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Pedagogy of Relevance: A Critical Communication Pedagogy Agenda for the “Basic” Course

*Deanna L. Fassett
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A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teacher and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 69)

Any approach to inquiry is best characterized not by its method but by the kinds of questions that it finds worth investigating. (Sprague, “Expanding the Research Agenda,” p.4)

For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods. If they have none, school is pointless. (Postman, *The Ends of Education*, p. 4)

We begin this essay with tribute to Paulo Freire, whose books *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2003), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992), and *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998) remain for us, the authors of this essay, a central philosophic staple. That is, by opening our essay with the notion of a “Pedagogy of...”, we call out to his sense of urgency and his sense of pedagogical vision. We write this essay today out of similar passion; this essay stems

from a sense of hope for the field and a dedication to make the moments of our communication classrooms relevant, contextualized, and immediate for students. By framing our work within the tradition of Freire, we do not mean to suggest that the conditions that sparked Freire's writing and activism are the same as the contexts we face in our introductory communication course; yet, there is a parallel that stretches across the divide of time and geography that link the two. Like Freire, we are trying to address the context of education within the framework of relevance, of giving flesh and blood to the work we do in the pedagogical settings we experience. In the introductory communication course, this need for relevance is perhaps best exemplified by the detached writing styles of some of our textbooks, the use of theories that are culturally specific yet addressed to students as universal (see the repeated use of Knapp's relationship models in almost all introductory hybrid books), or the use of diversity as a frame without ever really addressing how or why diversity matters beyond the old adage that we live in a diverse world. What the "basic course" needs—what our students need, what *we* need—is a connection between the content and pedagogy of our courses and the content and experiences of their (our) lives. This paper is an effort to incite (or, giving Sprague her due, extend) conversations about the potential of critical perspectives in the introductory communication course. Here we extend our earlier work (Fassett and Warren, 2007) that argues that the field of instructional communication is undergoing a paradigm shift, a move toward more reflexive and critically informed pedagogical practices in communication research and teaching. Our goal here is to make relevant that

conversation in the context of the “basic” communication course and to advocate an agenda for critical communication pedagogy in this important context.

The field of communication studies has a long and rich pedagogical tradition, as evidenced by this journal, among other writings, conference short courses and GTA professional development programs. We, as teachers of communication, are products of this tradition, carefully shaped and nurtured by our graduate program (and our various academic families) into the educators we are today. Part of this training, this instruction as to what it means to be a teacher at the college level, centered on our own crafting of our scholar-teacher selves. That is, at stake in our preparation was the sense that there was a point to our education as new teachers—to become innovative and critically informed teachers and scholars. While this was an nourishing context for us to generate our own purpose in the classroom, the translation to our introductory communication students was not always fulfilled in the same way; we haven’t always been sure our students felt a similar sense of purpose. This was not, however, about the graduate program we attended, nor was it a problem of the course we taught. The problem was larger, stemming from how “basic” courses have taken shape in our discipline. Indeed, as we will explore later, it is not incidental that we use terms like “basic” to describe our work in those contexts; this language matters in terms of how we think about our curricula and our goals within that context. As new teachers, we went about the basic course as the textbook would have us do. In our graduate training (as well as during our roles as basic course directors at different universities), we used a variety of textbooks, each

teaching roughly the same content in roughly the same way. As teachers, our goal in the classroom was to teach the material contained in the book—get the students to a basic level of understanding of communication theory, interpersonal, small group, and intercultural communication, as well as some introductory public communication competency—emphasizing coverage perhaps more than meaning. Students in these classes were mostly turned off by the course, taking it as a requirement and nothing more, regardless of how much we encouraged them see its import.

Looking back, we can see our central problem with gaining students' attention in this class is that it lacked a central unifying purpose. Often, textbooks foreground content components over unifying narratives, disciplinary or subdisciplinary areas (e.g., organizational communication or interpersonal communication) over students' experiences, and basic competence over complex understanding. As Postman (1995) might suggest, this is the problem with godless education—not godless in the sense of religiosity, but rather in a sense of purpose. Postman argues that education suffers from a lack of a driving narrative, using the loaded term god (small “g” god) to suggest the power of what narrative can do for education. We find Postman's assertion a chilling reminder: Without a driving narrative to guide our actions, frame our past, and project our future, our work in the classroom is pointless. Freire (1970/2003) made this same claim 25 years earlier when he observed that education suffered from “narration sickness” (p. 71). Our problem in the introductory course then, as is our problem in the introductory course now, is that for all its benefits (of which there are many), it lacks a central

narrative that drives its own curriculum and its purpose in the overarching curricular schemes of our institutions. This problem, we argue, is not locatable to a specific course or university; rather, it is a disciplinary problem that requires conversations about the goals and central role of public speaking, hybrid approaches to the study of communication, and other similar courses in the university today.

As a response to the above concern, we offer an agenda. That is, we offer here one way of thinking about what kind of god (narrative) our “basic” communication course might serve. For us, the introductory communication course is essential in the curriculum of university students (and secondary schools) because oral and written communication skills are necessary tools for an active and responsible citizenry. That is, within our increasingly complex multicultural (globalized) world, the need for understanding the role of communication as constitutive (and, thus, constraining) of our understandings and relationships must be part of students’ education. In what follows, we chart out one possible agenda for the introductory communication course—one that evolves from and is enriched by critical communication pedagogy—the outcome of which we believe will give renewed relevance to the work each of us undertakes in this important course.

WHAT IS CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY?

Like most critical scholars, we’d rather have you tell us, building a critical paradigm together as Freire would have us do. However, given the absence of palpable or

authentic dialogue in the pages of a journal, we offer here the lessons we have learned from communication and education scholars before us, patch-working an agenda for critical communication pedagogy that is dialogic to the extent possible. Critical communication pedagogy is, in its finest moments, the best possible combination of work in critical pedagogy—scholarship and teaching that work toward a more socially just and accountable society—and communication pedagogy—both instructional communication (i.e., the fine attention we pay to the role of communication in teaching and learning) and communication education (i.e., what we’ve learned, as a discipline, about how teaching communication is a unique responsibility and challenge, distinct from other fields). So, in this sense, “critical” is not so much about tearing down or pulling apart, but rather making the most of all we’ve learned in an effort to reach all students and educators of all abilities and backgrounds, in an effort to fashion for ourselves social or civic and professional relationships that are self-sustaining, nurturing, hopeful and make possible more equity for people who have been historically disenfranchised. Critical communication pedagogy is, at its most fundamental, about dialogue or engagement between various constituencies, dialogue that builds spaces for transforming the world as it is in favor of a collaborative vision of what could be.

This is not an alien perspective to those of us who have worked for years or even decades with/in the introductory communication course. As general education instructors, we meet and engage every kind of student who attends our universities and colleges. When we teach public speaking, we share a commitment to civic

engagement, to meaningful social action and advocacy (and perhaps even civil social protest). Many of us engage in service learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning and other efforts to make the educational experience more meaningful to our students in and beyond their time in college. In other words, though our textbooks (and therefore sometimes our courses) feel perhaps dispassionate, we don't "just" teach content or concepts stripped of context and values; teachers are always already engaged in an argument with themselves, their colleagues and their students about what is worth knowing, worth remembering, worth repeating. Critical communication pedagogy, as a frame, is a way of rendering meaningful and purposeful our efforts to move past a seemingly apolitical, neutral, "just the facts" approach to teaching and learning, one that divorces knowledge from context, to an embodied, intellectual commitment to communication as constitutive of our worlds, for better and for worse. Simply put, critical communication pedagogy is about making the theory of and engagement with communication relevant, revealing insight into how communication can be both constitutive of as well as resistive to oppression and disenfranchisement.

COMMITMENTS OF A CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

As a paradigm, critical communication pedagogy is best understood by the commitments that guide its approach to the arts of research and teaching. A commitment is, of course, a promise—a belief or a value we

align with, that guides our actions and lends focus to our work. Commitments are not universal (even though putting them to paper might make them feel that way); they change and adapt according to particular contexts and concerns. What is important is that we articulate them, whether we fully or partially or resistively engage them, as this gives rise to useful and productive intellectual and disciplinary tensions and challenges, alignments and fissures. These are ten commitments (Fassett and Warren, 2007) that guide critical communication pedagogy and that may serve as an entry for scholars and teachers of the introductory course; each builds and extends upon the previous.

First, critical communication educators see identity as constituted in communication. That is, building from work in performativity (see, for example, Butler, 1990, or Warren, 2003) or ethnomethodology (see, for example, Garfinkel, 1967 or Fassett, 2003), one can see that identity is built, sustained, and constrained by our communication and is subject to the future communication we encounter. Second, power is fluid and complex, shifting to accommodate time and context. Foucault's (1977) observation that power is located in no one and everyone, shifting and moving through people as they enact their lives is apt here; though it is tempting to understand power as a tool we can own or abdicate consciously and willfully, Foucault reminds us that power is not a thing that one can possess, but rather an exercise—a process that engages us as we engage it. Third, culture is not additive, but central in every way—this is true both in terms of teaching as well as in the research and study of teaching. And, as any GTA who is not in the cultural mainstream (for example, someone who is transgen-

dered, atheist, an international sojourner, or working class) will attest, the social reality, the risk, that surrounds our bodies when we teach matters.

Commitments four and five are linked, showing the connection between micro communication practices and macro understandings of what those practices do in culture. That is, while critical communication pedagogy is interested in micro practices as constitutive of the macro institutional structures that frame our meanings and our sense of each other, we are at the same time concerned with the ways the macro structures place such micro communication practices in a meaningful context. In the end, critical communication educators are concerned with the interplay between micro practices as constitutive of social structure, while also understanding that it is only by concerning ourselves with the structure that we may see the meaning in the micro moments of communication. A sixth commitment asks us to engage in the study of language and how language constitutes self, other, culture, and the super structures that guide our understanding and future potentials we might imagine. Studying language affords us access to how power and oppression (e.g., racism or sexism) are constituted in and through our communication practices. It is by exploring the larger, social implications of speech that we can begin see fully the power of language in our lives.

Commitment seven concerns reflexivity, the need to be acutely aware of oneself and how that self is situated in relation to others. The introductory course, for instance, is a powerful site for cultivating this ability as we already ask students to carefully examine themselves as speakers and the messages they might convey

to others. Commitment eight examines the interplay between research and pedagogy, focusing on praxis, careful thought or reflection and action that generates spaces for dialogue and decenters taken for granted understandings of knowledge and culture. Critical communication pedagogy as praxis is about creating generative spaces (Lather, 1991) for interrupting the norms of our classrooms, about teachers and students working together to build new understandings in order to effect change in their relationships, classrooms, and communities. This commitment leads to the next: commitment nine seeks to frame human subjectivity and agency as nuanced and complex. That is, within a critical perspective, given these commitments, we understand that who we are and what we can do are still in the process of being written, still in the process of becoming. This is a particularly hopeful thought in that if we can discern how we shape and are shaped by others, if we know that we are not fated to oppressive or rigid social structures, then we are better able to pursue other ways of thinking, of acting, of living.

Finally, the last commitment is about the need for and the cultivation of dialogue. When Freire (1970/2003) describes the desire for, the need for, dialogue, we learn that it is dialogue that re-enforces our humanity, our shared roles as Subjects in the world, that we can begin to imagine new ways of enacting our lives in ways that inflict less pain and suffering on the world. Though Freire was concerned with liberation in Brazil, the same can be said of our classrooms, as the spaces for authentic dialogue collapse under the weight of increasing State and Federal demands. Recovering, reopening

these spaces for dialogue, for collective consideration of purpose and meaning, should be our priority.

It is this sense of commitment, of concern, that draws us to the introductory communication course as a site for investigation, as a site rich with potential for critical communication pedagogy. Classroom discussions are not necessarily dialogue, at least not in this critical sense. Involving ourselves in our students' lives (and them in our own) is not necessarily dialogue, at least not in the sense we describe here. As educators, as GTA supervisors, or GTAs, how will we build dialogue in the introductory course? Critical communication pedagogy asks us to focus more on building knowledge together rather than conveying concepts, on meaning more than coverage. It is one way to lend narrative coherence to our efforts in this vein.

As the next section of this essay will demonstrate, introductory courses in communication studies are replete with opportunities for innovation and relevance. Given the compartmentalization and oppositional nature of disciplines, our rich interdisciplinary courses are sites where communication, the medium for how power is constituted in each word, each gesture, is central to the conversation. In these classes, we can engage ourselves and our students in dialogue toward living rich, textured, and critical lives.

REFRAMING THE VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR WORK

As critical communication educators, one of the most important actions we can take for ourselves, our col-

leagues and our students is to respect the work we undertake, especially as regards the introductory course. To this end, we advocate a shift in attitude, if not in paradigm. First, courses like public speaking or introduction to communication studies are not “basic,” they are “introductory” or “foundational.” This is a distinction that matters. “Basic” courses are, at best, easy, and, at worst, boring; they’re beneath us; and, in the case of communication, can represent busywork instruction in skills people have had some facility with throughout their lives. Consequently, we each know faculty who don’t feel a lot of love for the “basic” course; though it has made possible most of our achievements in other, seemingly more engaging areas of the field, it is still a grading heavy, general education course that takes us away from our graduate seminars and our special topics courses to work with sullen and frightened first and second year students. An “introductory” course, on the other hand, is an invitation; it engages students and asks them to become part of our field, of our collective work to more fully understand communication in all its distinct and distinguished and divergent ways. (Similarly, a “foundational” course is integral, significant, the bedrock upon which we build our curriculum.) No educator should be “above” or “beyond” teaching the introductory course; an introductory course is intellectual, evolves from the theories that form the foundation of the field, and builds the foundation our students will need to succeed not just in future communication courses, but also as citizens, parents, workers, and educators. To this end, it would be appropriate to reconsider the name of this very journal; *Basic Communication Course Annual*, though rich with tradition, fails to evoke

the sense of purpose and commitment many of us who love the introductory course feel. It does not say to us, or to our colleagues in this or other fields, that communication is complex, powerful, or in any way part of a greater vision or purpose. At worst, it risks continuing to relegate to the sidelines, to further ghettoize, the heart of our work as a discipline.

Now, neither of us is so naïve as to assume that a simple change in language will change the world, will recover the lowly public speaking class or hybrid course in the hearts and minds of the most crusty and resistant academics; yet as Freire (1992) reminds us, “changing language is part of the process of changing the world” (p. 68). In the end, the words we use to talk about a thing (a basic course) do indeed work to make it (basic). If we don’t love what we do in that course, if we don’t believe in it, then who will? Who should? It is our responsibility to tend this garden if we expect it to continue to flower.

To this end, we must also advocate for ourselves and for our colleagues who serve as “Basic Course Coordinators,” “GTA Supervisors,” “Core Curriculum Directors” and so forth. In writing this essay, we considered the folks we’ve known who have served in this capacity; each brought energy and skill to the assignment. It is worth noting, though, how few of these folks continued to serve in this capacity past tenure, how few associate and full professors take on this challenge. And those who have served often note they’ve “done their time.” This suggests they have been victimized by an unyielding educational structure that uses more than it gives, in this case, a prison. Whose interests do we serve in envisioning the introductory course and service with re-

spect to the introductory course as “doing time?” In part, this is a matter of demanding appropriate working conditions for faculty who are engaged in the introductory course. This faculty includes not only graduate teaching assistants/associates and their supervisors, but also department chairs, assessment coordinators, and part-time or adjunct instructors. We are already well-aware that the instructors of our introductory courses—whether public speaking, or critical thinking, or a hybrid of key communication theories and skills—are our own best disciplinary ambassadors, people who will shape others’ perceptions of our field, our efforts and our values (Nyquist and Wulff, 1996). The students we meet in public speaking may or may not go on to become majors in our departments, but we can count on the fact that they will become industry leaders, educators, parents, and voters. It is, therefore, essential that we care for the people who teach our “basic” courses as we would care for our discipline, for the various specialties and interest groups we call home. At a most basic level, how many of us could claim to have earned our graduate degrees without a teaching assistantship? How many departments could sustain rich, cutting edge graduate programs without the FTEs that come from being so respected on their campuses as to be entrusted with a required general education course? In an ideal world, the introductory course would serve not only as a duty we do because we believe in the work, but it should serve as a location to make our research matter. If the content and the nature of the course has become so distant from how faculty describe their passions, the problem is with how the course has come to rest, to fall into arrears, in the discipline. That is, renewed energy could

and must be proffered to the introductory course that places it once again at the forefront in engaging and educating citizens about the power of public discourse and their role in sustaining a critical role in democracy.

In what follows, we introduce four recommendations, a critical communication pedagogy agenda for the “basic” course. We suspect these are not ideas wholly original to us—that, in fact, we’d find these particular recommendations drive right back to the heart of our disciplinary roots and traditions. However, while we find tendrils of these ideas in our discipline’s publications, we more commonly find them expressed by ourselves and our colleagues in convention hotel bars, in reviewer and respondent remarks, and in the hallways outside our offices. But whatever values we hold, whatever narrative or purpose we’d fashion for ourselves as scholars invested in introductory communication courses, it is only when we begin to articulate them publicly that we can begin to reflect on and act in relation to our efforts, to engage in praxis. We hope articulating this agenda here re-invigorates the reader, challenging you to reflect on how you feel about your work, on what you already do well and what you might learn to do better. There is no one critical communication pedagogy for the introductory course; your energized engagement, your vision, your action will give it shape, meaning and purpose for you and your students.

We must challenge and revise seemingly “teacher-proof” textbooks, policies and curricula.

When I interviewed for my first basic course director position, I was encouraged to produce a manual for the course that would detail each assignment, each class pe-

riod's activities, and to ensure that all sections of the course, taught all by GTAs, were exactly the same. The logic was that we would be in trouble if, upon inspection, it was found out that the section student A was in was different than the one student B was in. I remember asking how we would assume that each section could be the same since students A and B would inevitably have different teachers. Surely, the sections would be different since there were going to be populated by, well, different people. It was, I argued, impossible to achieve. The response was simple: it is your job to make them the same. Same book, same lesson plans, same policies, same assignments. Sameness was key and, in the department's estimation, the only way to ensure that all students were treated equally. I understood my role in this context to be simple: make sure that the teacher in the room is as irrelevant as possible. And this, I thought, was the death of education as I had come to know it.

* * *

As it stands, our introductory texts suffer from their conception as “basic.” Though comprehensive and well-written, measured and paced to include time-tested concepts in communication studies, these works have, as a result of their publication, been slowly eroded by reviewers, developmental editors and an overwhelming sense of agreement about what constitutes an appropriate introduction to our students. This is, of course, a difficult issue to broach in a venue such as this; many of us who have had the opportunity to work at length with teaching associates and large introductory courses also have written or aspire to write introductory textbooks.

As critical communication educators, it is essential that we reflect upon our assumptions about textbooks. How many pages should they include? What about cartoons or photographs? Must they all move from theory to perception to verbal to nonverbal? Is the developmental editor's logical sequence intuitively logical to student readers? Who do our textbooks include? Who do they ignore or exclude? Are there issues we'd never ever address in an introductory text? Are there theorists we'd never introduce that early? Too often, publishers advance textbooks that are in multiple editions, long lineages of writing, that are not especially divergent; often colleagues will note that their choice of text was as much a reflection of what they used when they were GTAs, rather than any overt ideological commitment. Another reason we hear frequently is that a colleague has chosen "the lesser of the evils."

How might a commitment to critical communication pedagogy help us build textbooks that are relevant, timely and culturally significant? For example, several introductory course textbooks address culture (Dunn & Goodnight, 2007; Jaffe, 2006; Kearney & Plax, 2006; Wood, 2007), often effectively reminding students that culture (and our location within culture) affects our communication. These books tend to trace intercultural theory through a book, often preserving the basic information of an introductory hybrid or public speaking text but naming culture as a central framing element. Critical communication educators would follow this direction to a more profound and fundamental conclusion: the world is produced through communication. Texts should address language as "post-semiotic," as productive or constitutive of our social worlds, rather than maintain-

ing, as have all other introductory texts, an emphasis on language as representational (or merely a reflection on/of the world). This shift in approach is not simply cosmetic—it is about developing a course text that is paradigmatically aligned with a critical theory tradition. Such books would challenge readers to see communication as both productive of power and a productive way of resisting unethical or unjust power.

To do this effectively, we need to engage our students differently. That is, many of our textbooks in the field talk to students about the concepts and ideas of the field, a strategy that resembles a teacher bringing students into the field. In many ways, this is a powerful tool for an introductory text—it was, in fact, one of the ways we were introduced to the field. One of us was introduced to communication via Ehinger, Monroe and Gronbeck's (1978) *Principles of Speech Communication* (8th ed.). Texts since this edition have changed relatively little in terms of how they address students—the pedagogical tenor of the text works a concept, theory, or idea for a student, trying to gain understanding from all students who might meet that book. However, this way of talking to students is not universal and not suited for all classrooms the introductory books might enter. For example, we often find our students, profoundly diverse in ability, age, ethnicity, economic class, faith, gender, and sexuality, frustrated by the concepts they encounter in our field's textbooks; in attempting to apply concepts like uncertainty reduction theory or general semantics, students find these concepts lack the sort of fine attention to power, privilege and justice that can render them meaningful in their own lives. The textbook, by trying to address the specifics of this idea or concept in rich de-

tail, apart from sociopolitical context, risks rendering itself irrelevant because of the ways it portrays the idea for the idea's sake, rather than locating that idea within some sort of context and showing when and how it can be useful. Nowhere is this more clear than in conversations of interpersonal communication in which our gay, lesbian, bi or transgendered students challenge the heteronormative assumptions behind the text's theories. For them, in the context that surrounds them, these ideas are not just context-less, they are potentially violent as they erase their presence on each page. We must strive for textbooks that take teachers and students seriously, that engage them in communication concepts in ways that are always within context, always within a perspective and aimed toward a specific end. Such books may more fully approximate the sort of dialogue that invites challenge, appraisal, critique and change.

Moreover, it is worth considering how we, as a discipline, broach the issue of reading with our students. Apart from the content and structure of our introductory textbooks, our efforts (or lack thereof) to render that reading significant or integral both within (as in preparing for upcoming assignments or examinations) and beyond (as in preparing to live a meaningful life wherein each of us feels capable of and invested in effecting change in our classrooms, communities and cultures) the course shape our students' sense of the purpose and function of the course. As Nathan's (2006) ethnographic fieldwork as a first year college student suggests, in a culture where students must choose from competing and compelling demands, if we fail to underscore how the reading will make a material difference in students' lives, they will (quite reasonably, we think)

direct their attention to other, more pressing matters. Nathan's (2006) findings suggest that, in order to encourage students to read, we must underscore both the immediate and long-term usefulness and value of given reading assignments; if students perceive their introductory communication text to be integral to their success in the course *and* to their success beyond the course, they are more likely to take seriously that reading.

As a field, we must resist the exigencies of the publishing industry that have reduced the number of publication outlets (and approaches to textbook conception, authorship and marketing). We must resist making our theories and commitments basic, neutral and stripped of controversy. We must build textbooks that are engaging to students and teachers both, that challenge them and ask them to think critically and carefully about the world around them. And we must clearly communicate to students and to ourselves the relevance and value of the reading we assign, both within and beyond the introductory course.

We must engage, not simply accommodate, diversity.

Working with my first group of GTAs, I became aware of how difficult the enterprise would be. In my new position, I would have 45-50 GTAs from not only a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but from a variety of different graduate programs. Some of my GTAs would have finished their undergraduate programs a few days before, while others had been teaching for years as part of community colleges or as part of Master's programs. Getting everyone on the same starting page was rough,

especially since many wished they were teaching other subjects and others wished they weren't teaching at all. What these GTAs wanted was a quick primer on making do, getting it done so they could move on to other more important parts of their schooling. A few were dedicated and excited about their assignments, but most were put off, already falling in to the trap that the basic course was beneath them. It was not, of course, their fault.

Perhaps the largest struggle was the difficulty of talking about diversity and culture with these new teachers. "We are teaching public speaking, why do we even need to care about diversity—I'm not judging them on race, am I?" These maneuvers, I'd learn, were tricks. It is a trick we learn as a culture without even needing to have specific lessons—our politicians, our CEOs, our entertainers have made this logic so easily available. To notice (or to acknowledge that you noticed) race, is to, by that act, promote racism. To notice gender (or to have gendered bodies acknowledged in the classroom) is to make them the only issue at play. The logic here is that we should really only accommodate the fact that we are different from each other, never actually engage it as meaningful, as part of how communication works. Challenging this logic with my GTAs was not an easy thing to do—the models for how to do it are few, the work theorizing it still under-developed. And, this too is not the fault of my GTAs.

* * *

The GTA professional development literature, though dated, effectively anticipates the challenges of teaching in the 21st century. A number of studies note the profoundly diverse student composition in our col-

leges and universities. Though, in the past, communication educators could count, if they ever could, on a certain degree of homogeneity between themselves and their students, this is most certainly no longer the case. Students differ in ethnicity, ability, economic class, gender, sexuality, political perspective—from each other and from their professors. (One might question whether the seeming homogeneity of the past was ever in fact so...it may be that we have a more comprehensive understanding of diversity, as well as a culture that is more accepting—however grudgingly—of divergence.) As GTA supervisors, we have had the pleasure of working with a profoundly diverse array of GTAs, including GLBT TAs, working class TAs, TAs from other countries, TAs with disabilities, etc. GTA development research must engage/confront how changes in students have led to changes in TAs and ultimately TA coordinators; surely things have changed since the 1990s.

There is quite a lot of TA training and development literature from the 1990s; it effectively delves into the concerns of the international teaching assistant, developmental models and so forth. What exists with respect to on-going professional development, however, is thin. A few authors posit what they have found to be effective instructional strategies for the preparation of GTAs—e.g., trigger moments, microteaching, etc. What does not exist, however, is an articulation of how the supervisor can develop these and utilize them to their fullest advantage. Nor does this literature take into consideration a substantive and nuanced understanding of power, identity or culture. In general, this literature casts GTAs as a relatively monolithic group, distinct only in assumptions about what their role entails and

their standpoint along a developmental continuum from naïve novice to junior colleague.

To some extent, the degree to which this work is indebted to instructional communication research shapes its assumptions regarding identity and power. For instance, power is still, to some extent, seen as a tool to be deployed and used or mitigated and offset. This is, to some extent, exacerbated by two factors: (1) the GTAs' concerns that students will play them because they have less institutional power and authority than other faculty, and (2) the trouble-shooting nature of the GTA supervision process, one that focuses more fully on prevention and control of possible crises rather than learning from the messiness of classroom practice.

Yet, the major lesson studying power in the classroom might offer us as communication scholars lies in the careful analysis and pedagogy of how power affects what counts as knowledge and how such knowledges produce us as educational subjects. For instance, in GTA training, what would it mean to not only address how one maintains control in the classroom, but to ask GTAs to examine how such moves work to construct the context for learning. That is, while disciplined students will perform "good student" with, perhaps, greater proficiency, the appearance of what we perceive to be learning might not, in fact, be actual learning. When a teacher uses her or his power in the classroom to shape students' performances of student, s/he is also creating disciplined student subjects—students are reminded how power works upon their bodies, how they are subject to the whims of their instructors if they desire an acceptable grade in the course. In the end, the lessons one may learn from our classes, those sites where power

in the classroom research comes to play, is how to be disciplined properly. In these moments, the multiplicity of our students, the diversity they represent, and the unique and wonderful knowledges they possess about how communication works is lost in an effort that risks effectively neutering students into docility or complacency. The effort in some of our research to maximize efficiency and produce particular representations of student learning (e.g., power in the classroom research, compliance gaining) may very well lead to learning that is less about communication and more about coercion. An extended effort to have students embrace and engage in diversity, including different ways of being in the classroom, might very well enable a more dynamic and rigorous context for learning communication (as well as the kinds of potentials that communication might afford).

It is also worth noting that engaging in these explorations with both GTAs and undergraduates is a cross-cultural project. For example, Nathan's (2006) work, observing that student culture is characterized by individuality and choice (e.g., to opt in/out of majors, classes, clubs, living arrangements), poses challenges for our long-held understandings and hopes regarding community, in general, and diverse communities in particular.

We must embrace an understanding of pedagogy as teaching and research.

I am one of the "privileged" few who "gets" to be involved in the re-accreditation of my university. On my most cynical days, I see this as time I won't get back, as an endless array of soul-killing meetings and memos and

data collection and analysis and meetings and memos and... My colleagues, especially those my senior, are not inclined to dispel this impression:

“Oh, yeah, I was approached for that...looks like I really dodged a bullet!”

“Careful...doing good work now will only mean you’ll be in charge of the damn thing in ten years... Better plan to be on leave.”

“Yeah, assessment’s bullshit; I’m so sick of everyone getting up in my business...Can’t I just teach?”

I feel their pain. But, I do think there’s something important they’re missing: Don’t we care how we’re doing? Isn’t it worth our time and energy to take stock of what we do well and what we can do better? Given the rapidly changing composition of our student body and their needs and goals, shouldn’t we pause to consider whether all of our “go to” teaching moves are still effective for them?

* * *

All good teachers engage in assessment. We carefully prepare our lesson plans in light of our student learning objectives and then we ask our students and ourselves whether we were successful, for whom, and when. We might not use the terms our accreditors use, but we do engage in this process, and fortunately for us, we can do all of this without having to schedule endless meetings, and write memos.

As readers of and authors in this journal can attest, the introductory course can be a rich resource for information about communication and learning in higher education. However, one of the challenges we must confront is our tendency to use the students in our courses

for research into topics of our own interest, such as communication apprehension, family communication, and so forth—though these are important topics to be sure. It is not that we should avoid this sort of research, but rather that we must remind ourselves that our work in the introductory course itself IS research. Here we are not intending to make a facile argument that teaching and research are interchangeable; as academics who are or have been in the review, tenure and promotion process, we understand that our senior colleagues, administrators and the general public will see those as qualitatively different activities. However, just for a moment, let's consider the ways in which the two are meaningfully alike. First, if our research interests are congruent with our service responsibilities with respect to the introductory course, consider how many rich and fruitful directions there are to pursue. Second, embracing the critical paradigm makes possible many new directions in research than heretofore explored. For example, we might well consider the ways in which our rhetoric with respect to the introductory course has shaped our interactions with our students, with our administrators, and with our colleagues in other disciplines.

Introductory courses might very well demonstrate the largest gap between what we research and what we teach. We can think of nowhere in our respective universities where the gap is so large. Further, we can think of no course that has more opportunities for a collaboration between the two. We have our own journal dedicated to the topic (*Basic Communication Course Annual*), as well as divisions and interest groups at a variety of associations (NCA, etc.). Yet, the introductory

course remains basically the same as it has for the past few decades. Some of the curriculum has shifted (thanks, in part, to folks in organizational communication, computer-mediated communication, and intercultural communication who have insisted on chapters dedicated to those areas), but largely the model of the introductory course has remained the same. An assessment of the research featured in our journals and in the books in our field would show a growing disparity between the content of our introductory course and the directions the field has taken. Moving current communication content into the “basic” course will help not only modernize the course, but create a whole new level of relevance for our students. When we talk, even anecdotally, about the current research, students respond. The central problem is that these moments are more often than not separate from the content of their textbooks and the central focus of the standardized course.

We must recover communication education from abandon.

I began my graduate teaching assignment as a “teacher-scholar” and I knew, somehow, that the title was more than just lip service. I knew that it mattered, that the shift from “GTA training” to “becoming a teacher-scholar” mattered. A friend of mine, attending another school, was in training, and I remember that I was more than a bit nasty about it—my job sounded so much more important. A teacher-scholar. Wow. You are trained not to pee on the carpet, I told my friend; when learning how to teach, you are in the process of becoming. Becoming a teacher-scholar. This was not a semantic difference; this mattered. And while I would probably

not be so obvious about my feelings today (siding on tact rather than one-upping her at every turn), I think the difference still matters. Learning to teach communication is a significant step toward becoming a teacher who cares, a teacher who teaches reflexively, a teacher who makes communication matter. I was, in the end, becoming a teacher-scholar. And that mattered.

* * *

When we began our careers as teachers, we also took a graduate seminar on university level communication instruction. This course had, as central texts, two books. First, we were to purchase McKeachie's (2002) *Teaching Tips*, a generally helpful but mostly uninspiring resource for assisting the new teacher in the daily tasks of teaching. We were also assigned Daly, Friedrich, and Vangelisti's (1990) *Teaching Communication: Theory, Research, and Methods*. This second book, in the tradition of communication education, focused on basic goals of teaching in the communication discipline, the teaching of certain courses, as well as helpful pieces on organizing a course and evaluating students. Each of these pieces, written by various people in the field, served to frame the teaching of communication. We each remember reading the volume, feeling like the content was useful, but not fully theorized. That is, we struggled with putting reasons and logic behind the recommendations, many of them falling back on under-theorized personal examples. However, we hoped that more was to come—after all, Sprague (1993) had recently called for a more theoretically informed discipline-specific pedagogy. All we had to do, as young graduate students, was to wait. Besides the newer edition of *Teaching Communi-*

tion, there has not much more discussion of teaching communication. Even the short-lived Scholarship of Teaching and Learning section in *Communication Education* ended when Editor Don Rubin filled his final issue.

Does anyone engage in communication education research? Apart from the scholarship of teaching and learning folk, we're not sure anyone has heeded Sprague's call. Or, more accurately, as a discipline, we have heeded the call, but have continued to work in the quiet, in the local. Each of us assesses our efforts with students; each of us considers how best to teach a given concept or theory. However, as a discipline, we have continued to suffer from the inferiority complex associated with researching teaching itself, leaving that work to GIFTS sessions and in-house professional development, and preferring, instead, to pursue work that feels more empirical, more conventionally scholarly. To some extent we could say that people who write introductory course texts are attempting to engage in communication education research. Such work is typically grounded in anecdotal experiences teaching that course to the students at their university, which is valuable, and may make a palpable difference for the students at that school. Moreover, such work may draw upon established learning theory. However, neither is a theoretically rigorous examination of pedagogy in the communication classroom. Without a focused communication education research agenda, we fail to properly theorize about the potentials communication (and the teaching of communication) can offer students in this newly globalized world.

TOWARD A CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY IN THE “BASIC” COMMUNICATION COURSE

What would it mean to have a god for our introductory course, a driving narrative that serves the interests of our students? What would it mean for us, the teachers and administrators of the introductory course, to have a god? What would it mean to engage in a critical communication pedagogy that really considers what communication courses might be able to offer that is unique, that is especially significant? What would it mean to engage diversity in ways that matter to our students, in ways that really challenge our students to think about culture and diversity in ways that disrupt normative conceptions of difference? What would it mean to connect more carefully the discipline’s research with the discipline’s introductory course—how might that enliven the course and raise the stakes for teachers, students, and faculty across the range of ranks and positions? What would it mean to infuse the introductory course with challenging content that makes teacher-scholars of our GTAs, that demand of them the same rigor we expect them to display in our graduate courses? How might such a change alter the students who take their courses, them now coming to our advanced classes with greater and greater expectations? And what would it mean for GTAs to enter those classrooms with greater readiness to teach that material? Together, might these elements, infused with a pedagogy of social action and critical thinking, create a narrative for our education in the introductory course that truly pushes the limits of what these classes can do?

We end with a story. A GTA at one of our institutions comes in to one of our offices and tells us a story about her day in class. These happen daily for us all, these moments when something really worked and the graduate student has to come and talk about it, debrief the moment with a mentor. Listening to this new teacher, sharing her experiences with an exercise that examines race and power, that incorporates embodied learning, is like listening to someone who has just seen her first sunset—she is excited, reflective, and hopeful about her enterprise as a teacher, a person, a somebody in the lives of others. What we know of this moment is that tomorrow or the next day, this teacher will go back to class and return to the curriculum of the book, of the course, of the state's required number of public speaking minutes. We know that soon, this exercise will become nothing more than a moment, part of a personal teacherly canon that will more than likely be insular than universal. It will be how this teacher broaches that topic, in the range of other modes for other topics. It will not revolutionize that class, as the class is not under this teacher's control, not really. It is part of an administrative machine that I supervise and I have only allowed for so much room, not complete freedom. The ends I have created are limited, they are not coherent and certainly not this teacher's choice. The activity, considered most skeptically, does more harm than good actually—in this moment, the students might see the potential of this “basic” course doing more than it actually will. They have an idea of what could be, but not what will be.

We have yet to undertake, as a discipline, the work we need to do to bring our introductory courses to their

full potential. That is, the “basic” course needs revision, needs a re-envisioning of what it could be. In any subject, the introductory course deserves a healthy dose of current theory, critical debate, and innovative ideas, and communication studies is no exception. Critical communication pedagogy is but one way to envision these changes. There are no doubt others. But without a focused dialogue about what the course should do and the relationship between current scholarship and the practices of teaching these courses, we are fated to simply reproduce the canon of these courses without any sincere, reflective conversation about whether that is a good idea. We need a sustained conversation about how to make connections beyond tradition, beyond the segmentation of the hybrid course (interpersonal plus small group plus intercultural plus public), and beyond the dictates of state articulation boards. We need to determine what god our course serves. We need to locate the end to which we tell this disciplinary story. We need to renew our efforts in the introductory course and make it relevant to our students again. We need to build and share our work in more collaborative and significant ways; our students are waiting, instructors and supervisors are waiting, for what we can achieve.

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