



# The Other Side of 2020: Questioning Everything— Doing Something

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**Abstract:** In February of 2020, everything around the world changed. By mid-March, the majority of the world was locked down. Teachers were called on to create a sense of “normalcy” for their students. And we tried. During that process, though, as a teacher, I started to truly question what I was teaching and—more importantly—HOW I was teaching. This reflective essay offers a critical interrogation of my own pedagogical choices during and because of the COVID-19 pandemic . . . and so many other “moments” that have led up to it. I contend that we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, “Are we doing this right?” The following offers my starting point.

There is nothing quite like a pandemic, the outcry for social justice/systemic change across myriad of fronts, a presidential election tarnished by what is now referred to by many as the “big lie,” and an insurrection at the United States Capitol to force one to look seriously at how we are performing our professional and personal identities and ask, “Am I doing this right?” Given my areas of teaching and research (popular culture, media studies, critical theory, argumentation, and pedagogy), I believe I am morally obligated to disconnect myself from my teaching to make space for students to form their own conclusions and ideological positions. Frankly, that is what I was taught to do. Today, as faculty find ourselves on “lists” generated by online spaces like TurningPointUSA and RateMyProfessor.com, it seems critical to maintain that separation for personal and professional protection—even for “tenured” faculty members like me. As I reflect on the current state of society though, I am no longer so sure I am willing to maintain this position. This essay attempts to clarify reasons for my transformed position on what my moral obligation is as both “teacher” and “scholar.”

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I have been teaching introductory mass communication courses for nearly 20 years. I started teaching that class 2 years after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States now referred to as “9-1-1.” Based on what I considered my obligation as a teacher, I did not intentionally set out to examine the event from a critical perspective; however, it crept in anyway. Unfortunately, neither the class nor I were ready to tackle the conversation skillfully.

I left that class (and headed into my PhD) hoping I would never have to experience another national crisis again let alone discuss it from a critical lens in my classes. Since then, we (the United States) have found ourselves facing the economic recession of 2008/9 . . . then a second recession in 2019/20. We experienced the death of Trayvon Martin and the Sandy Hook massacre, and the Aurora, Colorado, theater shooting (all in 2012), Michael Brown (in 2013), Charlottesville (in 2017), Stowman Douglas High School (in 2018), and the list could continue ad infinitum, it seems. In 2020, however, the country and world found ourselves in the midst of global mega-crises stemming from the novel COVID-19 virus pandemic and social justice protests spurred by George Floyd’s murder. News feeds and social media networks exploded with calls for—among other things—“the media” to refrain from being biased for/against the president, for/against the virus, for/against the scientific and medical communities, for/against the social justice protesters, as well as for/against White supremacist people and groups. It was and is in this discursive space that I began to question whether or not it is even possible—let alone morally responsible—for me to be this “neutral” and “objective” teacher not only in my introductory mass communication courses, but also in the content I select and pedagogy I employ in all my classes. Moreover . . . should I be?

Outside the classroom, I fly my politics openly. For example, I was raised to defend those who are not able to defend themselves whenever possible. Until now, however, I would tuck my personal values and beliefs away once I stepped into the classroom. I saw myself enacting what Socrates did nearly 3 millennia ago (or at least the Socratic method as I had been taught to understand it—these are two very different things). Challenge but do not proclaim. The cognitive dissonance I was experiencing led me to re-read the account of Socrates’s trial and execution as described in Plato’s *The Republic*. That re-reading drove me to tackle *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks and *Critical Media Literacy* by Douglass Kellner again. As I reflected on my pedagogy in light of re-reading these insightful works, I realized I was wrong. I have been doing it wrong for 20 years. Perhaps not entirely wrong but definitely not in the way Socrates, Dewey (1997), Freire (2005), Giroux (2011), Hall (1996), hooks (1994), Fassett and Warren (2007), among others suggest. Consequently, in this essay, I interrogate my personal teaching philosophy and the way I conduct my pedagogy, starting with the “Intro” class but really expanding into all facets of my teaching life. In doing so, I expose what I have been doing wrong and why, as well as propose how and why I am transforming both.

“Time to take the gloves off.” When attempting to be objective no longer serves the greater good (if it ever did).

Most primary and secondary level schoolteachers must be licensed to do so in the United States. Licensure preparation typically includes completing coursework in curriculum, classroom management, educational psychology, teaching strategies, as well as discipline-specific courses. Ultimately, this is where new teachers learn the rules, the laws, and the processes and are discursively constructed as “teachers.” I see nothing wrong with the licensure process. I learned valuable insights and strategies during that process . . . which I promptly forgot when student teaching (making for an honestly rather

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terrible experience). I also crammed for an exam (the PRAXIS<sup>1</sup>) I did not realize I was required to take. I dutifully complied throughout the process, deeming these necessary hoops through which to jump. Today, however, I fully recognize I was Foucault's (1995) *docile body* being fed through what Pink Floyd likens to "the meat grinder" in *The Wall* (Parker, 1982). I joined the program naïve and eager to comply. I came out of the grinder with a bit of gristle and tasting a little more "gamey" than some, but I earned the paper that proved I was now a "teacher."

<https://graveshamnut.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/meat-grinder.jpg>

**Image from *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (Parker, 1982)**

Although I had done the work and earned the license, I never fit in as a high school teacher. Even during my student teaching experience, I had a difficult time sticking to the "preferred" (i.e., "required") content. Perhaps I pushed students to think rather than merely regurgitate. Perhaps I had been seen by students at a 311 concert with a beer in my hand. Whatever the reason, I met with the principal who reminded me of the "rules" I needed to abide by. I transitioned into the role of regular long-term substitute teacher after that semester. The school districts loved me as a long-term substitute—simply not as "one of them."

Why is this history important? It is important because these are some of the first spaces where my pedagogy was formed and revised. It was here where I was socially conditioned to ground my pedagogy in what Freire (2005) describes as "the banking model" of educational practices. Since then, however, I was introduced to Fassett and Warren's (2007) argument that we need to teach students how to think, not what to think. Based on what I learned from them and other crucial communication pedagogy scholars, I re-constructed myself from "high school teacher" to "college professor." Oddly enough, expectations based on my social conditioning as a high school teacher as the teacher "at the head of the class" have continued to float around my pedagogy today—which has inspired this reflection and subsequent transformation of my teaching philosophy and praxis.

Given the conversation thus far, the specific expectation I interrogate here is the one that claims a teacher's political views do not belong in the classroom. Debates about teachers indoctrinating students has been a dominant topic in "the media" for as long as there has been a tension between the goals of the classroom and the desires of the political machine. Having taught in everything from middle school and high school classes to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to large lecture hall college classes, I can assure you there is no time to indoctrinate. There is barely enough time to cover course content. Although there is potentially more academic freedom and space to "play"<sup>2</sup> at the university level (versus K–12 classrooms), there is always more content to translate and skills to develop than there are hours in the day. Time is undoubtedly a constraint prohibiting overt indoctrination via course content and readings.

Another charge suggests that lectures, discussions, and assignments might indoctrinate students by covertly privileging a left-leaning ideology. If a Republican is in office, then the argument focuses on teachers as part of a left-wing conspiracy to overturn the duly elected president, administration, and congress. If a Democrat is in office, then the argument focuses on teachers as part of a movement to further entrench the "Radical Left" into society. A thought for everyone to consider here—perhaps those

1. I do find it interesting that I often use this phrase to discuss the intersecting moment between theory and practice, and see it as emancipatory and necessary. Back then—it was just a hurdle to do what I wanted to do.

2. I use "play" in the Foucauldian, discursive sense here.

faculty teaching subjectively are not asking students to align with a left-leaning or radical left-leaning ideology at all. Rather . . . and this might be truly radical . . . perhaps those faculty are asking students to be critical of ALL systems of governance, policies, and existing power structures. Perhaps they are following Freire's (2005) imperative for teachers to go beyond asking students to regurgitate normalized information (which is inherently biased by author's stance) and to, instead, work with students to develop skills to learn on their own—to think, not to memorize.

Here is the hard truth I have come to realize: As a teacher, I have grown too lazy and too passive in my pedagogy. Working under the assumption that I have been teaching “the right way,” I have probably been limiting breadth and depth of classroom conversations and, consequently, have probably been limiting what students actually grasp and retain. If I am truly going to come out of the other side of 2020 doing something better, I must (like a mechanic looking for the problem in the engine) tear down the whole powerplant, examine each valve, line, hose, gasket, fluid, and contact point, and try and figure out what I have been doing that is working and, equally if not more important, what is not working. Only then do I get to turn the engine over and see if it is running the way I want it to . . . the way I need it to so I can make sense of my place as a college professor on the other side of this new “normal.”

“Time for a little Praxis tune-up”: Moving a transformed teaching philosophy into classroom pedagogy.

We can do all the critical reflexive work we want. We can read books (my stack is growing), attend seminars and conferences, journal, write essays (like this one), and think critically on what we do. Unless we actually take action, however, such reflexive work means nothing. Without intentionally making strategic changes to our day-to-day practices as teachers, all we are doing is making ourselves feel better, creating some sort of academic or professional catharsis—which does nothing beyond helping us tolerate who we see in the mirror. As I work through my own reflective COVID-19 video journal (entries still happen to this day), I came to a realization—I think I have been sick of my own teaching practices for a few years now. Self-promotion moment: I had an idea 3 years ago that became the impetus for an edited book I did with Dr. Autumn P. Edwards out of Western Michigan University.<sup>3</sup> The idea was and is that “Communication is Service.” To clarify, the underlying thought is that the base of “communication” is “commune.” In the process of communing, we understand each other, respect each other, and—hopefully—become better for it. It is meant to bring peace and enlightenment. It serves a purpose. The same can be said of teaching. In the classroom, I am meant to bring ideas to the floor, and engage in intellectual exchange with students around these ideas. We come to a meeting place. Rather than making that service further entrenching the status quo, I consider what both hooks<sup>4</sup> and Freire<sup>5</sup> argue in their discussions of pedagogy and the responsibilities of faculty. Their argument—and one that makes more and more sense to me in the world we all find ourselves in right now—is that the purpose of the classroom is to work toward understanding both the course content and the intersection of that content with the systems that create, shape, and control whatever that content is.

Remember that I began this essay talking about the introductory mass communication (a.k.a. Intro) course. This past summer (2020), I taught Intro asynchronously online for the first time. We had moved into the Zoom universe (like so many others) to finish the Spring 2020 term, but I was asked to teach the summer course so students could finish it on their own within the allotted time—6 weeks. While I was

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3. The book is called *Communication Is . . . Perspectives on Theory*. You are welcome to check it out.

4. Read *Teaching to Transgress*.

5. Read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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“teaching”<sup>6</sup> the class, I also journaled (for a little grounding), reflecting heavily on how I teach my classes and why I do things the way I do. I always thought I was able to create a space where conversations happened—I am not sure now if I actually ever did that all too well. I also assumed that students could approach me about near-anything—so why did I limit my interactions with students more now than I ever did? My “tear down” exposed something in my pedagogy and, subsequently, my praxis in the classroom: I devoted a lot of time to actions that did not result in truly emancipatory and critical moments, but it made me feel like I was doing something. If there is one thing the Zoom universe has taught me, it is the imperative to focus on quality rather than quantity. Spend less time doing something light—spend more time getting in the trenches. Zoom requires names under faces. It is the best name tag ever created. Use them! Our classroom management must be about the quality of engagement in the room and not simply about ticking the minutes down so that we meet some established “contact hour” norm. What can be accomplished in 20 minutes? What actually needs the full 75? The full 2+ hours or that seminar? I am thinking about my Spring graduate seminar right now and am pretty sure there is no reason for us to be on a Zoom call for 2 hours and 40 minutes. Be smart—be strategic.

Personally, we must be just as honest with ourselves. Are we taking care of ourselves? Really? If you know me, you may know that I competitively powerlift (pick up really heavy things and put them down). We all need those aspects of our lives that have NOTHING to do with “the work.” Find those things that take you out of your head and your classroom, just for a little while. When putting your own practices for a semester together, be smart about it. Some changes I have made that I am holding myself to—and it has not been easy. First—know how to declare work hours and non-work hours (yes, this will need to be fluid as grading marathons begin while also pushing for the next hurdle, but do the best you can). Provide for one or two more office hours per week, but do not respond to emails at all hours. The act of self-care is as important to teaching as well thought-out yet flexible for “those moments” lesson plans. Take care of yourself. We need to take care of ourselves!

My last little moment of realization: Make the content count. The Communication discipline, in all its myriad forms and subcategories and nooks and crannies, works to help us understand how we construct our worlds not just through the ideas exchanged but also how and why and where and to what end goal. That is a massive challenge for the discipline—and an incredible opportunity to develop a space where students and teachers can hone their personal critical awareness of the messages that surround us daily and, by extension, further develop the ability to create, interrogate, and change our realities themselves. As a teacher and researcher of the discipline—I can say that I am guilty of not taking this opportunity on to its fullest potential. Considering what I teach (heading back to the top of the essay), I have ample opportunity to make those moments count. We need to treat it as agenda-setting: We should never tell our students what to think—but we definitely can and should be helping them figure out what to think about, talk about, and do something about.

As I close, I am still left wondering “Can I really do the work required to make all of this actually happen?” My answer is “maybe” and that is why I am morally obligated to try. If I can make it through what is happening right now and get to the other side with minor emotional scarring, I guess my answer is more accurately, “I damn well better, otherwise what is it all for?”

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6. I personally have to really think about whether that was actually teaching I did during Summer 2020. It very well may have been me struggling for some sense of normalcy. What I discovered, instead, was that the class was not being taught. I was doing something—recording lectures and comments, grading assignments, reading essays—but I am not sure if it was teaching. I DO know that it was forcing me to look in the mirror.

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