

Journal of Communication Pedagogy

2018, Vol. 1(1) 70-75

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DOI: 10.31446/JCP.2018.13

Central States Communication Association

Classroom Ideas for Promoting Social Justice: Encouraging Student Activism in Intercultural and Gender Communication Courses

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Abstract: Communication courses (e.g., intercultural communication and gender communication) dedicated to the promotion of social justice often result in students' raised consciousness regarding privilege and the oppression of people who have been marginalized historically. Affected students, however, often are at a loss about what to do with the newly acquired knowledge; consequently, they may experience anger and frustration that causes them to feel overwhelmed and leaves them with a sense of hopelessness. This essay provides 10 suggestions to help communication pedagogues guide students from anger and hopelessness to action and empowerment. Tips offered center on classroom discourse, curriculum choices, and potential assignments.

My childhood and undergraduate years were experienced in the conservative space of Northeast Oklahoma. Although influenced by strong 1980s television women, such as Murphy Brown and Julia Sugarbaker, I was influenced equally by the sweet and submissive women of my rural community (population 1,600). It was not until I attended graduate school at a large research university outside Oklahoma (enrollment of 30,000) in my mid-20s that I was exposed to a diverse range of races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, social classes, abilities, and religions. In my hometown, everybody was White or variations of White and Cherokee, poor, and evangelical. If a person was anything but cisgender and heterosexual, they kept it a secret for fear of being put on a prayer list. Diversity meant having a Methodist church *and* a Church of Christ, as well as the better attended First Baptist and Assembly of God Churches.

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The author would like to thank her students for the journey and Scott A. Myers, Lawrence R. Frey, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

After experiencing three years of the eye-opening cultures of a large university city, I accepted a teaching position in higher education back in Northeast Oklahoma, determined to commit my pedagogy to raising the social justice consciousness of rural students. Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996) encouraged communication scholars to expand and transform communication theories, methods, and pedagogical practices to promote *social justice*, which they define as “the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically and/or culturally underresourced” (p. 110). My familiarity with students’ lived experiences made it relatively easy to open their eyes metaphorically to injustices in the world. Their reactions, however, took me by surprise; in short, they were angry. They were angry at society for marginalizing folks, angry at Hollywood for stereotyped character portrayals, angry at their high school teachers for not giving them access to alternative voices, angry at their relatives for being racist and sexist, and they were angry *at me* for teaching them things they could not unlearn. Students simply did not know what to do with their new knowledge. I expected them to turn their anger into activism, but it did not happen, and I wanted to know why.

A few years ago, I published results from a series of qualitative interviews conducted with university students in the lower Midwestern region of the United States about their relationships with the terms “activism” and “feminism” (Sanford, 2014). Students could not own those labels, even when, technically, they met the definitions. They discussed barriers to activism, including family ideology, lack of leadership, and fear of confrontation, which were similar to barriers identified many years earlier by McAdam (1990) and Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980). Based on those students’ interviews, below I offer 10 best practices for encouraging student activism. Not all suggestions will be achievable in all communication courses that promote social justice, but ideas can be chosen from the list to encourage students to move from inaction and confusion to action and empowerment.

Best Practice #1: Own the Vocabulary

There are many important words for budding social justice activists to know and understand, including patriarchy, heteronormativity, ethnocentrism, marginalization, microaggression, intersectionality, and privilege. However, among the most misunderstood terms that require attention, time, and clarification are “feminism” and “activism.” Unlike the aforementioned words, students tend to arrive with some knowledge and negative histories tied to “feminism” and “activism” and, consequently, they reject the labels based upon what they have heard from their families or the media. While there are many definitions for both terms, I borrow from Baumgardner and Richards (2005) to define feminism as “the movement toward full political, economic, and social equality for men and women . . . [It] implies having enough access to information to make informed choices about one’s life” (p. 20) and define activism as the “deliberate act or actions of like-minded individuals working together to change the status quo in a way that satisfies the activists” (Sanford, 2014, p. 204). “Feminist” and “activist” should be used constantly in social justice classrooms, and both instructors and students should own those labels or justify and articulate clearly their preferences for different terminology. For example, once students are educated about feminism, they may agree with critics like Crenshaw (qtd. in Vasquez, 2016) who warned that feminism is a monist approach that is “partial and exclusionary.” The students may instead choose to call themselves “womanist” or “queer” or reject labels altogether, but they will own their vocabulary.

Best Practice #2: Study Local Community Activists

When students think of activists, they are likely to think of high-profile activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Gloria Steinem, Harriet Tubman, Delores Huerta, Mother Teresa, or Mahatma Gandhi—well-known legends who risked their safety and commanded national, and, sometimes, international attention. If these are the only activists studied in communication courses, social justice activism will appear unattainable. Many people do not want to risk their lives or their safety, especially when they are new to activist work. Thus, it is imperative that students also learn about local activists and activism that is not life threatening. This goal can be achieved through inviting local guest speakers and by examining media platforms, with an assignment asking students to look for and share with their classmates examples of local activism.

Best Practice #3: Dialogue through Disagreement

Tough topics should be embraced in classroom discussions (Keating, 2007), and communication courses are ideal for modeling open, respectful dialogue. Too many times, students expect that disagreement will be handled the way that they see it portrayed on television, where discourse is quick-witted, cynical, and has only one winner at the end who shames verbally the other interactant(s). Instead, students need to learn that dialogue is a synergetic experience that requires reflective deliberation, compassion, and a willingness to change (Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Mallin & Anderson, 2000). Early readings or lectures should center on invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995) or something similar, because models of civil discourse tend to be favored within the communication discipline. Criticisms of these models should also be addressed; additional topics could include historical trauma, vulnerability, and respectability politics. Through the discussions of these early readings and lectures, the students will begin to model an ongoing dialogue. For more advice regarding classroom dialogues, see Sanford and Emami (2017).

Best Practice #4: Identify Students' Passions

There are many worthwhile activist causes that students can confront such as the environment, homelessness, violence against women, immigration, ableism, racism, and bullying. Indeed, there are so many potential causes that the choices can be overwhelming, particularly to those who are new to activist work. Students benefit from instructors who help them to identify and focus on no more than three (preferably, less) passions or causes at a time. A classroom assignment is to have students compose personal mission statements and identify one to three causes that match their missions. Furthermore, some students may welcome guidance from instructors to identify specific problems that are associated with social justice causes. It is not sufficient for students simply to identify immigration as a cause; they need to identify a specific problem, such as the proposed wall on the northern border of Mexico or policies regarding undocumented children within the United States.

Best Practice #5: Encourage Action

Identifying problems does not make people activists; finding solutions and taking action is necessary. Students need a good understanding of what “counts” as activism, including

writing letters to media editors, attending public meetings and inviting others through social media posts, creating art, boycotting businesses and their products, starting social justice activist-oriented clubs, and participating in marches. There are two areas of caution, however, when it comes to encouraging students to take action: (a) social justice is not charity work and (b) allies do not speak for those who are oppressed. Those individuals engaged in social justice must be willing to get to the root of a social injustice and transform social structures (Frey et al., 1996) as simply donating money, having a book drive, or performing some other charitable action does not challenge systemic oppression. Additionally, instructors should encourage conversations about what it means to be an ally with groups in which students are not members. For example, nonimmigrants may seek to aid the struggles of those who are immigrants, but those allies need to be reminded that they do not speak for others; they need to listen to people who are immigrants and assist when asked. Alcoff (1991) warned that one must interrogate carefully the initial impulse to teach rather than to listen to a less privileged speaker.

Best Practice #6: Discuss Barriers and Naysayers

Students often face many personal barriers and confront naysayers (both perceived and real) regarding their participation in activism. Personal barriers identified in my communication research included financial and family responsibilities, lack of movement leaders or organizers, no similar-minded cohorts, a dislike of politics, fear of verbal confrontations by naysayers, and family ideology. McAdam (1990) found that a quarter of the people who registered but did not show for Freedom Summer in 1964 stayed home because their parents opposed Black people's right to vote. Communication pedagogues should take time in their social justice courses to discuss students' perceived barriers to activism and their interactions with relevant naysayers. Many of those barriers can be addressed via course readings (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2005; Kahn, 2010) or assignments. For example, a lack of leadership in social movements can be addressed by teaching students how to collaborate and plan events. Additionally, students can learn to deal with important naysayers, including family members, by engaging them in thoughtful dialogues about social justice.

Best Practice #7: Promote Collaboration

In one of the first studies about college students' activism, Snow et al. (1980) interviewed 115 would-be student political activists and found that 73 of them (63%) did not get involved in political activism because they did not know anyone else involved. Thus, it is important to encourage students to collaborate with each other, such as in the event-planning assignment in Tip #8, but also they need to understand that organizations are potential collaborators. For example, students interested in immigration should contact local refugee and immigration centers to inquire about how they can be partners and advocates.

Best Practice #8: Assign Event Planning

Many communication educators recognize that students, particularly communication majors, should have the ability to plan and execute events for the public. For example, it is not uncommon for students in a group communication course to hold public forums or panel discussions and being assessed on their ability to work together as a group, market the event, conduct valid research, and demonstrate effective public speaking skills. Event planning should

take place in social justice courses to encourage students to take action when they see a need within their communities. The assignment can be fairly open, such that participants decide what event (e.g., forum, march, meeting, fundraiser, movie screening, or book club) works best for the social justice cause(s) and problem(s) they have identified.

For example, eight years after I returned to Northeast Oklahoma, to fulfill an event-planning requirement in the intercultural communication course, four students proposed the organization of the state's first SlutWalk. SlutWalks began in 2011 after a Toronto police officer told a crowd of women that to avoid sexual assault, they should not dress as sluts. The students' localized proposal was accepted, and although the term "slut" caused some concern on campus and in the community, the march was well attended and ultimately raised community members' consciousness regarding sexual assault and victim/survivor blaming.

Best Practice #9: Plan for Crises

Crisis communication should be addressed in courses that promote social justice, especially if students plan public events. Student organizers should answer the following questions regarding public events that they plan: What will be done in the case of bad weather? What will be the reaction to counterprotestors? What if more people show up than expected? Have proper permits been filed? Have campus or local police been notified? Who are the spokespersons and what will they say if members of the media ask questions about the event? Students who planned the Slut Walk, for instance, collaborated with campus police and with the university's Division of Student Affairs to develop a crisis plan. There were counterprotests, but organizers had formulated a plan with campus police about how to best ignore them.

Best Practice #10: Debrief

After an event or other activist undertakings, instructors and learners need to debrief, both through self-reflection (e.g., journaling, meditation, and art) and in a group. The classroom should be a safe place to conduct group reflection among sympathetic, informed peers. If relevant and appropriate, stakeholders outside of the course also should be consulted, either through a talk-back session (used after theatre performances for actors to explain their actions and to answer audience members' questions) or via a survey questionnaire or other written communication. Student organizers need to understand what went well with events and what can be improved. For example, upon reflection, coordinators of the SlutWalk discovered that the staff and board members from the local women's shelter were hurt that they were not consulted about the event or asked to join the march. Organizers corrected for their oversight and involved the shelter when they organized two more Slut Walks over the next two years.

Conclusion

Many of these best practices will benefit students long after college graduation. Having the ability to identify social justice problems, dialogue with other individuals about those problems, and take action to affect those problems will provide opportunities for students to empower themselves throughout their lives. These skills, ultimately, will make them better communicators, community members, and activists.

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