Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research

2017

Culturally Responsive Graduate Teaching Instructors: Lessons on Facilitating Classroom Dialogues on Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Injustices

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Recommended Citation

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Nancy Maingi

Graduate teaching instructors (GTIs) have the unique opportunity of learning to be both scholars and teachers at the same time. This juxtaposition between teacher and student presents distinctive challenges that are seldom captured in existing research. One such challenge is the task to facilitate classroom dialogues on issues of race, ethnicity, and culture. While GTIs are charged with the labor of instructing university classrooms full of diverse student populations, it is common for them to instruct these courses without ever having instructional training on culturally responsive teaching. It is also possible that GTIs are not comfortable discussing issues of race, ethnicity, and culture because they may have not critically examined their own positionalities, or the impact these positionalities can have on their instructional/classroom communication strategies and behaviors. This paper offers an autoethnographic account of the awakening of my own critical consciousness during a semester long community-based learning project at a predominantly African American high school. In reflecting on this experience, I offer suggestions for GTIs on becoming more culturally responsive teachers.

During the 2016 National Communication Association (NCA) convention, scholars, graduate students, community partners, and practitioners assembled panels, courses, film screenings, and workshops to animate the intersections of civic engagement with communication research, theory, teaching, and practice. As a second-year graduate teaching instructor (GTI) completing my master's program, I attended the conference for the first time. I was enthused by our sense of commitment to question and explore communication practices that may work toward social change in our local, national, and international communities. I was especially excited about how the various sessions connected and informed questions I was starting to explore on culturally responsive teaching, and how to teach students to use their communication skills to work toward social change in their communities.

The tumultuous past few years in our country have increasingly galvanized students of all races, ethnicities, and cultures to voice their opinions on issues of racial injustice and systemic inequalities. Given this rampant uneasiness, teachers have been thrust into position to either ignore these issues and protests happening all over the U.S., or else offer students a critical education on productive communication practices for students to organize and use their voices to work toward social change.[1] As a graduate teaching instructor, I have found myself grossly uncomfortable and unprepared for this task. While at NCA, I realized that other GTIs felt just as underprepared and unsure how to facilitate dialogues, deliberations, and discussions on issues of race, ethnicity, and culture in their culturally diverse college classrooms. This was especially evident during a session sponsored by the Black Caucus titled "Civic Callings in the Communication Classroom: Dialogues of Race and Social Justice." During this session, GTIs from different universities expressed their difficulties in facilitating meaningful dialogues with their students on issues concerning race and social justice. It was clear that students wanted to engage in conversations about the issues they were seeing around them, but they struggled with engaging one another in the classroom (for various reasons). GTIs from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, expressed that they personally lacked confidence in their ability to engage their students in dialogue, while also maintaining less-than-hostile classroom environments. Myself, a Black woman born in Kenya, East Africa, related to this predicament of feeling distanced across differences, as these were the same hardships I had experienced in the past. That is, before I delved into my semester-long service-learning project at a local high school.

During the Black Caucus session at NCA, I offered that community-based learning projects, similar to the one discussed in this research, provides GTIs practical learning opportunities that can aid them in their quest to become more skilled at facilitating classroom dialogues on issues of race, ethnicity, and culture. I had, in fact, noted the lack of situation-relevant scholarship available to me during the early stages of my own research. The conversations during the Black Caucus session at NCA confirmed the need for more research on instructional/classroom communication, written from the perspective of GTIs, and especially so during the current social, political, and economic landscape. The call for more research is especially important as news consumption and political dialogues through social media outlets – such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. – have increased student awareness and engagement with these complex issues. And particularly so in high school and university settings, where these issues are affecting members

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1   A few examples of things that have contributed to a tumultuous year in our country are: the historic victory of President Donald J. Trump; fatal shootings by and of police officers; national scrutiny of police tactics; passage of House Bill 2 in North Carolina; gerrymandering challenges; and voting rights restrictions.

of the student community and beyond. The cultural landscape is (always) changing and teachers at all levels must be better prepared to facilitate dialogues, deliberations, and discussions on issues of social injustice along the lines of race, ethnicity, and culture. This research offers suggestions for new teachers, and particularly GTIs, toward this goal. This work is divided into two key sections: the first examines critical reflections of myself as teacher-as-researcher, and the second section offers lessons I have learned through classroom activities and from students' voices.

In what follows, I offer an autoethnographic account of the awakening of my own critical consciousness during a semester-long community-based learning project. In doing so, I explore different dimensions of classroom communication by using a critical pedagogy lens. I detail the gaps in my learning that prompted this research, followed by a discussion of my decision to use autoethnography as my research method. Then, I address culturally responsive teaching and communication activism pedagogy, before turning to the community-based learning project that became an awakening space for both the students and me. To conclude, I offer suggestions for other GTIs looking to become culturally responsive teachers (CRT). It is my hope that my autoethnographic account continues the conversations that we started back at NCA. I feel that building upon this conversation adds to current research on instructional/classroom communication. While there are plenty of case studies exploring dimensions of instructional/classroom communication experiences and practices from the perspectives of experienced teachers, faculty, and scholars – particularly in communication activism pedagogy – there is little to no research exploring dimensions of classroom communication from the experiences of graduate teaching instructors (GTIs). I find this especially alarming because even though new graduate instructors typically have less experience and training than tenured or experienced faculty, they nonetheless instruct courses in which issues of race, ethnicity, and culture will come up. This occurrence is only amplified by the increased discussions, dialogues, and debates concerning race, ethnicity, and culture that students see occurring in the current American multicultural landscape. It is time that we all learn how to talk together about these important issues.

While a lack of experience and the fact of being non-tenured may be underlying reasons as to why many GTIs are uncomfortable facilitating classroom dialogues on race, ethnicity, and culture, it is also possible that GTIs are uncomfortable facilitating these dialogues because they have not critically examined their own identities, positionalities, and prejudices – or the impact these facets have on their classroom culture. Additionally, I do not discount the fact that is it relatively taboo in U.S. American culture to talk openly about race in casual conversation. In any case, many of these notions are somewhat daunting for the communication discipline, as several of our goals focus on teaching students to use their public voices to initiate change. These aims might seem more like a mere dream if scholars at all

levels are uncomfortable talking about intersectional concerns, or are not getting the training needed to be able to do so.

To this end, there is a pressing call for research on instructional communication strategies and experiences written for, and by, graduate teaching instructors. GTIs must possess the skills to facilitate classroom dialogues that encourage students to think critically, listen across difference, and to discriminate between facts and opinions (Giroux, 2013). GTIs must also be skilled on how to empower students of all races, ethnicities, and cultures to use their communication skills to work towards social justice. To do so, I argue, GTIs must be purposeful in seeking opportunities to reflexively interrogate their own identities, and how their identities influence communication processes in the classroom. GTIs should also be keen to learn which lessons, activities, and communication strategies can be employed to empower students from culturally diverse population groups to utilize their voices to initiate change.

To guide this research, I use my experiences in a semester-long community-based learning project to interrogate two research questions. The first is: How does my identity influence the way I communicate in the classroom as a teacher? The second is: Which creative lessons and activities can graduate teaching instructors use to encourage students from diverse populations to speak up and express their views and experiences in classroom dialogues on racial, ethnic, and cultural injustices? In investigating these two important questions, I build on previous literature on culturally responsive teaching and communication activism pedagogy, in order to critically examine my understanding of identity, culture, and power in the classroom setting. I am intentionally centralizing an interrogation of my/self, and especially the role my/this identity plays in classroom dialogues. As such, I am first obliged to discuss who I am and why this reflection is important.

Teacher Identity: Who I am and Why It Matters

There is a central focus on teacher identity in this research, and this is both intentional and necessary. I realize that who I am, and who you are, influences how we can and do approach difficult dialogues in the classroom. As a Black woman, who is also an immigrant from Kenya, East Africa, the challenges I experience in facilitating talks about race, ethnicity, and culture in the classroom are different from that of a U.S.-born Black woman; are different from that of a U.S.-born White man, and so forth. As a teacher, I see myself through my students. This perception of *self*, best described by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) as *double-consciousness*, has greatly contributed to my discomfort discussing issues of race, justice, and inequality. My identity as a Black woman, who is also an immigrant from Kenya, East Africa, seems complicated in these conversations. My immigrant status makes a difference; whether this difference is good or bad is often determined by the other person's perception.

If I am being transparent, I am just as afraid of being perceived as the Black teacher who silences White students as I am of being the African teacher who doesn't like U.S.-born Blacks. These are harsh realities and unknowable doubts that stem from each of our identities, and that affect the way we approach and can approach conversations of race, justice, and inequality. Our identities do make a difference, but we cannot let them deter us from offering students a critically sound communication education, as well as the opportunity to engage in difficult dialogues. We also cannot begin to get better about facilitating transformative dialogues if we are not willing to honestly and directly interrogative ourselves, our prejudices, and the baggage that our identities and experiences bring into the classroom. Because of these convictions we each hold about ourselves, I believe it is necessary for teachers to turn the "ethnographic gaze inward" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). As such, I have chosen to use autoethnography as my research method in this work. I have also selected some of Kahl's (2011) ideas of *Writing Autoethnographically Applied to an Instructional Setting*, as adapted from Engstrom's (2008) original principles, as an additional baseline for both analyzing and writing this research. The following principles proved to be helpful tools for helping me in identifying elements of my own understandings of race, ethnicity, and culture:

> (1) critically reflecting upon prejudices that one brings to a situation (e.g., a classroom); (2) examining the effect an instructor has on students; (3) discussing the impact that the writing has on oneself and students. (Kahl, 2011, p. 1929)

These three principles centralize reflection as a method of understanding one's relationship with culture, and with the students in their classroom. I assert that this introspective perspective on identity, self, and culture can best be realized by using autoethnography as a research method in the present study.

The Case for Autoethnography as a Viable Research Method for Communication Instructors

Autoethnographic writing often illuminates an author's relationship with culture. According to Fassett and Warren (2007), it is important to consider "how the author's very (in)actions create and sustain complex social phenomena, including how s/he understands identity, power, and culture" (p. 47). Autoethnographic styles of writing and conducting research are sometimes critiqued for their provocative relationship to readers. By provocative, I mean the use of creative literary techniques, such as figurative language, to rhetorically connect with and draw readers into a conversation. Autoethnography is also a writing style that centers its focus on reflection and the lived experience, which makes this method of inquiry ideal for my current research (Goodall, 2000). Autoethnography allows communication instructors to critically examine our experiences to better understand the roles we play in sometimes creating or reinforcing the "systems that bind us"

(Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 47). As Denzin (1997) asserts, autoethnography is the "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (p. 227). In turning the "ethnographic gaze inward," I admit that it makes me feel vulnerable (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). There are no fancy words to cover up the moments in which I feel that I may seem ignorant; words also fail to obstruct or cover the moments when I come face-to-face with my own prejudices.

This feeling of doing autoethnographic inquiry is vulnerable and unsettling, yet I strongly believe that this feeling is a necessary part of becoming a culturally responsive teacher. Furthermore, while my goal is to create knowledge that may potentially help other GTIs who are learning or striving to become culturally responsive teachers, it is also important to note that I do not intend to colonize knowledge creation by privileging my own reflections over the community partners and students with whom I engage with (Collier & Muneri, 2016). As an aspiring critical pedagogy scholar, I have learned to continuously assess the ways in which I might be re/producing and/or de/colonizing knowledge (Collier & Muneri, 2016). This critical assessment of the ways in which scholars and teachers potentially control and produce knowledge inside culturally diverse classrooms, is especially important to note when one is conducting research with students who come from historically oppressed groups. Considerations of student-, teacher-, and classroom-related research require deeper understandings of the existing literature on culturally responsive teaching and communication activism pedagogy; as well as an appreciation of the gaps that make this very research especially relevant for GTIs.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

At its core, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is focused on highlighting and researching effective teaching strategies in culturally diverse classroom (Stairs, 2007; Gay, 2000). CRT scholars Kathryn Au (2009) and Andrea Stairs (2007) have drawn clear distinctions between culturally responsive teaching, and "good" teaching, by stating that "culturally responsive teachers make explicit the issues of race, ethnicity, and culture as central to teaching, learning, and schooling; a stance not often evident in more homogeneous, suburban teaching contexts" (Stairs, 2007, p. 38). Existing research suggests that teachers are often ill-prepared to address the challenges presented by diverse classroom settings (Stairs, 2007; Jost et al., 2005; Gay, 2000). Part of this problem is that teachers are sometimes either unaware of issues of inequality, or else are reluctant to speak up about them. Jost et al. (2005) state:

> Based on their own experiences, most White teachers are blind to issues of racial inequity, and often refuse to recognize differences that separate races. They believe

> that society is fair and just. In fact, they believe that the
> United States was built on principles of fairness, justice,
> and equality. For most Black teachers, on the other hand,
> race is a concept that they cannot ignore. It is a concept
> they have to reconcile with on a daily basis, and many of
> them understand institutional racism at a gut level, but are
> reluctant to articulate it. (p. 14)

While this reluctance to speak up or recognize issues of inequality may have worked across different spaces and times, students' awareness and involvement in protest action across the country no longer permit this silence in today's classrooms. Therefore, it behooves teachers at all levels to be readily prepared to facilitate these challenging conversations.

Race and ethnicity are only one part of CRT. A consensus in culturally responsive literature is that culture also plays a huge role in the classroom. While most scholars would agree with this idea, there is limited research on how the identities of both students and teachers influence classroom communication. Furthermore, most available literature focuses on strategies for K-12 teachers – often neglecting new college teachers who instruct at culturally diverse universities. Instructors new to universities, and specifically GTIs, are often teaching in classrooms full of students from different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, and thus it seems pressing for scholars to lend their voices and research to these experiences. GTIs striving to be culturally responsive teachers could also benefit from communication activism pedagogy. This is particularly true since activism pedagogy offers practical outlooks on how to empower students to use communication as a tool for initiating change.

Communication Activism Pedagogy

Students' awareness of the injustices happening in the world necessitates that pedagogical approaches and tools assist them in making more agentic and empowered choices. How then, do we teach our students to use their communication skills to work toward social change and justice (Frey & Palmer, 2014)? This is the fundamental question in communication activism pedagogy literature. While conversations about joining social justice activism with ethical communication practices have been happening for centuries, it has taken a significant amount of time to galvanize academics – and particularly communication scholars – since they are ideally situated to initiate inclusive change (Frey & Carragee, 2007). Communication activist scholars Frey and Palmer (2014) advocate that teachers need to go beyond merely making students aware of the injustices that plague our society. They explain:

> It is not enough merely to demonstrate or bemoan the
> fact that some people lack the minimal necessities of
> life, that others are used regularly against their will and

against their interest by others for their pleasure or profit,
and that some are defined as "outside" the economic,
political, or social system because of race, creed, lifestyle,
or medical condition, or simply because they are in the
way of someone else's project. A social justice sensibility
entails a moral imperative to act as effectively as we can
to do something about structurally sustained inequalities.
To continue to pursue justice, it is perhaps necessary that
we who act be personally ethical, but that is not sufficient.
Our actions must engage and transform social structures.
(Frey & Palmer, 2014, p. 111)

As such, scholarship on communication activism pedagogy is well-stocked
with service-learning case studies. Frey and Palmer provide exemplars
of communication activism pedagogy by highlighting the experiences of
various students, community partners, and teachers that have committed
themselves to this type of work (Batac, 2016). These activists' research is a
solid foundation for communication activism pedagogy; however, much of
this work contains few examples that are situationally relevant to GTIs. This
lack of concrete examples, along with the ever-changing cultural landscape,
provides justification for the GTI experiences I note in this research. Before
offering my autoethnographic account, I preview the research institution
I worked at, offer a brief description of the partnerships involved in this
research, and provide a short introduction of the community-based learning
project I was a part of.

The Research Institution, Partnership, and Community-Based Learning Project

The institution of higher education documented in this research is a
public, research-intensive university located on the East Coast. The university
is regarded as one of the most diverse of its kind in the region. The community
partner is an urban high school located in the same city as the university. As a
community partner, the high school has a rich history in the local community.
Especially so because it was one of the first Black high schools in the area.
This high school was also the first to be racially-integrated, even though it
has largely remained a predominantly African American school.

The community partnership between the high school and university
was designed to foster greater social justice sensibility for communication
studies students at the university, and has been in place since 2007 (Jovanovic,
Poulos, & Legreco, 2010). While this partnership is inevitably designed to
deepen students' learning on public speaking and writing, the central focus
is on teaching youth, at both the university and the high school, how to
initiate and actively participate in positive social change within their local
community. During the course of this partnership, university professors work
alongside teachers and administrators at the high school on local projects. Past

projects include mobilizing students to work together to fight homelessness in the community, initiating a community-wide project to improve transportation policy, partnering with various community entities to improve relations between community teens and the government, and promoting the democratic process of participatory budgeting in the community (Jovanovic et al., 2010).

During the semester this research took place, the partnership brought together 25 high school students taking an 11th grade honors English class and their teacher, 12 students from an undergraduate communication class, and two GTIs from the university's Communication Studies Department. The cultural backgrounds of all participants were diverse in age, race, and gender. Of the 25 high school participants, 23 identified as African American, and two identified as Hispanic. The 12 undergraduate students from the university class included three African American students, one Hispanic student, and eight White students. In addition to myself, there was another male GTI who identifies as an African American. The semester's objective was for the university students, both undergraduate and graduate, to host class sessions for the 11th grade honors English students at the high school on civic literacy and community advocacy. In order to do so, we needed to construct a ten-week student-centered curriculum featuring interactive exercises that deepened students' learning on how to use their voices to create positive social change in their community.

The Awakening of My Critical Consciousness in Community-Based Learning

In what follows, I offer some of the lessons I learned during the awakening of my critical consciousness. In an attempt to stay true to the reflexive nature of this research, I go back and forth between the practice of reflecting, and that of interpreting, to best situate this experiential research and knowledge. During my reflection, I will highlight meaningful revelations that uniquely informed the awakening of my own critical consciousness. These meaningful revelations will be ***bolded and italicized*** for emphasis. In the body of my autoethnographic accounts, I highlight three lessons that I learned in the process of becoming a more culturally responsive GTI. These lessons are numbered and include subsections that serve as experiences intending to further illuminate the lessons and findings discussed. I have organized these three lessons in a manner that ultimately strives to answer the research questions (from above) guiding this project. In the concluding sections, I ease out of my autoethnographic voice to offer a wider view of what this research might mean for other GTIs and the communication discipline at large. I also offer a post-writing reflection that addresses the concerns I raised earlier in this article. Finally, I summarize the lessons learned and offer suggestions for ways to implement these lessons in daily practice. To start off, I begin with what I believe to be the most foundational lesson I learned in this work – critical reflexivity.

Lesson #1: Critical reflexivity is necessary for understanding how identity influences communication processes in the classroom.

In this first lesson, I critically reflect on my own prejudices and biases; I reflect on the effects my teaching has on my students; and I reflect on the impact that writing has on both the students and myself as their teacher. Coming into my second year of graduate teaching instruction, I did not know the difference between the idea of reflection, and that of *reflexivity*. Perhaps I was too busy to make this distinction, or maybe, it took me longer to understand Giroux's (1988) idea of the *transformative intellectual*, and Freire's (2012) call for *critical pedagogy*. It was not until this community-based learning project that I realized that knowing and understanding the difference between reflection and reflexivity might be the single most important distinction for new teachers to make.

While reflection is a central tenet of reflexive research, the act of simply reflecting – pondering, thinking, and meditating about something or an experience – is only enough to illuminate the process of knowledge creation – or the relationship between researcher and participant. On the other hand, reflexivity is based on the central idea that knowledge is context-based and reality is socially constructed (D'Silva, Smith, Della, Potter, Rajack-Talley, & Best, 2016). Reflexivity demands the researcher's critical self-examination, in relation to the others present and cultural context, while reflection only scratches the surface of researcher identity. Thus, reflexivity is especially important for GTIs looking to become culturally responsive teachers since it requires a willingness to examine how one's background, personal values, and experiences affect what they are able to observe and analyze (D'Silva et al., 2016). This reflexivity is particularly important when interrogating and reconciling the biases that we, as teachers, bring into the classroom.

Critically Reflecting Autoethnographically on My Own Prejudices

I felt like an outsider when I first met the students at the high school. The other graduate student and I had gone in for a preliminary session with the students to give them an overview of the semester and introduce ourselves to them. I did not feel comfortable. I was nervous on my first solo day teaching the public speaking course at the university; however, the discomfort I felt facilitating in front of these high school students was far worse than any discomfort I had ever felt in any classroom (even as a student). At the university, I felt like I spoke the language of teacher, student, and professional with ease. I sounded confident, I knew the material, and I felt like I looked the part. I felt less judged. But, in being transparent, the discomfort I felt with the high school students was deeply rooted in my own biases and understanding of race, identity, and oppression. According to Leonardo and Porter (2010), "pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power" (pp. 139-140).

While this potential for me to possibly connect more readily with students of color may be true in some ways, it is still possible for Black teachers – who do not benefit from racial power – to experience the same discomfort as White teachers in these situations. This was definitely the case for me.

I've gone through most of my life never consciously thinking or talking about race, oppression, or social justice. I've chosen to be colorblind. I did not see much wrong with this until now. As a Black woman born in Kenya, East Africa, my reality has always felt different than that of the Black people born in the United States. My identity as an immigrant from Africa has always lingered outside of the primarily binaried racial realities in America (that of Black people and White people). This identity position that I, both consciously and unconsciously, (have chosen to) occupy has always made me feel justified in avoiding – what seems to be – messy race relations in America. By rejecting these negative race relations as silly and unnecessary, the issues and realities of those who are disenfranchised because of their race, has often been dismissed as an afterthought for me.

In most contexts of my life, I did not have to interrogate my own identity; but while standing there, in front of the students, I felt like an imposter. I looked like them, but the fact that I could not even pronounce their names made me feel completely out of place. The fact that they kept laughing every time I mispronounced a name made me feel both embarrassed and unwelcome in their space. I had never felt this way when teaching at the university.

On my drive home that first day, I wondered how my faculty adviser had worked through this. Had she experienced the same discomfort when she first started working with these students? Was she far too advanced in her career as an activist/critical pedagogue to experience such discomfort? Had her experiences caused her to interrogate her own positionality? Was it too late for me to quit? It has often seemed most necessary for White teachers to interrogate their privilege, but my disconnect with these African American high school students forced me to consider my own privilege. This reflection is something I now believe all teachers need to do.

I couldn't ignore my own privilege. Growing up in a middle-class African family afforded me different experiences than those of the students I was teaching. I was raised in a home with both of my parents, and each had post-secondary degrees. My siblings and I mostly went to charter schools growing up. I was accustomed to very different cultural values and experiences than those of the predominantly African American students in the class. I never considered this in my public speaking course at the university. My reality was different, and my experiences were different; this would only become more evident when we got into conversations about the police, equal education, and violence/crimes later on in the semester.

I thought more about my race and ethnicity standing in front of the students than I had my entire life. Part of me was irritated with them. I thought that the fact that I was Black warranted some sort of edge with the students.

I come to find out that race is by no means a unifying force (Freire, 2012). In realizing this disconnect, I made a mental effort to try and find "common ground" (a concept I now believe to be deeply problematic) with the students. (I will return to why I find "common ground" problematic when discussing activity #5.) When we went around saying interesting things about ourselves, I mentioned that I was born in Kenya, East Africa. While some of the students found this information interesting, this did nothing to mask the disconnect I felt between us. I reflected on this disconnect between myself and the students well into the end of our semester, and this allowed me to better understand my own discomfort discussing issues of race, culture, and social injustice.

I realized that not only had I been ignoring issues of race and oppression, but that this ignorance affected my ability to be a more culturally responsive teacher. I had felt this same disconnect before with African American students – and particularly female ones – in my public speaking class I was teaching at the university, but I had chosen to let myself ignore it. I refused to acknowledge the systemic disadvantages students of historically marginalized groups suffered, because, in a way, this kept me from being negative or pessimistic about my own future in the academy. I did not want to accept this, and I still struggle with accepting the notion of systemic inequalities of any sort. This very thought scares me in ways I cannot even verbalize. It took me a while to admit to myself that, I also, was struggling to find my voice. It turned out that I had more in common with these students than I had thought. This realization made me more open and motivated to interrogate other aspects of myself as an instructor; and particularly about aspects that were possibly negatively affecting the students and our classroom culture.

Reflecting on the Effects Instructors have on their Students

The disconnect I felt between the students and me made me critically interrogate the power dynamics between us. I started to wonder if the way I communicated when I was facilitating class was reinforcing power differentials and hierarchies between us: *I am incredibly detailed, I like to plan everything down to the minute, and while I don't mind adjusting during classroom sessions, I strongly prefer not to. I did not consider the effects this had on students and classroom instruction until this service-learning project.* Midway through the semester, during a post-reflection session between the high school English teacher and me, I mustered up the courage to ask her, her thoughts on how I was doing. She was honest with me and told me that she felt that the students were eager to learn, but that my desire to stay within the lesson plans sometimes interfered with emergent dialogue in a way that was potentially silencing. Instead of empowering the students to use their voices, I had possibly reduced dialogue down to a mere technique to keep the students engaged in the conversations, rather than appreciating this dialogue as a "process of learning and knowing that

invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process" (Freire, 2012, p. 17). My insistent nature to live in the details of my plans was affecting the students' learning and the knowledge-creation process. It took a while after my conversation with the English teacher for me to start challenging myself to go with the flow of the conversation, and when I did, in the best ways that I could, I found that I started to learn from the students, as well.

The pressure to stay within my lesson plan details also came with a pressure to "steer the ship," and even to monopolize knowledge creation. This reinforces what Freire terms as "banking" education – in which students are viewed as "empty vessels to be filled" with knowledge by their teachers – ultimately reinforcing systemic oppressions (Freire, 2012, p. 73). Releasing the pressure to get through every single detail on my lesson plan allowed students to become co-facilitators as well. The university students became actively engaged in the classroom discussions, and they began asking students to share their thoughts during classroom discussions. And the high school students started engaging each other in tough dialogues. During a discussion on the Black Lives Matter movement, a Hispanic student offered that he felt that Brown lives were overlooked in these conversations. A Black female student who felt that he was missing the point explained what she perceived as the logic behind the movement. Students seemed more willing to engage with one another, and they began trying to reason with each other. I also started to see things that I had always deemed to be disruptive student behavior, as an integral part of the knowledge creation process. Students engaged in more side talk than they had previously, and while this goes against traditional notions of listening and classroom decorum, in this space, it served to create greater peer-teaching and learning. Students that were uncomfortable speaking up during large discussions often shared their thoughts with their peers, and this prompted discussions between them that would often be brought up later during larger class discussions when a group disagreed, or sometimes, one of the these students posed a question to the whole class.

Reflecting on the Impacts that Writing had on both Students and Teacher

At the beginning and the end of each session, students were offered five minutes to write about their initial thoughts about the topic of the day, as well as respond to a reflection prompt. Initially, this practice seemed necessary for our research on culturally responsive teaching, but it became an even more important practice for me, as a researcher. Reading their responses gave me a gauge on what they were learning, what they liked, and what they did not like. More importantly, it gave me insight into who they were as people. I noticed that a lot of the information they shared in their writing responses, were not often shared in open discussions. For example, in a prompt that asked students to share their thoughts on violence, one student shared the following thoughts:

> I learned that a lot of people have different views of violence, I feel that we need to change something as a community. I have seen my mother get abused more than once. I learned to not stand by myself. (Student Writing, 2016)

In another prompt that asked students whether their initial thoughts on police accountability changed following our discussions, a student shared the following: "police tendencies are never going to change. There's always going to be racist, hateful, evil cops, and people will continue to die. Protest only get more people killed" (Student Writing, 2016). These thoughts were not shared in the larger class discussion. Perhaps the vulnerability of sharing personal experiences in front of 30 to 40 people, some of whom they did not know, was daunting for some of them. I often wondered about how these informed writing responses captured their voices more than an interviewing method might – which I had initially thought would be best methodological approach for this research. I cannot help but think that the interviewer-interviewee dynamic would have produced less reflexive and honest responses.

Writing allowed them to be more honest about their thoughts, positions, and experiences. In similar fashion, I suspected that the level of transparency in writing these reflections from a first-person point of view is much deeper than if I had done this research in the more traditional style of reporting research, of which I have become accustomed. In critically reflecting on my experiences during this project, I feel more informed in my role as a teacher. In responding to Denzin's (1997) call to "turn the narrative gaze inward" (p. 227), I feel more critically conscious and open to discussing issues that I had previously been reluctant to discuss or even acknowledge. This autoethnographic account is the first place I have ever honestly discussed the level of discomfort I feel concerning issues of race, ethnicity, and social justice. Beyond reflecting and interrogating my own identity as teacher, I also realized the importance of student-centered teaching. Getting students involved as co-constructors of their communication education is likely to both inspire their interest, and empower them to speak up.

Lesson #2: Student-Centered Teaching Encourages Active and Responsible Learning

Prior to designing the content for the semester's weekly lesson plans, my faculty advisor, the high school English teacher, the other GTI, and I met to discuss an approach for co-constructing the lesson plans. Our discussions resulted in a unified desire to employ a student-centered approach in designing the semester curriculum. This would hopefully encourage students to participate in their own learning process, as opposed to being passive receivers (Freire, 2012). In creating a student-centered curriculum, we asked the high school students to individually identify what they considered to be the single

most pressing issue in our community. The students identified a total of 13 issues in our community, and then, students prioritized these topics through voting, and settled on a top six. The most pressing issues they identified in the community were: (1) police accountability, (2) violence/crime, (3) poverty, (4) homelessness, (5) education, and (6) equality (HB2 bill).[2]

As instructors, we included news stories and articles that articulated these identified issues in our lesson plans. The undergraduate students contributed to the process by finding two articles pertaining to the weekly topics they were interested in co-facilitating. Their articles were generally written within the last year and featured in a local news outlet. We also wanted to make sure that we included student experiences and perceptions into weekly lessons plans by incorporating pre-reflection and post-reflection writing prompts at the beginning and end of each session. In utilizing these methods, we were able to work together to co-design student-centered lesson plans that lasted for a total of ten weeks. Designing a student-centered curriculum provided activities and lessons that GTIs can utilize to encourage students from diverse populations to speak-up, express their views and experiences, and illuminate the issues important to them that can spark a critical awakening in both the students, and the GTIs themselves. As such, lesson two informs the following lesson.

Lesson #3: Creative Lessons and Activities

Encourage Students to Develop their Public Voice

During our first topical session on police accountability, we had two local grassroots activists come in to help facilitate the session. One was a civil rights attorney and advocate who has dedicated more than 40 years to using his voice to fight for children's rights. The other was a civil rights leader and professor who, as a 17-year-old student at the same high school, was involved in national conversations about race and police accountability. Our students had expressed frustration and fear regarding police brutality in our community and beyond, and we had invited the grassroots activists to offer insights on how students could confidently and competently enter this conversation to influence change in our own local police department. While the civil rights activist was discussing his experiences during the Greensboro Rebellion, a student who seemed eager to speak rose her hand asking, "Why can't we start a social justice club here?" Her question was met with great enthusiasm from her fellow classmates, and by the rest of us. As a communication teacher, I found the students' eagerness to organize and use their voices inspiring. This conversation with the grassroots activists

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2   A North Carolina law that prohibits transgender people, who have not taken legal and surgical steps to change the gender they identify with on their birth certificate, from using public restrooms of the gender with which they identify (House Bill 2 of 2016).

was monumental because it started to shape the direction of the semester. We discussed issues of importance to the students and then asked them what we could do to move from simple awareness to action. During our time together, classroom dialogues, deliberations, and activities illuminated key lessons on how GTIs can become culturally responsive teachers.

Activity #1 – Live Survey

Following this conversation on police accountability with the activists, we did a live survey activity that illuminated students' ideas, perspectives and experiences with police, and related issues surrounding police accountability. Prior to the activity, three poster boards were hung-up on the classroom walls. One poster was labeled "yes," another was labeled "no," and the third was labeled "maybe." When I read a prepared question, students were asked to move to the sign that best represented their answer. Some of the questions we asked included: Do you trust the police? Do you think that police body camera footage should be available to the public? Do the police make you feel safer in your neighborhood? Once students had picked a position, individuals were then asked to explain why they chose to stand where they did.

Our goal was to engage the high school students in honest dialogue about their experiences and ideas of police, but surprisingly, it did even more. For most of the activity, both high school and university student groups were divided. When asked if they trusted the police, most of the high school students stood at "no," while the majority of the university students stood at "yes." While the high school students did not feel safe calling the police when they had an issue, the university students did. One high school student said, "I don't feel safe calling the police" (Student, 2016). When asked what would make her feel safer calling the police, she responded, "If they came to my neighborhood and got to know us" (Student, 2016). A high level of discomfort could be read across the faces of all the university students. Watching their nonverbal facial expressions emphasized how powerful communication between differing groups of community members can be, and especially when these groups have few opportunities to bring such important discussions to life. Seeing these real-life issues on the news and talking about them in our college classes had paled in comparison to witnessing 11th grade students express their view that the police did not make them feel very safe in their own neighborhoods.

Hearing these students' experiences and feelings about police in their neighborhoods seemed to move the university students to re-evaluate their own privileges. During our solo post-reflection meeting after this class session, the university students discussed how this activity had opened their eyes. One student noted, "I just can't imagine being their age and not feeling safe in my neighborhood" (Student, 2016). This session prompted me to realize the importance of creating classroom activities that encourage

students from culturally diverse backgrounds to see and hear the experiences of one another, and how students from more privileged backgrounds can also learn from this ethical exercise.

Activity #2 – Writing Letters to the Editor

The next week, in an attempt to move from awareness to action, we had the students pair-up and write letters to the local newspaper editor offering recommendations to our police department on how to be more effective in policing our community. This gave us an opportunity to discuss how important it is for civically-active students seeking change to research, learn how to craft sound arguments, and to communicate using respectful and non-accusatory language. Our undergraduate students helped students with research issues and also helped to edit the students' letters. These letters revealed student concerns including the need to hold police accountable for treating Black and Brown citizens justly. The students also expressed their desire for improved relations between members of low-income communities and the police, that are sworn to protect and serve *all* of the citizens of the community. The students asked the police department, through an invitation for dialogue, to communicate with them and help them learn how they, as students and community members, can work alongside the police to improve the community. One such letter sought to help this effort: "If there are any suggestions you have to help us improve the community and help put an end to this clear, racial oppression, please, let us know" (Student Letter, 2016). Another letter read: "We understand that not all police officers are corrupt but there have been police officers acting unjustly toward citizens that they swore to protect. It's time to build trust and have officers get to know our community and other cultures" (Student Letter, 2016). One letter even offered a list of suggestions to lower crime rates in our community:

> We feel like police should not shoot unless they see a gun or it is absolutely necessary. It would be highly appreciated if you came around to neighborhoods without being called, to ensure more safety locally. Police should also be more involved in lower-income communities. Become mentors to children. Change lives for the better. (Student Letter, 2016)

Each of the students read their letters out loud in front of the class. Hearing these letters read aloud seemed to generate a more unified voice among the students. While many of the letters expressed the tension between members of their community and the local police, they also expressed a strong desire for change and to be a part of that change. These activities and various others of the like were utilized to engage students in stimulating dialogues as well as challenge them to use their voices to initiate change for issues they felt strongly about.

Activity #3 - Students Give Speeches

The last assignment of the semester was to pick an issue that we had discussed during the semester, and craft a speech that students could present at a City Council meeting, or another public place. Most of the students spoke on violence and crime, police accountability, and education equality. When we asked the students why they chose the topics they did, they responded with comments reflecting their concerns for social justice and bringing an end to persistent inequalities. Some students who wrote about education equality said:

> "I chose this topic because in most schools students aren't given the same opportunities as other students" (Student Writing, 2016).
> "I feel everyone should not be judged on how they look and be given a chance to education" (Student Writing, 2016).

Some students who prepared speeches on violence and crime said they did so because:

> "I chose this topic because a lot of people have been victims of violence or falsely accused of crimes they didn't do" (Student Writing, 2016).
> "This topic is important to me because these type of situations could happen to me at any time especially being African American" (Student Writing, 2016).

Some students who developed speeches calling for police accountability said:

> "I don't want to have to worry about if I'm next or my brother maybe sister" (Student Writing, 2016).
> "It means a lot to me and I would love to know why they're not held accountable when the main point of actions is to be held accountable for their actions" (Student Writing, 2016).

These speeches gave students the opportunity to demonstrate the research and reflexive skills they had acquired, and to observe how their speaking skills had improved throughout the semester. These speeches reflected how personal experience, classroom dialogue, and sound research come together to produce more effective communication skills, which in turn, empower students with the tools to advocate for the changes they want to see happen in their community.

Activity #4 – the Last Day of the Semester

The last reflection prompt of the semester asked students to write what they had learned during the semester. A thematic analysis of this assignment revealed three overarching themes: (1) students felt more informed about issues affecting their community; (2) students felt more confident about speaking-up; and, (3) students realized that they ultimately have the power to influence the future of their lives, their community, and their country by

taking even the smallest action. One student said, "I learned that we have a voice, and we can speak up with it. If we don't, things will never change. The government will override us, and chaos will take over" (Student Writing, 2016). Another student wrote, "I learned how to constructively place my opinion about world problems and to effectively listen to others' opinions" (Student Writing, 2016). Several students wrote about how they would put their learning to good use in the community. Another student wrote, "I will use my voice to help people," and another reported, "I will take issues and actually try to change them" (Student Writing, 2016).

Activity #5 – The Real Lesson

On our last day of class, the bell rang, signaling the end of our time together. Students who usually bolted out of their seats, ready to leave for the weekend, were a little slower to exit. They didn't run to the door as they usually would, and instead, went around saying goodbyes to their friends, peers, and allies that they now had at the university and in this community. The students shared hugs, special handshakes, and exchanged in genuine messages of giving thanks. I was then, and still am today, moved to tears by their actions. In the midst of this still-framed moment, a young lady walked up to me and said, "Thank you for teaching us, I feel like for the first time we have a voice." I couldn't help but think about how they had inadvertently empowered me in the same way. By rejecting my initial attempt to strategically find "common ground" with them, they had helped me to realize that my preconceived thoughts on connecting across difference was more problematic than it is empowering. These students challenged me to re-consider my identity, and the role it plays in the way I communicate in the classroom. Their complex identities ultimately led me face-to-face with my own. These students, in other words, were the teacher all along. Together, we had built a co-constructed learning community.

Learning from Missed Opportunities

While it is tempting to conclude this autoethnographic account quickly, I do not want to avoid the opportunity to discuss some of the opportunities we may have missed during this semester. While there were countless wins during the semester, there were also other situations, that upon reflection, stand out as necessitating some improvement. In reflection, I realize that I paid very little attention to some of the random moments in the class that presented further opportunities for dialogue. One particular moment during session three stands out to me. While we were working on the letters to the editor about police accountability in our community, a university student came up to me, emotionally-bothered, because one of the students she was working with expressed that he was "uncomfortable putting his name on the letter" because he was afraid that the police could find out where he was and might harm his family. I was just as emotionally saddened and troubled

by this comment, but in an attempt to calm the undergraduate student and keep the flow of the class going, I simply told her to tell him that he did not have to send it if he did not feel comfortable doing so. I now wonder how many students may have felt this same way. It was a learning moment, for me, for the high school students, and for the university students, that I had missed. In reflection, I realize this probably happened a lot, and especially so at the beginning of the semester when I was determined to get through everything on the agenda. While it is impossible to catch every moment in the classroom that presents an opportunity for transformative dialogue, learning to be flexible with one's agenda – as I have learned – is very important.

Another missed opportunity might be that we were not as purposeful as we could have been in reviewing students' post-reflection prompts on a weekly basis. Sure, the other GTI and I looked at them from time to time, but since I mistakenly viewed the post-reflection prompts as part of the data collection process, I did not necessarily put a lot of emphasis on them during our reflection sessions, or in our meetings with the university students. I think going over the reflections during solo-reflection sessions with the university students would have better informed their study, as well as mine. I also wished that we had more questions on the reflection prompts that helped the other GTI, myself, and the university students gauge how students felt we, as instructors, were doing throughout the semester. Perhaps something similar to teacher evaluations after the first session, mid-semester, and at the end of the semester would have helped us to more effectively gauge the students' perceptions of our instructional communication. I would recommend these changes to other GTIs wishing to take part in similar projects. In the remaining space, I offer how the findings in this research were best irradiated by my willingness to vulnerably turn the "ethnographic gaze inward" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). And then, I bring this work to a close.

The Power of Autoethnography

The missed opportunities (mentioned above) and the lessons I have learned through my experiences with the high school students were uniquely illuminated by the powerful praxis of autoethnography. In turning the "ethnographic gaze inward," I was able to see how the ways I communicate, affect others (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). These days, I am hyper-aware of the ways I communicate with others and how this affects the students that I teach. Beyond this inter-connection, my heightened awareness of communication and communicative affect is now part of the ways I engage with everyone I encounter in the world (Engstrom, 2008). This realization speaks to the power of reflexivity and autoethnography – it is a consciousness that holds the existence my/*self* accountable in each and every situation. It is harder to oppress and silence the experience of the *other* when your consciousness is continually challenging you to interrogate how you may be perpetuating oppressive ideologies. Autoethnography provides a lens for GTIs struggling

to become culturally responsive teachers to reflexively interrogate how their *self* can and does communicate and influence the shared cultures around us. In concluding, I discuss what this means for the discipline of communication and offer suggestions for productive ways forward.

Moving Forward: We Have to be Intentional in Finding our Voices

I cannot help but think that the fact that many GTIs are uncomfortable and underprepared to facilitate dialogues on racial, ethnic, and cultural injustices is more telling about how far we still have to go as a discipline, than anything else. Perhaps, as much as we would like to think, our reluctance as teachers, in embracing communication activism pedagogy, presents a bigger problem than many of us are willing to see. It may be that, like me, other GTIs are struggling to find their voices, but are not purposefully working hard enough to find this reflexive agency. Maybe GTIs are, consciously and subconsciously, possibly avoiding getting "too deep in the mud" because the uncertainty of this effort can be daunting. While many of us are thrilled to commit the rest of our lives to the communication discipline, which is dedicated to working towards a more just world, far too often leave many of us not really letting ourselves see what this labor actually means. It is possible that we have focused too deeply, and for too long, on the conversations that we are comfortable having, and spending too little time on facilitating conversations that challenge us to connect with others that live beyond our comfort zones. To this end, it becomes easier to accomplish these ethical connections if we continually reflect upon and discuss our levels of discomfort in facilitating students' learning on delicate issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. We must first begin by challenging ourselves to learn how to engage with difference – and this begins with an interrogation of our own selves. This tumultuous moment in time and history that we all find ourselves in requires an "all hands-on deck" mentality when it comes to the critical and cultural challenges we all face. It has always been, and is usually somewhat typical, in any discipline and at any stage, for teachers to perform customary disciplinary practices, without ever getting their hands dirty. Thus, it behooves us, as GTIs, to reconsider the implications of the importance of connecting across cultures with our students, through the shared efforts of dialogue.

While I realize that practices on how to become a culturally responsive teacher largely depend upon the person and situated context, the lessons I have learned and reflected upon in this research are quite foundational for GTIs looking to become culturally responsive teachers. I close by reviewing the three most important lessons I carry with me from my experiences during this research study. (1) GTIs must first critically examine themselves, their identity, and the ways this identity impacts classroom communication processes. (2) GTIs must also learn how to enlist students as active participants in their own learning by allowing students to co-construct lesson plans, course

content, and course curriculums wherever and whenever possible. (3) GTIs should take the time to research, create, and co-create activities and lessons with students that serve as communication tools. Such activities are not only fun and interactive, but they also enable students to learn how to advocate for and voice their own experiences of living issues that affect them – such as their race, ethnicity, and socially constructed cultural injustices. The most important lesson that I have learned, however, is that GTIs must intentionally seek-out, find, and embrace opportunities that challenge them to learn, teach, and promote positive social change.

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