



# A Pedagogical Mystique?: Lessons of Incorporating Feminism Into Skills-Based Communication Courses

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**Keywords:** feminist pedagogy; skills-based course; corporate social responsibility; professional communications

**Abstract:** It is imperative that today's advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations students are prepared to engage in corporate activism and corporate social responsibility communications once in the workforce. This article explores the need for incorporating equity-based pedagogy, using feminism as one of many approaches, into skills-based communication courses. The researchers conducted 20 qualitative interviews with academics to discuss various approaches, examples, and learnings. The findings suggest that using a feminist framework to teach skills: (1) enhances the skill being taught, (2) allows students to communicate more effectively, (3) builds life skills, and (4) comes in many forms. The article concludes with consideration to areas for future research and contributes to the understanding of academics engaged in a feminist approach to teaching skills-based communication courses.

## Introduction

Preparing young professionals to enter the communication subfields means preparing them to account for diverse audiences in messaging, design, and dialog while preparing them to be self-reliant and confident in most communication contexts. Teaching through a feminist lens utilizing feminist pedagogy is one approach that offers a more empowering learning environment for students. By implementing feminist

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pedagogy, educators acknowledge the influence of race, class, sexual orientation, and geographical location on learners. With feminist pedagogy, students are given the ability to question norms which promotes social change—both within the student as well as society. Feminist pedagogy teaches students to explore their group identities, examine differences both inside and outside the classroom, and become aware of their various roles in domination, superiority, hierarchy, and exploitation. The approach, associated with the liberation movement, encourages not only self-reliance, but also an understanding of social equality.

The purpose of this study is to understand the approaches and experiences of professors who incorporate feminism pedagogy into skills-based courses in advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations programs. Feminist pedagogy centers on the importance of theory for understanding the world around us. In her seminal work, bell hooks (1994) argues for educational opportunities centered around learning theory which allows for the learner to become aware of their surroundings through engaging, interactive, and transgressive pedagogies. With this in mind, feminist pedagogy was chosen as one of many possible approaches to integrating equity into the classroom due to its ideological overlap with other equity-based theories, such as ethics of care and intersectionality. The term “feminist” in this paper refers to an ethical perspective that considers gender issues as central to culture and power (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; hooks, 1996a, 1996b; Weiler, 1991). Feminist pedagogy is a set of classroom practices grounded in critical pedagogical and feminist theory (Webb, et al., 2002; Weiler, 1991). A review of the literature reveals the discussion of teaching strategies that teach feminist ideas or have been done by self-identified feminists. The authors define a skills-based course as one with learning goals focused on building practical skills (Callister & Love, 2016).

Feminist theory can often be found in dedicated communication courses in gender or diversity. Communication includes the subfields of advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations, among others. Lacey and Smits (2015) offer “mainstreaming” as an alternative approach to incorporating feminist pedagogy across the curriculum (p. 256). Take advertising as an example. The curriculum can be divided into creative, media planning and buying, research, and strategy. The mainstream approach to teaching feminism would mean that every course would incorporate feminist teaching.

Feminist pedagogy should not be blindly incorporated into every communication course. Rather, we assert that feminist teaching, and equity more broadly, should be thoughtfully and practically integrated into courses where students are learning how to communicate to and with the public. Advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations shape culture, and therefore communication educators have an obligation to foster fair-minded, critical graduates.

## **Framing the Pedagogy and Research Context**

Communication professionals are frequently confronted with decisions regarding their organization’s purpose and role in society. Students need the critical thinking skills to address these issues. Porter Novelli (2020) reports 88% of U.S. business executives know that now, more than ever, companies must lead with purpose. Communication graduates will enter the workforce and be involved in conversations and decisions regarding the impact their work has on society.

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate activism are ways that businesses self-regulate their impact on and role in society. CSR reflects the voluntary integration of social and environmental interests into day-to-day business activities and interactions with stakeholders (Bednárík, 2019; Chin et al., 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). Stakeholders extend beyond shareholders to include employees, communities, the environment, and society (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). Corporate activism, a form of CSR, is distinct because it aims to make societal change in the institutional environment (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 464). Often, corporate activism involves advocating for political, economic, and/or environmental reform (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Patagonia, the outdoor apparel brand, is driven by a set of strong corporate values that advocates for environmental protection, fair trade, and stricter labor standards. The company engages in both corporate social responsibility and corporate activism, including its Worn Wear initiative. The program allows customers to repair, trade-in, or buy used Patagonia apparel, in effect reducing consumption (Patagonia, n.d.). The practice of recycling and extending the life of goods positively impacts the environment and is a testament to the quality of Patagonia apparel. Worn Wear now has a dedicated section on the retailer's website and has experimented with physical pop-up shops.

An example of corporate activism is Patagonia's actions toward environmental protection legislation. In 2017, Patagonia swiftly opposed then President Trump's reversal of protection of two national monuments in Utah in a blog post (Kenna, 2017), website takeover, and social media communication (Patagonia, 2017) encouraging Americans to act. Patagonia sued former President Trump, the secretary of the interior, the secretary of agriculture, the director of the Bureau of Land Management, and the chief of the Forest Service for unlawfully reducing national monuments, which Patagonia argued is solely the right of Congress (Gelles, 2018).

As future practitioners of communication, students must also be culturally competent. Cultural competence means understanding and communicating with people from different cultures (Jean-Baptiste, 2018). To achieve these responsibilities requires both theory and application in the classroom.

### ***The State of Corporate Social Responsibility***

When integrated into skills-based classrooms, feminist pedagogy's examination of relationships of power in society prepares students to consider and implement CSR's critical role in business and society. The following data and literature offer insights about why integrating feminist principles in skills-based courses aid students in both personal and professional development.

**Consumer Expectations.** A mindset is taking hold where consumers see the products and services they buy as a representation of their values. This mindset prompts higher standards expected of companies, where some consumers believe brands should be held accountable to develop and live values, ultimately impacting society in a positive way. According to Edelman (2020), 73% of global respondents believe that a company can take actions that both increase profits and improve conditions in communities where it operates. In fact, ethical drivers are three times more important to company trust than competence (Edelman, 2020).

According to Porter Novelli (2020), 70% of Americans believe companies have more responsibility than ever before to address social justice issues. The top 10 issues Americans believe companies must address include employee health and safety (94%), access to health care (90%), privacy and internet security

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(89%), sexual harassment (88%), domestic job growth (85%), racial equality (84%), women's rights (83%), immigration (75%), climate change (75%), and cost of higher education (74%).

Consumers confer immense trust and responsibility on businesses to address societal issues. Globally, businesses lead as the most trusted institution, ahead of NGOs, government, and media (Edelman, 2021). Globally, 86% of people expect CEOs to publicly speak out about one or more of these societal changes: pandemic impact, job automation, societal issues, and local community issues (Edelman, 2021).

Generation Z, consisting of people born between 1997–2012 (Dimock, 2019), lead the way in their belief that brands should act responsibly and express their values through action. In fact, 67% of young Americans (age 13–25) buy a product or service solely because they support the brand's values (DoSomething Strategic, 2019). Generation Z wants to see brands engage in corporate activism by advocating for institutional change (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). Further, 52% of Generation Z adults want the brands they use to be involved in activism, compared to only 17% of Baby Boomers (Dubina, 2021). The importance of CSR to the students that today's professors serve, predominantly Generation Z, is another reason to prioritize teaching activism in skills-based classrooms (Luttrell et al., 2020).

**Employee Expectations.** Further, CSR is on the mind of people when considering companies to work for. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021), 75% of people surveyed want to work for organizations that make positive contributions to society. Weber Shandwick and KRC Research (2018) report that 62% of U.S. communications and marketing executives are favorable of their own CEO taking a public position on issues.

Younger generations lead the way. Millennials will not take a job if a company does not have strong CSR values and 88% say their job is more fulfilling when provided opportunities to make positive impacts on social and environmental issues (Cone Communications, 2016). Research indicates that Millennials seek responsible workplaces due to their beliefs that “community extends beyond themselves” and focus on individual values over economic performance (Chatzopoulou & Kiewiet, 2021).

Generation Z, who share beliefs with Millennials on key social and political issues (Parker et al., 2019), made up 20.3% of the U.S. population in 2019 (The Brookings Institution, 2020) and are a large segment of the workforce. The youngest generation is expected to be the most racially and ethnically diverse generation (Fry & Parker, 2018), which informs their views on society. The value employees place on their employer's impact on society make CSR and corporate activism key tools in employee recruitment and retention (Noguchi, 2018).

**Business Executive Directives.** The rising expectations and motivations of consumers and employees, in combination with a global pandemic and social unrest, have influenced U.S. business executives to consider a larger set of stakeholders. Porter Novelli (2020) reports 91% of U.S. business executives agree that business must benefit all stakeholders, not just shareholders. CSR has cemented its role in business. Further, 85% of U.S. business executives say it is no longer acceptable just to make money; companies must positively impact society (Porter Novelli, 2020). Business executives and U.S. consumers, respectively, agree that companies should address the following issues: sexual harassment (97%, 88%), racial equality (93%, 84%), women's rights (89%, 83%), and LGBTQ+ rights (78%, 67%) (Porter Novelli, 2020).

The motivations of executives for engaging in CSR varies. Research indicates that executives' belief in the CSR business case is based on a positive ideological view on the market economy, also known as

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fair market ideology (Hafenbrädl & Waeger, 2017). Alternatively, research indicates that some CEOs have self-serving motivations for engaging in CSR efforts. CEO narcissism affects the focus of CSR activities, such that narcissistic CEOs are more likely to engage in external CSR efforts (Al-Shammari et al., 2019). Similarly, celebrity CEOs, those who have received celebrity status due to their strong business performance, engage in CSR efforts when the business is experiencing variability: uncertainty regarding the performance of the business, poor business performance, or high competition (Lee et al, 2020).

Corporate social responsibility and corporate activism are not going away. Public opinion will expand as the youngest generation becomes adults. As members of the workforce, our students will be expected to engage in these conversations as consumers, employees, and eventually leaders. It is imperative that educators of communication arm students with the theory, skills, and cultural competence to engage in business in today's world.

### **Lack of Existing Literature**

Consumer and employee expectations, combined with business executive directives, require communication professionals to be culturally competent to effectively succeed in a world of corporate social responsibility and corporate activism. Feminism, and other equity-based theories, are pedagogical approaches that can prepare students for the demands of the workforce.

Yet the literature review revealed limited scholarly contributions with a focus on teaching feminism or using feminist pedagogy specifically in a skills-based communication course. A communication course is defined as a course in the field of advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations.

A broader literature review did produce limited yet informative reflections and tips from educators incorporating feminist pedagogy into non-gender dedicated courses in the fields of business and management (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) and politics (Lacey & Smits, 2015). The findings suggest that in business and management skills-based courses, academics face difficulties and resistance (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) but also excitement (Sang & Glasgow, 2016) from students in the classroom. Additional reflections indicate that teaching feminism did not influence their relationships with colleagues but had a range of perceived negative and positive impacts on their career development (Sang & Glasgow, 2016). A separate article reporting on responses from participants from a plenary session at the 2014 New Zealand Political Studies Association conference highlights different approaches to incorporating feminism and intersectionality into politics departments and ponders whether feminist teaching is activism (Lacey & Smits, 2015).

The research questions underpinning this research are:

1. What are the motivations for incorporating feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
  2. What approaches are used to incorporate feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
  3. What are the learnings from incorporating feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
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## Self-Disclosures

Self-disclosure is in line with intersectionality theory, which emphasizes that individuals are multidimensional (Crenshaw, 1989). Scholars emphasize the importance of transparency and articulating any potential subjectivity in identity-based research (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013). Specifically, the notion that the researchers' self-identities inform the research they conduct and the perspectives they bring to research.

Researchers of this project approach it from similar and different standpoints. Two researchers are women, and one is a man. All researchers transitioned from the public sector to academia, each covering one of the following fields of communication: advertising, communication, and public relations. All researchers believe communication professors should have a vested interest in integrating equity into skills-based course curriculum to prepare students to engage in equitable communication and the growing interest of CSR and diversity. A framework of self-disclosure and intersectionality in the classroom can afford students a glimpse into potential biases of the educator and prepare students for industry and workforce obstacles, respectively.

## Materials and Methods

The purpose of this study is to understand and analyze the approaches and experiences of professors of communication (advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations) who incorporate feminist thought into skills-based courses. To do so, the researchers conducted 20 exploratory interviews (via video conference) of academics who incorporate feminism into skills-based communication courses. The exploratory interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix A) and were informed by previous literature on incorporation of feminist principles in education (Shrewsbury, 1993).

The composition of interviewees, broken down by gender, region, field of communication, and job title is outlined in Table 1 below. Participants skewed female (90%). The majority (75%) of participants teach at an institution in the East. The composition of fields of communication is well distributed: journalism (33%), public relations (26%), mass communication (22%), and advertising (19%). Finally, participants include assistant professors (41%), associate professors (18%), professors (18%), PhD students (14%), and chairs (9%).

The researchers utilized qualitative content analysis to identify themes (Patton, 2002) to better understand the incorporation of feminist themes in skills-based communication courses. The qualitative content analysis took place in four stages: decontextualization of the data, recontextualization of the data, categorization of the data into substantive themes, and compilation of findings in the write-up to ensure a thorough examination of the course descriptions (Berg, 2001; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). The intent of the four-stage examination was to achieve a latent analysis, in an effort to consider deeper meanings related to the philosophical focus and motivations of instructors incorporating feminism in skills-based communication courses (Berg, 2001). Frequent debriefing sessions (akin to intercoder reliability checks) between the researchers were employed to ensure validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the findings as categories of course content and approaches to teaching were established (Patton, 2002). For example, the researchers would independently analyze the transcribed

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responses, identify themes that emerged in the responses, which enabled them to come together to discuss the themes identified and examples highlighted. Through each discussion, the researchers found consistency and clarity in interpretation of the themes, enabling them to develop the larger categorical themes by the third data review, which facilitated the finding reports below.

<b>TABLE 1</b>		
<b>Composition of Research Participants</b>		
<b>(gender, region, field of communication, job title)</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage of Total</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	18	90%
Male	2	10%
<b>Region</b>		
NE	8	40%
SE	7	35%
W	2	10%
SW	2	10%
MW	1	5%
<b>Field of Communication</b>		
Journalism	9	33%
Public Relations	7	26%
Mass Comm	6	22%
Advertising	5	19%
<b>Job Title</b>		
Assistant Professor	9	41%
Associate Professor	4	18%
Professor	4	18%
PhD Student	3	14%
Chair	2	9%
<i>Note.</i> The number of participants exceeds 20 when participants teach across fields or have more than one job title.		

A participant profile can be found in Table 2. Pseudonyms are used to mask the identity of the participants.

**TABLE 2**  
**Profile of Research Participants (pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of research participants)**

Participant	Region	Field of Comm	Job Title	Gender	Research Expertise	Teaching Expertise
1	NE	Advertising	Assistant Professor	Female	Health communication	Research, strategy
2	NE	Public Relations	Assistant Professor	Female	Crisis communication, social media activism	Public relations core
3	NE	Advertising	Associate Professor	Female	Branded content, predictive TV ratings	Data analytics, media planning, strategy
4	SE	Journalism, Mass Comm	PhD Student	Female	Associations communication	Public speaking, writing
5	MW	Public Relations, Mass Comm	Assistant Professor	Female	Celebrity culture	Mass comm, public relations
6	W	Journalism	Associate Professor	Female	News women history, subaltern politics on the internet	Media literacy, media theory, social media
7	SE	Advertising, Public Relations, Mass Comm	Associate Professor, Chair	Male	Pedagogy, public relations	Advertising, political communication, public relations
8	NE	Advertising, Mass Comm	Professor	Female	Gender in sports media	Race and gender in media
9	NE	Journalism	Assistant Professor	Female	Newsroom sociology	Production, video editing
10	NE	Journalism	Associate Professor	Female	Journalism education	Journalism, editorial
11	SE	Journalism	PhD Student	Female	Gender in sports media	Sports reporting, sports journalism
12	SE	Advertising, Journalism, Public Relations	PhD Student	Female	Equitable pedagogies, critical media theory	Film, journalism
13	SW	Public Relations	Chair and Professor	Female	Intersectionality	Public relations core
14	NE	Journalism	Assistant Professor	Female	Magazine, journalism, cultural criticism	Critical writing, magazine editing
15	SW	Journalism	Professor	Female	Representation of race/gender in media	Media theories, race and gender in media reporting
16	SE	Public Relations	Assistant Professor	Male	Pedagogy, public relations	Political comm, public relations
17	NE	Mass Comm	Professor	Female	Social justice in film	Film, production
18	SE	Public Relations	Assistant Professor	Female	Labor activism, TikTok	Public relations core
19	W	Mass Comm	Assistant Professor	Female	Women's sports communication	Communication
20	SE	Journalism	Assistant Professor	Female	Newsroom sociology, journalism ethics	Broadcast journalism



Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) A call for participants was distributed on academic listservs and social media (Twitter); (2) Recruitment emails were sent to the authors' contacts, contacts recommended by prospective and current participants, and academics whose research interests involve diversity, feminism, and/or intersectionality. The recruitment methods represent convenience sampling—"a type of nonprobability sampling in which people are sampled simply because they are 'convenient' sources of data for researchers" (Lavrakas, 2008). Convenience sampling allowed the researchers to find relevant participants who met the selective criteria of being a professor of communication (advertising journalism, mass communication, and public relations) who incorporate feminism into skills-based communication courses. The authors verified the specific skills-based communication courses that participants derived their experiences from, though this information is withheld from the study to uphold anonymity. Informed consent was obtained through email (ahead of) or verbally (at the beginning of) the interviews.

## Results

### Teaching Feminism Often Means Teaching Equity and Life Skills

For many participants, teaching feminism extends beyond gender to equity across social identities which could include ability, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality. It was widely acknowledged that bias and inequities are prevalent outside of gender. Educators have the opportunity to introduce students to a wide variety of issues, while preparing them to exercise critical thinking skills that will enable them to be agents of change for the better in the profession. Many understand feminism to coincide with equal rights, representation of and opportunity for all communities, and, as such, take a broader perspective on what it means to teach feminism.

When asked about her approach to integrating feminism into a skills-based communication course, professor of journalism, Participant 6, explained that in the classroom she emphasizes that feminism stands for everybody and that "we're in this together." Participant 6 teaches in a conservative area and reflected on student appreciation she received after discussing LGBTQ+ representation in media narratives. She paraphrased: "This student sent me an email, and said, 'Thank you, it's been a really tough year, and this is the only time when I felt actually comfortable and seen'" (Participant 6). Creating space for dialogue and discourse is an intentional decision for Participant 6. She adds:

If we're not approaching our classes with an eye toward what we're doing, our students are at a disservice. Students want to talk about these things; They need to talk about these things in a safe space where they know they're not going to be completely shut down. (Participant 6)

The intention of many participants is to use the university setting, where many students are becoming aware of social issues for the first time, to broaden and give space to explore their understanding of society. In doing so, students learn both professional and life skills that allow them to lead and live with empathy.

Participant 13 suggests that teaching feminism is about getting students to challenge norms and structures. Participant 13 intentionally creates space for students of various identities (e.g., students of color, LGBTQ+) to discuss their differences. Participant 13 perceives the result to be a classroom where students feel protected and encouraged to engage in healthy dialogue:

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When I have students who have differences, they can address those things and you can have those conversations. They know that they feel protected because the professor is willing not just to have their back, but to encourage a healthy conversation and dialogue.

To some, teaching feminism is also about teaching life skills.

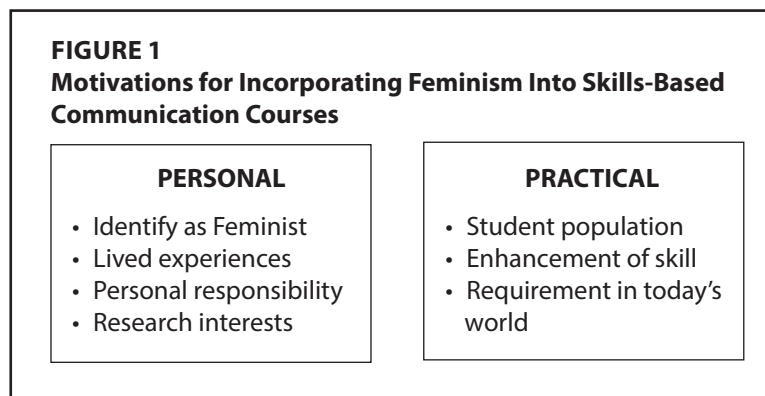
Participant 14 said: “I believe it is a duty of academic institutions to train people not just for the work that they’re going to do, but how they’re going to move through the world.”

Similarly, Participant 5 explained that part of her role as an educator is to assist students in being informed citizens. She does so by teaching media literacy and integrating critical cultural discourse and inclusivity in the classroom. Participant 5 explains:

I think a very large part of our job is to keep them informed as citizens. How do you deconstruct a news story? How do you know what’s considered a good news source? How do you see the role of PR playing into the news business? So I wear a few hats. . . . These are all very, very real issues that I think this particular generation of students, I hope, are more cognizant of.

## Motivations for Incorporating Feminism Vary

To understand participants’ reasons for incorporating feminism into a skills-based communication course, we asked, “Why do you teach feminism in a skills-based course?” Participants’ motivations range on a spectrum from personal to practical, as summarized in Figure 1. While the intent was to create differentiated categories, there is inherent overlap between categories and motivations.



### *Personal Motivations*

**Identify as Feminist.** Some participants say that feminism is not something that they can “turn off.” Participant 13 comes from a lineage of Black women who mentored and educated her in different ways. She reflects on how Black Feminism is ingrained in her and how it shows up in the classroom: through a warm demeanor; by acknowledging where students are; by shining light on systemic issues while encouraging students to overcome them and do better.

**Lived Experiences.** Another recurring theme was driven by lived experiences as past students and practitioners of communication. Many participants emphasized the lack of attention to bias and

inequities in their own undergrad, graduate, and doctoral programs and how, as a result, they were not equipped to navigate injustices when entering the profession. These participants now feel an obligation to prepare students for the realities of the industry. Participant 14 explained how issues of injustice were not brought up during her experience in journalism school and the disappointment of facing them when entering the industry.

Participant 15 reflected on the discrimination she faced in the profession when she realized men (who joined at the same level of her) were getting promotions faster. Looking back, she realized that she didn't know how to ask for a promotion and speak up for herself. Participant 15 now shares these stories with students to build awareness among both men and women who will eventually have the opportunity to affect change. Participant 15 and others stressed the importance of striking a balance when talking about these topics with students. Inherently, the process of making students aware of the realities of injustices in the profession could discourage students from entering the field.

**Personal Responsibility.** A third theme was the personal responsibility that the participants have, as educators, to teach critical thinking skills. A professor of public relations who emphasizes critical thinking in skills-based courses, Participant 13 expressed how the philosophical mindset of advertising and public relations departments can hinder holistic learning:

For junior faculty and graduate students, the biggest problem is the structure of academia and the structure of the departments we're in, where we are (especially within advertising and PR) so very corporate minded. We're sending out good soldiers to be on the work battlefield for these companies. That's fine, but they also need to be critical thinkers.

**Research Interests.** A final personal motivation was related to participants' research interests. Educators whose research interests involve gender and intersectionality, for example, felt inclined to incorporate their learnings and research in the classroom. Participant 20 expressed her passion for studying intersectionality in journalism:

I live it and I research it but there's so much more to intersectionality that needs to be understood from a sexuality standpoint, you know, and from a racial standpoint, an economic standpoint and so thinking of all these intersections is so important.

### ***Practical Motivations***

**Student Population.** Some participants emphasize equity because of the student population they serve. Many interviewed serve a majority female student body—nearly two thirds, or 64% of communication students are female (Borruto, 2015). Some participants are driven to prepare students for inequities that females might face once in the industry.

Participant 7 emphasized issues of wage and equity and teaches students about their right and responsibility to negotiate pay:

From an industry and professional standpoint, it's helping young women understand what the industry is like, some of the challenges they can anticipate, thinking about issues of wage and equity and having a conversation around that, teaching them about their right and responsibility to negotiate when they go out on the job market as an entry level and not being afraid to do it.

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Participant 15 casts light on sexual harassment in her classroom. She shares her own experience with it and how it placed a burden on her ability to do her job:

We talk a lot about the kinds of pressures that women face that men might not face, and we do get into sexual harassment, which is a big factor. I tell them that I experienced it myself when I was a journalist and that it really can put a burden on you when you're just trying to do your job.

Educators with diverse student bodies expressed how being selective with course content allows students to see themselves represented in media and the profession. Participant 20 identifies as a cisgendered heterosexual White woman that grew up middle-class and went to a predominately White university. As an educator at a diverse school in the South, she finds it important to select guest speakers who sound different and have different experiences than her.

Participant 6, however, is an educator with a predominantly conservative student body in the Midwest who feels obligated to expose her students to new diverse perspectives. She has received encouraging feedback from students, which she paraphrased as: "I've never had a chance to talk about these things, or to really think about these ideas and thank you, because it really helped me understand and talk with other people" (Participant 6).

**Enhancement of the Skill.** A second practical reason for incorporating feminism into a skills-based course is that it enhances the skill being taught. With an eye toward equity and inclusion, practitioners communicate more effectively. Participant 7 explained how ethics of care can be used as a framework to inform relationship management, relationship building, and conflict resolution. He feels that it allows him to extend beyond what is referenced in the PRSA Code of Ethics (PRSA, n.d.). Linked to feminist theory, ethics of care is a theory that emphasizes that everyone has a voice that should be listened to carefully and with respect (Gilligan, 2011).

Participant 10 believes that a feminist framework aids businesses in being more collaborative and inclusive. She adds:

If you look at . . . putting a feminist framework on an organization, then that organization by design is . . . more collaborative instead of hierarchical and . . . tries to be . . . empathetic and supportive of each other and more inclusive.

**Requirement in Today's World.** The final practical motivation is because it is required in today's world where CSR and inclusivity in communication and media are at the forefront of culture and society. Participant 14 explained that inclusivity and equity are demands of the magazine and news media market. Similarly, Participant 6 stresses to her students that equity is a big conversation in the workplace, and advises:

If you can't do it here, you're not going to be able to identify it in the media, you're not going to be able to write about it, you're not gonna be able to produce a video about it, your social media is going to have a huge hole.

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## **An Equity Framework Enhances the Skill**

A recurring theme was that equity and skills are not two separate frameworks forced together. Instead, teaching communication skills with consideration to equity and/or feminism strengthens the skill. As communication professors, we are teaching students how best to communicate with society. Without a focus on equity and inclusion, how can we communicate fairly?

Participant 12 explained how she incorporates a theoretical perspective on equity in her introduction to digital storytelling course:

What I've been trying to do is for each lesson, include some kind of theoretical perspective from filmmaking in to incorporate some kind of approach that adds to equity . . . my lighting portion . . . is a little bit more focused on equity and race, and making sure that we're teaching students how to light people of color in different ways than they light white people.

Participant 16 frames feminism and intersectionality as “practical tools for them to navigate communicating in diverse environments and within diverse organizations and to diverse audiences.” Participant 8 explained how a feminist framework helps advertising students understand their target audiences:

Students need to understand how you develop an understanding of who your target audience is within advertising, and so I approached it from the perspective of you need to know who your audience is and, you know, 52% of the population is female. So you should have some sense about if you aren't female yourself, then you should have some understanding of that as a target audience.

Many participants believe that an eye toward equity and inclusivity that is engrained in feminist thought improves the quality of the communication skill being taught. This sentiment was shared across communication disciplines: advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations.

## **There's Balance to Be Had**

Participants shared a variety of approaches to integrating feminism into a skills-based communication course that range from vague to explicit. Some participants do not label content as feminist and instead teach through a broad lens of equity. The benefit expressed by some is that the content is more digestible for students who consider feminism too political or radical. The potential drawback is that some students may not grasp the diversity lens that frames the content. Participant 18 calls it the “dog medicine approach,” where she sprinkles equity in various ways throughout the semester. For example, guest speakers, projects, and student reflections. Participant 12, for example, acknowledged that she's nervous to be more explicit because students might feel that there's too much theory in a skills-based course.

Conversely, other participants label feminism. This can show up in class by sharing one's feminist identity with students, labeling one's approach as feminist, and labeling feminist theories. The benefits of this approach are that it can debunk what feminism means and gives credit to the feminist movement and scholars who have contributed to it. The drawbacks are some students will consider the course to be too political or radical, which may build a barrier to teaching the skill. Participant 16 expressed the importance of ensuring the voices who brought us feminist theories are still at the center of discussion.

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For example, when teaching intersectionality, he will begin by allowing students to hear from Kimberlé Crenshaw and explaining the theory's root in violence against Black women and eventually work toward the professional application.

The decision to incorporate feminism into a skills-based classroom depends on the educator. The educator's rank is one consideration. Participant 13 expressed that not all academics will welcome this approach to teaching skills, and junior faculty, in particular, should be aware of potential pushback. Participant 11, an instructor of journalism, would like to see more institutional support and encouragement to incorporate feminism into the curriculum:

There's a lot of support for these ideas [equity] among the faculty, especially the tenured faculty versus the adjuncts who are in the industry and less attuned. . . . It's sort of just an understanding that people are taking it up on their own and doing it versus having the support to do it versus . . . you know ideas for how to put it in the curriculum or even like "Oh, you should be putting this in the curriculum."

### **Importance of Course-Wide Integration**

As Carolyn Shrewsbury (1993) notes, "feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practice by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes" (p. 8). This assertion is aligned with what we found during our interview process. Participants stressed the importance of integrating feminism throughout the curriculum and semester rather than a day on "intersectionality theory," for example. The perspective comes from awareness that the skill and theory should be intertwined. Isolation of feminist ideologies doesn't enhance the skills and can alienate the content. Likewise, many participants prepare students in the beginning of the semester that they will teach with a framework toward equity in communication.

Participant 16 reflects that intersectionality and other diversity-centered discussions are often left to the end of semester, which siphons it off and leaves little room for application. Instead, he brings up these topics early and applies them throughout the semester. He explains:

There are a lot of challenges to squeezing everything in at the beginning, but I've tried to bring this up within the first two to three weeks of class to address that feeling specifically . . . Then we can keep talking about these issues as it applies to a lot of different scenarios across the course of the semester, whether that's a bunch of different writing assignments, or a bunch of different kinds of management or campaigns related issues that pop up. (Participant 16)

### **Wide Variety of Application**

Participants shared a range of ways to incorporate feminist ideologies into skills-based communication courses. Participant 10 emphasized the importance of careful consideration to class materials:

What we select carries a lot of weight and what we say is good carries a lot of weight in some ways. We are . . . tastemakers for our students and calling attention to, you know, in my case . . . really great journalism that . . . is done by a woman and/or person of color, that matters.

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### ***Guest Speakers***

Participant 18 is intentional about who she brings into the classroom. When thinking about diversity in guest speakers, she considers a variety of factors:

Especially with guest speakers, I've always been very intentional about bringing them [into] the classroom and making sure that they're coming from diverse experiences. Not just from race and gender but also . . . How they got to their position; Did they take a traditional track?; Are they first gen? (Participant 18)

Participant 10 emphasized the importance of inviting guest speakers who are in underrepresented groups. She shared the perspective that doing so allows more students to see a version of themselves as a leader and normalizes diversity in leadership:

I used to think about it as . . . “I want all students to see a version of themselves at some point in school,” as . . . a boss or a leader or whatever it is. I was taking the class once and a fellow student who was Black said it's also important for other students to see those people in those positions, and not be a big deal that they're in those positions. And she was right. (Participant 10)

### ***Case Studies***

Participant 20 tries in the classroom to illustrate that there's space for all kinds of people in broadcasting. Rather than selecting examples of broadcasters who portray the norm, she will find examples of people pushing the boundaries. She elaborated:

I always like to tell students: this is the norm, these are people who are pushing against it. Whether that be women can't wear big giant jewelry, and here's a woman of color who's pushing against that. Or, braids are not okay. Or, you know, nonbinary persons can't wear bow ties . . . and so showing examples of people who are pushing back against it. (Participant 20)

### ***Assignments***

Participant 17 uses the Bechdel-Wallace Test, a measure of the representation of women in fiction, in her film production course. To pass the test, which brings attention to gender inequality in entertainment, the work must meet the following criteria: (1) it must have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something other than a man (Garber, 2015). Participant 17 explained that “most movies fail that test. So, I don't do it in every semester, but there have been semesters where I will have the students apply that test to anything that they're making.”

Participant 12 asks that students look beyond stereotypical portrayals to intentional use of characters in storytelling. She provided the following example:

We especially talk about . . . romantic beats and how we should like try to work on creating those romantic beats without creating shots that are literally only to gaze at women. . . . These shots need to actually be motivated by something other than looking at a pretty, beautiful, usually white woman. (Participant 12)

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Participant 8 created a group assignment in her advertising course that challenges students to think about the way gender functions in society:

I . . . assign each group what is a typically male or female targeted product—so things like feminine hygiene products or I used jock itch cream one year—and then I would have them develop a questionnaire of like, half of your group probably has experience with this product, and the other half probably doesn't so how would you go about eliciting information from those who do so that you can develop insights about the product?

Participant 1 approaches teaching how to define a target audience in advertising by requiring that students begin with behaviors and psychographics rather than demographics:

I never let them start with, "Okay we're . . . going to target women to an age of 18 to 35," because my question will always be "Why?" . . . I only allow them to bring those demographics out of those other things.

The intentional selection of class materials including guest speakers, case studies, and assignments are forms of teaching feminism in a skills-based classroom.

## Implications Beyond the Classroom

Feminist pedagogy is more about a way of life rather than merely a theory within a classroom setting. In Estelle Freedman's (2007) text, *No turning back: The history of feminism and the future of women*, she clearly articulates the central purpose of feminism as both ideology and social movement:

Feminism is the belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between men and women, with the understanding that gender always intersects with social hierarchies." (p. 7)

Through this type of instruction, students are given the opportunity to examine relationships of power in society and contextualize their own center of being. This in turn has an impact outside of the classroom after the course ends.

One of the seminal aspects of feminist pedagogy is the ability to create a community in which students can empower one another. Leading through a feminist lens provides leadership opportunities for both women and allies, be they scholarly or elsewhere, by creating an environment open to all genders that might result in positive changes. For many, the ideals of community and empowerment is central to activism and achieving social change. Feminist pedagogy seeks social justice in teaching and learning; looks for ways to include marginalized voices that are typically left out of the dominant discourse; encourages student empowerment by engaging their lived experiences (Morley, 2019; Rohrer, 2018; Shackelford, 1992; Weiler, 1991). This can take place through critical dialogues about equity/oppression, diversity, and access at multiple intersections, which challenges oppression in all forms. Beyond the classroom, community, empowerment, and leadership are central to feminism and feminist pedagogy, both the avenue by which emancipation of women is achieved and the educators who help achieve that goal. The awareness of social inequities and experience with feminist ideals such as community and

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empowerment arms students with tools to address the social responsibility of corporations and more effectively communicate with publics once they are out of the classroom and in the field.

Feminist pedagogy can empower students to actively strive for revolutionizing thought. Educators should be praxis-oriented, meaning taking time to gather relevant data, trying to understand how privilege influences both their teaching style and curriculum preferences, while simultaneously creating a safe environment in which students can speak openly about these concepts. Feminism goes beyond the narrow concern with achieving equality of opportunity within existing power relations. Feminism is also about exploring, promoting, and refining the already recognized consciousness of women's systematic rights (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Feminist pedagogy challenges traditional ways of teaching perspectives on knowledge, curriculum, texts, and assessment processes that exist in the classroom (Jones, 2018). An important goal of feminist pedagogy is to empower students and other marginalized people (Johnson, 2003). This should be achieved both inside and outside of the classroom.

## Discussion

The growing expectation of consumers, employees, and other publics for companies to contribute to society beyond products and services, and to effectively communicate with the public about these efforts and other initiatives, suggest the need for communication professionals to develop skill in empathy, cultural competence, and a sense of equity. The researchers' belief that integrating feminist theory into communication classrooms helps to shape future culturally competent communication professionals is reinforced by the participants' responses, which also reinforce feminism's potential to create equity in the classroom by laying bare potential barriers and forms of privilege and encouraging students to challenge normative practices and thinking.

The findings illustrate that participants perceive feminist teaching in a skills-based communication course to enhance the skills being taught. The reason for this, the participants suggest, is because a framework toward feminism—often including other communities outside of gender—has the power to build critical thinking skills and empathy that prepare students for the demands of industry. The thinking goes, the more one understands biases and inequities and can empathize with their intended audience, the more effective their communication in the profession will be. Further, given that many communication subfields are well-populated by women, a feminist lens also helps students to see and challenge the barriers put before young women trying to work in the industry, whether as an ally or a woman.

Another clear finding was a firm sense of personal identification of the educators as women or as allies of those treated inequitably, and the sense of personal responsibility that comes with this identity when deciding to integrate feminist principles and theory into skills-based courses. This finding suggests an opportunity for deeper examination of identity and its impact on teaching and learning. The researchers acknowledge that this calls for a deeper examination of assessment and assessment outcomes to understand the potential impact on students' affective, cognitive, or behavioral learning.

The findings create an understanding of how feminist theory is currently being integrated in the communication classroom, an area of study that is lacking research. Findings indicate there are different approaches to incorporating feminism into skills-based courses—ranging from those that

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do so intentionally to those that do so but may not label it as such. The variety of approaches used reinforces the findings in political studies that there isn't a streamlined approach (Lacey & Smits, 2015) and findings in business and management studies that some participants are cognizant of faculty and/or student resistance and career development (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) when choosing a personal approach. This presents an opportunity for institutional support for faculty who teach skills-based classes through a lens of equity. One suggestion is a more exhaustive examination of curricular development to see a bigger picture of where and how feminism and other forms of critical theory on race, class, and equity are being integrated in communication classrooms.

The range of approaches and examples of incorporating feminism into a skills-based communication course reveal that teaching feminism comes in many forms. There is a balancing act for educators in how intently they focus on feminist themes in skills-based courses, where some will directly discuss some themes, while others choose to integrate principles with more subtlety and nuance. The researchers conclude that there is no *right way* to incorporate feminism into a skills-based communication course. The decision to do so, and which approach to take, depends on the educator. One clear finding, however, was that educators interviewed almost universally agree feminism should be integrated across a curriculum, rather than relegated to stand-alone lessons or courses. Educators who are considering incorporating feminism for the first time, or enhancing their practice of doing so, should explore all the possibilities and do so in a way that is true to themselves. Further, the researchers acknowledge that feminism is one among several meaningful approaches that can be employed to help skill build in empathy, empower students, and ensure equity in the classroom. It would be worthwhile to explore comparatively and independently how other forms of critical theory are being integrated and their impact on student learning experiences, both from the instructors' and students' perspectives. Our colleagues have developed inventive approaches to teaching feminism in a way that informs and enhances skills. The academy would benefit from this knowledge through teaching briefs.

Given the qualitative nature of the methods, we cannot generalize the findings across all communication schools. The participant profile is skewed toward female participants who teach at schools in the East. Low participation among men is an indicator of opportunity to incorporate feminist pedagogy into skills-based classrooms.

The title of the call for participants, "Participants Needed: Teaching Feminism in a Skills-Based Communications Course," may have alienated those who incorporate feminist thought into a skills-based communication course but do not label it as such. If the intent is to learn from those who use a vaguer approach to teaching feminism through a lens of equity, future research recruitment should consider defining what it means to "teach feminism." Alternatively, it would be wise to add an interview question asking participants, "How do you define feminism?" Understanding the specific or broad nature of participants' responses can help to frame the range of approaches to and motivations for feminist teaching.

Limitations acknowledged, this study has revealed an encouraging range of approaches and experiences of professors who weave feminism, and equity more broadly, into skills-based communication courses. While findings indicate that there isn't an overwhelming approach or experience, we hope academics will find ways to experiment with doing so to enhance practical skills and prepare students for the demands of the workforce.

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## Appendix A

### Structured Interview Questions

1. What's your relationship to feminism?
  2. Why do you teach feminism in a skills-based course?
  3. What's your approach to teaching feminism in a skills-based course?
  4. From what ideology(s) do you teach feminism?
  5. Do you encounter encouragement or hurdles when teaching feminism in a skills-based course?
  6. What are your learnings from teaching feminism in a skills-based course?
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