



# Responding to Neoliberal Individualism: Developing an Ethic of Empathy Through Critical Communication Pedagogy

David H. Kahl, Jr. 

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**Abstract:** The university's mission involves educating students to become civic leaders, balancing both individual and collective goals. However, neoliberal influences have shifted the balance to focus on the individual over the collective. Communication curriculum has also shifted over time, with a sizeable percentage of its classes designed to prepare students for individual economic success, with the byproduct being a deemphasis on collective thinking. The communication discipline can resist this neoliberal encroachment by redefining three of its goals and applying commitments of critical communication pedagogy to aid in the process. Doing has the potential to work toward the development of an ethic of empathy, an ethic that can assist students in pursuing their goals while concomitantly (re)learning compassion for marginalized groups.

## Introduction

Students in the contemporary university experience concern about their future careers. Thus, they complete coursework in the discipline of communication, or in myriad other areas of study, in order to apply their knowledge to their future careers. They work diligently because they understand the importance of individual success. Students realize the merit of preparing for their futures and of cultivating aspirations for what they desire to achieve in their lives. The importance that students place on individual success is a crucial feature of an individualistic culture. Individualism is the cultural practice of independence, prioritizing personal goals over group goals, and behavior based on personal attitudes instead of group norms (Hofstede, 2001). Alternately, collectivism is the cultural practice that

is predicated on interdependence and prioritizes group goals over those of the individual (Hofstede, 2001). Neither practice, individualism nor collectivism, is inherently negative. In fact, cultures could be considered dysfunctional that are not amalgamations of both perspectives (Triandis, 1995).

However, the problem in contemporary universities is that, instead of fostering both individual and collectivistic perspectives, they place greater importance on individualism, while deemphasizing collective thinking. Many courses place emphasis on the value of individual success and the detriment of individual failure. This emphasis teaches students that learning is not something that is done for the benefit of the collective. Instead, they learn that it is done to create hierarchies and to shape their individual identities as learners (Blinne, 2021). One example of how universities promote individualism is through their grading systems. The vast majority of grading systems that universities offer are individual in nature, which serve to inculcate the individualization of work (Blinne, 2021). Grading instills the belief that students are responsible for themselves and no one else. Therefore, grading, at least in its traditional form, teaches students that “struggle is individualized and transformed into something that should be solved individually” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.), while often deemphasizing how collective thinking can ameliorate struggle. Such practices also foster vertical individualism—cultures that promote inequality (Triandis, 1995). The rise of neoliberal thought creates this emphasis on individualism, both in the university and society.

## Overview

The following sections will develop the idea that universities’ and communication courses’ deemphasis of collectivism has led to the overemphasis on neoliberally driven, individualist thinking. This individualist mindset has played a part in refocusing the university’s mission away from emphasizing the development of civically minded citizens toward the development of employees who learn to focus their attention only on a small circle of acquaintances. Because of this, educators must assist students to develop an ethic of empathy to counter this problem through the application of critical communication pedagogy in order to (re)focus the university on balancing individualistic and collectivistic goals. The public speaking course will serve as an example of how instructors can assist students in cultivating and applying an ethic of empathy.

## The Rise of Neoliberal Thought

Neoliberalism is the hyper-capitalist state that has existed since the late 1970s. Unlike the traditional capitalist ethic that placed some value on collaboration, the social contract, and a favorable wage-productivity ratio, neoliberal capitalism has instilled values of disposability, profit at all cost, and complete devotion to work by developing indefatigable employees (Kahl, 2018b). Neoliberal entities have accomplished this goal in numerous ways, but a primary rhetorical tactic has been to instill the value of individualism into the populace. Individualism eschews collectivism and inculcates the idea that people can only obtain success, wealth, and happiness through the actions of the self. In this vein, “success remains unequivocally and continuously measured in and pursued as individual wealth” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.). Thus, reliance on others is anathema to neoliberal ideology. The irony of neoliberally inculcated individualism is that those who already hold power reap the vast majority of profit and wealth (Leopold, 2016). Employees actually create wealth for others; they typically do not attain wealth for themselves. Additionally, although neoliberalism promotes individualism as the means to fulfilment, individualism actually results in anxiety, the breaking of social bonds, the dissolution of community, and a decrease in happiness (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014).

## The Neoliberal University

Although the university was founded, at least in part, on the importance of critical thought and the development of the engaged citizen, neoliberal ideology has hindered this goal. The neoliberal axiom, “There is no such thing as society” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.) provides evidence of the individualistic goals that obviate the university’s original mission. The contemporary university now excels at promoting individual pecuniary success. It works diligently to demonstrate to prospective students the monetary value of a college degree and emphasizes metrics such as return-on-investment. Consequently, it often de-emphasizes the idea that students will leave the university as critical thinkers who can work together to solve problems and mitigate marginalization. While critical engagement may still be an ancillary benefit of a university education, the student-as-consumer model of education reigns supreme (Bunce et al., 2016). The neoliberal encroachment on the university creates difficulty for instructors who feel pressure to participate in neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberalism creates a situation in which instructors feel pressure to focus course content and instruction around careerism, individualism, and reward/punishment systems (such as individual grades). Thus, instructors tend to place less emphasis on considering ways in which they can use course content to mitigate hegemony and foster empowerment collectively. The neoliberal system creates cognitive dissonance for instructors who may wish to subvert hegemony, but also hold concerns that universities will evaluate their pedagogical performance through a neoliberal lens.

Neoliberal education produces deleterious effects as it emphasizes the betterment of the individual because, as a consequence, students do not gain a critical awareness of the ways that hegemony marginalizes others. For example, the discipline of communication has corporatized the focus of many of its courses (Palmer, 2014). While not inherently negative, a focus on corporate communication (unintentionally) privileges individual success. As a result, the courses deemphasize and/or ignore material relating to developing collective success. Concomitantly, corporatized communication courses often ignore matters of hegemony, as these areas do not (seem to) relate to the subject matter, which often focuses on “market preparation” (Palmer, 2014, p. 46). In a market-driven system such as neoliberalism, individual success necessitates others’ individual failure.

Neoliberalism inculcates an ethic of individualism that it has taught contemporary students to speak fluently because they have been raised in a neoliberal culture that values individual success, consumerism, and profit. For this reason, contemporary students have had little opportunity to learn an ethic of empathy, which is a cornerstone of collectivism. The neoliberal emphasis on individualism has deprived students of the opportunity to care for others who experience marginalization. This is evidenced by the fact that college students experienced a 40% decline in empathic concern for others between 2000 and 2011 (Konrath et al., 2011). To counter this problem, communication pedagogy can draw on the broad base of critical literature that exists in the discipline, specifically through the lens of CCP. Learning an ethic of empathy based in communication pedagogy allows students to pursue their own goals in life while demonstrating compassion for people who do not have the same advantages. The following sections will describe how an ethic of empathy can be developed through critical communication pedagogy (CCP), a critical response to neoliberal education.

## Critical Communication Pedagogy

Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) is an ideological framework through which instructors and students can collectively examine the marginalizing effects of hegemony in the classroom and society.

Extending the work of critical pedagogy, CCP includes the examination of the meaning of messages to gain a more complete picture of the ways in which messages serve to either marginalize or liberate. CCP also plays an important role in empowering students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Specifically, CCP approaches student empowerment by, “facilitat(ing) discussion, provid(ing) alternative spaces for engagement and dialogue, and also offer(ing) new opportunities for students, particularly historically marginalized students, to articulate their voices and experiences with course content” (Atay & Fassett, 2020, pp. 1–2).

CCP lies at the intersections of the critical examination of ideas, the meaning of messages, and instruction. CCP articulates 10 commitments that constitute how CCP can be applied to make communicative change. Three commitments are especially applicable to this analysis. Through the application of Commitments 2, 8, and 10, CCP can become the foundation for building an ethic of empathy. Commitment 2 discusses the idea that power is complex. This commitment questions what is inherent in a system of education that puts students at risk (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Commitment 10 focuses on dialogue as a method by which change can occur (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Commitment 8 articulates the idea that change can occur when instructors and students work collectively, often with other groups, to engage in praxis (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Overall, CCP “provides a language for recognizing how teaching communication knowledge should be understood within a political-moral imagination that centers social justice” (Golsan & Rudick, 2018, p. 16). These commitments of CCP can be applied to the problem of individualist thinking in order to assist students in developing an ethic of empathy.

## Developing an Ethic of Empathy

Calloway-Thomas (2010) defines empathy as the “ability imaginatively to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural Other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally” (p. 8). An ethic of empathy involves the application of empathy to enact change. An ethic of empathy resists the neoliberal focus on individualism because it focuses on ways in which educators can use pedagogy to assist students to care for each other and for those around them. Doing so “is to nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom they come in contact” (Noddings, 1984, p. 49). Such action involves utilizing empathy to “help global citizens respond to and manage intercultural encounters caringly and competently” (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 214). Calloway-Thomas (2018) argues for the integration of instruction of empathy in communication programs, stating that they should “should have lessons and units stitched into them that model how citizens are *supposed* to behave in the presence of others, without violating humans’ sacred rights” (p. 496). Empathy is crucial to the functioning of society, as it serves as “the moral glue that holds civil society together” and “unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble” (Calloway-Thomas, 2022, p. 7).

Instructors can develop an ethic of empathy in the communication classroom by instructing students how to communicate empathetically and to recognize and resist neoliberal hegemony that inculcates individualism. An ethic of empathy involves dialogic listening. This practice is based on Conquergood’s (1985) notion of dialogic performance, in which he describes communicative pitfalls that performers/interlocutors must avoid in order to communicate with others who are different from them (McRae, 2015). These pitfalls include communicating for reasons that are selfish, ignoring difference, focusing exclusively on difference, and avoiding communication with people who are different (Conquergood, 1985). It is important to note that an ethic of empathy is the first step in the development of a social justice orientation. The scope of this discussion here is to focus on communicating empathy because students

must be able to first experience and communicate empathy before empathy becomes a truly applied practice. Breaking the bonds of neoliberally inculcated individualism that fosters a lack of empathy is the first step. After this occurs, students can later learn to put their empathy into practice to ultimately lead to civic engagement.

In order for students to move toward the development of an ethic of empathy, based on Conquergood's (1985) principles, and toward critically engaged pedagogy, a need exists to redefine three aspects of education in the discipline of communication: (1) the goals of communication pedagogy, (2) the role of the student, and (3) the outcome of the pedagogical act (Palmer, 2014). In this way, communication pedagogy can become transitional, an approach that identifies "first steps that can lead to transformation" (Artz, 2017, p. 370). Instructors can redefine these aspects of communication pedagogy by applying CCP Commitments 2, 10, and 8—to examine the hegemony present in education (Commitment 2), to use dialogue to create change (Commitment 10), and to work collectively toward praxis (Commitment 8). Such a model paves the way for incremental change toward the goal of developing an ethic of empathy. The following sections examine how instructors and students can redefine the three aspects discussed above by applying Commitments 2, 10, and 8. Further, these aspects and commitments will be applied to the public speaking course in order to provide some concrete examples of how empathy can be applied to a public speaking course. In addition, each example will briefly discuss how Conquergood's (1985) dialogic listening principles can aid in the development of an ethic of empathy.

## **Redefining the Goals of Communication Pedagogy**

Developing an ethic of empathy involves redefining communication pedagogy's goals. The discipline of communication is committed to the goals of social justice and the amelioration of marginalization. However, the discipline has not been immune to the ravages of neoliberalism. The ideologies of social justice and neoliberalism stand in stark contrast to each other. For example, Communication departments sometimes administer the public speaking course in ways that encourage students to speak about career goals. When this occurs, Communication programs further inculcate students with the corporatized version of university education that produces employees ready for the market. Certainly, communication students desire to attain fulfilling, well-paying careers upon graduation. However, neoliberal influence takes individual success a step further by designing a large percentage of courses to promote entrance into the corporate world and (often intentionally) to promote the individualistic notion that "If you fail in the market, you should accept the consequences" (Ciepley, 2017, para. 41). This ideology eliminates empathy from corporate life. Numerous courses taught in the communication discipline are either professional or corporate-supportive in nature, such as a career-focused public speaking course (Palmer, 2014). The proliferation of these types of courses may have the unintended side effect of inculcating neoliberal beliefs, especially when their instructors do not balance them with critical evaluation.

### ***Application of CCP Commitment 2***

Instructors can apply Commitment 2 of CCP to this problem to assist in redefining communication pedagogy's goals. Doing so involves examining the neoliberal pedagogical practice of using communication coursework to foster individualism. In this case, Commitment 2 involves deemphasizing neoliberal ideologies that put students at risk of losing their connectedness with others. Applying this commitment involves moving from the traditional goal of, "produc(ing) market-ready personnel," to the critical goal of "build(ing) social justice communities" (Palmer, 2014, p. 53). From a CCP

perspective, a shift in goals entails moving away from the banking concept of education that Freire (1970) describes. Doing so involves ceasing the practice of making deposits of neoliberal information in students' minds. When instructors abandon the banking concept, students learn how to use knowledge about the neoliberal marketplace to change it. When students learn to think about communication with others through the lens of inclusion and collectivism, they recognize that communication is not/should not be designed to compete with others but rather to foster empathy for them.

In the public speaking classroom, one way in which instructors can apply Commitment 2 is by assigning speeches that ask students to examine hegemony in society. For example, students could research social issues/problems that affect humanity, learn about the (possible) neoliberal causes of these problems, and work to craft arguments that attempt to convince classmates that they should take action to mitigate their effects. This dialogic performance works toward the development of an ethic of empathy as instructors challenge students to engage in audience analysis and speak about issues that marginalized students in their classes may experience (Conquergood, 1985). Reimagining pedagogical goals allows for communication coursework to foster a social justice orientation, an important step in the development of an ethic of empathy.

## **Redefining Students' Role**

The development of an ethic of empathy also involves redefining students' role in the university. Under the current corporatized model, universities educate students to fulfill the role of a future employee (Palmer, 2014). Such a model, although perhaps unintentional, propagates the ideals of "exploitation (profit from others' labor and creativity), inequality (accumulation of wealth through dispossession), alienation (isolated consumers with little political power), and oppression (access to resources determined by race, gender, nationality, and social class)" (Artz, 2017, p. 371). This pedagogical model has the negative effect of preparing students to become corporate power's apprentice (Giroux, 2014).

### ***Application of CCP Commitment 10***

To counteract the role that neoliberalism has designated for students, communication pedagogy can educate students to become public intellectuals who (can) serve as social activists (Palmer, 2014). When this occurs, students develop a voice that they can use to speak out against neoliberal individualism. Instructors can apply Commitment 10 of CCP in the communication classroom to advance this goal. As opposed to the banking concept of education in which students act as passive vessels who are not allowed to actively critique ideas, Commitment 10 utilizes dialogue as a means to foster change. By employing dialogue, communication students can converse about how neoliberalism has silenced them and can develop resistance strategies to it. In the public speaking classroom, students can employ Commitment 10 by building impromptu speaking skills in order to engage in dialogue about the silencing effects of neoliberalism. Instructors can develop an activity or assignment, for example, which asks students to craft impromptu speeches about research they have conducted about (1) the marginalizing effects of neoliberal individualism, (2) what can be done to resist this marginalization, and (3) how community can be built through resistance. This dialogue is emblematic of an ethic of empathy in that it requires dialogic listening and challenges students to speak with each other so that they cannot ignore difference or avoid communicating with students who are different from themselves (Conquergood, 1985). Such dialogic interaction fosters empathy, as students learn to relate to those who are affected by neoliberal subjugation.

## Redefining the Outcomes of Communication Pedagogy

Developing an ethic of empathy also involves a redefinition of what communication pedagogy should accomplish. Communication is a discipline that holds civic engagement, social justice, and action as its core values. For this reason, communication as a field is well suited to teach students to use course content to make meaningful change in the world. To do so, however, the communication discipline must resist the neoliberal influence on course outcomes. Certainly, it is necessary for communication curriculum to teach students to communicate and be successful in the corporate world. These traditional outcomes, which are not inherently negative, are focused on the development of skills and abilities that are useful in corporate settings (Kahl, 2014). However, critical outcomes, centered around critical goals, must permeate the communication curriculum as well. These outcomes challenge students to “examine and question issues of power, class, privilege, hegemony, marginalization, sex, gender, and economic status” (Kahl, 2018a, p. 38).

### *Application of CCP Commitment 8*

Instructors can apply Commitment 8 of CCP to aid in accomplishing the goal of redefining outcomes. In order for instructors and students to collectively redefine what the curriculum (in the classroom) and what the results of the curriculum (in the community) look like, they must engage in praxis. Pedagogy in the discipline of communication involves engaged action. Praxis, in terms of pedagogical outcomes, can take many forms. In this case, Commitment 8 can aid in creating an ethic of empathy by articulating pedagogical outcomes that challenge students to critique neoliberal outcomes that focus only on using communication for individual attainment. When instructors redefine outcomes, students learn to communicate in ways that promote empathy that can result in action. In the public speaking classroom, students can employ Commitment 8 by presenting their previously discussed speeches about community problems that neoliberalism has created to a public audience. A public audience on campus or at a community organization will allow students to connect their messages to the broader community. By doing so, instead of ignoring community, empathy with action builds community by asking “how might students develop . . . unique concepts for dealing with a community’s problems?” (Del Gandio, 2017, p. 377). This type of praxis fosters the development of an ethic of empathy in that it challenges students to communicate with unfamiliar audiences, conduct audience analysis, and engage in dialogic performance and listening (Conquergood, 1985), which aids in building an ethic of empathy.

## Conclusion

The neoliberal emphasis on individualism in the university causes students to develop an individualistic orientation which devalues the collective nature of society. This orientation makes students largely unaware of how neoliberalism marginalizes others. In order to counteract the impact of neoliberal individualism, the communication discipline needs to redefine communication pedagogy’s goals, the role of the student, and the outcomes of communication pedagogy. Such a process involves dialogic listening/performance so that students can gain awareness of the ways in which they should communicate and listen to others/marginalized groups with whom they interact (Conquergood, 1985). As discussed, instructors can help to build such an orientation in communication courses like public speaking. Overall, the application of CCP principles 2, 10, and 8 provides a framework for redefining these three aspects of communication pedagogy that can lead to the development of an ethic of empathy that promotes communication as a means by which people care for others. Reimagining the pedagogical goals of Communication coursework has the potential to foster empathy as a social justice orientation.

Consequently, when students graduate, they can have successful careers and can also begin to make empathy an applied practice as they become engaged citizens who work together to solve problems and obviate marginalization.

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