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Critical Communication Pedagogy as a Framework for Teaching Difference and Organizing

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As organizational communication scholars increasingly respond to calls to investigate difference and organizing, I urge them to heed a parallel and equally pressing need to incorporate difference into their teaching. Scholars and teachers should strive to help students understand how varying dimensions of social identity articulate with one another, with a focus on the consequences of those articulations for organizing (Simpson & Allen, 2006). While difference is a focus of study in several fields, communication scholars can offer students a uniquely communicative understanding of these issues and how humans (re)produce them. Such an approach can provide pivotal insight and understanding to prepare students to interact effectively and humanely in contemporary organizational contexts, where matters of difference are ever more apparent and important. However, because teaching difference and organizing can be particularly daunting and complex, faculty can benefit greatly from resources that can guide their efforts.

One potential framework for teaching difference and organizing is critical communication pedagogy, a relatively new perspective that studies relationships between power and communication in educational contexts. In this chapter, I present critical communication pedagogy as a useful approach for teaching organizing and difference. I begin by describing critical pedagogy—the theoretical and philosophical foundation upon which critical communication pedagogy rests. Then, I lay out the critical approach to communication pedagogy. Next, I suggest ways to apply critical communication pedagogy to teaching organizing and difference, including an overview of an organizational communication course about difference. Finally, I discuss the challenges and benefits of using this approach.

❖ CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to analyze and transform educational contexts by applying principles of critical theory (Giroux, 1997). Like critical theory and critical organization studies (e.g., Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Mumby, 1993, 2001), critical pedagogy strives to critique and change power relations in society. However, critical pedagogy concentrates on educational contexts and related structures in society. More specifically, critical pedagogy advocates a social justice orientation for transforming oppressive educational institutions into sites of emancipation and equality. Marking education as a crucial site of power dynamics, proponents of critical pedagogy examine impacts of dominant ideologies on teaching and learning, and they seek to create more democratic and socially responsible arrangements (McLaren, 2003). For example, they encourage educators to become social activists, and they invite us to interrogate and revise our teaching perspectives and practices. As Henri Giroux (1994) explained, critical pedagogy “signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities” (p. 30).

Critical pedagogy relies heavily on the work of scholar-activist Paulo Freire (1970), who conceptualized liberatory education as a process where learners come to consciousness (*conscientization*) through praxis, which integrates critical theory with reflection and practice. According to Freire, educational processes are not neutral; they can either domesticate or liberate. That is, they can indoctrinate students to accept dominant ideologies and go along with the status quo, or they can raise students’ consciousness by identifying and

challenging those ideologies. Thus, a primary goal of liberatory education is to develop students' (and teachers') critical consciousness of how power tends to serve some groups more favorably than others. The hope is that after students become more aware of these dynamics, they will be empowered and inspired to construct and enact alternate, more equitable social realities. To accomplish this goal, Freire recommended moving away from a traditional, passive "banking model" of education, in which educators deposit knowledge into students and reward those who regurgitate that knowledge, to a problem-solving approach that regards all subject matter as socio-historical constructs to be questioned and encourages students to challenge authority. As one scholar explained: "In this democratic pedagogy, the teacher is not filling empty minds with official or unofficial knowledge but is posing knowledge in any form as a problem for mutual inquiry" (Shor, 1992 p. 33). Freire (1970) also endorsed engaging students in dialogue—for instance, by inviting them to name and narrate their own experiences and to relate those experiences to what they are learning.

Critical pedagogy enjoys an enduring tradition in the United States, and its proponents have developed numerous variations that retain the central aim of applying critical theory to transform education (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). Contemporary advocates of critical pedagogy have extended Freire's work to encompass issues that are especially relevant for teaching difference and organizing. Whereas Freire took a Marxist perspective that tended to focus on essentialist, class categories, some critical pedagogy scholars have developed postmodern, constructionist conceptions of identity and difference (e.g., Giroux, 1994, 1997; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003). They acknowledge the importance of difference and identity politics by adopting critical perspectives that draw on feminist, performative, queer, and critical Whiteness studies (see Fassett & Warren, 2007). They also emphasize complexities of identities, asserting that most people simultaneously embody identities associated with privilege *and* oppression (e.g., Alexander, 1999; Allen, 2004; Cooks, 2003; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003; Orbe, 1998). As critical pedagogy infuses various disciplines, communication scholars have begun to provide substantive insight and direction about the crucial role of communication in critical pedagogy.

❖ CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

Communication scholars Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren (2007) developed critical communication pedagogy as a framework for

studying relationships between power and communication in educational contexts. In this perspective, they position communication as central to the processes through which humans reproduce or resist power relations. Critical communication pedagogy encompasses "critical theory's dedication to social change as a goal of research as well as communication studies' analytical focus on mundane practices" (Warren, in press). Fassett and Warren (2007) based critical communication pedagogy on elements of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and two areas of study in communication: (1) communication education, which focuses on how best to teach communication, and (2) instructional communication, which strives to improve classroom communication processes in any discipline. Fassett and Warren began their efforts after communication scholars in the early 1990s invoked critical pedagogy to interrogate conventional studies of communication education and communication instruction that typically focus on helping teachers to be more effective (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Rodriguez & Cai, 1994; Sprague, 1992, 1993, 2002). Along with other scholars, they critiqued functionalist tendencies of communication education and communication instruction, as well as assumptions about communication pedagogy related to knowledge and curriculum construction, teacher-student relationships, and functions of language and power in the classroom. (See, for example, Sprague, 1990, 1992.) To guide their efforts, Fassett and Warren (2007) relied on critical paradigms as well as related scholarship in education. Thus, critical communication pedagogy emerges at the intersection of critical theory/pedagogy and communication.

Critical communication pedagogy incorporates tenets of critical pedagogy while focusing explicitly on how everyday communication helps to (re)produce and (de)construct dominant ideologies. Similar to critical pedagogy, critical communication pedagogy depicts teachers as "transformative intellectuals who are located in a position to radically transform culture" (Sprague, 1992, p. 17), and it portrays the classroom as a significant site of social influence where actors engage in the social construction of their and others' identities. However, critical communication pedagogy operates through the basic premise that humans communicatively constitute power relations through social interaction, and therefore, we can use social interaction to change those relations. (See, for example, Deetz & Mumby, 1990.)

A communication approach to critical pedagogy provides methods, discourses, and perspectives that might be particularly useful for accomplishing the goals of critical pedagogy. For example, critical communication pedagogy studies how humans use communication to

constitute identity(ies), power, and culture. As Fassett and Warren (2007) explained:

Critical communication educators look to postmodern and post-structural understandings of human identity, to senses of students and teachers as relational selves produced in collusion and collision, to theories and methodologies that help them account for identities as produced in cultural—and therefore inherently ideological—contexts. (p. 40)

Fassett and Warren (2007) detailed ten fundamental, interconnected commitments of their vision for critical communication pedagogy that can guide processes for teaching organizing and difference. The first commitment asserts that humans produce identity in and through communication. Critical communication pedagogy characterizes identity as performative: Gender, race, class, sexuality, and so forth are not fixed, inherent qualities that we *have*; rather, they are contingent features of our identities that we *perform* in everyday social contexts (Butler, 1993; Warren, 2001). Thus, critical communication pedagogy moves away from essentialist, static notions of social identities that pervade instructional communication studies and toward a social constructionist perspective of identities as fluid, emergent, contextual, relational, and therefore, changeable (e.g., Allen, 2004; Burr, 1995).

The second commitment portrays power as dynamic and complex, in contrast to the traditional notion of power as something that only persons in authority (e.g., teachers) possess and wield. The latter viewpoint frames power as a tool or skill for gaining student compliance and discouraging student resistance, and it seeks to give teachers strategies for using communication to manage their classroom and to maintain order (Sprague, 1992). In contrast, critical communication pedagogy sees power as a processual, shared, and reciprocal element of classroom interactions. Thus, for example, this commitment invites teachers to be self-reflexive regarding the power dynamics of how they “manage” their classrooms. Combined with the first commitment, this perspective encourages educators to monitor how they might interact with students based on dominant ideologies about identities (e.g., teacher, student, as well as other social categories such as gender, race, and class).

The third commitment stresses the centrality of culture in the classroom. It debunks the idea that classrooms and education are neutral and apolitical by acknowledging and valuing diverse ways of knowing and being among students and teachers. Therefore, it encourages educators

to acknowledge that culture matters, to incorporate culturally-diverse reading materials and classroom activities, and to invite multiple cultural perspectives on course concepts. This approach can illustrate and validate course concepts while also helping students who are members of nondominant groups to feel more included.

The fourth commitment highlights a “focus on concrete, mundane communication practices as constitutive of larger social structural systems” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 43). This commitment signifies how a critical communication approach can contribute to critical pedagogy by acknowledging how everyday interactions help to (re)produce knowledge, (re)construct identities, and (re)iterate ideologies.

The fifth commitment extends the fourth by situating mundane communication practices in institutional and social contexts, and by conceptualizing them as co-constructive. Therefore, as we critique everyday interactions in the classroom and how they help to (re)construct institutional norms, we should also consider the contexts in which these interactions occur. For example, our behaviors in the classroom can interrelate with our academic department, the university, the surrounding community, our discipline, and society at large. My choices for course materials and assignments are subject to my sense of what seems appropriate in my department, on my campus, and within my discipline. When I teach organizing and difference, I often invoke my department’s mission statement—which refers to helping students become more humane and civil communicators—as a rationale for delving into difference matters and as a goal for students to work toward as they process what they are learning. Also, I often refer to current events and concerns in my local community or society as topics for teaching. Moreover, as a full professor, I feel freer to engage in more radical ways of teaching than I did as an assistant professor seeking tenure and promotion because I am not as concerned about potential sanctions from students or my colleagues.

The sixth commitment extends the constitutive role of communication by asserting the centrality of language. Fassett and Warren (2007) underscore language as a system we use to objectify subjective meanings and to internalize socially constructed meanings. They also note that language holds major ramifications for identity development. For instance, when I teach difference matters, I provide an historical overview of labels and their meanings for members of the racial group with which I identify. These labels include *nigger*, *Negro*, *colored*, *Black*, *African American*, and *Afro-American*. I tell students that I prefer *Black* because it represents pride in my racial identity, a perspective that activist groups in the 1960s constructed in resistance to earlier labels

whose meanings were more derogatory. I also ask students if they have preferences for social identity labels for groups to which they belong, and to explain why.

Commitment seven centers on radical reflexivity as essential to critical communication pedagogy, encouraging us to be aware of ourselves and how we enact our identities as scholars, teachers, learners, researchers, and so forth, as well as the ideologies that drive us. This commitment also requires us to reflect on how we as critical scholars simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant ideologies through everyday discourse.

Commitment eight harkens back to Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of praxis by urging teachers and students to reflexively bridge knowledge with action to transform the conditions that they critique. When I teach difference matters, I usually ask students to develop and begin to employ strategies for applying what they have learned to their everyday interactions. The final project in a class I taught on difference and communication in the ivory tower required students to develop their research for a specific stakeholder group (or groups) and to develop actionable items to submit to that group based on their research. I encouraged them to share their ideas with those groups, and I was committed to facilitating that process. In addition, I modeled this commitment after two students came out to our class as having learning disabilities. As I reflected on these students' compelling narratives about their struggles with navigating university systems for students with disabilities, as well as their recurring challenge of deciding when and if to inform professors of their disabilities due to fear of being stigmatized, I decided to take action. As chair of my college's diversity council, I enlisted that group's buy-in to reform our campus policy and procedures related to students with learning disabilities, and they agreed. I also told my class what I had done and why, and I thanked the two students for being courageous enough to share their stories. Each of them was gratified to know that their stories may lead to better experiences for other students with learning disabilities.

Commitment nine enjoins faculty to see our identities and our agency as individuals in complicated and nuanced ways. Warren (in press) explained: "What counts is how one engages—the effort to see the self and other as complex beings, each striving for meaning and purpose, is to engage them with a kind of care that embraces the ethics of a critically compassionate communication pedagogy."

The last of the ten commitments emerges from and elaborates the other nine commitments. It cites dialogue as a key principle of critical communication pedagogy that offers a means for deconstructing

power and constructing new, more socially just realities. In my classes on organizing and difference, I describe Buber's (1958) perspective on dialogue, and I frequently refer to this perspective during classroom interactions. I invite willingness to create something new through being open-minded and by avoiding the tendency to debate one another, or to defend our side of a discussion.

In sum, critical communication pedagogy advocates a dialogic, reflexive approach to teaching and learning, in which participants collaborate with one another to critique and transform educational practices and to consider how language and forms of interaction proactively (re)construct teaching and learning environments. Classroom interactions conscientiously refer to knowledge about power dynamics as they unfold within the classroom, rather than referring to external, more abstract examples of power. The goal is to facilitate classrooms that are sites of resistance and empowerment, where students acquire (and faculty hone) critical perspectives and skills that can not only reform the classroom and higher education, but also translate into other contexts.

Critical communication pedagogy provides a viable, valuable framework for teaching organizing and difference because it speaks to the constitutive role of communication in a specific context of organizing (education), and it emphasizes relationships among power, identity, and culture. It invites instructors to specify higher education and the classroom as crucial sites of power dynamics rather than referring to external examples and examining politics in the "real" world. Thus, the common ground of education among participants can serve as a pivotal source for collaboration and learning as they observe and analyze how relations of power develop contextually. It also can help respond to students' recurrent refrain of "What's in it for me?" by "highlighting the immediate power of communication, power that may be both oppressive and liberating depending on local contexts" (Nainby, Warren, & Bollinger, 2003, p. 207). Therefore, a critical communication pedagogy framework may engender learning that leads to raising students' consciousness and empowering them to be change agents.

In addition to being valuable for teaching organizing and power dynamics, critical communication pedagogy can facilitate teaching difference because it focuses on how humans use communication to produce identity. This approach permits a type of experiential learning that can punctuate the focus of critical organizational communication studies on organizations as key sites of identity (re)construction where we learn much of what we know about ourselves and others (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). For example, Sprague (1992)

asserted that classroom interaction “cannot be considered as the result of conscious cognitive choices without regard for the interplay of factors like class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness that shape each encounter” (p. 17).

Therefore, critical communication pedagogy corresponds well with contemporary critical organizational communication studies that increasingly treat power relations in terms of complex intersections of salient social identities (e.g., gender, race, class, ability, age, and sexuality, as well as professional roles and disciplinary identities) that induce varying degrees of privilege and oppression (Allen, 2004; Ashcraft & Allen, 2009). Consequently, this approach can help prepare students for a multicultural world by helping them understand and negotiate identity politics. Basically, a critical communication approach to pedagogy can equip and empower students to understand and resist power dynamics related to social identity politics while they are students and, in the future, as they participate in other organized settings.

❖ **IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY IN TEACHING DIFFERENCE AND ORGANIZING**

Numerous challenges can impede achieving the benefits of applying critical communication pedagogy to teaching organizing and difference. Preparing to teach in this way can be time-consuming because it entails creating a nontraditional course design that casts the teacher in the role of facilitator instead of the traditional “sage on the stage,” while also anticipating various learning styles and incorporating a variety of course activities and materials. Furthermore, as they implement their courses, faculty should be ready to respond to emergent developments and to incorporate new resources that students provide.

In addition, critical communication pedagogy reconfigures student-teacher relationships, which can be difficult for students and teachers, and which makes everyone vulnerable. If faculty members wish to adhere to Fassett and Warren’s (2007) commitments, they will have to relinquish some of their authority in the classroom. They will have to decide not only how much power to share but also how to do so. Faculty will need to be self-reflexive and willing to acknowledge and disclose to themselves and their students how they may be enacting and experiencing domination and oppression in the classroom and at related sites. They will need to “find ways to teach critically while also actively searching for ways to call privileged perspectives—including

[their] own teacherly perspectives—into question with students” (Nainby, Warren, & Bollinger, 2003, p. 199). They will also have to balance seeming to propagandize and providing information to allow students to choose to be engaged with critical communication pedagogy.

In addition, faculty will need to be attentive and responsive to all students, who will vary in learning capacity and style, cultural background, receptivity, communication skill and style, and social identity composite. As instructors strive to teach course content, they will also need to be acutely aware of, and responsive to, socio-emotional issues in the classroom. I once neglected to observe that a student was distressed during a class discussion about race as I pressed her to explain her perspective, which seemed to reflect a position of White privilege. Fortunately, she was comfortable enough with me to write an e-mail that explained her feelings and stated that she wasn’t sure if she would feel safe again in class. As I read her message, I initially felt defensive, and I thought that she may have been overreacting. However, as I replayed the conversation and tried to put myself in her shoes, I began to empathize with her. Although I had engaged in the discussion as a sort of intellectual exchange, I could see that I had failed to recognize complex power dynamics related to my role as professor and hers as student, combined with my identity as a black person and hers as a White person as we enacted those roles in the public space of the classroom. After apologizing to her privately, I also apologized to her during the class (with her permission), and I deconstructed the experience with students as an example of the complexities of identity politics in a classroom. I am pleased to report that she resumed her active engagement with the class, and that I became more vigilant about my behaviors and feelings, as well as about picking up on nonverbal cues.

As another example, I once taught a class where a White male student tried, at the beginning of two class sessions, to sit outside the circle of seats in the classroom. Both times, I gently invited him to join us. In subsequent classes, he began to sit in the circle without prompting, and I was conscientious about responding to any nonverbal cues implying that he had something to share. During a discussion about power and social identity, he offered compelling comments about religious discrimination on campus, and I affirmed the importance of his perspective. He later told me in an e-mail that he had felt alienated by some of his peers during the first session of the class because of his religious affiliation. I think that he became more comfortable as the class continued because of how I responded to him. Perhaps the other students also became more receptive to him because of my behaviors.

As these examples imply, although critical communication pedagogy will bring challenges for faculty, it probably will be even more

taxing for students, whom faculty will ask to engage in nontraditional ways of learning while also contesting their beliefs about a variety of issues, including identity (theirs and others'), power, and equality. Faculty will tell students to think for themselves, to challenge authority, to ask questions. Faculty will also expect students to learn and understand complex concepts such as *hegemony*, *ideology*, *privilege*, *praxis*, and *social construction*. Students may struggle to understand content while also processing their responses and reactions, as well as their peers' and professor's. If we do our job well, students will feel various emotions about what they are learning, and they may not know how to process those emotions. Faculty may need to respond to painful consequences of raising students' consciousness. When I taught a course on difference for undergraduates, two middle class White males disclosed in reflection papers that they were having headaches from thinking about the issues we were exploring as they began to understand the concept of unearned privileges. I reminded them to view privilege as a means for effecting social change, rather than as something about which to feel guilty.

As students process their learning, they may respond by complaining to other faculty members or administrators, by resisting course activities, by accusing the instructor of proselytizing, and by evaluating the course and instructor negatively. As a result, faculty may experience disciplinary consequences from colleagues, students, and others. Basically, to apply critical communication pedagogy to teach organizing and difference, faculty will need to ask a lot of students and themselves, and everyone may experience varying types of discomfort and pain. To put it mildly, taking this on is much, much easier said than done. However, I believe that the potential benefits are well worth the effort.

I also think that faculty can be proactive to try to optimize success and minimize obstacles. For example, they can alert students that the learning process probably will be different than they have experienced and that it probably will challenge them in new ways. I often tell students that we will consciously think *and* feel as we explore course content. I explain that although college classrooms and higher education tend to devalue emotionality in favor of rationality, we will honor and value both. I also highlight rationality as an example of hegemony and ideology.

Faculty should plan to ease students and themselves into the experience of critical communication pedagogy to teach organizing and difference. Rather than attempt to implement major overhauls of courses or create brand new ones, they could select aspects of existing courses to experiment with some of the commitments of critical communication

pedagogy. For example, they could denote higher education as one type of organizational context where we enact power and difference, and they could assign readings about difference and higher education to exemplify course concepts such as socialization. They could also develop assignments that invite students to critically analyze power dynamics in their roles and relationships in higher education or to conduct critical case studies of difference in their educational contexts and to propose ways to transform those contexts. As they teach students about organizing and difference, faculty could disclose their own struggles with power in the academy, especially those related to their own social identity intersections. These are just a few examples of how faculty might take steps toward developing and implementing courses about difference and organizing that employ critical communication pedagogy.

Another more ambitious and challenging option for incorporating critical communication pedagogy into teaching organizing and difference is to treat organizational communication education as a distinct, representative site of politics, as a living case through which to teach and learn how social identities and other relations of power become organized. To illustrate this approach, I offer next an overview of a master's course in communication that I taught, titled "Difference Matters in Organizational Communication: Power in the Ivory Tower." This course could be adapted for senior level undergraduates or doctoral students in communication studies. I created and began to teach this course as I wrote this chapter because I wanted to provide specific examples of how to use critical communication pedagogy for teaching organizing and difference. In addition, I wanted to respond to the recurring call for critical theorists to engage in praxis.

I also decided to take advantage of my circumstances, which demonstrate the significance of socio-cultural context for the type of power dynamics in higher education that the course covers. As I mentioned earlier, I am a full professor who probably doesn't feel as much pressure as non-tenured faculty regarding student or faculty evaluations of my teaching. Please understand that I'm not saying that I don't value feedback, because I do. What I mean is that I don't have to be concerned that those evaluations will affect my job security. In addition, I have the authority to create the course as I wish because I developed the original seminar ("Difference Matters in Organizational Communication"), and I have the leeway to frame it as I wish (i.e., by focusing on power in the ivory tower). I also have extensive experience teaching, writing, and talking about difference matters for a wide variety of audiences, and I have received positive feedback about my endeavors. In addition, I teach in a department that values

diversity and that strives to prepare students to be advocates for social justice. Therefore, I suspected that my class wouldn't be too out of line with others that students had taken in my department. Finally, as a social justice activist, I am committed to increasing my efforts to make a positive difference in the world, and I would be remiss if I didn't try to optimize this opportunity to (1) take my own teaching and learning to another level, (2) model processes of developing and implementing courses based on critical communication pedagogy for others, and (3) disseminate practical knowledge that might effect change in the discipline.

In the next section, I provide excerpts from the overview of the course, after which I discuss a few aspects of how it was implemented. My goal is to offer insight that might inform anyone interested in applying critical communication pedagogy to teach organizing and difference.

❖ COURSE OVERVIEW

Difference Matters in Organizational Communication: Power in the Ivory Tower

This course will apply perspectives on power to investigate higher education-as-organization. We will engage in a variety of activities to explore the ideas that we are all located in intersectional systems and relations of work and power, and our routine organizational communication in higher education contexts (re)produces those systems and relations. Rather than view communication as one factor of modern organizational life, we will approach our study from the perspective that communication constitutes organizations. Moreover, we will emphasize the idea that power pervades all communication. However, we will not view *power* as a four-letter word! Instead, we will actively explore the positive consequences of power, as well as ways that we can empower ourselves and others to accomplish our personal and professional goals. Therefore, a primary premise of the course will be as follows: Those who constitute an organization are responsible for creating and changing communication systems associated with an organization. Although members of an organization have different levels of power for socially constructing its communication systems, everyone has at least some capacity to change those systems.

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This course will review concepts, theories, and research about power in organizational communication studies and other disciplines to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding power dynamics by studying higher education. We will consider these dynamics as related to various micro-, meso-, and macro-level contexts, from our specific course and classroom to the department, the college, the university, the community, the discipline of communication, and beyond. To investigate these and other issues, the course will draw on the expertise and experiences of all class members to conceptualize, design, implement, and evaluate course activities.

During the course, we will study higher education as political process and product and consider how relations of power develop contextually rather than universally. All members will engage in open, collective self-analysis (as teachers, students, or as a classroom community). We will focus on theoretical and practical issues regarding relationships between communication processes in higher education contexts and socially constructed aspects of identity, including gender, race, sexual identity, social class, ability, and age—and their intersections. Intersections of these social identities matter because most individuals simultaneously occupy privileged and nonprivileged social identity groups. Therefore, I will stress the ideas that social identities are complex and multifaceted and that intersections of social identity matter. The course will focus on how systems of power and privilege help shape perceptions of salient social identity groups within the United States and on how individuals and groups resist and transform those systems. We will also investigate the role of discourse in constructing social identity throughout the history of the United States. To study these issues, we will rely on social constructionism, a theoretical perspective which basically contends that humans create reality through communication and interaction. . . .

Throughout the course, we will explore ways that discourse produces, maintains, or resists systems of power and inequality, especially as related to social identity and higher education. The course will also delve into communication issues relevant to ways that we learn about social identities from such sources as our families, education, the media, and organizations.

To explore these matters, we will take a critical approach, which means looking for power dynamics, including ways that people comply with dominant ways or resist power to change conditions in society. We also will self-consciously delve into our personal perceptions, perspectives, and experiences as related to course materials. In addition, we will discuss implications of our studies for social change, especially in higher education. . . .

I e-mailed this overview to students before the first session to give them an idea of what to expect. I also e-mailed them the following message:

I am so excited that you have signed up for our course. We are going to have a learning good time! I am pleased to tell you that we will take a different approach to the course than you may ever have experienced. Specifically, we will reflect upon our experiences in the classroom and the course to learn and enact the concepts that we will study. This means, for one thing, that I am going to offer to share my power with you by inviting you to co-construct and co-conduct the learning experience. Also, we all will engage in self-reflexivity as we study issues such as social identity, power, resistance, and reform. To do so, we will refer to a wide variety of resources, including traditional academic sources as well as popular press, the Internet, film, television, and so forth. We also will engage in lots of interactive activities in the classroom. Please see the attached overview for more information about the goals and the framework of the course. (Allen, personal correspondence, January 14, 2009)

During my first class session with students, I talked about my vision and rationale for the course. I hoped to give anyone who might not be interested in the course an opportunity to opt out, even as I understood that some of them may not have had other options due to limited course offerings, scheduling constraints, and so forth. As I frequently do in courses on difference and communication, I shared a list of guidelines for interaction (see Appendix). We discussed each of the guidelines and agreed to follow them throughout the course. The goal of this exercise was to help establish and maintain a safe classroom, where everyone feels empowered, included, and invited to express her or his thoughts and feelings. Although this exercise usually takes almost an hour to complete, the time spent is worth it. I think it was especially important for this class because it helped to set the stage for constructing a classroom community by providing an implicit framework and foundation on difference and power dynamics. I realized while writing this essay that this exercise corresponds with several of Warren and Fassett's (2007) commitments because the guidelines elicit self-reflexivity, value cultural differences, and foster agency and dialogue.

During that first class, I shared my philosophy of teaching, which, briefly, is to provide a teaching-learning experience where everyone in the class has an opportunity to grow during the course of our time together. I also always hope to provide class members with experiences

that bolster their sense of agency. And I view myself as the lead learner who has primary responsibility for facilitating learning, but who also actively seeks to learn from everyone else. I explained further that I wanted to share my power with them, and I asked them to reflect on my invitation during the following week. I asked them to be prepared to talk about why they should or should not agree. I also asked them to put themselves in my shoes and to discuss why I should or should not be willing to share my power.

Then, I asked them to write their thoughts (for their eyes only) about their philosophy of learning. I was pleased with their responses. They said that no one had ever asked them such a question, and they appreciated the challenge. This exercise seemed to help form the foundation for the class by reminding students about their responsibility for learning and by encouraging them to remind themselves of what they hoped to accomplish as students. It also began the process of self-reflexivity, a pivotal aspect of critical communication pedagogy.

Among notable experiences with the course is that students eventually agreed to accept my invitation to share the power with them. Although I had asked them to be responsible for 50% of the grading schema (I had developed the other 50% as follows: attendance and participation—15%, three reflection papers—20%, and a final project—15%), we struggled, primarily because they ended up with a lengthy list of possible assignments, and they couldn't come to consensus. The only items everyone agreed on were (1) to assemble final projects as a resource for future classes, and (2) for groups of students to be responsible for developing and implementing class sessions during the last month of the semester (to which we ended up assigning 25% of the final grade). As we discussed other possibilities, an international student who hadn't spoken much said that she needed more points for written assignments because she believed that it took her much longer because English is not her native language. Her comment was pivotal for my response, which was to offer each student an opportunity to develop an individualized plan for 25% of her or his final grade. I also told them that they could add any of those points to existing assignments. Everyone agreed to this approach, and I marked our discussion as a great example of dialogue because, through listening and thoughtful sharing of perspectives, we had created something we couldn't have predicted prior to engaging in the decision-making process.

I also couldn't have predicted the consequences of this plan. Most exciting is that many students generated ideas that I wouldn't have imagined, including a slam poetry performance about difference

matters; a down-to-earth guide for working-class parents and families whose children will be first generation college students; a Web site on inclusive teaching; and a report of experiences volunteering at an agency devoted to members of a non-dominant group. As part of her 25%, the international student who expressed concern about the time she needed to write proposed to produce three short video recorded commentaries on current events related to our course, and to add 10% to her written assignments. Two students who had established a routine of meeting for lengthy talks about the class immediately following each session asked for credit to continue those conversations, and to generate a letter to each other about what they had learned because of those conversations, as well as to refer to those sessions in their final projects. Their request was noteworthy because although they are similar to one another in terms of race, gender, and age, they realized that they are also very different in terms of other aspects of social identity, including sexual orientation.

Because I met with each student individually, this process took a lot of (well-spent) time. Scheduling also proved challenging because a few students worked full-time jobs and could only meet after 5 P.M. Many of them seemed reticent to share their ideas, possibly due to skepticism that they really could do whatever they wanted. I decided to accept whatever they proposed, as long as they could tie their projects explicitly to course objectives and give me criteria for how to evaluate their assignments. Most students seemed to gain respect for faculty because they hadn't thought previously about the challenge of creating a grading rubric.

In addition to spending time figuring out students' 25% of their grade, I took more time than usual with students who came to see me during office hours or asked to schedule appointments. I think their visits reflected their excitement and enthusiasm about the course as well as their need for reassurance and guidance on individual and group projects. I needed extra time for grading because each student had a different grading schema. I also spent a lot of time finding current materials that related to the course and that responded to that group of students' interests. Consequently, I definitely plan to teach the course again so that the time feels well invested!

I did not anticipate that I would sacrifice time that I usually apply during the course to cover certain information and to engage in certain activities that have been productive during previous courses. Because I needed to ensure that students fully understood course concepts and that they were comfortable as a learning community before I relinquished the final month of the class to them, I focused more on

accomplishing those goals during the first couple of months than usual. For instance, we didn't view and discuss films that I usually show.

I feel quite good about what we accomplished. Although the group was diverse in terms of visible aspects of identity, such as race and gender, students disclosed invisible aspects of identity, such as social class backgrounds, sexuality, ability, nationality, educational experiences, and religion, in ways that punctuated (1) the significance of intersectionality and (2) the idea that most individuals simultaneously embody positions of privilege and disadvantage according to dominant ideologies in the United States. These points have become increasingly important as I teach this course and conduct other work on difference because they diminish the likelihood of polarized groups within a class while optimizing a sense of shared responsibility and agency among students for effecting social change. Students also embraced the notion that identity is performative, and they often offered or highlighted examples to substantiate it.

I already learned many lessons, especially since I was looking for them (self-reflexivity elicits lessons galore). For instance, I struggled more with sharing my power than I expected. I can justify some of the tension with a logical concern for providing adequate resources and information to accomplish course goals. However, I also discerned reluctance based on my need to be in control, period. And although I believe that students will rise to the occasion when you ask and empower them to be creative, I often was surprised when students fulfilled that premise. So I probably am more jaded and judgmental about students than I realized.

On a more pragmatic note, when I teach the course again, I will need to be more directive about student-led sessions by providing resources and grading criteria related to issues such as generating learning objectives, facilitating discussions, managing time during class, and performing as a team. The good news is that even if I never teach this course again, I am so glad that I undertook this project. My interest in pedagogy has been heightened, and I definitely grew as an educator. More important, most of the students seem to have gotten the material, as based on their reflection papers, in-class discussions, blog posts, one-on-one conversations with me, and final projects, which included substantive, specific, action plans related to difference and power in the ivory tower for various stakeholder groups, including Hispanic families, African American male high school students, the Office of Disability Services, faculty members of dominant groups who teach subject matter about non-dominant groups, graduate students who are mothers, international students, the university's Board of Regents, and the Human Resources Department at our university.

In conclusion, I encourage those who teach organizing and difference to consider applying critical communication pedagogy because it can facilitate our efforts to teach organizing and difference and allow us to accomplish the important goal of preparing students to be “critically-reflexive citizens” (Warren, in press) in our increasingly multicultural world. Fortunately, a wealth of resources exists to direct and support applying critical communication pedagogy. Faculty can refer to the growing body of publications by scholars describing their experiences with critical communication pedagogy, teaching difference, and related topics (See, for example, Alexander, 1999; Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Cooks, 2003, Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003, Lewis & Hayward, 2003; Nainby et al., 2003, Shor, 1992.) Faculty also can study relevant literature on pedagogy, organizational communication, and difference, while using Fassett and Warren’s ten commitments as a primary framework to develop and implement course content, policies, and practices.

Benefits of employing critical communication pedagogy to teach (and learn!) organizing and difference may be incremental, especially if we are proactive. We should form alliances with others who teach similar topics, and we should share our experiences with one another. We also can parlay teaching experiences into Web sites, textbooks, and other resources. And our teaching experiences can inform other aspects of our scholarship, including research, service, and consulting. Furthermore, as educators deal explicitly with organizing and difference, we will imply to students that those topics matter to organizational communication studies, which might attract, orient, and socialize future scholars. Ultimately, we can help grow organizing and difference into a substantive, transformative area of study in communication.

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❖ APPENDIX

Working Assumptions for Class Interaction

These will be discussed in class and agreed upon by the whole group in order that respect for diversity permeates all aspects of class interaction and learning.

1. Acknowledge that sexism, racism, ageism, heterosexism, and other types of discrimination have most often been systematically taught and learned.
2. We cannot be blamed for information we have learned, but we will be held responsible for repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
3. We do not blame others if they do not have the advantages and opportunities that we may have.
4. We will assume that people are always doing the best they can.
5. We will actively pursue information about our own groups and those of others. We are each assumed to be the experts on our own reality and very much involved in researching that reality with each other.
6. We will share information about our own groups with other members of the class and we will NEVER demean, devalue, or in any way put down people for their experiences.
7. We each have an obligation to actively combat the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down walls, which prohibit group cooperation and group gain.
8. In every way, we will work to create a safe atmosphere for open discussion.
9. We will recognize the uniqueness of each student.
10. The process of learning is an ongoing process for all involved in this class and requires constant critique, reflection, and action. Learning is seen to be a collective process, where participants share and analyze experiences together in order to address concerns, relying on each others' strengths and resources rather than either addressing problems individually or relying on outside experts to solve them.

11. Content in this process is emergent. Each of us has to be involved not only in determining content but in explicitly reflecting on what counts as knowledge, how learning takes place, and our own roles in this process. The “bank” from which content is drawn is the social reality of our lives: It may range from the very immediate context of the classroom itself to family and community content to broader political issues.
12. The teacher’s role in this is to act as a problem-poser, facilitating the process of uncovering important issues and reflecting on them, rather than as a transmitter of knowledge and skills. Because students are the experts on their own reality, the teacher is a co-learner.
13. We will become lifelong learners, continually accepting differences among diverse populations, including ethnicity, disabilities, social class, culture, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and race.

Source: Adapted from: <http://www.d.umn.edu/~hrallis/courses/1100sp04/index.html>