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Creating a Dialogue for Change: Educating Graduate Teaching Assistants in Whiteness Studies

Kristen P. Treinen

During a discussion about the need for anti-racist pedagogy, I was asked whether or not I believed anyone would announce that he/she is a “racist” educator. At first, this question seemed ludicrous — of course most educators would not claim that they are racist. The more that I reflected on this question, the more ironic I found it to be. The same educators who would not claim to be racist would also not consciously teach in racist ways. But, at the same time, I wonder how many educators reflect upon whether or not they engage in racist teaching practices? I wonder how many white educators understand the effects of their race on choices in curriculum, teaching strategies, and the ways students get differently privileged in their classroom? I believe that a great number of educators do work to include diversity in their classrooms and work to combat racist remarks made by students. However, overcoming racism and including diverse perspectives in the classroom involves a greater understanding of the extent to which racism is perpetuated in textbooks, grading procedures, and assessment techniques.

In this article I discuss the need to integrate an anti-racist pedagogy through work in Whiteness Studies in the college classroom. It is my hope to facilitate a dialogue with basic course directors, communication educators, and graduate teaching assistants about antiracist practices in the classroom. In order to bring about an antiracist dialogue, I begin this essay by framing antiracist pedagogical theory. Next, I discuss the relevance that antiracist pedagogy has for communication educators and the basic communication course. Finally, I offer a model for incorporating antiracist pedagogical theory and practice into the training and development programs for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs).

ARTICULATING ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY

Antiracist pedagogy emerged as a way to address the institutional and structural inequities in schools. Antiracist pedagogy is fundamentally an interdisciplinary approach that addresses "the histories and experiences of people who have been left out of the curriculum" (Lee, 1995, p. 9). Antiracist pedagogy works to move beyond the "people are different" perspective, and examine how and why particular groups are marginalized in our schools and larger society (Lee, 1995, p. 10). Furthermore, an antiracist pedagogy confronts racism as an institutional problem that moves beyond individual instances of prejudicial acts or attitudes. Duarte and Smith (2000) explain, "Antiracism does not seek to develop pedagogical practices that are designed for prejudice reduction. Instead this location produces an oppositional critique of racism in its systemic and institutional form" (p. 16). Thompson (1997) argues that "racism is a *system* of privilege and oppression, a network of traditions, legitimating standards, material and institutional arrangements, and ideological apparatuses that, together, serve to perpetuate hierarchical social relations based on race" (p. 9). Thompson conceptualizes racism as "structural and embodied inequities that are rendered "legitimate" and appropriate by particular conventions of policy, law, common sense, and even science" (p. 8). What becomes legitimized in our society is that White people are the norm and, as a result, get to set the standards for normalcy.

At the core of antiracist education is the study of Whiteness and its implication in the systematic nature of racism. For several years, scholars of color have been discussing the implications of whiteness; now white educators are beginning to understand the value of examining the implications of whiteness for whites. West (1990) maintains that "'Whiteness' is a politically constructed category parasitic on blackness" (p. 29). Whiteness needs blackness to maintain its purity and normality. For instance, by focusing on blackness, whiteness becomes further hidden behind its veil or neutrality. The historical inequalities that non-whites have faced in our country are the direct result of placing whiteness in binary opposition with blackness. Shome (1996) argues that whiteness is "the everyday, invisible, subtle, cultural, and social practices, ideas, and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of White people" (p. 503). Antiracist educators argue that through a naming and marking of the white center of power, space can be made for the voices of those oppressed by systematic racism. An antiracist pedagogy must make problematic how whiteness "as a racial identity and social construction is taught, learned, experienced, and identified in certain forms of knowledge, values and privilege," otherwise it risks reinforcing the dominant discourse in the classroom (Giroux, 1997, p. 295).

Anti-racist pedagogy "is fundamentally a perspective that allows us to get an explanation of why things are the way they are in terms of power relationships, in terms of equality issues" (Lee, 1995, p. 9). Anti-racist pedagogy treats racism as more than merely prejudice and demands that we "examine the unexamined assumptions concerning issues like textbooks and curriculum decisions" (Warren, 1999, p. 198). Anti-racist pedagogy includes examining the struggles of "racial minorities against imperial, colonial, and neocolonial experiences" and "insists on closely studying the sites, institutions, and ways in which racism originates" (Rezai-Rashti, 1995, p. 6). An important aspect of racism involves our fundamental assumptions about diversity. Moreover, antiracist pedagogical theory calls for us to critically interrogate whiteness—the hidden norm against which non-whites are judged. An analysis of the unquestioned normalcy of whiteness and a dismantling of the inherent power of whiteness will allow room for the cultural perspectives others.

An anti-racist pedagogy provides educators with a lens through which they and their students can question the taken for granted nature of whiteness in the classroom. If you have ever been asked what whiteness means and failed to come up with an answer you have encountered the power that whiteness possesses. Nakayama and Krizek (1999) explain that "whiteness has assumed the position of an uninterrogated space" (p. 90). As long as we do not know what whiteness means, it is allowed to remain invisible. Nakayama and Krizek (1999) go on to argue that "the invisibility of whiteness has been manifested through its universality. The universality of whiteness resides in its already defined position as everything" (p. 91). Whiteness as an unmarked location is normative and as such sets the standards for all other groups.

A JUSTIFICATION FOR ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY IN THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

> Analyzing Whiteness opens a theoretical space for teachers and students to articulate how their own racial identities have been shaped within a broader racist culture and what responsibility they might assume for living in a present in which Whites are accorded privileges and opportunity (though in complex and different ways) largely at the expense of other racial groups. (Giroux, 1997a)

Through research in anti-racist pedagogy and work in whiteness studies, I have found a need for basic course directors, communication educators, and graduate teaching assistants to understand the implications and impact of racism and whiteness in the classroom. Several scholars (Derman-Sparks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995; Kanpol, 1995; McIntyre, 1997; Shome, 1996) reinforce the need for work in antiracist pedagogy. Antiracist pedagogues work to transform the dominant Eurocentric curriculum (e.g., middle class, heterosexual, male, able-bodied, etc.) to include "histories and knowledges that have long been silenced in the name of socially constructed sacrosanct norms" (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 33). Rodriguez points to what is known as the hidden curriculum, a curriculum that reproduces dominant ideological views and silences the views of students from minority groups (Darder, 1995, p. 331).

Transforming the classroom experience through work in antiracist pedagogy is not an easy charge. Those incorporating antiracists approaches in the classroom will face ethical issues ranging from the choice of materials to incorporate in the curriculum to the treatment of students in the classroom. For instance, in order to challenge the hidden curriculum, students must be challenged with issues of racism and whiteness. As a result, educators will have to make the choice to silence traditionally dominant voices while encouraging minority voices to be heard in the classroom. Students who have been silenced or faced with issues of racism may respond with feelings of guilt, discomfort, and anger. Understanding these reactions and working to help students work through and past these feelings is central for educators utilizing antiracist practices in the classroom. Educators might also encounter resistance from their students and their colleagues. Anderson, Bentley, Gallegos, Herr and Saavedra (1995) argue "teachers who attempt to interrupt and interrogate power relations that favor dominant groups are often viewed as 'political" and may face a backlash from educators of the dominant group. However, Anderson, Bentley, Gallegos, Herr and Saavedra (1995) also point out that the backlash may come from members of the non-dominant group who identify with the interests of the dominant group. Consequently, educators utilizing critical approaches in the classroom are often teaching on the defensive. As someone who works to implement antiracist pedagogical strategies in my classrooms, I contend the benefits of incorporating antiracist pedagogical strategies is worth the time and effort taken to confront the potential obstacles and ethical choices an educator may face; however, I also believe that each individual educator must answer these questions for him/herself (Andersen, 1999).

There are several reasons why I argue antiracist pedagogical strategies should be implemented by communication educators. First, I explore why basic course directors, communication educators and graduate teaching assistants, our future colleagues in the discipline of speech communication, should address issues of race and ethnicity in the college and university classroom. Next, I address why communication educators are integral to transforming the college and university classroom for students of color. Finally, I discuss why basic course directors and graduate teaching assistants can be instrumental in helping transform the systematic racism faced in our institutions of higher education.

As communication faculty, basic course directors, and graduate teaching assistants, we are facing an increasingly diverse classroom. According to Wirt, Choy, Provasnik, Rooney, Sen, and Tobin (2003), “more than half of undergraduates were women in 1999-2000” and “the proportions of White students has decreased, while the proportion of students in each other racial/ethnic group has increased” (p. 66). As a result, “combined, minorities represented nearly a third of all undergraduates in 1999-2000” (p.66). While our undergraduate student population has become more diverse, the graduate student and full-time instructional faculty and staff have remained predominantly white. Wirt, Choy, Gerald, Provasnik, Rooney, Watanabe, and Tobin (2002) reported that nearly 80% of all graduate students were white in 1999. While 9% of graduate students were black, nearly 6% were Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% of graduate students were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Full-time instructional faculty and staff are demographically similar to the graduate student population with slight differences in the amount of black faculty members in our colleges and universities. Zimbler (2002) reported that in 1998 the majority, or 85%, of full-time instructional faculty and staff were White. Approximately 6 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander; 5% were Black; 3% were Hispanic; and 1% were American Indian or Alaskan Native (p. 48). With such disparities between the ethnic and racial backgrounds of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students, I argue that in order to be successful in the communication classroom we must deconstruct our current teaching strategies in order to transform our classrooms for all students.

Communication educators are central to helping transform the classroom experience for non-white students in our college and university classrooms. Antiracist pedagogical research and practice in the field of communication is important because it is these instructors who introduce undergraduate students to the principles informing effective communication. Communication educators teach the ways in which communication influences students' thoughts, perceptions, and actions (Gouran, Wiethoff, & Dolger, 1994). A student's race and the race of other communicators significantly impacts how these students think about, perceive, and engage in communication with others. Therefore, an antiracist pedagogue with work in Whiteness Studies would engage in a systematic analysis of what it means to be White in our society, and how whiteness provides power and privilege in hidden ways. An antiracist pedagogue might also examine how communication processes are influenced by whiteness. Through a clearer understanding of whiteness and the role it plays in our educational institutions and wider society, we will not only help our students become better communicators but also help our students learn more about themselves — their identity — in the process.

Tanno and Gonzalez (1998) pose these questions to communication scholars: “Where is multicultural identity to be found? How is it formed and maintained?” (p. 4). The study of antiracist pedagogy within the discipline of Speech Communication is also important because communication scholars argue that culture and identity are created through the process of communication — through our interactions and interpersonal relationships. Our communication helps us construct our cultural reality and our identities. Consequently, communication also helps our students learn more about cultures other than their own. For example, we teach students that communication helps them express, sustain, and alter our cultural backgrounds (Wood, 1997). Through conversations and interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances, our students have the ability to represent their cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes to friends, family, and wider society.

What antiracist pedagogues purport to do (i.e., identify and break down the systematic nature of racism in our educational institutions) is imbedded in our taken for granted communication patterns as researchers, scholars and teachers. Our patterns of communication reflect our cultural values and perspectives. For instance, while many scholars have taken great strides to include cultural communication throughout their basic communication course textbooks (Brydon & Scott, 2003; Kearney & Plax, 1999; Wood, 2001; Wood 2003) the dominant culture view (which is the Eurocentric, White male perspective in the U. S.) is the view most often represented in the textbooks and curricula (Churchill, 1995; Levine, Lowe, Peterson, & Tenorio, 1995). Furthermore, when culture is explored in our basic communication course classrooms it is often the "other" that is studied. In other words, the "White" person is implied as the normative first person perspective present in the text (Treinen & Warren, 2001). These patterns become so imbedded in our everyday communicative practice that we rarely question or critique whether or not they are racist.

Basic course directors play a significant role when serving the undergraduate student population. For example, Trank (1999) argues

> The basic course is the only course within our discipline that is required by a significant number of other departments and colleges for graduation surveys over the past 2 decades have indicated that the basic communication course is required for noncommunication majors in a majority of the institutions across the country. This unique characteristic provides healthy departmental enrollments and excellent visibility across campus. . . . The ultimate responsibility for the quality of this course with several sections inevitably belongs to the director of the course. (p. 447)

Basic course directors have important decisions to make concerning content and pedagogical strategies when considering how to best serve the undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. Trank (1999) contends that basic course directors must serve "as the educational leaders for the most critical program within most undergraduate communication departments" (p. 450). Trank (1999) explains that a liberal interpretation of a National Communication Survey of more than 2,000 institutions reported close to 2 million students are served each year by the basic communication course (p. 450). When considering the goals of communication education, the increasingly diverse student population in our colleges and universities, and the importance of the basic communication course to colleges and universities, basic course directors are in a key position to help GTAs develop new and meaningful pedagogical tools.

GTAs are in a particularly significant position to critique and destabilize the way that culture is represented and explored in the curriculum. Although GTAs have little impact on the decision of which materials will be used in the basic communication course and the overall course requirements, GTAs often teach stand-alone sections of the basic communication course with total responsibility for the pedagogical strategies and methods used to transmit the communication theory. While teaching the stand-alone courses, graduate teaching assistant's have the opportunity to reach a vast number of students on a college campus. For instance, Cano, Jones, and Chism (1991) explain that at some large institutions, "TAs teach as much as 38% of the course sections offered during a given semester" (p. 88). More recently, Staton (1999) argues that GTAs are responsible for teaching nearly half of all undergraduate instruction (p. 42). For example, when I was a graduate teaching assistant at a small Midwestern university, GTAs were responsible for teaching approximately 25 sections of the basic communication course. These courses enrolled approximately 22 students per section each semester. In one semester, these GTAs collectively taught nearly 550 students. At another large Midwestern university where I served as Assistant Director of the Core Curriculum, GTAs taught approximately 60 sections per semester of the basic communication course. These courses averaged 20 students per section. In one semester, GTAs collectively taught nearly 1200 students. Currently, I serve as Basic Course Director at a small Midwestern university. The GTAs that I supervise teach 25 sections of the basic communication course each semester. These courses average 28-30 students per section. In one semester, these GTAs will collectively teach 750 students. These statistics underline the importance of graduate teaching assistants to the educational environment at several universities and colleges throughout the United States.

While I believe that is important for all communication educators to begin working with antiracist pedagogical theory and practice, I will focus the remainder of this essay on how to incorporate antiracist theory and practice with basic course directors and GTAs. These educators are central to transmitting the foundations of communication theory to our undergraduate student populations on most college and university campuses. Once GTAs have a firm foundation in pedagogical strategies such as how to administer a college course, how to evaluate and assess student learning, what teaching strategies to employ, and how to manage a classroom, a basic course director can introduce antiracist pedagogical theory for points of exploration and discussion.

IMPLEMENTING ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY IN THE BASIC COURSE CLASSROOM

A graduate student training and development program is a unique opportunity to introduce GTAs to antiracist pedagogy. For many GTAs, this is their first exposure to teaching practices and issues surrounding pedagogy in the classroom. A GTA training program also allows a space to challenge and confront future pedagogical issues that graduate teaching assistants may encounter. As Thompson (1997) argues, there is a need "to create performative spaces in which the commonplaces of racism can be unsettled–in which racism can be addressed as a framing of meaning rather than as natural" (p. 35). In what follows, I offer one potential model for integrating an antiracist pedagogy into the training and development program utilized with graduate teaching assistants. What I offer is not the only approach to antiracist pedagogy; rather, it is a place to begin the discussion about implementing antiracist pedagogical approaches with GTAs for use in the basic course classroom.

A useful model for introducing antiracist pedagogy through work in Whiteness studies with graduate teaching assistants (or other communication educators) is articulated by Rodriguez (1998) in his article *Emptying the Contents of Whiteness: Toward an Understanding of the Relation Between Whiteness and Pedagogy*. First, Rodriguez (1998) asserts that work in whiteness studies should "not only uncover the hidden curriculum of normalizing systems but also bring to light and teach subjugated histories" (p. 33). The training of GTAs in antiracist pedagogy must start with the basic course director engaging in an analysis of the current curriculum of the basic communication course. For instance, the Basic Course Director may ask him/herself who decided which cultural perspectives are being presented in the textbook that will be used? More importantly, who created the representations of cultural others that the students will be reading about? How is race, including whiteness, being articulated in the textbooks, syllabus, activities, and assignments required in the basic course? All too often the representations in college classrooms are from a Eurocentric perspective. At the same time, the curricula and the methodologies used in the basic course are being examined, the histories and knowledges of those who have been systematically silenced need to be brought to the forefront. Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) argue that educators "who successfully teach children from oppressed communities actively affirm the cultures, ideologies, memories, languages, and communities of the children" (p. 117). For instance, one might consider whose communicative practices and realities are represented in the textbook that GTAs use, and, second, how do these representations push other perspectives to the margins? Because GTAs teach a required course with core-curriculum requirements, these issues should be considered before graduate student training and transferred into the training and development of the GTAs.

Next, a pedagogy of whiteness "should attempt to reconfigure whiteness in antiracist, antihomophobic, and antisexist ways" (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 33). Basic

Course Directors need to give GTAs the opportunity to critically reflect on what it means to be white and be "cognizant of themselves in relation to history and place, that is, in this case, able to define and acknowledge their own whiteness" (Titone, 1998, p. 167). Just as conversations about African Americans or Latino/as should not essentialize the experiences of all members of these groups, whiteness should be exposed as something that is ever changing and possible to recreate in positive ways. During conversations about what it means to be white, the (white) graduate teaching assistants may experience feelings of guilt or shame. As Sleeter (1996) explains "the more we critically attend to our behavior, the more guilty many white people feel because we realize the degree to which we adhere to racial boundaries, as well as boundaries of social class, language, and so forth" (p. 145). These conversations about whiteness can take place throughout the course of a graduate student conference, but should also continue throughout the training and development of the GTAs in order to help these teachers move from feelings of guilt to an understanding of how an understanding of racism and whiteness can bring about social and transformative change in our basic communication course classrooms. These discussions could be continued as part of developmental workshops, or in a course on pedagogy offered to graduate students. If these critiques and discussions do not take place, whiteness is allowed to remain the invisible and naturalized center of power in the classroom.

Rodriguez (1998) also argues that any pedagogy of whiteness must "be thought of as a *critical* pedagogy of whiteness in the sense that it must deal, in some way, with the issue of power" (p. 35). Graduate teaching assistants students should be asked regularly to discuss the role of the teacher in the classroom. These discussions provide an opportunity for conversations about power in the classroom. For instance, a critical pedagogy of whiteness would prompt a number of questions for explanation. How does the traditional style of lecturing (i.e., teacher behind the podium, or the banking model of education) reinforce power structures in the classroom? Whose style of public speaking is valued in the speech communication classroom? Often instructors of the basic course are still teaching the public speaking style taught by Plato and Aristotle. Clearly, their speaking style is fundamental to our discipline; however, as Nakayama and Krizek (1999) maintain, “Plato and Aristotle, from a privileged class were not interested in theorizing or empowering ways that women, slaves, or other culturally marginalized people might speak. The rhetor was always already assumed to be a member of the center” (p. 90). Through critical conversations about power and empowerment in the classroom, graduate teaching assistants can begin to rethink their role in the classroom.

Finally, a pedagogy of whiteness “must examine culture, especially popular culture, for a political struggle demands attention to culture — understanding what’s out there, resisting cultural messages that disempower us, creating circulating alternative visions” (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 35). The products of popular culture can be used to interrogate how whiteness and racism shape our daily lives. Case studies and critical incidents could be used to examine how to integrate the interests of the students (computers, sports, movies, parties, etc.) into the classroom curriculum as sites of learning. Addressing popular culture, as sites of political struggle will inevitably provide GTAs with a clearer understanding of how invisible whiteness is in our society. Giroux (1997b) argues that movies can provide "exemplary" representations of dominant readings of whiteness. For his analysis, he uses two movies (*Dangerous Minds* and *Suture*) to examine the pedagogical implications for examining whiteness (p. 296).

The examination of popular culture by GTAs during training and development programs could also provide ideas for how these teachers could then use popular culture in their own classrooms. It is especially important for graduate teaching assistants of the basic communication course to examine popular culture in order to help students relate their everyday exposure to televisions, movies, music, and news to what they are learning in the classroom. As Johnson (1999) asserts, communication studies "has a particularly important role [in Whiteness Studies/antiracist pedagogy] as communication is concerned not only with the means of communication, but also the construction of *meaning* through communication" (p. 5). The constant bombardment of popular culture images on our students provides the perfect opportunity to analyze how whiteness is constructed in our [students and teachers] daily lives. bell hooks (1997) argues that

> since most white people do not have to "see" black people constantly (appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard, observing black people to be "safe," they can live as though black people are invisible, and can imagine as though they are also invisible to blacks. (p. 168-169)

Asking students to consider why there are so few representations of African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, or Asian Americans on billboards or in magazines could create a dialogue that begins to investigate the invisibility of whiteness in popular culture. We might ask our students, for example, how the television show *Friends* perpetuates the "invisibility" of whiteness? Or, we might ask ours students to explain how whiteness gets constructed on *Friends*. Through an investigation of popular culture representations, whiteness becomes marked and scrutinized — it can then no longer be the taken for granted norm by which all nonwhite others are judged.

The training and development of GTAs in antiracist pedagogy involves more than figuring out where to include materials about diversity in the curriculum. An antiracist pedagogical approach to training graduate teaching assistants begins with an examination of the materials that the GTAs will be using in the classroom. Next, GTAs must be given the opportunity to question white identity and its implication in the system of racism, to critique and analyze the power structures in the classroom, and to investigate how popular culture sites reinscribe the normalcy of whiteness. Antiracist pedagogy should also be viewed as a process that is ongoing and ever changing. After the initial graduate student training, the GTAs must continue the work they began in their classrooms and in discussions with colleagues.

CONCLUSION

> One of the most serious problems confronting teachers is that they cannot recognize their own biases. There is an attachment to the colorblindness among educators, who forcefully contend they operate on the principle that all children are the same and should be treated the same. By denying racial differences, teachers are refusing to recognize [students'] full range of social experiences, histories, including membership in racial groups as well as the possibility of painful episodes of discrimination. (Rezi-Rashti, 1995, p. 12)

Few educators would enter a classroom and intend to perpetuate racism. However, if studying "other" cultures becomes acceptable, without recognizing that race will not be recognized. Simply adding the voices and perspectives of cultures other than white culture will not alleviate the inequities that minorities experience in the classroom. Treating students as though they are all the "same" does not benefit them — it only allows an instructor to further distance her/himself and her/his students from the system of racism.

Antiracist pedagogy through work in whiteness studies demands a critical examination of the center of power [whiteness] in "the hope that the center will fall apart" (Warren, 1999, p. 197). An antiracist pedagogy seeks not only to glance outward at the cultural margins, but it should "also include critical and focused attention inward toward the powerful center of racial privilege" (Warren, 1999, p. 198). Educators engaged in antiracist pedagogy find their classrooms offer a site to begin the critical examination of racism, of what it means be white, and the implications of white privilege in our society.

What I proposed in this essay is one way for basic course directors to expose graduate teaching assistants to antiracist pedagogy. If communication educators want to create the spaces for learning how to combat racism, anti-racist pedagogy is a necessary and essential componentof teacher training and development. Educating graduate teaching assistants in antiracist pedagogy is especially important when one reflects on the vast number of students GTAs will encounter and the stark contrast between the race of students, communication faculty, and GTAs teaching the basic communication course; the future of the professoriate.

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