



Teaching Communication Activism: Communication Education for Social Justice

Lawrence R. Frey and David L. Palmer
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Teaching Communication Activism: Communication Education for Social Justice provides an innovative account of activist teaching. It is an excellent read for instructors navigating an increasingly overburdened and underfunded academic environment. The contributors of this edited volume provide inspirational accounts of social activism in the classroom. *Teaching Communication Activism* is a hopeful compilation with the potential to reinvigorate higher education by reuniting theory with practice and celebrating the cacophonous melody of multiple voices.

Lawrence R. Frey and David L. Palmer—both respected activist educators and researchers—are the editors of the book. Their rich experiences in the field of social justice come forth in *Teaching Communication Activism*, and they have partnered with an impressive array of contributors. The authors in this book work together to create a comprehensive understanding of Communication Activism Pedagogy (CAP) that provides a history of democratic education, a context for understanding the turn toward the capitalistic, business model of education, and the experience of teachers and students co-creating scholarship in the classroom. The following paragraphs review the book's chapters and offer insight into the strengths and weaknesses of *Teaching Communication Activism*.

The Introduction of the book addresses the separation of theory from practice in higher education. Frey and Palmer (2014) argue that:

A substantial thematic gap in education and in education scholarship is the systematic practice and study of teaching students how to actually intervene with members of oppressed communities and with activist groups and organizations to make systems and practices more just; that is offering students opportunities to put their conceptual knowledge into concrete action to promote social justice. (p. 2)

In calling for a return to democratic learning, Frey and Palmer argue for a turn toward collaborative education that helps students employ their communication knowledge through interaction with marginalized communities. The chapters that follow provide educators with outstanding exemplars of CAP in the classroom.

Chapter 1 outlines the corporatization of communication education. Palmer provides a thorough history of the increased individualism undergirding the vast majority of communication theory, research, and instruction. As a result, Palmer argues that much of communication pedagogy prepares students for a workplace that appears to have no space for democratic deliberation. Palmer highlights the obstacles activist teachers encounter in corporate dominated structures of modern universities. Palmer's conclusion reiterates one of the book's common themes—activist teachers fall outside the parameters of much communication research and education.

In Chapter 2, Simpson situates critical pedagogy within the parameters of communication scholarship. Importantly, Simpson carefully describes the politics and power associated with injustice. Simpson's chapter situates CAP in the theoretical foreground of critical activism for social justice and critical communication pedagogy. Simpson highlights the tensions existing among researchers from both areas, but explains the partnership between activism and pedagogy moves students beyond a mere awareness of injustice to intervention.

Chapter 3 is an exploration and application of ethics in the activist classroom. Jovanovic (2014) demonstrates CAP's potential to reclaim the "primary ethical mission of U.S. higher education to strengthen democratic society by actively redressing social injustices" (p. 106). The critical component of CAP allows the students in Jovanovic's class to recognize injustice, express their anger and frustrations, while also engaging in the generosity of actively recognizing and listening to the voice of the other. Jovanovic contextualizes the partnerships between students and communities as they build and sustain relationships.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how service-learning courses combine academic exploration with community service. Britt (2014) provides a "Typology of Service-Learning Approaches" that explains the relationships between "Skill-Set Practice and Reflexivity", "Civic Values and Liberal Democratic Citizenship", and "Social Justice Activism" (p. 139-153). Britt's contribution makes note of the unpredictability and evolving nature of service learning. While students take a fundamental leap in their education by becoming co-creators of learning, the uncertainty of S-L courses and instruction make activist learning difficult to fit the model of standardized courses. Britt outlines S-L's benefits to students, educators, and communities as opportunities to promote civic values and liberal democratic leadership. In particular, students learn to

consider their roles in their communities via critical pedagogy and social movement as they “build collaborative relationships with those who experience injustice and those fighting injustice” (Britt, 2014, p. 149).

In Chapter 5, Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz provide a comprehensive look at Communication Activism in the classroom. They note the important differences among the terms “charity, volunteering, and philanthropy” (p. 170) as they explore the differences “between grassroots activism and public service” (p. 171). The strength of this chapter is two-fold: 1) it provides an excellent example for educators interested in developing CA courses; 2) it provides helpful discussion of the disconnect between activism and community service where the latter is underscored by issues of privilege and power. Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz’s chapter highlights the need for robust, political, and democratic discourse in CA courses that reconnects theory and practice via conversations in the classroom, collaborative relationships among students, and collaboration with and among communities.

In Chapter 6, Susan Enck provides an autoethnographic account of her experiences as an activist and teacher. Enck’s account highlights a common problem activist teachers encounter—her students report being inspired by her courses, but have no space to enact social justice. Enck chose to bring theory and practice together by creating an interdisciplinary course that addresses gender, violence, dominance, and resistance. The course incorporates feminist frameworks with cultural examples of gender and violence. Students then apply their readings to “outreach projects” (Enck, 2014, p. 200). The classroom becomes a place of opportunity and hope that extends to organizations designed to alleviate pain and suffering in the hope of creating better ways of living. Enck’s class displays a strong commitment to partnerships among students, community, and the university with the class culminating in a community sharing of the students’ work.

Chapter 7 explores how “community-based performance works as a conduit of *social justice*” (p. 232). Gilbert’s (2014) chapter is an excellent example of “everyday life performance” working as social activism (p. 233). Like the other chapters in the book, Gilbert underlines the pedagogical philosophies that undergird her course. Britt employs performance and ethnography to create a voice for marginalized groups. Students inhabit the lived spaces of marginalized people, which culminates in a haunting and poignant narrative. The chapter has many strengths, and like the others, provides readers with insight into using performance as a means of CAP.

Christopher Carey, in Chapter 8, discusses his journey teaching an Environmental Advocacy course at Portland State University. This chapter explores communication as both constitutive and inherently political. Carey incorporates a template for CAP by describing his pedagogical approach of combining readings, class lectures, and theory building with the experience of working alongside activist communities to stop timber sales. An interesting aspect of Carey’s course is the use of role-playing as a means to practice conflict. Carey explains that role-

playing is an affective learning tool that helps students understand the nature of social conflict, and helps them understand their place as community members and activists.

Chapter 9 explores social justice from a global perspective. Hart and Walker describe their experiences teaching an interdisciplinary social justice activism S-L course for students at the University of Louisville. Students work in rural villages in Belize and the Philippines to design and implement health communication projects. The course, which appears to be a rich and rigorous interdisciplinary program of orientation and implementation, embraces social justice activism by partnering the university, students, teachers, countries, and local communities in the goal of bringing better, more democratic health care to people around the globe.

Rebecca Kennerly (with Tyson Davis), in Chapter 10, combines an intercultural course with an advanced video production course. The result is a collaborative effort to engage social justice through service learning. Partnering with migrant workers and the Southeast Georgia Communities project, the class created a documentary of student-worker relationships. This chapter is unique in that it provides a wonderful discussion of student transformation, as well as a template for interdisciplinary work (as does Hart and Walker's chapter) and collegiality. Kennerly's students learned important intercultural concepts to help them recognize standpoint theory while Davis's students learned the importance of social justice documentary in a new era of social justice activism.

Chapter 11 differs a bit from the other chapters in the book. Cox and Geiger examine CAP in a graduate classroom by creating a multilayered and longitudinal study of bullying and racial prejudice in a Missouri middle school. They frame bullying as a form of hate/hurtful speech associated with human rights violations. This chapter works to redefine bullying as an issue of social justice, which portrays the problem more holistically as an act of deep social psychosis upheld by archaic prejudice. From a CAP perspective, the chapter provides insight into teaching S-L courses at the graduate level and documents the effects of bullying on those being bullied, those doing the bullying, and the graduate students working to intervene.

Chapter 12 examines the Speaking Center at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Authors Cuny, Thompson, and Naidu describe their re-imagination of a campus speaking center that broadens the center's service from strictly student and faculty oriented activities to including services for underrepresented communities. In particular, this project incorporated CAP through student training, partnership, and instruction with community members. Students engaged in social justice activism by providing underprivileged communities the rhetorical tools necessary to better their circumstances through engagement in dialogue with the dominant classes.

Squires and Creager (2014), in Chapter 13, describe an activist teaching partnership between their university and an at risk, diverse, low income local high school. The project utilizes digital media as a means to empower students through storytelling. As students recount their life stories, they gain practical knowledge of digital media while concomitantly becoming

connected to local community organizations. The result is a dynamic network of connectivity where the student's stories become the conduit for social change.

Teaching Communication Activism concludes with an examination of critical performance pedagogy. Deal employs the use of testimony performance to explore the narratives of the incarcerated. In coming face to face with the realities of discrimination in the U.S. prison system, student perspectives of the incarcerated are dramatically altered as they uncover the systematic oppressions that maintain disparities between the jailed and the free. Students enact their roles as citizens by working to better the conditions for those who have little to no means of recourse.

Teaching Communication Activism is obviously best suited for activist teachers or those aspiring to become activist teachers. However, it is an excellent and inspiring book for all educators, regardless of their teaching commitments. There are many instructors who have difficulty teaching S-L or CA courses due to lack of resources, the increasing pressure to create courses that easily fit assessment standards, or because faculty with tenured positions are increasingly scarce (and these positions undeniably provide more support for this kind of instruction). This book demonstrates how CAP is manageable at any level of teaching. *Teaching communication activism* is also a beneficial resource for department chairs looking to implement S-L and CA courses, or defend the courses they have. Finally, administrators are often asked to provide "proof" of a university's centrality to the community/State or the ability of the university to create capable workers. They too, can use this book to demonstrate to regents, legislators, and accreditation boards that their faculty and students are not only meeting standards of excellence, but they are also becoming master problem solvers as they engage in some of the most difficult challenges society offers.

As the first of its kind, the book is difficult to compare with others. It exceeds most instructional pedagogy books in both theory and example. It is an inspirational account of social activism and quality teaching. It is also a great example of partnership, as authors refer to each other's work, allowing the reader to move back and forth as they experience the book. It is a smooth, cohesive read. There are sections that might be a bit long in their explication and others where thicker, more autobiographical accounts could provide better contextualization, but as a whole, this is a solid collection of essays by accomplished educators. Those seeking social change have been given a wonderful resource.

The book concludes with a chapter by Beth Osnes and Jason Bisping which documents the cultural and environmental struggle between indigenous Mayan populations and the environment. Using what Osnes and Bisping call "theater for energy justice performance" the authors provide the community (particularly the youth and women) with alternative fuel options for burning. The performance serves a two-fold purpose of environmental protection and empowerment, particularly for Mayan women, who experience extreme gender discrimination. Like other chapters, Osnes and Bisping detail the rigorous process of melding

performance, activism, and pedagogy, but of particular value is the authors' discussion of navigating the murky subjects of culture, consumerism, and activism.

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