Creating Equitable and Inclusive Basic Course Classrooms: A Response Essay

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Basic Course Forum

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In 1992, Jo Sprague challenged communication educators to think more critically about how we teach and what we include in our communication curriculum. In the decades since Sprague's powerful call for instructional communication researchers and instructors to ask ourselves, "What is knowledge and how is curriculum established?" (p. 11), we find ourselves needing to engage with ongoing contemporary conversations about what counts as knowledge in a basic communication course and which knowledge is viewed as important enough to include in the curriculum. A meta-synthesis of basic communication course surveys showed little change in the basic communication course content over the last 60 years (LeFebvre and LeFebvre, 2020). The radical changes that have occurred in our society and in higher education student populations over the last decades have required a rethinking of how college classrooms function to create inclusive and equitable campus communities. Campus Chief Diversity Officers who inform institutional policies surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion and Centers for Teaching and Learning are working to support faculty in critically examining their curricula and teaching practices in support of campus inclusion efforts (Ruiz-Mesa, 2022). In the previous essays, the authors offer a variety of creative and pedagogically-informed practices to support campus and classroom inclusion and equity. This essay responds to the Basic Course Forum submissions about how instructors and basic course directors can effectively support diversity, equity, and

inclusion efforts through course materials, pedagogy, and instructor training in the basic communication course by focusing on three emergent themes.

Culturally Responsive Content and Assignments

One of the first themes that emerges in these essays is the need for basic course directors and instructors to consider which communication skills and content we consider essential in the introductory communication course. In their essay, Prentiss and Strawser argue that the basic course needs to be redesigned with a culturally relevant pedagogical lens and needs to include more contemporary assignments that reflect the ways that students will be communicating in their own careers and communities. As the latest Basic Course survey (Morreale et al., 2016) demonstrates, there has been relatively little change in the content of the basic course at many institutions over the past several decades. As we move forward, there are two questions that every course director and instructor should keep in mind: (1) Do students in this class see themselves and their experiences embedded in the course material? and (2) Are students in this class learning and practicing the communication skills that they will need to be successful in their future courses, careers, and communities?

First, as we consider content, we challenge instructors to be mindful of the multiple intersectional identities and diverse experiences that are represented in the examples used throughout the course. Will all of your students see themselves in the names, celebrations, relationships, cultures, and experiences represented in the examples that are used in the textbook, in videos shown in class, models of speakers shown as illustrations of "good speaking," and in the assignments or exam questions embedded in the course? Additionally, as future communication professionals who may be responsible for publicly addressing an organizational crisis, doing media interviews, leading a land acknowledgement, or advising language around inclusion and equity, students should be equipped with accurate and contemporary inclusive language as part of the basic communication course curriculum. There are many nonprofit educational organizations and campus organizations that provide educational tools for teaching and speaking about diverse identities and experiences. Instructors should utilize campus resources from various offices including those offices focused on campus equity and inclusion, disability services, undocumented student services, student veteran services, among others.

Second, as we consider the assignments in our courses, we need to think carefully about what types of speaking students will be doing throughout their life.

How often will they present in front of a room filled with 25 people to deliver an uninterrupted speech? Is it more likely that they will be giving presentations in teams, posting video messages online, participating in meetings, engaging in discussions with others, or speaking in a context where they will be responding to questions? Communication is still seen as one of the most important skills our students will learn, but our colleagues in other disciplines identify listening, explanatory skills, building and supporting arguments, and group and team communication skills as some of the most important communication skills that students need to be successful in their careers (Broeckelman-Post et. al, 2022). As we update our courses, we need to ensure that we are listening to the needs that our colleagues and employers identify so that we are preparing students to be effective communicators in the contexts where they will soon find themselves.

Transparency

Another theme that emerges in these forums is the importance of transparency and clarity for supporting students and instructors. McKenna-Buchanan and Farris emphasize the importance of minimizing ambiguity about course expectations and revisiting the course goals throughout the semester to promote a growth mindset. Similarly, Tristan recommends using a Universal Design for Learning Model to ensure that materials are easily accessible to everyone, as well as modeling inclusive teaching practices and incorporating training about unconscious biases and positionality to help novice instructors better understand expectations. Throughout the course and instructor training, it is important to have as much clarity as possible about our expectations for students and instructors, as well as the underlying reasons for those expectations, in order to help make the implicit communication and classroom expectations explicit and ensure that everyone is working on an even playing field.

Transparency as a pedagogical practice in support of student success, equity and inclusion efforts is a potentially transformative classroom experience for students' growth and understanding of course content. It is important, however, to unpack practices for being successful in an assignment or project, and to also unearth why specific speaking or organizational patterns are most effective or desirable. This unpacking of both quality expectations as well as the biases, assumptions, and exclusionary cues embedded in particularly speaking practices is a critical part of the transparent teaching and learning process. Transparency, however, is not a "one and done" step in the teaching process. The next step in the transparency process is to

then dissect and critically analyze why such practices are desirable and for what purpose. We encourage an extension of transparency to include reasons why particular skills or practices are needed, where this need stems from, and how as agentic beings students have the choice of whether to engage this practice or to choose alternative practices (and to understand the potential outcomes of such choices). For students who may be the first person in their family to attend college, or the first to be educated in U.S. institutions of higher education, the unpacking of the assignment outcomes, success measures, and expectations is vital to student success in the course.

Inclusion

A final theme that emerges in these forum essays is the need to create an inclusive and supportive classroom community. All of us bring different identities and experiences to the classroom, and each class session is embedded in a particular historical moment that will impact the conversations on any given day. McKenna-Buchanan and Farris remind us that we can promote well-being by being conscious of our collective humanity, listening empathetically, and referring students to resources when needed. Tristan recommends including training to help graduate student instructors prepare to navigate difficult discussions, and Prentiss and Strawser encourage instructors to embed authentic storytelling into the course as a way to connect the course to their own experiences. All of these approaches can help to create a classroom environment where students feel like they are at home in the class rather than feel like they are a (potentially uninvited) guest.

Creating a supportive, challenging, and affirming classroom environment where students can feel that they can openly share their intersectional experiences, learn about diverse cultural norms, and feel seen and valued by their instructor and peers all contribute to student well-being. Immediacy practices such as knowing and correctly pronouncing student names, using accurate pronouns, and providing students with speaking and listening skills to be able to engage in difficult dialogues are all well-being practices grounded in immediacy literature and demonstrate to students that they are valued members of the classroom community. Additionally, we need to ensure students build communication skills to challenge an idea or assumption, correct an inaccurate statement, and articulate a position that may be opposed to a commonly-held ideal or belief. These communication skills for effectively sharing ideas in a complex and often polarized world are needed for our students to successfully self-advocate and support their communities.

Conclusion

By integrating culturally responsive content and assignments, transparency, and inclusion practices, basic course directors and instructors can take meaningful steps towards creating equitable and inclusive basic communication courses. While these are important first steps, we need to remain critically self-reflexive and responsive to student needs. We also need to recognize that this journey is one that requires humility and will continue through our lifetimes as we respond to ever-changing student populations and needs.

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