



## Pedagogy, Protests, and Moving Toward Progress

Nannetta Durnell-Uwechue <sup>ib</sup>, Deandre J. Poole <sup>ib</sup>, Felton O. Best

**Keywords:** pedagogy, pragmatic, humanistic, cultural competency, Civil Rights Movement, instructional communication

**Abstract:** Our world is in constant flux and educators are at the ship's helm steering toward what former U.S. Representative John Lewis called "good trouble." However, in many cases, educators lack the training required to be most effective in doing so. As instructors face student demands to address topics on race and social justice, many educators are unsure about how to respond appropriately to the chants of "No Justice, No Peace!" Thus, this essay explores humanistic and pragmatic approaches for doing so in terms of fostering cultural communication competence when incorporating topics on race and social justice issues in the classroom.

With more than 60 years of combined experience teaching topics on race and ethnicity, our primary focus in the classroom is to teach students to become *Good Citizens*. Recently, protests, politics, and the pandemic have laid bare the need to place topics on race and ethnicity prominently in our college classes. Thus, we offer this essay as a guide regarding how to address these topics in ways that facilitate communication competence and encourage civil discourse. More specifically, we explore two pedagogical approaches: a humanistic approach and a pragmatic one. We begin, however, by providing a brief historical overview of race and ethnicity in the United States.

### Brief Historical Overview

Scholars have hotly debated various philosophies, historical facts, geographical settings, and chronological timelines of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Early studies focused primarily on national religious

Nannetta Durnell-Uwechue, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

Deandre J. Poole, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

Felton O. Best, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT

CONTACT: [uwechue@fau.edu](mailto:uwechue@fau.edu)

leaders such as Rev. Dr. Martin L. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy. Monographs such as David Margolick's (2018) *The Promise and the Dream: The Untold Story of Martin L. King Jr and Robert F. Kennedy*; Taylor Branch's (1989) *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963*; and Clayborne Carlson's (2007) *The Struggle for Freedom* are prime examples. Most of these publications portray the movement as a Southern rather than national event. Consequently, these studies provide insight into the lives and philosophies of these Black leaders, but not in relation to the presidents they served.

Aldon Morris's (1986) *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, marks a shift from this top-down perspective to focus specifically on local Black social movements. More specifically, he examines the history of the Civil Rights Movement by looking at African American community organizations such as the Black church, the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Union (SCLC). Morris argues that the African American Church is responsible for the success of the modern Civil Rights Movement because it is the only institution owned exclusively by African Americans. As such, the Black church was the backbone of each local African American community. It housed all the protest meetings, provided funding for both local and national Civil Rights campaigns, and selected church members to serve as their local community activists. Like Morris, William Chafe's (1981) study, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* breaks new ground, as well. His study of race relations in Greensboro, North Carolina, revealed that the African American community could sustain successful campaigns by utilizing Black leaders from local community organizations. He also illustrates how historically African American College institutions like North Carolina A&T State University and Bennet College provided "massive African-American student participation in protest demonstrations and sit in campaigns, within local downtown department stores which successfully led to the desegregation of business enterprises like Woolworth department stores" (p. 94).

Recent scholarship also focuses on Northern states campaigns too; for example, eradicate du jour segregation in public schools, prejudiced access to higher education, redlining, job discrimination, and police brutality. This important scholarship illuminates the false perceptions that the Civil Rights Movement was limited to Southern states. Clarence Taylor's (1997) *Knocking at Our Own Door: Michael Galimison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* and his (2019) *Fight the Power: African-Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York* are excellent resources. Another is Felton Best's (2018) book, *Not in Our Own Backyards: African-Americans in the Civil Rights Movement of the North*. In it, he argues that racial integration in the Northern states was a myth and exposes discriminatory practices against African Americans in insurance, banking, housing, voting, lodging, zoning, and educational curriculum. He also discusses attempts to integrate Roxbury's African American children into the Boston public school system. Massachusetts newspapers reported that, "the racial mixture of black students into public schools is welcomed everywhere else, but not in our own backyards" (p. 84). Moreover, when a Black student was denied admission to a nearby West Harford predominately White school, Governor Roland celebrated with a glass of wine on television when the *Sheff versus O'Neill* case was rejected. In response, many Northern public schools created charter schools that admitted students, instead, based on a lottery system.

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter campaign arose in response to citizen journalist reports of rampant police brutality against African Americans. Although such brutality is not new, it was undeniably exposed for all to see, particularly in the recording of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Hill et al., 2020). Some have called this a mandate for a "New Civil Rights Movement" (Alexander, 2010, p. 38). The modern Civil Rights Movement is clearly a national one that continues to gain momentum both in

the U.S. and around the world. The Black Lives Matters campaign focuses directly on the existential right of Black existence.

## Today's Civil Unrest/Protest—*Race and Social Injustice*

The civil unrest and protests taking place across the nation and world today are not new nor are the systemic injustices put upon Black Americans. Recent marches, however, have shined a light on how Blacks continue to suffer unjustly from police brutality and racial bias in the criminal justice system. In fact, according to the Criminal Justice Factsheet (n.d.) published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), “84% of Black adults say white people are treated better than Black people by police; 63% of white adults agree based on 2019 research on police relations.” In the same factsheet, “87% of Black adults say the U.S. Criminal Justice System is more unjust towards Black people; 61% of white adults agree” (Criminal Justice Factsheet, n.d.). When it comes to the treatment of Black children, “Nationwide, African American children represent 32% of children who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are judicially waived to Criminal Court. African American children represent 14% of the population” (Criminal Justice Factsheet, n.d.). Although these statistics are certainly impressive, we offer some examples as further support.

In 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was playing with a toy gun at a neighborhood playground when he was shot and killed by a police officer (Barrett, 2020, p. 1). That same year, Eric Garner, a 43-year-old Black man, died from a police choke hold that suffocated him to death (Marcus, 2016, p. 55) and an 18-year-old Black male by the name of Michael Brown was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a police officer as he stood 10 feet away (Potterf & Pohl, 2018, p. 422). In 2015, Sandra Bland, a woman of color, was arrested on July 10, 2015, after a traffic stop, and found hanging in her jail cell 3 days later on July 13 (Dowler & Christian, 2019, p. 823). In 2016, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old Black male, was shot by a police officer after a traffic stop (Ockerman, 2016, p. 56). In 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black female was asleep in bed when police entered her home and shot and killed her as a result of a no-knock warrant by Louisville police officers (Legal Monitor Worldwide, 2021, n.p.). And, as mentioned earlier, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black male, died when a police officer knelt on his neck for over 8 minutes, suffocating him to death. What do these deaths have in common? They represent the Black men and women who died at the hands of police officers.

Since the George Floyd murder, protests have erupted both in the United States and abroad. Crowds of protesters representing myriad cultural backgrounds chant “Black lives do matter” and “hand’s up, don’t shoot” in solidarity, clearly frustrated at this utter disregard for Black lives. In essence, protestors are demanding that we no longer judge people by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. These words, attributed to the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. more than 50 years ago, extend beyond injustice embedded in the criminal justice system to many other disparities inflicting Black communities and, frankly, the systemic racism that has inflicted people of color for centuries.

To those reading this essay who may not understand what it means to be Black in America, we offer this perspective based on history and personal experience. Black people living in the U.S. have persevered and overcome countless encounters of injustice and racism at work and in their communities to hold positions as educators, doctors, attorneys, business owners, corporate executives, and political leaders today. That said, however, the economic, political, and social institutions of this nation continue to perpetuate unfair treatment of Black Americans. In a 2016 Pew Research Center report, for instance:

The racial gap extends to household wealth—a measure where the gap has widened since the Great Recession. In 2013, the most recent year available, the median net worth of households headed by whites was roughly 13 times that of black households (\$144,200 for whites compared with \$11,200 for blacks). For most Americans, household wealth is closely tied to home equity, and there are sharp and persistent gaps in homeownership between blacks and whites. In 2015, 72% of white household heads owned a home, compared with 43% of black household heads. And on the flipside of wealth—poverty—racial gaps persist, even though the poverty rate for blacks has come down significantly since the mid-1980s. Blacks are still more than twice as likely as whites to be living in poverty (26% compared with 10% in 2014). (pp. 8–9)

In light of the fact that this nation was built on the backs of people of color, these statistics should outrage all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. In essence, the political, education, health care, judicial, and financial systems were designed to oppress Black Americans and have been doing so for generations.

Unfortunately, America remains a largely segregated and politically polarized society. In many ways, this segregation is traced to slavery in America, which served to preserve White supremacy and maintain power and control over Blacks. We argue in this essay that Black America cannot achieve systematic, racial justice reforms without the support of White allies. We contend that success in overcoming systemic racism and social injustice rests with Blacks and White allies working together. As educators, we are responsible for doing our part by demonstrating proficiency in teaching our subject matter, as well as cultural competency in acknowledging and honoring the lived experiences of oppressed groups, in terms of both epistemological relevance and cultural applications. The next sections propose some strategies for doing so rooted in humanism and pragmatism.

## Humanistic Approaches to Instructional Communication

Some teachers seem to just know innately what to do and say to manage even the most difficult discussions. They appear to be anointed with some special gift to manage even the most volatile discussions. Class discussions result in fostering a heightened sense of awareness and enlightenment. This perception begs the question, are these teachers born or made? Joseph DeVito's (1995) humanistic approach to communication effectiveness offers five qualities and behaviors that teachers may employ when dealing with topics of race and ethnicity.

### #1 Open

Teachers who employ a humanistic approach to instructional communication are open to the individuality of each student. Differences of opinion will undoubtedly occur and, when they do, teachers encourage openness by reminding students that being open does not necessarily also mean agreement. Rather, openness makes space for diverse views and opinions to be both expressed and honored as they represent a variety of worldviews. Take the following example of a class discussion in an intercultural communication course. There may be students who have different political views and opinions. It is important to ensure that everyone has a voice and is included in the dialogue. Take for example, student A who might be a supporter of Black Lives Matter Movement and student B may be a supporter of Blue Lives Matter or All Lives Matter. It is important that the instructors create an atmosphere of respect and set ground rules to be open to civil discussion around differing worldviews, political, or social perspectives.

---

## #2 Support

Supportive teachers create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas without fear of judgment. For example, teachers encourage and then celebrate apprehensive students when they courageously answer questions and volunteer to lead group activities. Students of color may wonder whether their unique perspectives will be honored or dismissed, which may result in class discussions and activities controlled predominantly by White classmates whose perspectives may perpetuate dominant American culture. Supportive teachers are intentional in how they use verbal and nonverbal communication to dissuade such concerns. For example, in an ethnicity communication course, you may have an international student who may not be a proficient English speaker. It is important that the instructor encourage students to express themselves as best they can and provide verbal and nonverbal affirmations.

## #3 Positive

Each teacher portrays a unique aura or energy in the classroom. The aura of teachers enacting a humanistic approach to instructional communication is one of high regard for self, others, and the situation. This aura fosters a positive communication climate where students and teachers are excited to participate and motivated to learn. For example, in an African American communication course, there may be non-Black students who may feel apprehensive contributing to class discussions. Therefore, it is significant to create a nonjudgmental environment and simultaneously provide encouragement in a non-evaluative setting during class discussions.

## #4 Empathy

Not to be confused with sympathy; where an individual *feels for* another person, empathy is where a person *feels as* another person without losing their identity. In other words, a teacher that conveys empathy is able to put themselves in the shoes of another person. Teachers that exude an empathic humanistic approach to discussion of race and social justice also integrate and encourage opportunities for students to experience empathy regarding worldviews that are not their own. For example, in a race, gender, and communication course, sometimes students of color, women, and those who identify as LGBTQIA may feel frustrated because they believe their voice is not being heard. This is where the teacher's role is most important in establishing a welcoming and open dialogue where the student does not feel invisible, ignored, or insignificant.

## #5 Equality

Equality is another term that is often both misunderstood and misused. As Wendy Fox-Kirk and colleagues (2020) argue that equality is a myth perpetuated “in organizations through discourse and text” (p. 586). Juliana Menasce Horowitz and colleagues (2019) report that most Americans believe “the country hasn't made enough progress toward racial equality” despite the dominant narrative suggesting otherwise (para. 1). Simply stated, to communicate as a human interacting with another human is equality. For a teacher, this means fostering a climate where no student is superior or inferior in the classroom. Enacting equality recognizes that each person (teacher and students) has something important to contribute. For instance, in a rhetoric of social movements course, the student and professor should both have equivalent voices. Both are valuable contributors. Instructors should create an atmosphere where various political views and philosophical opinions are welcomed and embraced.

---

## Pragmatic Approaches to Instructional Communication

The humanistic teacher characteristics and instructional communication strategies described in the previous section may help instructors integrate discussions of racism and social justice effectively in our classrooms. This section adds to those strategies by illustrating how pedagogies embedded in a pragmatic approach can further enhance such discussions.

### #6 Confidence

With this approach the teacher demonstrates confidence in diverse classroom settings. Regarding discussions about racism and social justice, there will be times when the student knows more than the instructor. When teaching a course on race and ethnicity, it is imperative that instructors are sufficiently prepared and knowledgeable with the current literature in the field. This includes keeping up with contemporary published scholarship, current issues, media, and cultural events. It is especially important for a novice instructor in an ethnic studies course to demonstrate cultural competency.

### #7 Expressive

Expressive teachers use verbal and nonverbal communication that connects with the students and demonstrates genuine interest in them and what they have to say, as well as in the subject matter. For example, in a culture and communication course, the instructor should be enthusiastically engaged with the subject matter and students. “Life is a stage” for these expressive instructors. Not everyone is animated or dynamic; however, you can demonstrate enthusiasm with what you are endeavoring to convey, and in one’s response to students and the classroom dialogue.

### #8 Interaction Management

Interaction Management as a pragmatic instructional strategy refers to *taking turns* during the communication interaction. No one (teacher or student) should monopolize the conversation or feel as if they are being interrogated. *Everyone has a voice*. Teachers that enact interaction management regularly give students opportunities to find their voice. For example, in a small group communication course, no one should dominate the discussion, including the instructor. When students are silent, instructors should induce verbal and collaborative engagement. The mantra should be “Thank you so much, let’s hear others’ opinions.”

### #9 Other-Orientation

Other-orientation is essentially *audience analysis and adaptation*. To clarify, the teacher translates academic jargon to be intelligible to students. Lectures, classroom discussions, and activities result in students that are more informed about myths and truths regarding racism and social justice in the United States when everyone is given an opportunity to participate. For example, in an international communication course, instructors should not always make the classroom discussions about themselves. Allow others to tell their truths to debunk the myths and stereotypes about their culture.

### #10 Immediacy

Immediacy promotes an environment of “*We-ness*.” It is important in the classroom setting that the teacher avoids terms such as *You* and *Them*. This creates an “*Us vs. Them*” mentality. Instead use terms

---

such as “We,” “Us,” and “Our” to promote classroom unity. For instance, teachers convey immediacy when they refer to students by name as a rule rather than an exception. For example, in an intercultural theory course, comprised of students from various cultural backgrounds, it is vital to never refer to such students as “You People.” Instead, ask students how they would like to be identified in terms of their cultural identity. Instructors can also include a statement on their syllabus regarding students’ preferences regarding their identity.

## Conclusion

In a 2009–2014 criminal justice report released by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP):

African Americans represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of youth judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of youth admitted to state prisons. One in six black men have been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, one in three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. African Americans now constitute 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population. African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of Whites. (Criminal Justice Factsheet, n.d.)

Given the historical, philosophical, sociological, and political realities regarding issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity, such topics should be addressed in college classrooms. To do so effectively, however, teachers must be educated in ways that foster cultural competence generally and provide pedagogical strategies for doing so. This essay begins to address that need by illustrating strategies rooted in humanistic and pragmatic approaches to instructional communication. As such, we invite scholars to join the conversation by doing research to assess learning outcome achievement in classes that do and do not integrate topics about race and social justice in them.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2010) *The new jim crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Barrett, D. (2020, Dec. 29). “Justice department closes investigation of Tamir Rice killing.” *The Washington Post*.
- Best, F. (2018). *Not in our own backyards: African-Americans in the civil rights movement of the North*. Linus Books.
- Branch, T. (1989). *Parting the waters: America in the king years, 1954–1963*. Simon & Schuster.
- Carlson, C. (2007). *The struggle for freedom: A history of African Americans*. Pearson.
- Chafe, W. H. (1981). *Civilities and civil rights: Greensboro North Carolina and the Black struggle for freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Criminal Justice Fact Sheet. (n.d.). Retrieved September 12, 2020, from <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>
- DeVito, J. (1995). *Interpersonal communication*. Harper & Row.
- Dowler, L., & Christian, J. (2019, June). Landscapes of impunity and the deaths of Americans LaVena Johnson and Sandra Bland. *GENDER PLACE AND CULTURE*, 26(6), 813–829.
- Fox-Kirk, W., Gardiner, R. A., Finn, H., & Chisholm, J. (2020). Genderwashing: The myth of equality. *Human Resource and Development International*, 23(5), 586–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065>

- Hill, E., Tiefenthaler, A., Triebert, C., Jordan, D., Willis, H., & Stein, R. (2020, May 31). How George Floyd was killed in police custody. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>
- Horowitz, J. M., Brown, A., & Cox, K. (2019). Race in America 2019. *Analysis and Policy Observatory*. <https://apo.org.au/node/229656>
- Legal Monitor Worldwide*. (2021, Jan. 9). Two Louisville police officers fired over Breonna Taylor shooting.
- Marcus, N. C. (2016, Sept.). From Edward to Eric Garner and beyond: The importance of constitutional limitations on lethal use of force in police reform. *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy*, 12(1), 53.
- Margolick, D. (2018) *The promise and the dream: The untold story of Martin L. King Jr and Robert F. Kennedy*. Rosetta Books.
- Morris, A. (1986). *The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change*. Free Press.
- Ockerman, E. (2016, July). Read the transcript of the video taken during Philando Castile shooting in Minnesota (p. 56). Time.com.
- Pew Research Center. (2016, June 27). On views of race and inequality, blacks and whites are worlds apart. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>
- Potterf, J. E., Pohl, J. R. (2018, Nov.) A black teen, a white cop, and a city in turmoil: Analyzing newspaper reports on Ferguson, Missouri and the death of Michael Brown. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, (34)4, 421–441.
- Taylor, C. (1997). *Knocking at our own door: Milton A. Galimison and the struggle to integrate New York City schools*. Columbia University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2019). *Fight the power: African-Americans and the long history of police brutality in New York City*. New York University Press.
-