutional norms. Similar patterns and strategies appear in business settings (Hester, 2020).

Black Women in Business Leadership

In corporate hierarchies, Black women remain underrepresented at every level and "stay behind white men, men of color, and white women" (Dutta, 2021). The State of Black Women in Corporate America (2020) documents sexual harassment, gender bias, challenges with working motherhood, and unequal pay, intensified by racism. Black women entrepreneurs and professionals use counter-storytelling to challenge Eurocentric design norms and amplify marginalized voices (Bruneau, 2025; Miller, 2023). The "Black ceiling" (Woodson, 2023) captures racialized barriers to executive advancement, while advocacy, visibility to senior leadership, and access to leadership development programs are pivotal for mobility (Hester, 2020; Viscone, 2022; Watson & Henderson, 2023). These dynamics echo those found in ID organizations.

Black Women in ID

Within ID, Black women face distinctive and underdocumented challenges (Romero-Hall, 2021). Lawler (2023) offers a foundational study of African American women entering the field, noting limited representation and a paucity of data on their trajectories. Key issues include race, gender, sexism, compensation, and diversity, with intersectional identities shaping career paths. Autoethnography has emerged as a powerful method for exposing structural inequities through personal narrative; for example, Romero-Hall (2021) uses feminist autoethnography to surface the challenges of Afro-Latinx women in academia and contest entrenched systems of oppression. Building on these insights, Lawler (2023) emphasizes disseminating research so women can locate opportunities, secure mentorship, and develop competitive skills for roles that offer financial security and growth. Participants, including 13 African American IDers, also describe transitions from corporate America to the private sector and the supports needed to thrive (Lawler, 2023).

Taken together, adjacent literatures document challenges and resilience strategies; however, the specific intersection of Black women's identity and leadership in ID remains understudied. Constance's practice-based autoethnographic study responds to this gap by examining project management from the perspective of a Black woman in ID, generating knowledge to inform and support future Black women leaders in the field.

Method

This study employed a practice-based autoethnographic research approach to examine Constance's project management styles and communication competencies from a gendered perspective illustrate the complexity of the ID in real-world practice. This method facilitated an examination of how Constance's reflective storytelling, in consideration of her race and gender, relates to her project management style and communication competencies development within a higher education setting. As Ellis et al. (2011) noted, combining personal storytelling with contextual analysis produces "thick descriptions" that reveal the subjective nature of practical experience (p. 277). Additionally, autoethnography challenges traditional qualitative methods by foregrounding the researcher's voice and reflexivity, allowing for a deeper investigation of identity and power dynamics in professional environments (Berger, 2001). In our case, we used the term "practice-based autoethnography" to emphasize the importance of reflection drawn from real-world settings.

Context

The context of Constance's reflective storytelling in this study was the design, development, and implementation of OCDI, one of the biggest organization-wide ID projects that Constance managed. Using the OCDI example as a complex project that encompassed all stages, Constance reflected on how her project management style and communication competencies were informed by her background and identity, including race and gender. In this PBS, the OCDI served as a guiding example to help understand Constance's practice-based autoethnographic reflective storytelling within a specific situational context, thereby enabling a collective examination of commonalities between previous and current projects under Constance's management.

OCDI was established to help faculty build expertise in online teaching and learning. It provided an excellent opportunity for faculty interested in learning about evidence-based teaching practices, enhancing their teaching skills, or exploring new strategies. The institute had two phases: Create and Build. In the Create phase, faculty used backward course design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to develop their courses from the ground up, starting with their learning outcomes. In the Build phase, faculty worked independently to complete modules and design activities and assessments. They also participated in synchronous sessions with colleagues where they listened, discussed, interacted, learned, and reflected on topics to enhance teaching and learning (see Figure 1). Throughout the program, ID staff were available to offer one-on-one consultations to support course design. During OCDI meetings, faculty met with their colleagues.

Figure 1

OCDI Schedule
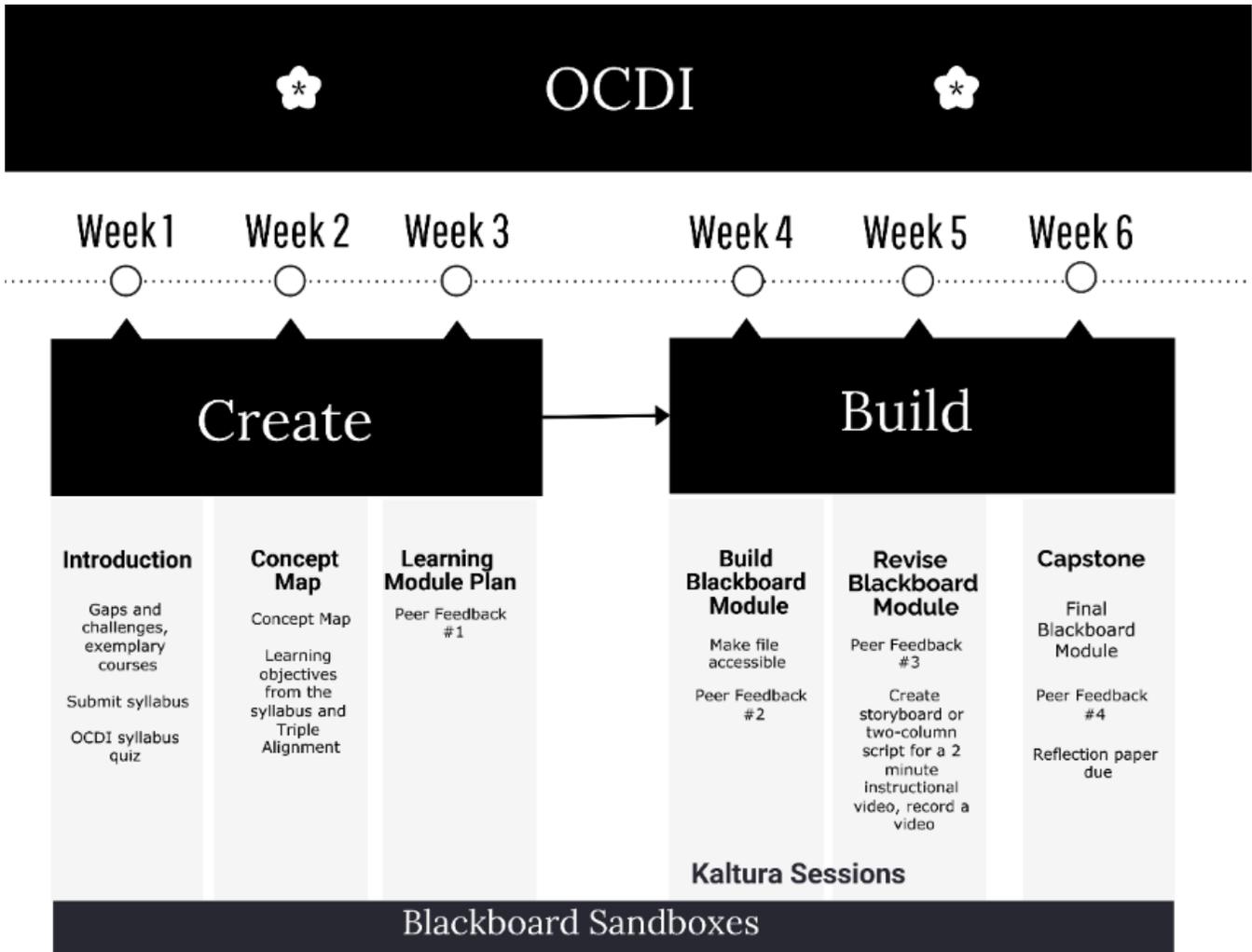
Constance's Background

Personal

Constance's formative years instilled in her values that profoundly shaped her leadership and professional conduct. Growing up in a military household, with her father serving as an Army drill sergeant who exemplified dedication and precision, she learned the importance of completing every task to the best of her ability. This commitment to excellence, coupled with a deep-seated respect for all individuals, regardless of their background, became the defining characteristics of her work ethic and leadership philosophy.

Professional

As a Black woman, Constance's professional journey has been profoundly influenced by navigating environments where her managerial skills were often unexpected. She embarked on her career in the technology sector shortly after earning her undergraduate degree, holding positions in both the public and private sectors. Each role has, in some way, prepared her for the role of Manager of the ID Team and Project Manager.

Early Career Experience: Programmer Trainee

Constance's entry into the technology field began with a state government programmer-trainee program. This pivotal experience shaped her leadership style by emphasizing fair access to feedback, mentorship, and growth opportunities for all team members. What started as a difficult introduction to the tech industry turned into a deliberate commitment to fostering inclusive environments.

Programmer and Principal Systems Consultant

Building on her programming expertise, Constance advanced to Principal Systems Consultant for a major computer vendor, guiding diverse Chicago-area clients through complex technological transitions. She mentored clients across various organizational levels, facilitating technology adoption through personalized training methods.

IT Management and Project Leader

As Manager of Office Automation Services, Constance led a three-person team focused on implementing technological solutions to streamline university operations. Later, as an institution-wide project leader, she successfully managed the campus-wide transition from DOS to Windows, overseeing a diverse 25-person team and coordinating the migration of 1,500 computers. When political resistance arose from another department that regarded training as their territory, she organized comprehensive team meetings emphasizing collective achievements and each member's valuable contributions, ultimately completing the project on time and within budget.

Adjunct Instructor and Academic Advisor

After transitioning from technology management to academia, Constance served as an Academic Advisor, managing a caseload of 300 students. Her approach focused on thorough preparation, providing accurate information, and offering steadfast support to students as they worked toward graduation. Her student-centered philosophy was developed during her earlier role as an adjunct instructor teaching an information technology service course, where she fostered inclusive learning environments that valued each student's individuality beyond academic performance.

PhD

In 2006, inspired by her students and her teaching experiences, Constance decided to further her education. She was accepted into a graduate program at Purdue University, focusing on curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on learning, design, and technology. This program provided her with both practical and theoretical knowledge, enhancing her ability to support faculty as an instructional technologist

This demanding program provided her with both theoretical foundations and practical experience in educational technology, preparing her to design and assess learning experiences that effectively combine pedagogy with technology. The knowledge she gained at Purdue proved invaluable in her later roles working as a faculty consultant, instructional technologist, and ID team manager, where she used evidence-based methods to support faculty across different disciplines.

Manager of ID

When Constance was hired as Instructional Design Manager to complete the Online Course Development Institute (OCDI) project within a four-month window, she quickly recognized that technical expertise alone would not guarantee success; building strong team dynamics and strategic relationships would be equally critical. Constance collaborated across the university to strategically promote effective teaching practices while managing a team of instructional designers and fostering partnerships with key campus units, including Learning Support Services, the Center for Teaching & Faculty Excellence, and the Office of Distance Education. She provided the team with ongoing training and mentoring opportunities, ensuring effective collaboration across all instructional support units. Under Constance's leadership, the six-member instructional design team successfully supported 17 faculty members during the OCDI pilot, demonstrating the power of this integrated approach. This study serves as a critical reanalysis of the OCDI project events originally documented by Garcia de Hurtado et al. (2025). While

the initial report examined the project through the lens of cognitive decision-making and bounded rationality, this paper re-examines those same events to uncover the racialized and gendered workplace dynamics encountered by the project manager.

Data Sources and Analysis

In this practice-based autoethnographic study, we emphasized reflexivity and transparency through semi-structured interviews conducted by the second author Larisa Olesova.

Triangulation of Sources

Considering that autoethnography has been criticized for the subjectivity of personal stories, self-indulgence, and limited generalizability (Mao et al., 2023), we triangulated sources by using Constance's observations, practical examples, faculty-recorded interviews and reflections, Larisa's witnessed experiences as a classmate and an ID under the supervision of Constance, and the OCDI artifacts. The project artifacts and narrative data used for this reanalysis are derived from the same institutional context described by Garcia de Hurtado et al. (2025). By revisiting these artifacts through a practice-based autoethnographic lens, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of the leadership experience. Source triangulation was used during semi-structured interviews in addition to Constance's storytelling to locate evidence when Constance shared or reflected on her project management experience. Triangulation of sources also helped clarify the meaning and make accurate connections across the codes and themes. Larisa participated in Constance's experiences at Purdue University as a PhD student and worked under her supervision as a Senior IDer for four years. This triangulation of sources greatly increased validity in explaining the complex areas of race and gender in ID leadership, helping to eliminate subjectivity and biases.

Interviews

Four one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were developed based on the Project Management Institute (2021) performance domains to explore how Constance's knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques applied to the OCDI based on her previous project experiences.

Earlier, the interviews covered the following domains: stakeholders, team, development approach, planning, project work, delivery, measurement, and uncertainty to uncover patterns within each stage. For example, when discussing stakeholders, the question was: How would you describe your experience working with stakeholders to design, develop, or implement the OCDI, reflecting on your previous background and experience? After each interview, Larisa coded Constance's reflective storytelling to link Constance's positionality and balance revealing aspects of her identity with upholding professional boundaries. At the start of the next interview, Larisa asked Constance to confirm the accuracy of the codes or to expand on some of Larisa's comments to gain a deeper understanding of how Constance's lived experiences influenced her ID project management style.

Change Interview Questions

The initial interview questions and the plan to explain each project management stage changed because we consistently revealed similar patterns across each project's stage, and decided to combine them all together to unpack the overall Black woman identity within the ID project management. We should note that the change happened only during the third emotional interview, when Larisa identified consistent patterns of struggle, challenges, or concerns as Constance discussed the project management process in the first two interviews. That's why we explained and described themes from a Black woman's lived experiences and reflection instead of the project management stages. Viewing the situation through the lens of a Black woman helped us gain a deeper understanding of how gender and race played the most critical roles in Constance's development of her ID project management style and communication competencies.

Adding Ethics of Care

Once the codes were created, Larisa discussed themes with Constance based on the commonalities across all four interviews. It is important to note that the application of the Ethics of Care in relation to Constance's leadership experience was revealed during the last, fourth interview. Using the OCDI artifacts, visuals, diagrams, and faculty reflections, we observed consistency in Constance's caring approach at each stage of the project. Finally, we developed the themes by reaching an agreement on the meaning of each to better understand how Constance's positionality might influence professionals and the interpretation of data (Bourke, 2024).

Findings

The findings identified two main themes: (1) identity-driven project management style of how background and identity shape a distinctive ID leadership approach; and (2) communication competence through race and gender of how project management communication skills were developed within the ID context. Each theme was further broken down into sub-themes to enhance understanding of how gender and race informed the project management style and communication competencies through the ethics of care. Both themes drew on Constance's reflection on how her identity as a Black woman in ID influenced her management style and communication competencies to ensure that every team member felt equally valued and supported, regardless of background or role. These themes together show how Constance's personal and professional background and identity, including gender and race, shaped an ethics of care approach, one that made fairness a regular practice, not just an aspiration, throughout the OCDI process, as an example based on reflection on previous project experiences.

Theme 1: Identity-Driven Project Management Style

This exploration illustrates how various sub-themes, including caring despite challenges, fostering a caring collaborative environment, and complexity navigation with care, combined to shape Constance's style as ID project manager.

Caring Despite Challenges

Born into a military family with her father serving as an Army drill sergeant, Constance learned the principle that every task should be done to the best of one's ability. This core lesson significantly influenced her approach to professional work. Her project management style, rooted in this expectation, played a crucial role in the successful completion of the OCDI, a project once deemed unachievable. Constance's distinctive background not only prepared her to confront OCDI and previous projects' challenges but also cultivated a strong dedication to ethical principles, especially the ethics of care in our case. Her military upbringing, which emphasized thorough task completion, combined with extensive experience leading large projects, motivated her to apply principles of care ethics in her work.

For example, even when stakeholders did not supply data, Constance focused on supporting university faculty with care principles in designing and developing online courses through the OCDI. Faculty became her top priority as she guided the ID team through each project stage (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025).

Fostering Caring Collaborative Environment

Her advising experience further shaped her project management style, ensuring fair treatment of all colleagues, regardless of their backgrounds or skills. Her consultative role enhanced her educational leadership skills by improving active listening, practicing empathetic communication, translating technical concepts for diverse audiences, and collaboratively designing tailored solutions. These experiences not only expanded her technical expertise but also sharpened her ability to assess diverse needs and implementation challenges.

Later, in other roles and, specifically, in the role of the ID project manager, by seeking input from each IDer regarding their preferred development areas and design interests, Constance fostered a caring, collaborative environment. Recognizing that

many team members, though experienced in working with faculty, lacked formal ID training, Constance took the initiative to organize and streamline the project. Given the limited timeline and to meet each ID's expertise with care, Constance and her team used a caring collaborative approach, which Larisa identified during the study's analysis as an early example of agile principles, structuring each OCDI module as sprints supported by pairs of IDers (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025).

Trust building has been observed throughout Constance's professional career, when people always questioned her first, followed by trust. Trust building takes time in any professional situation, but in Constance's example, the phenomenon of trust was mixed with her identity misconception as a Black woman in the ID profession. Moreover, a Black woman manager who leads a diverse group of IDers who sometime underestimated Constance's ID knowledge and skills. Finally, Constance concluded: "This professional mission has guided my career and continues to motivate my dedication to promoting equity in every space I enter."

Complexity Navigation with Care

Constance's PhD background further shaped her project management style, leading her to pursue evidence-based solutions for complex ID processes. By consistently applying research-based examples to real-world situations, Constance demonstrated competence grounded in the principle of care. Whether convincing stakeholders or training IDers without an ID background, she approached each complex situation with thoughtful care, drawing from existing literature. The principle of caring was clear in Constance's project management, as the ID team successfully guided 17 faculty members to complete the OCDI within the set timeline (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025). Faculty feedback highlighted the high-quality training they received. For example, one of the faculty members, Benjamin" who taught an undergraduate economics course, said:

> The OCDI was most useful in the way the content was delivered. Going through an online course experience to learn about how to teach in an online environment was very helpful. Having never taken an online course before, this was incredibly useful.

Another faculty member, "Sarah", who taught a project management course, also mentioned that:

> Online training will make me a better teacher. Because one must invest more time up front, the additional time must be invested efficiently and with an expectation of a return. This means better upfront planning, using templates and guides, and breaking the work down into more granular work packages that are easy to configure and manage in the event of course changes.

Finally, as evidence of Constance's caring principles in practice, the ID team's receipt of the Outstanding Team Award and an Honorable Mention for our work on the OCDI project (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025) at the end of the university's fiscal year demonstrated how Constance's caring management style influenced the successful outcomes of the project.

Theme 2: Communication Competency Through Race and Gender

This theme encompassed two sub-themes: navigating barriers with care and navigating questioning with care. During the interviews, communication competency was mentioned multiple times when Constance discussed stakeholders, the ID team, the OCDI development approach, planning, project execution, delivery, measurement, and uncertainty while reflecting on previous projects' experiences. At each stage of any project, Constance was asked about her competence, including as an ID manager during the OCDI, and whether she received adequate training. For example, when presenting the OCDI project to university leadership or collaborating with stakeholders, Constance consistently had to demonstrate her ID competencies, despite her degree in LDT from Purdue University. She had to use clear visuals to explain her ID approach or justify the importance of her decisions based on the foundational ID stages, such as needs assessment, including learner analysis and task analysis, followed by instructional strategies, formative and summative assessment, and evaluation.

Navigating Barriers with Care

As a Black woman manager, Constance never fully recognized the sources of resistance or other barriers that arose during OCDI and other projects. She underestimated how much her gender and race influenced the reception of her management competencies to work on OCDI and previous projects. For example, Constance said: "Despite my efforts, I continued to experience microaggressions from staff in the other department and IT staff colleagues. Both groups described me as someone difficult to work with and continued to target microaggressions toward me, including marginalization of my role, and exclusion from departmental meetings and decision-making processes."

It was only through these autoethnographic interviews that Constance truly understood how the organizational environment perceived her and created barriers, which deeply affected her awareness of how gender and race impacted her work on past projects and OCDI. The answers were evident earlier in her manager career, marked by microaggressions, unfair project assignments, and exclusion of her innovative ideas. For example, Constance's reflective storytelling emphasized an example that we provide below. This example is from her early career, but similar patterns were consistently repeated throughout Constance's professional career:

> As the only Black participant, I encountered explicit racialized and gendered bias from the white male cohort leader and facilitator. He engaged in behaviors consistent with well-documented microaggressions, specifically micro assaults and microinsults, including statements such as, "You only got this job because you are a colored girl," and "You are not smart enough to learn computer technology."

Further, Constance continued by reflecting on later experiences by sharing:

> Early interactions with other managers revealed subtle yet persistent microaggressions and resistance, shown through vague responses to direct questions, limited collaboration, and cautious, noncommittal behavior and support. Recognizing these patterns was just the beginning for me.

Additionally, there were times she hesitated to share information, reflecting a complex interplay of factors that created barriers for success. Constance said: "During this period, I experienced significant stress while trying to address microaggressions targeted toward me."

Navigating Questioning with Care

ID competency questioning also influenced Constance's project management style, which was shaped into a style of care. For example, when others asked her how she knew whether the work was completed, she responded based on her ID competencies (Garcia de Hurtado et al., 2025). Constance said, "They diminished my confidence and impeded my learning," and supported the statement with more reflective memories during the interview:

> Despite possessing professional credentials and technical expertise, I experienced challenges and microaggressions that included colleagues questioning my competence to lead the team, using technical jargon to prevent me from understanding work requirements, withholding critical information to delay project progress, and seeking to undermine my authority among colleagues who worked for me.

In Constance's case, navigating questioning of her competency in ID not only enabled her to manage her team effectively but also helped her train ID professionals who did not have an ID background. For example, one of the IDers could not separate teaching and ID, the most common mistake and misconception that exists in practice. Despite consistent questioning of her competency, Constance was able to train IDers who didn't have an ID background. However, even though Constance had an advanced degree in ID, the team continued questioning whether she was able to manage the OCDI through the ID principles. It was only through the presentation of detailed diagrams illustrating the OCDI process, firmly rooted in established ID principles, that Constance ultimately earned the complete trust and confidence of her ID team. This finding demonstrated the importance

of discussing communication competencies in ID in relation to gender and race, which can unpack reality where people continue questioning to prove professional competencies, specifically for marginalized managers like Black women.

Discussion

This practice-based autoethnographic study examined Constance's project management style and communication competencies within the complex environment of the ID process in higher education in relation to her gender and race. Using a practice-based autoethnographic research design, we explored the detailed connections between Constance's personal stories of project management experiences and the wider organizational contexts. Following Ellis et al.'s (2011) statement of blending personal storytelling with organizational cultural contexts, in our case, the higher education context, using a practice-based autoethnographic approach helped Constance use her own voice to reflect on her project management journey. Specifically, deep reflective exploration of her lived experience allowed Constance to realize how her own identity within the institutional power dynamics shaped her as a successful ID project manager. We used the OCDI as an example to demonstrate this success at the organization-wide level to help practitioners approach project management thoughtfully and more critically when they deal with ID.

Two themes that were identified in this study, namely: (1) identity-driven ID project management style, and (2) communication competence. These themes helped us structure the discussion of two key points derived from the findings: 1) strategic navigation of micro-aggression - how caring ethics and diplomatic skill mitigate subtle bias; and 2) caring communication competence - how emotional maturity and inclusive dialogue foster collaboration. Both discussion points emerged from Constance's lived experience as a Black woman in ID, whose military childhood, large-scale project management, advisory roles, and doctoral preparation all inform her managerial style and communication competencies.

Strategic Navigation of Microaggression with Care

Findings of our study are similar to previous works about Black women in higher education, business, and the ID field (Berk, 2017a; Orelus, 2020; Smith, 2017; Sue & Spanierman, 2020; Sue et al., 2007) who experienced micro-aggressive behaviors in their work settings. The literature identifies such behaviors as tactics that demean targets and reinforce non-belonging within the team (Cook & O'Hara, 2020). However, in our case, Constance strategically approached the issue of microaggression and advocated for herself through official channels, including reporting the cohort leader's behavior to Human Resources, which resulted in a reassignment to a supportive mentor who helped her succeed. Mentorship is essential in any professional context; it helps new professionals and graduates understand how to approach issues such as microaggressions strategically as they enter real-world practice. For example, Black students may inherently feel the signs of microaggression, as they may be used to this type of behavior, like Constance. However, situating the phenomenon of microaggression within the right framework, such as strategically reporting and accessing mentorship support, can help newly hired graduates succeed.

Similar to previous studies (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021; Bruneau, 2025; Dutta, 2021; Lawler, 2023; Miller, 2023; Perry, 2024; Showunmi, 2023; Sue et al., 2020; Viscone, 2022; Woodson, 2023), we also found how microaggression towards race can withhold constructive feedback and create significant barriers to professional growth. In our case, Constance also approached this challenge strategically. She said, "I knew it was important for me to persevere. I responded proactively by asserting my knowledge, translating technical language into accessible terms, and directly addressing exclusionary behaviors with staff and leadership." Overcoming these challenges requires a strategic combination of diplomacy, persistence, and relationship-building skills that proved just as vital to the success of Constance in our case. Moreover, research on project leadership indicates that success in higher education projects depends not only on meeting deadlines and achieving goals but also on mastering nuanced skills such as political acumen, cultural awareness, and trust-building (Avença et al., 2023; van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2019). Where Garcia de Hurtado et al. (2025) identified 'bounded rationality' as a primary constraint on decision-making, this reanalysis suggests that these 'bounds' were often constructed or exacerbated by systemic microaggressions and communication barriers inherent in the academic hierarchy.

Further, to effectively navigate these challenges, the Ethics of Care framework can be used as a guiding principle for any leadership approach. This framework highlights relationality, responsiveness, and supportive interactions within project settings, providing a strong strategy for addressing issues like microaggressions related to race and gender (Feitosa et al., 2025; Olesova et al., 2025). For individuals who have faced microaggressions, care ethics can offer a way to address and mitigate the impacts of these subtle forms of discrimination by fostering more inclusive and supportive environments (Kim & Meister, 2023; Williams et al., 2021). In our case, Constance's background fostered a commitment to ethical principles, especially the ethics of care, which was vital for the successful completion of the OCDI. Her dedication to ensuring that every team member felt equally valued and supported demonstrated an ethics-of-care approach.

Caring Communication Competence as Emotional Maturation

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of communication competency in project management to overcome barriers based on race and gender (Denney et al., 2020; Tracey, 2016). Our practical example of how communication competence was changed based on Constance's emotional maturation is one of the strategies to overcome barriers that may be perceived due to a person's race and gender. In our case, it was demonstrated through Constance's strategy in presenting clear visuals and explaining her approach, based on her professionally established ID principles, which was crucial in overcoming questioning barriers to earn her team's trust and confidence. Being questioned by her ID competencies based on biases of race and gender, Constance developed a persuasive but caring approach to show her ID professional competence. This approach can help others who are in marginalized groups to be equipped with their own communication strategies, for example, use clear visuals or facts to minimize competency questioning.

Questioning competencies is rooted in practical approaches of how ID managers are usually hired; some of them can have an ID background, and some do not. Practice shows that managers without an ID training background often have difficulty managing an ID team, and that's why Constance was always questioned about her professional preparedness to lead the ID team. This is because ID involves specific skills and knowledge related to learning theories, instructional strategies, and educational technologies that are essential for guiding a team in creating effective learning experiences that not all managers can handle (Allen & Gardner, 2021). Managers lacking this background may struggle with understanding the nuances of ID processes and the specific needs of their team members (Mancilla & Frey, 2021). ID has often been confused with teaching, as both have distinct goals. Teaching focuses on direct student engagement and adaptive instruction, whereas ID concentrates on creating structured, effective learning experiences and materials (Mitchell, 2025). This suggests that having strong communication competency can be beneficial not only for managing ID teams and avoiding or minimizing questioning but also for mentoring and developing the ID skills of team members who are new to the field.

Despite Constance's ID abilities to cope with questioning, the study also revealed the underestimation of project management Constance faced as a Black woman manager. This finding is similar to what Hester (2020) found about the emotional approach that Constance used, such as in questioning ID competency situations. She said: "I initially used resistance coping strategies by directly addressing concerns and creating detailed planning documents. Eventually, I adopted more self-protective strategies by setting emotional boundaries while continuing to deliver results."

Emotional maturation is very important in overcoming barriers to establish a leadership philosophy, as in our case. After applying emotional maturation strategies to communication, Constance started fostering inclusive environments where team members can thrive and creating a safe space for difficult conversations and constructive feedback. This approach was built on Constance's previous experiences in alignment with Newell Burke (2023), showing that project management style is a complex phenomenon that involves developing required strong communication competencies based on emotional maturation.

Practical Implications

Our findings showed that LDT programs need to consider materials or courses that provide students with more support in understanding how project management styles and communication competencies are shaped by personal background and identities. This will help them understand why they experience barriers in work settings, reflect on their previous experiences with similar patterns, like in our case, to overcome microaggression, questioning, or underestimation of their abilities. For example, in our study, Constance shaped her project management style and communication competencies based on her worldview, having been raised in a military family, and she treated her team with care from her perspective as a Black woman. By understanding her positionality in this study, Constance recognized how gender and race influenced her management style and communication competencies, as reflected in the OCDI, drawing on her experiences in previous projects to apply principles of care and build a trusting, equitable, and collaborative work environment. Constance's identity as a Black woman informed her thoughtful approach to managing a diverse ID team, in which she considered their perspectives to foster a culturally responsive and caring professional environment (Romero-Hall, 2021).

Currently, having LDT graduates with different backgrounds across a variety of cultures, languages, races, and genders who transfer to real-world practices within educational institutions and industries, faculty may include cases of how personal identity may influence workplace experiences, sometimes creating unclear barriers and resistance. Having cases like this one may bring more support to prepare future ID professionals and enhance ID project management practices with the ethics of care principles. This, in its turn, will bring a variety of creative ideas to move the field forward as all voices will be heard and everyone can contribute equally to the ID process.

Consequently, this practice-based autoethnographic positionality method supported the broader goal of social justice and equity in project management, as emphasized by scholars like Romero-Hall (2021) and Lawler (2023). This research contributes to a wider understanding of project management in ID by highlighting the importance of reflexivity, positionality, and the ethics of care. It also emphasizes the need for greater awareness of how race and gender impact leadership experiences in higher education.

Conclusion

The primary research goal of this study was to demonstrate how Constance's gender and race as a Black woman influenced her project management styles and communication competence while managing an ID team at a higher education institution in the United States. Specifically, this PBS practice-based autoethnography examined how Constance's identity as a Black woman shaped her project management style and communication competencies while managing an ID team to deliver the Online Course Development Institute (OCDI). Two themes—an identity-driven project management style and communication competencies—clarified how Tronto's care framework (caring about, taking care, caregiving, and care receiving) informed leadership practice throughout the project.

Thus, our research highlights that gender and race, in addition to professional expertise, can influence and shape project management style, specifically communication competencies. Practically, this suggests that ID programs and students would benefit from curricula that pair communication competencies with explicit attention to how personal identity influences management practice. The findings of this study can further serve as an example of what textbooks on project management in LDT programs may include to prepare their graduates for real-world practices.

This study fills a significant gap by stressing the value of reflexivity, positionality, and the ethics of care in project management communication competencies to increase awareness of how race and gender influence leadership experiences in higher education. Future PBS should examine more cases that compare and contrast Black women as ID project managers and how care principles are being applied in other contexts. Additionally, more studies are needed to understand the experiences of other racial groups across diverse organizational environments and to connect practical experiences with research findings.

Ultimately, this research shows that race and gender, in combination with professional background, can shape project management styles differently, and that each project manager has a unique communication competency based on both personal and professional identities.

References

Allen, S. A., & Gardner, J. L. (2021). Project management competencies in ID. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 24*(2), n2.

Berger, L. (2001). Inside out: Narrative autoethnography as a path toward rapport. *Qualitative inquiry, 7*(4), 504-518.

Berk, R. A. (2017a). Microaggressions trilogy: Part 1. Why do microaggressions matter? *The Journal of Faculty Development, 31*(1), 63-73.

Berk, R. (2017b). Microaggressions Trilogy: Part 2. Microaggressions in the academic workplace. *Journal of Faculty Development, 31*(2). 69–83.

Blackshear, T., & Hollis, L. P. (2021). Despite the place, can't escape gender and race: Black women's faculty experiences at PWIs and HBCUs. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 20*(1). https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss1/3.

Bourke, B. (2024). Positionality: Reflecting on the research. *Educational Researcher, 53*(1), 1-8.

Bruneau, M. (2025, Feb, 23). The Counterintuitive growth strategy these 6 black women founders swear by. Leadership. https://www.forbes.com/sites/meganbruneau/2025/02/23/the-counterintuitive-growth-secret-these-6-black-female--entrepreneurs-share/

Cook, J. M., & O'Hara, C. C. (2020). An emerging theory of the persistence of social class microaggressions: an interpretative phenomenological study. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 33*(4), 516-540.

Crews, J. R. [Jasmine Roberts-Crews]. (2025, July 30). Centering DEIJ in research--part 2 [Video]. *YouTube.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkEwxN9MWD0

Denney, V., Haley, G., Rivera, E., & Watkins, D. V. (2020). Project management leadership and interpersonal skills: The past, present, and future. *Global Journal of Management and Marketing, 4*(1). https://commons.erau.edu/publication/1623

Dutta, S. (2021). The challenges faced by women in the workplace. Vantage Circle. https://blog.vantagecircle.com/women-in-the-workplace/.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung. *Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1), Art. 10.

Feitosa, J., Almeida, A. M., & Ishee, T. (2025). Microaggressions in the workplace: A guide for managers. *Merits, 5*(2), 10. https://doi.org/10.3390/merits5020010

Garcia de Hurtado, B., Olesova, L. & Harris, C. (2025). Dynamic Instructional Design Decision-Making: Three-Level Approach. *TechTrends 69*, 771–782 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-025-01079-9

Hester, J. (2020) The Battlefield of the academy: The resilience and resistance of black women faculty. (2020). Theses and Dissertations. 1252. https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1252.

Kim, J. Y., & Meister, A. (2023). Microaggressions, interrupted: The experience and effects of gender microaggressions for women in STEM. *Journal of Business Ethics, 185*(3), 513-531.

Kline, J., Kumar, S., & Ritzhaupt, A. D. (2020). Project management competencies of educational technology professionals in higher education: A qualitative analysis of the knowledge, skills, and abilities. *The Journal of Applied ID, 9*(3), 7-37. https://doi.org/10.51869/93jkskadr

Lawler, B. E. (2023). ID as an occupation: The lived experiences of African American women accessing that occupation [Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University]. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ohiou1679939983272928

Mancilla, R., & Frey, B. (2020). A model for developing instructional design professionals for higher education through apprenticeship. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 9*(2), 7-19.

Mao, J., Romero-Hall, E., & Reeves, T. C. (2023). Autoethnography as a research method for educational technology: A reflective discourse. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 71*(1), 2739-2756.

McDonald, J.K., Jackson, B.D. & Hunter, M.B. Understanding distinctions of worth in the practices of ID teams. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 69*, 1641–1663. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-021-09995-2

Miller, K. R. (2023). Resilience of the black woman: Thriving through storytelling. University of the Pacific, Dissertation. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/4202.

Mitchell, D. (2025, March, 28). Teacher vs. Instructional Designer: Key differences and similarities. Articulate. https://www.articulate.com/blog/teacher-vs-instructional-designer-key-differences-and-similarities/.

Newell Burke, L. (2023). Exploring the role of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieving corporate leadership (Publication No.124). [Doctoral dissertation, Bisk College of Business]. Florida Tech Evans Library Scholarship Repository.

Olesova, L., Yu, J. H., & Garcia de Hurtado, B. (2025). Integrating Care Ethics in GenAI-Enhanced Instructional Design: A Framework for Inclusive and Equitable Higher Education Practices. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 14*(3). https://doi.org/10.59668/2223.22576

Orelus, P. W. (2020). The cost of being professors and administrators of color in predominantly white institutions: Unpacking microaggression, isolation, exclusion, and unfairness through a critical race lens. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 14*(2), 117-132.

Parsons, K., & MacCartney, D. (2023). How to care: Teaching from the ethics of care for more equitable learning environments. *College Teaching, 73*(2), 114–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2023.2245099

Perry, Alicia C. (2024). Unmasking challenges of African American women at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) Unveiling phenomenological realities and prioritizing well-being. University of the Pacific, Dissertation. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/4236

Project Management Institute. (2021, July). A guide to the project management body of knowledge. (PMBOK® Guide)– Seventh Edition and The Standard for Project Management: Project Management Institute.

Romero-Hall, E. (2022). Navigating the Instructional Design field as an Afro-Latinx woman: A feminist autoethnography. *TechTrends, 66*(1), 39-46.

Showunmi, V. (2023). Visible, invisible: Black women in higher education. *Frontiers in Sociology, 8*, 1-14.

Skinner-Dorkenoo, A. L., Sarmal, A., Andre, C. J., & Rogbeer, K. G. (2021). How microaggressions reinforce and perpetuate systemic racism in the United States. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 16*(5), 903-925.

Silverman. S. (2024, May 30). Teaching vs. Instructional Design: Is there a difference and does it matter for faculty development? Beyond the Scope. https://beyondthescope.substack.com/p/teaching-vs-instructional-design.

Smith, I. A., & Griffiths, A. (2022). Microaggressions, everyday discrimination, workplace incivilities, and other subtle slights at work: A meta-synthesis. *Human Resource Development Review, 21*(3), 275-299.

Strong, D., Causey-Konate & Burrell, B. (2017). Black women in the professoriat: Enlightened, emancipated and empowered. In S. Jackson and J. Richard Greggory (Eds.). *The Black Professoriat: Negotiating a Habitable Space in the Academy.* New York: Peter Lang.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *American psychologist, 62*(4), 271-286.

Sue, D. W., & Spanierman, L. (2020). *Microaggressions in everyday life*. John Wiley & Sons.

Thompson, N. N. (2023). Leading at the Intersection: The Impact of microaggressions on black women in educational leadership roles [Doctoral dissertation, Texas Wesleyan University].

Tracey, M. W. (2016). Monica's voice: Developing designer professional identity. In J. A. Donaldson (Eds). *Women's voices in the field of educational technology: Our journeys* 1st ed. (pp. 93-97). Springer.

Tronto, J. C. (1998). An ethic of care. *Journal of the American Society on Aging, 22*(3), 15-20.

van der Hoorn, B., & Whitty, S. J. (2019). The five modes of comportment for project managing: Disclosing the tacit in project work. *International Journal of Project Management, 37*(3), 363-377.

Walkington, L. (2017). How far have we really come? Black women faculty and graduate students' experiences in higher education. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations, 39*, 51-65.

Watson, L. B., & Henderson, J. (2023). The relation between gendered racial microaggressions and traumatic stress among highly educated Black women. *The Counseling Psychologist, 51*(2), 210-241.

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill / Prentice Hall.

Williams van Rooij, S. (2010). Project management in ID: ADDIE is not enough. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 41*, 852-864. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2009.00982.x

Williams, M. T., Skinta, M. D., & Martin-Willett, R. (2021). After Pierce and Sue: A revised racial microaggressions taxonomy. *Perspectives on psychological science, 16*(5), 991-1007.

Woodson, K. (2023). The Black ceiling: How race still matters in the elite workplace. *The Black Ceiling*. University of Chicago Press.