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Exploring Cultural Contracts in the Classroom and Curriculum

Implications of Identity Negotiation and Effects in Communication Curricula

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> The first prerequisite to becoming a better practitioner in a multicultural classroom is having the attitudinal openness to improving your classroom practices. . . . This means that in order to be effective in a classroom of diverse students, we must reject the traditional model of college teaching — that the student must conform to the norms of the professor. Simply put, you cannot expect your students to clone your preferred way of learning. (Lou 1994: 33)

There they were, at the premier regional forensics tournament on the East Coast. Our individual events team had practiced all year long, preparing for their persuasive, informative, after-dinner, and dramatic-duo events. They were sharp, cogent, well-trained undergraduates who were eager to win. And they did, taking first, second, and fourth places in their respective events. They were proud, and so should they be. . . . But let's reflect afresh on that competition. What had they been taught? What had their instructor trained them to do? Essentially, to win at all costs. They learned to look stiff and planned and move almost robotically. Anyone who has trained students long enough and has judged forensics tournaments knows that after a while almost everyone begins to gesture alike and even sound alike. Conformity gets rewarded. Overexpressiveness, free-form gestures, and unique style are dangerous and often costly, so coaches follow a formula that works: Copy the one who is winning all the tournaments. It sounds a lot like *assimilation*, and it was. But it was easier than fighting the forensics association for being discriminatory.

This story is worth sharing because it is analogous to the institutionalized constraints of the academy. Many professors throughout the Communication discipline have classrooms filled with brilliant students each term. These same students are conceptually molded to embrace culture-absent or privileged European-centered paradigms. Curricular homogeneity, poor textbook coverage of cultural perspectives, and culture-insensitive pedagogy each fails to promote the success of students of color in Communication, as well as in other disciplines (Freire, Clarke, and Aronowitz 1998; Giroux 1997; Jackson 2000b). As a matter of fact, they inhibit it. When there is an absence of culturally inclusive teaching materials and

research, or professors of color in the classroom, the discipline of Communication is sending a powerfully clear message to culturally marginalized students that they are not welcome, that their experience is not significant enough to consider.

But, we believe, if diversity is infused at every level of the curriculum and its administration, from textbooks and curriculum design to faculty hiring and student recruitment and retention efforts, the end result will be a conducive atmosphere for students of color to succeed and perhaps to become interested in pursuing a career in academe.

In this conceptual-theoretic essay, then, we seek as authors to demonstrate and argue for incorporation of cultural diversity in the Communication curriculum as a way to promote the recruitment, retention, and success of students of color within that discipline. Using as our model Peggy McIntosh's (1994) 26 daily ways of experiencing privilege, we will present a list of 21 ways that white students experience privilege in the Communication classroom and curriculum. We will explore how some identities are embraced (via "cultural contracts"), while others are disregarded in the design of the texts and curriculum for the basic Public Speaking course; and we offer an example of the kinds of curricular content that must be in basic Public Speaking texts and classrooms. It seems clear that without cultural inclusivity, curricular homogeneity will remain a constant in the disciplinary equation, with the effect of gradually filtering out would-be academicians who cannot imagine how they fit (Courts 1997; Davidson 1996; Giroux 1997; Jackson 1997).

Perhaps our greatest challenge is to consider these three components of promoting the success of students of color: understanding the cultural contract paradigm as an approach to diversity; attending to pedagogical and curricular strategies and concerns for empowering students of color within the basic Public Speaking course; and understanding the classroom as a "space" of privilege or resistance.

Cultural Contract Paradigms

A *cultural contract* is defined as an agreement between two or more interactants who have different interpretations of culture and who have decided to coordinate ("sign a contract") or via negotiations choose to resist coordination of a relationship with each other depending on whether the relationship is deemed valuable to both. Two points of clarity: First, this definition allows for the possibility of *intra*-cultural contracts. One example of this is a contract between two white persons, one of whom is perceived by the other as "being too liberal"; this could be considered a potential breach of a "ready-to-sign" cultural contract with whiteness as a socially constructed position of privilege. Second, this definition does not assume that the relationship is mutually satisfying, as some previous research did (Hecht and Ribeau 1984); instead, the relationship must only be deemed important. It is critical to mention this, since it is quite possible that a person can be *forced* to sign a cultural contract. For example, in some classrooms, it is an implicit agreement between teacher and student not to upset the balance of the class or the authority of the teacher with ideas that oppose those of the teacher. In a classroom driven by such a pedagogical philosophy, a student who breaks the contract is penalized, sometimes verbally and sometimes in other ways.

Hendrix (1998) addresses this penalty avoidance concern in her study of student perceptions of how race influences the credibility of professors. With a sample of 28 white respondents, Hendrix designed a triangulated study using semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and open-ended surveys. She discovered that race is a factor that tends to influence how some students evaluate their professor's teaching and credibility. That is, those students thought less of the professor who made race an issue in class, altering their collective "ready-to-sign" contract (to always hold the professor credible) in the classroom by implicitly demanding that the professor not devote much time, if any at all, to issues of race. Understandably, racial issues can promote discomfort among white students if they are led to feel responsible for racial injustice or racism. However, we contend that it is more than pedagogical approach; it is that the topic of race itself is volatile. But students must understand these issues if they are to truly communicate with cultural others. Though a decision to remain silent about race and culture in the classroom might not be the preferred choice for professors of color, students from marginalized groups, and cultural experts, silence is deemed valuable at times merely for the sake of survival. This kind of contract to be silent about race is too often signed in advance, and precludes in-depth discussions of race in a national climate heavily concerned with it. (These contracts are called "cultural" rather than "relational" contracts, because it is assumed that human beings can only relate using the apparatus of their cultures, e.g., language.)

Before proceeding any further, it is important that we explain what the different cultural contract types are. *Ready-to-sign* cultural contracts are prenegotiated, and no further negotiation is allowed. "Signing," or relational coordination, might or might not be the goal for the parties to such contracts. White students or professors, for example, have either directly or indirectly chosen to contract with themselves regarding what it means to be white in this society. White students or professors might not even be aware that their whiteness is a marker of normality and privilege that offers them the opportunity not to think about their whiteness as a racial position (Jackson 1999a, 1999b). Cultural contracts with whiteness are often defined by an interest in maintaining privilege, as in the case of curricular homogeneity; sometimes such contracts are defined by a resistance to retaining privilege. (Why in this example must they have contracted with themselves? Because there is no such thing as *not* having a contract. To say one has no cultural contract is to say that one has neither a culture of one's own nor any understanding of how to function in the culture where he or she lives.)

Quasi-completed cultural contracts are partly prenegotiated and partly open for negotiation. These interactants are not ready to "co-create" a contract (this type is discussed below) and they do not necessarily rule out maintaining their own worldviews. These persons straddle the fence in terms of their commitment to reorder privilege. The quasi-completed contract is perhaps the least durable and most popular contract in the discipline of Communication. It is easily observed in the "additive approach" to curriculum change. As explained by Courts (1997), the additive approach is enacted when, for instance, a textbook author tacks on a section or paragraph on race and gender rather than addressing the book's treatment, scope, or depth on the issues.

Finally, *co-created* cultural contracts are fully negotiable, with the only limits being personal preferences or requirements. Such a contract is often perceived as the optimal means of relational coordination across cultures, since the relationship between interactants is fully negotiable and open to differences. If a cultural contract is co-created, that means there is an acknowledgment and valuation of cultural differences. The co-created contract is the ideal context for students of color to thrive. Their cultural perspectives would be reflected, and the theoretic paradigms and curricular heterogeneity would benefit all students as they prepare to enter a multicultural workforce.

Unfortunately, too often we treat those multicultural intellectual legacies and cultural ancestries as secondary or as sensitivity-training components of the curriculum, rather than as fully legitimate lines of inquiry or rigorous explorations of indigenous and lived experiences. So we hear Communication scholars debate the significance of introductory-level Intercultural Communication courses: Should they be required? What is their utility? But in the process of asking these questions, we forget that we are preparing the next generation of professionals for that multicultural workforce. Instead, the questions really should be: Why are we questioning the significance of culture in the curriculum? What do we want our students to be able to do in that workforce? And are we preparing them to do it?

Pedagogical and Curricular Concerns

Postmodern curriculum theorists (e.g., Giroux 1991, 1997; hooks 1994; Kincheloe 1993; Lather 1991; Slattery 1994) suggest that power plays a vital role in the classroom and curriculum. It sustains privilege in vivid and tragic ways to the extent that people of color are uninvited to participate in what the academy represents unless they forfeit their desire to have their identities affirmed by the academy via institutionalized practices and/or curricular reform. Giroux (1997) articulates it best:

> In general terms, [radical educators] have argued that schools are "reproductive" in that they provide different classes and social groups with forms of knowledge, skills, and culture that not only legitimate the dominant culture but also track students into a labor force differentiated by gender, racial, and class considerations. (119)

Giroux further contends that the "radical pedagogy" school of intellectuals seems to prematurely dismiss the possibilities of real change. He suggests that sometimes the overzealous insurgency of that school leaves no room for the possibilities after the discussion of ideological subordination is completed. Like Giroux, we recognize some clear weaknesses and assert that the extant traditional pedagogical paradigms are limited and oppressive, and therefore must be radically reformed to embrace global change. When working within the confines of a system to produce change, one must first identify the microbes that are infecting the system. That is the goal of critical pedagogy, a seed of cultural studies that polices the boundaries of authority, learning, and curricular practice in order to maintain institutional integrity. All of these boundaries have a profound effect on how knowledge is disseminated and consumed in the classroom and throughout the academy. It is within these boundaries that cultural workers must attend ethically to cultural particularities and asymmetrical relations.

There is much to be said about the possibilities of change, especially in the wake of the Oakland school board's Ebonics controversy. A referendum that was the representation of collective efforts to make schooling practical was mocked, scorned, and derided (Ogbu 1999; Rodriguez 2000). Meanwhile, the parents of that school district helplessly observed the enactment of politics inexplicably linked to their children's futures. This well-meaning gesture had been designed to restore agency to the children as true participants in their own educational experience. Instead, it was read as a debate about linguistic inferiority, racial tolerance, and lower class values being imposed on the middle and upper classes. The students were lost in the shuffle in much the same way they are in the discipline of Communication. Democracy was interrupted and homogeneity continues to live in the space of privilege (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991). There are ways to empower students of color to succeed. The possibilities are endless if properly guided.

Strategies for Empowering Students of Color

Below we present a few ways in which students of color can be empowered in the basic Public Speaking course; some can apply to any course.

- Choose a text that either incorporates or is wholly designed to address a diversity of perspectives concerning race, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, age, health.
- Use ancillary materials such as recorded discussions, live presentations, and/or class exercises in the form of simulation and gaming. These should be reflective of diverse cultural experiences and learning styles. Kincheloe (1993) recommends using the holographic mind to connect to holographic realities such that multiple dimensions or layers of reality

can emerge from the classroom experience. This involves synthesizing linear and curvilinear thinking as often evoked in Afrocentric research (Jackson 1995, 2000a). Linear thinking alone leads to linear behavior and theory development. Mainstreaming a more diunital model to learning facilitates innovation and eventual paradigm shifts that are so vital to disciplinary progress.

- Be innovative with assignments and have students make direct contact with the immediate community, using theoretic perspectives or a set of tools that allows them to apply what they are learning in the course. Do this so that they are encouraged to learn about diverse cultural experiences.
- Invite guest speakers who can talk about their lived cultural experiences.
- Use students from previous semesters to give you feedback on the class and how you might incorporate a more culturally diverse perspective. They can serve as auditors and perhaps be given a one credit-hour independent study or internship so that they can receive something in exchange for their time.
- Have a friend or colleague of a different cultural background visit your class and evaluate you and your pedagogical approach. The key is accepting criticism and being honest about your limitations.
- Consider how your own approach to learning is culturally biased. Do you have students in your class from cultures where speakers typically make indirect eye contact with audiences; will those students reside in the United States after graduation? Moderate your range of acceptable speech behaviors so your speaking advice does not ignore cultural differences, yet still prepares students for future success.
- Don't be afraid to do periodic checks with students about the level of inclusiveness they perceive. For example, you might create and distribute a small survey that asks students to identify weaknesses in the course and discuss the perceived cultural and curricular diversity represented in the course.
- Assign at least one speech that is nontraditional. For example, maybe the assignment would be for the speaker to sit down while in front of the class, or to serve as instructor to teach a lesson from the textbook or the student's own culture. Perhaps have the student serve as an external expert for a day. This strategy, especially, can lessen the communication anxiety that intercedes classroom performance (Ralston, Ambler, and Scudder 1991).
- Be conscientious about accommodating varied styles of learning and communicating. Vary your lectures so that some are visual, tactile, auditory, or experiential (i.e., hands-on) or are a synthesis of these.
- Establish teams of students early in the term. Give the class opportunities to bond through in-class games and exercises. This also facilitates development of new relationships and offers students who are reticent a sense of inclusion.
- After at least one speech, require students to give feedback; for another, require the speaker to include the names of two or more classmates in the speech, not preplanned. This way, they are engaging audiences and speakers.

Understanding the Classroom Climate as a Space of Privilege or Resistance

As academics, we romanticize about freedom, justice, independence, and integrity. These important touchstones of the academy must be upheld in the classroom and curriculum, otherwise these attainable ideas are mere fantasies in our imagination (Giroux and McLaren 1993). Allowing privilege to be perpetuated in the classroom politicizes and suppresses the possibilities for growth. But in rejecting the impulse to maintain privilege, you can make the classroom become a climate conducive for students of color to succeed (Jackson 1997). As critical theorists, we are well aware of how privilege sometimes creeps into our consciousness, so for this essay we have identified at least 21 daily ways that whites experience privilege in the classroom. We only talk about white privilege here because it is that brand of privilege that promotes a climate that is not conducive for the success of students of color.

1. Course content will most likely reflect a white perspective paradigmatically (Freire and Ramos 2000).
2. Course content will most likely reflect a white perspective of history or classics (Epstein 2000).
3. Course content will most likely make white students feel normal and included (Giroux and McLaren 1993).
4. The instructor will most likely be white (Kincheloe 1993; Lather 1991).
5. The instructor will most likely use examples, stories, and/or jokes most relevant to whites (Lou 1994).
6. White students rarely have to worry that their grade has anything to do with their race or perspective on race (Hendrix 1998).
7. Most textbook authors will most likely be white and writing from a white perspective (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991).

8. Most of the students in the classroom will most likely be white or have similar backgrounds.

9. The tests will most likely be structured to reflect a strong white cultural bias (Hernstein and Murray 1996).

10. White students often do not feel the need to learn about other cultures, and not doing so will have no bearing on their future success (Jackson 1999a, 1999b).

11. White students typically have no need to behaviorally or linguistically codeswitch in the classroom (Jackson 1999a, 1999b).

12. White students at a predominantly white or black university can be assured that they will not be singled out to be used as an example in class and then asked to represent the entire race or culture with their one response (Jackson 1999a).

13. White students are rarely asked to think about their privilege (Jackson 1999b).

14. White students can be assured that they will not be ingratiated with a compliment such as "You are so articulate" or "You are not like the others."

15. White professors at predominantly white universities do not have to be concerned about whether their race is a factor in end-of-the-semester student evaluations. This is especially related to course content and physical appearance of the professor (Hendrix 1998).

16. Whites typically experience little to no race-related performance anxiety, so there is little chance of self-talk such as "I have to perform well because I am a white man" (Kincheloe 1993).

17. Virtually all multimedia excerpts (i.e., radio, print, television, film) used by the instructor or classmates will be reflective of or relevant to whites.

18. Whites find it fairly easy to form or join study groups with peers, due to their minimized differences and constant reaffirmation of white identity as being okay.

19. White students feel empowered to question the syllabus and overall class structure.

20. White professors do not have to worry about their credibility being almost automatically called into question due to race (Hendrix 1998).

21. The teaching and learning styles used in the class will most likely reflect a style most comfortable for whites (Lou 1994).

Implications for Empowering Students of Color

Davidson (1996) recommends that discussions of empowering students of color not be taken lightly; and suggests that not all oppositional identities lead to academic failure, some remain resilient and intact despite the challenges. This is much like the Ralston, Ambler, and Scudder (1991) study in which African Americans were predicted to have more communication anxiety than white students. To the researchers' surprise, African-American students performed as well and sometimes better than did the white students and had less anxiety. This finding evidences a strong resilience to dominance, a factor that is common among African-American identity scales and studies.

Davidson (1996) admits that identities are politicized in the classroom; and while theories, approaches, and strategies have been employed to alleviate this problem, it is only gradually diminishing. For example, she explores ways in which students have empowered themselves and consequently have countered the identity politics by resisting social categories, changing academic institutions, and shifting transcultural realities. These three self-empowerment decisions reflect all three of the cultural contract types — ready-to-sign, quasi-completed, and co-created contracts, respectively.

As communicologists, we have the wherewithal to understand interactional dynamics in the classroom and curriculum. Although we are situated at the periphery of the national conversation, this volume and this chapter offer substantive critiques and strategies capable of enlivening the ongoing debate and shift how scholars and students see cultural diversity. Diversity is an identity issue. It suggests that one's self-definition is distinguishable from others' — and that enhances, rather than subtracts from, the overall mission of a university as a community of citizens decidedly committed to progress and the preservation of integrity. Whitson (1991), among others, criticizes Hirsch's (1987) work on cultural literacy, claiming it appeals to popular audiences but fails to promote social competence, the cloak under which race and gender anxiety lie. Whitson's analysis represents a progressive educational advocacy. Critical pedagogy scholars such as bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe, Patrick Courts, and Patrick Slattery have successfully vied for a position in the debate on multicultural curriculum development and reform, postmodern literacy and instructional practices, and radical pedagogy. They have taken the lead as they theorize about oppressive pedagogies (see Freire and Ramos 2000; Freire, Clarke, and Aronowitz 1998), border pedagogies (see Giroux 1991, 1997), politeracies (see Courts 1997), and postformalism (see Kincheloe 1993). Now, we must formally institute new progressive changes in the Communication curriculum and classroom.

Note

A version of the cultural contracts theory introduced here was presented at the April 2000 Eastern Communication Association Conference, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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