The Basic Course in Communication: A Critical Intercultural and Participatory Approach

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Abstract: This paper advocates for using critical intercultural and participatory pedagogy as the basis for an introductory communication course. Communication programs are often concerned with the basics – teaching students to communicate effectively through writing and speaking. Yet the methods for teaching these two classic competencies diverge widely, with some instructors opting for a more traditional approach and others taking a more modern one. A divide also exists in the way today's students are viewed by educators in secondary and, in particular, post-secondary educational institutions. Where some teachers see lamentable shortcomings of millennials and Gen Z, others see infinite possibilities in these students. Either way, colleges and universities are dealing with a generation of students that is more diverse, connected, tech-savvy, and socially aware than ever before. This paper explores the advantages of using critical intercultural pedagogical practices – practices which are necessarily cooperative, multimodal, and participatory – to reach the students of today.

Keywords: education, critical pedagogy, intercultural, technology, participatory pedagogy

Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of first-year college students eagerly converge upon campuses every fall across the United States. They head off to class bedecked in school colors and mascot gear, excited hats in class are finally allowed. While working hard to project confidence, they are filled with nerves, questions, and expectations. Parents and teachers galore have filled their heads with the idea that college will be different, and most of all, college will be hard. The vast majority of these first-time freshmen are Gen Zers (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Their formal education up until this point has been filled with Common Core, Chromebooks, and cooperative learning. But then they walk into class only to see desks in neat rows and something they've probably never encountered before – a real chalkboard. The sharp disconnect between teaching and learning at the secondary and post-secondary levels is palpable for students and problematic for faculty. Gone are the days in which the sit and get (Martin, 2015) instructional style, filled with long lectures as students madly scribbled notes, simply worked. K-12 education largely recognized and adjusted to the shifting sands of pedagogy over the past ten

years or so (Heitner, 2018), whereas sit and get is alive and well in many post-secondary institutions. Need proof? Just take a quick walk through a classroom building on any college or university campus. Departments are left to grapple with the death rattle of "traditional" teaching practices, with certain faculty seemingly unwilling to let go of their rinse and repeat methods until they are pried from their cold, dead hands. Some departments, specifically those in the humanities and social sciences, are more of a natural fit for this new frontier of post-secondary pedagogy. What follows is a proposed structure of an introduction to communication course that utilizes critical intercultural and participatory pedagogical practices. This course approach, designed to pique interest while fostering agency, establishes communication theory and skill as a conduit for students to engage with real-world problems that affect their everyday lives or the lives of those in their community.

The Problem

Introduction to communication courses, usually the only general education class within communication departments, are the bread and butter of any university communication program. Traditionally the course has gone by the moniker "speech," mainly because the curriculum of most (57.8%) basic communication courses revolves almost solely around writing and delivering speeches (Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley, 2006). Introductory communication courses are in many ways similar to Comp I – we both cover research, organization/structure, rhetorical theory, audience awareness, etc. Where the two diverge is the product. In an English class, the product is a paper or some other type of writing; in a communication course, it's a speech. And English classes, by and large, have done a good job getting students to understand the "point" of classes like Comp I. Students, especially at the university level, realize they will need to write competently in their future professional lives. The line, "Even scientists have to write reports...engineers still have to write emails!" is something kids often hear throughout their school years. But for students in communication classes, the point of it all seems much more elusive.

When approached with questions from students about when they will ever need to stand up and give a formal speech in front of an audience, instructors often retort with something about job interviews and communication in the workplace. And it is true that outside of the classroom, the average student will constantly communicate with others. There are also things like nonverbal and interpersonal communication that students will use throughout their lives. Yet, on the whole, in traditional introduction to communication courses, the lion's share of instructional time is devoted to the preparation and delivery of formal speeches (Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley, 2006). Essentially, we are banking on the skills gleaned from speech giving in the classroom to transfer to other more practical areas, such as the workplace, relationships, and civic life.

This transferability assumption is tied up with our assumptions about communication pedagogy. It is tempting to assume that by standing before our class and lecturing to a seemingly captive audience, our students will, in turn, become competent lecturers themselves. Except our students don't want to be lectured to – in fact, instructors don't want to be lectured to either (Dodman, Zuidema, and Kleiman, 2018).

The Goal

Engleberg et al. (2014) identified the following core competencies for introductory communication courses: monitoring and presenting yourself; practicing communication ethics; adapting to others; practicing effective listening; expressing messages; identifying and explaining fundamental communication processes; and creating and analyzing message strategies (2014). Additionally, in their defense of the basic communication course as a requirement for general education, the NCA repeatedly cited the role of communication in civic engagement as well as the calls of employers for students to receive greater oral communication training in college (Simonds et al., 2012).

If the goal is to achieve these core competencies while also preparing students for the workplace and civic participation, then faculty must question how effective the traditional formal public speaking emphasis is in accomplishing these ends. How does a student presenting a five-minute speech on Pokémon Go or an eight-minute speech on "Pit Bulls Aren't a Dangerous Breed" realistically translate to career professionalization or civil discourse? The answer – it doesn't. Instead, there is undoubtedly a better approach to helping students become stronger communicators holistically, an approach that will still require students to give speeches but also compel them to engage with relevant issues and problems in their own lives, and society as a whole.

An (Intercultural) Answer

According to Atay and Toyosaki (2018), the goal of critical intercultural communication pedagogy is "To understand, critique, transform, and intervene upon the dynamics of power and domination embedded inside and outside classroom walls through careful, complex, nuanced, and intersectional analyses..." (p. ix). Furthermore, critical intercultural communication pedagogy is meant to work both in and out of the classroom, with an emphasis on understanding social, cultural, and political influences as a way to meaningfully affect the world outside of academia. Meanwhile, participatory pedagogy is defined as, "One that does not fully define all curricular needs in advance of interacting with learners...multiple perspectives, opinions, and active creation on the part of learners all contribute to the final context of the learner experience," (Siemens, 2008, p. 8). These two complementary pedagogical approaches are at the crux of my course approach for an introductory communication class.

The Outset

Following a critical intercultural and participatory approach must begin very early in the semester. Generally in the second week of class, students should be presented with a challenge – identify a significant issue that affects them and/or their community. The topic they select will be heavily researched, discussed, and debated throughout the term. This is usually a daunting proposition for first and second-year college students because it requires them to critically consider the system in which they exist as well as the social, cultural, and political forces at work within that system. Another problem is student misconception about "controversy" – most

communication instructors have had the experience of millennial and Gen Z students entering colleges and universities having been explicitly taught to not question authority or even broach contentious subjects. But, once they realize dissent is not only permissible but desirable, they are on their way for the rest of the semester.

By allowing students to determine the content around which their experience in the communication course will be centered, their buy-in is significant. The course essentially becomes a survey on their chosen topic, through which they sharpen their communication skills. Simmons, Barnard and Fennema (2011) note the excitement and increase in engagement that comes with inviting students on a "Personal and intellectual path of inquiry." (p. 89). What's more, the participatory aspect precipitates the interculturalism of the course. According to Halualani (2018), critical intercultural pedagogy should seek to establish students' "critical sensibility" and "remake not just their conceptualizations of the world but the way in which we work to transform the world and the larger systems of power" (p. 8). Even in a class that seems mostly homogenous, student dialogue on problems affecting their community forces their peers to reconsider their own lives, positions, beliefs, and misconceptions, giving them a wider worldview and greater understanding of the plights of others. Students are not sitting and getting; they are in the driver's seat of their own learning while also learning from the other drivers on the road – their peers.

They've Identified Issues...Now What?

Throughout the semester, the major assignments within a critical intercultural communication course are all structured to require student engagement with their selected issues. Rather than merely assign an informative speech over a random topic, students research and inform the class on some aspect of their chosen cultural, social, or political problem. They "live" within their issues throughout the term. Furthermore, original research requirements may be added so a student will not be tempted to AI their way through the term via ChatGPT. For example, a student in a course following this pedagogical approach recently chose homelessness in New Orleans for his semester-long study. His informative speech dealt with the causes of homelessness in the city, his persuasive speech advocated for policy change to help the homeless, and his final project was an action plan on how he personally could effect change to help the thousands of people without a home in New Orleans. To meet the original research requirements for the term-long project, he had to meet with groups that focus on helping the homeless, engage with leaders in the city, and even interviewed students who were formerly homeless. This gave him an "on the ground" view of his issue. And, even if he had, say, used AI to transcribe his interviews (if they were not already transcribed via Zoom) and entered the transcripts into ChatGPT, Bard, or Bing, telling the AI to synthesize the interviews into a speech on homelessness, he was still truly engaging with his issue, albeit using an "assisted driver" approach, steering the car while AI works the cruise control. Leveraging AI with this approach is actually currently being used in academic research (Grimaldi & Ehrler, 2023). Some educators are starting to advocate for teaching students how to use AI rather than ban it entirely, which is likely the most realistic view. Ultimately, the intercultural atmosphere of the course is further fostered with a group presentation requiring students to work with peers to examine the intersection of their selected issues or problems, such as socioeconomics and technology, race and gender, religion and inequality, etc.

Maintaining the Intercultural Climate

The goal in using critical intercultural, participatory pedagogy in the basic communication course is for students to appreciate the value and power of their voices in a democratic society, especially regarding issues relevant to students' everyday lives. A frequent question other instructors ask is: "How do you keep the class from falling into chaos?" Admittedly, there is usually dissent among students regarding their selected issues, but where better than the classroom for students to come to understand and value the plurality of voices in society? The mantle of maintaining the classroom's interculturalism falls not solely to the instructor, but is instead a collaborative effort between instructor and students. The challenge for teachers is establishing critical intercultural communication classrooms as, "A safe environment that promotes discomfort. Discomfort with the status quo, with limited understandings of self, and with ignorance of the marginalization of others," (Sandoval & Nainby, 2018, p. 24). Again, the participatory aspect is helpful in this regard – students are asking tough questions about the system(s) in which they exist and largely recognize their peers are simply doing the same.

The Result

Earlier, the assertion was made that traditional pedagogy in an introductory communication course falls short in realistically preparing students for the workplace or civic life because it presupposes the transferability of skills garnered from giving formal speeches, especially speeches on random and inconsequential topics. The critical intercultural approach for which this paper advocates has clear benefits in preparing students to participate in civil discourse, since students are challenged to wrangle with cultural, social, and political issues. In terms of career preparation and professionalization, a critical intercultural communication pedagogy is just as beneficial.

Lee et al. (2018) note the importance of intercultural educational practices due to increasing globalization, emphasizing the need for undergraduate institutions to "Explicitly and systematically develop the skills and knowledge graduates need to successfully navigate a complex, diverse, and increasingly interconnected world," (p. 2). Essentially, critical intercultural communication pedagogy provides students with a set of basic skills they will need as soon as they enter the ever-diversifying workforce. Halualani (2018) specifically cites business, international relations, healthcare, and education as fields in which intercultural training is becoming increasingly imperative.

One Last Thing

The approach to a basic communication course described herein has one more necessary ingredient to make it a success: technology. In 2023 and post-Covid, it seems senseless for any course, especially communication courses, to be taught without tech. As previously stated, millennial and Gen Z students have grown up as digital natives; the Common Core era dominated their K-12 education. And there are literally thousands upon thousands of academic articles, research studies, personal testimonies, etc., that demonstrate the need for digital

education. According to Gee (2013), colleges must shift away from focusing solely on content and toward digital thinking and problem solving. Otherwise, a crisis of "stupidity" will continue to ensue – one in which college graduates go into the world with meaningless degrees that have not prepared them for life in the digital age and digital workforce.

For critical intercultural and participatory pedagogy to work, for students to truly engage with their selected problems or issues, they have to use technology. And, really use it – not just make a presentation with an accompanying PowerPoint. Technology in the classroom contributes to intercultural and participatory learning, becoming even more of an interactive experience. Instructors who have embraced technology to the hilt know doing so helps them play more of a facilitator role than someone who gives students knowledge. This allows students to make meaning and think critically by using devices to research, participate in classroom activities, collaborate with other students, and design compelling modern presentations.

Conclusion

In the end, when students leave a communication course centered on critical intercultural and participatory pedagogy, they leave with a sense of empowerment on multiple fronts. All instructors want the students leaving their COMM101 courses to feel confident as communicators. But, what a student learns in a critical intercultural classroom is so much more than just how to give a speech. They leave with experience debating real issues that affect them personally, addressing people in positions of power, and confronting those steadfastly opposed to their positions. Students with a critical intercultural awareness also generally have a much broader and more empathetic worldview, as well as historical and rhetorical perspectives on the underpinnings of social systems on local, regional, and national levels. The most basic skills students glean from a course such as that described herein is problem solving, which is arguably one of the most important skills for students of today to possess. When confronted with anything from a complex civil or governmental issue to a confusing new app or software, I want them to have the self-assurance and determination to figure it out.

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