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Volume 8

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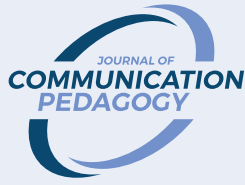
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INTRODUCTION



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Central States Communication Association

Editor's Note to Volume 8 of the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*

Never Stop Learning

Renee Kaufmann 

As I hit publish on my second volume for the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*, I cannot help but want to celebrate how much this journal has achieved since the inaugural volume in 2018. We continue to make gains in readership, downloads, and reach of audience. Each year, those numbers for JCP are higher. I am so proud of all the hard work we have put into these volumes. Notably, this year we doubled our submission rate, introduced a new type of submission (i.e., short reports), and were indexed into ProQuest.

Thank you to my wonderful Editorial Board, Consulting Editors, and Editorial Assistant. You all are the reason why this works so well. I would not be able to do any of this without your time, expertise, and willingness to serve. Lastly, I want to thank CSCA for providing communication educators a space to publish and access this work. These works are meaningful and necessary for our discipline and encourages us to continue to push ourselves to learn and grow.

Readers, I am excited to present you all with some thoughtful original research articles, best practice, and reflective essays. For this volume, we have wonderful authors who have called us to think about our students, our teaching, and our field in ways we possibly had not before. For me, my vision for this journal was a space for us to share, teach, and learn from one another. As I reflect, I am reminded of a conversation I had a while back with an undergraduate student in my program. We were talking about the number of readings one does in graduate school and they said something along the lines of—I bet you are happy you are done with all the reading and learning now that you are a professor. I remember I paused and then laughed. I smiled and responded, “No . . . that is not the case. I still read as much as I can, and I learn something new all the time!” I explained to the student that for me reading and learning

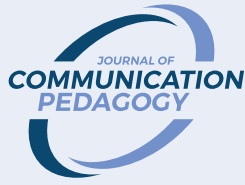
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is one of the best parts of my job. I am so lucky to be encouraged to never stop learning and to constantly explore new things and read and read some more. I am a lifelong learner. The student was not amused with my response at the time, but for me, it was a moment that highlighted the perk of the job . . . I get to continue to push the boundaries of what I know (or what I think I know) and challenge those thoughts (Kaufmann & Tatum, 2017). With that, I encourage you all to carve space to read and foster your own love for learning (*I acknowledge that many of us have time constraints and minimal time nowadays, which can make it difficult to carve out this time). May we always be lifelong learners.

Reference

Kaufmann, R., & Tatum, N. T. (2017). Forum: Do we know what we think we know? On the importance of replication in instructional communication research. *Communication Education*, 66(4), 479–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2017.1342849>



“Just Holding That Space”: Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Create Counterspaces for Black College Students in AANAPISI/HSI Classrooms

Nicholas B. Lacy , Yea-Wen Chen , and Damariyé L. Smith 

Keywords: Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), Black college students, culturally relevant pedagogy, race and critical pedagogy

Abstract: Black college students continue to face the specter of anti-Blackness which creates additional barriers to success and flourishing in higher education. This study investigates how instructors in higher education can provide racial equity to Black students in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms through counterspaces. We use culturally relevant pedagogy to investigate the experiences of 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI to understand better how higher education instructors can utilize counterspaces, places where Black college students can challenge dominant discourses and create a collegial learning environment. We identified three counterspace themes: (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones. Implications provide educators with ways to enact meaningful support both academically and socially to Black-identifying students in college classrooms.

Introduction

In recent years scholars and instructors have made considerable strides to centralize Black students' racial identities in higher education following the highly contested racial events of 2015 (i.e., the murders of Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and the burgeoning Black Lives Matter Movement [BLM]) and 2020 (i.e., the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and a resurgence of the BLM movement) (Lacy, 2023a; Lacy, 2024a). Black students have endured the

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resurgence of BLM atop the COVID-19 pandemic which some scholars have deemed a triple pandemic for Black students (see Carpenter et al., 2022; see also Lacy, 2023b). As a response to systemic racial injustices, communication scholars have long argued for the dismantling of white¹ supremacy in communication and instruction (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020; Chakravartty et al., 2018; Hendrix & Wilson, 2014; Rudick, 2017, 2022; Ruiz-Mesa, 2021; Waymer, 2021; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023).

Counterspaces Defined

However, less is known in the communication discipline as it pertains to the creation of intentional pedagogical counterspaces, which are defined as fixed entities (e.g., forums, classroom discussions), academic programs (e.g., mentorship, study groups), and social programs (e.g., sororities, fraternities, and student unions) (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces can mitigate racial microaggressions, a term coined by Chester Pierce, defined as everyday slights and degradations that can lead to mental and emotional material consequences like stress and trauma for students of color (SOC) (Pierce, 1970). Derald Wing Sue and colleagues have since created a typology for RMAs: (1) microassaults (e.g., name-calling), (2) microinsults (e.g., demeaning a person's heritage), (3) microinvalidations (e.g., devaluing SOC's feelings), and (4) environmental microaggressions (i.e., the manifestation of microaggressions in a centralized, specific location like college classrooms) (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2019). Counterspaces have been found to repair/counter harm caused by microaggressions through texts (e.g., ethnic studies readings), everyday validation (e.g., positive racial acknowledgment), environments (e.g., cultural art, banners, and cultural centers), and interpersonal affirmation (e.g., personal safe zones and creative spaces) (Huber et al., 2021).

Academic Based Counterspaces

The intentionality of counterspaces is growing increasingly useful for Black college student academic and social success (Brooms et al., 2021; Sulé & Brown, 2023). Academic counterspaces are needed for Black students as literature authored by scholars of color and centering Black experiences has the potential to disrupt patterns of white privilege and Black students' marginalization. For example, Lacy (2022) found that after the events of 2020, Black students at a West Coast 4-year university felt more of a need for Black affirming curriculum as an academic counterspace. Huber et al. (2021) also found that after the events of 2020, SOC on the West Coast felt culturally affirming curriculum like ethnic studies, a discipline that centers the experiences and histories of communities of color, can be empowering for Black students as the culturally and racially affirming readings introduce students to scholars and provide respite from white scholars and recognition by way of diverse epistemologies and ontologies.

Although readings are a start to employing academic counterspaces, employing a holistic pedagogical framework of counterspace is also important; that is, creating counterspaces in classroom activities and discussions. As for social successes, STEM fields have experienced an increase in counterspace literature, suggesting that transforming aspects of their field into counterspaces for Black students, particularly on campus discipline-related affirming peer groups, affirming groups for SOC for conferences, and mentoring groups for Black students in STEM (Ong et al., 2018). Additionally, Masta (2021) emphasizes

1. In de-colonial and anti-racist engagement, this study uses a lowercase "w" when referring to white individuals and capitalizes Black when referring to Black individuals to combat historical writing conventions that perpetuate white supremacy (see Bauder, 2020; Lanham & Liu, 2019).

the benefits of instructors creating discussion-based counterspaces for Black and Brown doctoral students at PWIs to breathe and learn as such spaces demonstrate a genuine concern for students' physical and psychological well-being. As few studies in the communication discipline have explored counterspace's pedagogical utility, we situate the overall counterspace concept in this research study as a bifurcated phenomenon that addresses (1) course curriculum and (2) interpersonal communication.

Rationale for Counterspaces at AANAPISIs and HSIs

Accordingly, through this study, we attempt to provide a deeper understanding of Black students' experiences at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is federally designated an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution (AANAPISI) and Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) on the West Coast. We argue Black students' well-being at AANAPISI/HSIs has largely been overlooked in communication and education literature. Overlooking Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs could be due in part to the existence of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which were created during the Black US reconstruction years until the Civil Rights era to provide the mechanisms for Black advancement within a white supremacist culture (Clayton et al., 2023; Gasman & Esters, 2024). For example, US higher education began with Harvard in September 1636, then known as Harvard College, being funded by the Colonial General Court wherein the first Black student did not graduate from the institution until over 230 years after the institution was established (Rudolph, 2021). Currently, Black college students occupy approximately 13% of the US college undergraduate population (Lake, 2021), and approximately 10% of the US graduate population (Lacy, 2023b), 53% of all Black college students are enrolled in PWIs, many of which are emerging AANAPISIs, HSIs, or a dual designation MSI (e.g., AANAPISI/HSI), as opposed to the 7% enrolled at an HBCU (Lake, 2021).

Specifically, the in-class experiences of Black students' psychological well-being in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms are critical to their learning process because "at best, Black [college] students feel excluded, and at worst, they suffer from racial trauma" (Sulé & Brown, 2023, p. 8). This study is critical for communication scholarship as Black college students are drawn to attending MSIs for perceived ethnic and racial diversity efforts only to feel underserved upon enrolling (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2022, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Therefore, we focus our attention to the necessity and benefits of in-class counterspaces as a means to highlight where additional support is needed for Black college students at AANAPISI/HSIs during a sociopolitical milieu such as: (a) the US police/citizen's murders of unarmed Black individuals which negatively impacts Black communities (Lacy, 2023a; Lacy, 2024a); (b) the US's education laws/censorship of racial, cultural, and ethnic difference in 36 states² which negatively impacts US education for Black students (Stout & Wilburn, 2022); (c) the Supreme Court of the United States overturning of affirmative action/race conscious admissions that enabled Black college students to experience their largest college presence in US history (Lacy, 2023b). And with MSIs enrolling over 5 million under/graduate students per year, most of whom are historically underrepresented and low-income students (Minority serving institutions, n.d.), it is important to determine how faculty at AANAPISI/HSIs can better racially support Black students through counterspaces. Insights gleaned from this study can benefit all higher education, given that effective Black student success initiatives are becoming increasingly interchangeable between PWIs and MSIs (Baker et al., 2021). In what remains of this study, we examine extant literature, outline our methods, provide a discussion, offer pedagogical implications, and explain future directions.

2. States to restrict education on racism: AL, AK, AZ, AR, CO, FL, GA, ID, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MI, MS, MO, MT, NE, NH, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA, WV, WI.

Review of Literature

Race and Blackness in US Education

Race, as postured by Allen (2007), is an obstinate systemic determinate which provides privileges to white individuals based on their skin color, and simultaneously oppresses Black individuals by creating a complex psychological space of cultural pride, internalized oppression, and/or systemic discrimination. In US school systems in particular, it has been well documented that Black students have been and continue to be subject to various oppressive phenomena based on their race such as inadequate materials pre-integration, racially hostile environments during post-integration, and beyond (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935; Dumas & ross, 2016). Due to a deathly and turbulent history and systemic entrenchment of anti-Blackness in US education, we situate non-supportive environments for Black students as two different dependent factors: (1) a site of struggle (Kendi, 2019; Orbe & Allen, 2008), and (2) as racially microaggressive (see Sue, 2010; see also Sue et al., 2019). Stated differently, race as a social construct has resulted in anti-Black policy, as well as anti-Black interpersonal phenomena that have deleterious and oppressive material educative consequences for Black students.

Black Student In-Class Experiences at AANAPISI/HSIs

Scant literature exists on Black students' experiences inside AANAPISI and HSI classrooms, with even fewer studies existing at dual designated MSIs like AANAPISI/HSIs. The handful of studies that center Black students' in-class experiences at AANAPISI/HSIs show Black students contend with various acts of anti-Blackness. For example, Lacy (2022) investigated Black students' classroom experiences at an AANAPISI/HSI and found that Black students desired curriculum that reflected their ontologies and epistemologies. To this end, Lacy et al. (2024) conducted a departmental case study of social justice and antiracist curriculum transformation in a Social Science department at an AANAPISI/HSI and found that departmental efforts at AANAPISI/HSIs can improve their curriculum by providing their SOC with race and social justice curriculum through (1) course readings, (2) land-use statements, (3) disability statements, and (4) faculty interventions that are clearly outlined on syllabi. The authors illustrate how university schools/departments can collectively implement social justice and anti-racist readings, land inquiries, and disability support on their syllabi while also professionally developing faculty to engage in inclusive activities like ascertaining race and having amicable racialized classroom discussions with students. Such interventions proposed by Lacy et al. (2024) correlate to other communication studies like Simmons et al. (2013) who found that Black students at PWIs desired readings from/by scholars of color, as well as Black affirming ideals such as racial discussions and the appreciation of Black culture.

Still, the counterspace concept is imperative for Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs. For illustration, Flores et al. (2023) conducted focus groups of Black undergraduate students in STEM at a West Coast AANAPISI/HSI and found students had stressful encounters with instructors wherein instructors dismissed their academic-related questions which led to feelings of exclusion. Flores et al. also found that Black undergraduates perceived their non-Black and Latinx peers to be exclusionary which added to in-class environments being perceived as unwelcoming. Lu and Newton (2019) conducted one-on-one interviews of Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI and found students perceived their courses to be marginalizing as academic support initiatives on campus were not readily available for them as were for their counterparts SOC (e.g., Latinx and Asian peers). Likewise, Lacy (2024b) illustrates why Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI remain silent and do not participate in the learning process as they (1) felt racially underrepresented in their courses, (2) they avoided (negative) peer attention, and

(3) feared instructor retaliation if they were to speak up and advocate for Black ideals. Here, Black students communicated silence in West Coast AANAPISI/HSI classrooms due to perceiving their dual-serving MSI as racially intolerant of Blackness, which impedes Black students' academic successes at non-HBCU MSIs by not fully engaging them (e.g., Black students) in classroom spaces. Consequently, we argue that the long-term effects of Black students' recruitment, retention, and graduation rates can be improved through the implementation of pedagogical counterspaces at dual-serving MSIs. The few research studies centering Black students' experiences in AANAPISI/HSI courses elucidate how Black students at dual-serving MSIs perceive their in-class experiences to be marginalizing by way of being underrepresented, and due to non-Black affirming pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b) is grounded on stimulating instruction for students' in-class experiences. CRP can stimulate Black students in college courses by *affirming* their learning experiences in environments that allow students to perceive themselves as capable of learning (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995a) defines CRP as,

a pedagogy of opposition [. . .] not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

CRP aligns with the present study given its utility to offer pedagogical opposition to whiteness which provides a critical collective means to empower Black identifying students at MSIs. The first principle of CRP maintains that students must experience academic success signals a need to foster in-class engagement of Black students. As Lacy (2024b) illustrates, Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI communicated silence, wherein they did not fully engage in the learning process due to their racial underrepresentation, fear of instructor consequences, and a fear of peer backlash. Since a Euro centered lecture style is used in most college and university classes, students and instructors alike often feel comfortable with the lack of student voice (Ladson-Billings, 1996). In cases like these, CRP suggests that instructors should invest more deeply in their student's well-being and find ways to circumvent silences by implementing inclusive stratagems like distributing index cards to all students to solicit their questions and comments about course readings to be used in discussion (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Fostering in-class rapport is critical as Masta's (2021) study provides further insight that Black students desire interpersonal culturally responsive spaces that enable them to experience academic success through social/well-being check-ins. Another study found that the most integral predictor of faculty-student engagement is created and first fostered by faculty's genuine concern for Black students (Wood & Newman, 2017). These studies demonstrate the importance of instructor initiation/invitation in fostering students' academic success.

The second principle of CRP holds that students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence. We argue that curriculum is critical in developing and maintaining cultural competence for Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs as irreprehensible harms throughout education history for Black students cannot be separated from their learning environments or learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Studies illustrate how Black students desire relatable curriculum that: (1) acknowledges anti-Black systemic injustices (Lacy 2022; Simmons et al., 2013), and (2) also provides spaces for celebratory Blackness

like Black joy and Black excellence (Tichavakunda, 2022). CRP's second precept, cultural competence, challenges a white, Euro centered way of teaching, which may not be inherently evident for white individuals (hooks, 2014). For Black students, cultural competence in curriculum is *most* needed post-integration, for example, after the landmark *Brown v. The Board of Education* case given the extreme and intolerable acts of anti-Blackness in US education (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935). Using critical race theory, Huber et al. (2021) shows how ethnic studies has a positive effect on Black and Brown graduate students at a public 4-year university in California during the second wave of BLM in 2020. Under the cultural capital framework, Yosso (2005) illustrates how cultural investment in SOC reorients marginalized students' identities from a deficit mindset to an asset-based mindset in Euro centered pedagogy. Thus, ethnic studies/racially affirming curriculum that offers Black epistemologies and ontologies is vital in instructors' development and/or maintaining of cultural competence.

The third principle of CRP posits that students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. Black students in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms can be empowered to challenge a dominant social group and global (D)iscourse (e.g., white supremacy, and anti-Blackness). Glocke (2016) argues that unlike Euro centered pedagogy, African Centered pedagogy offers a holistic communal/worldview, which is the optimal way for African/Black students to learn thereby challenging white supremacy. To this end, a European worldview encourages values of materialism, control, domination, and linear-ordinal ranking which culminates in a one-size-fits-all approach (Glocke, 2016). Whereas Afrocentricity enables Black students to develop a consciousness that challenges white Euro centered pedagogy by dismantling material capital and hierarchical notions of individualism and instead fostering a communal and liberative educative freedoms of expression and learning (Asante, 2020). We suggest that instructors should employ a variety of epistemologies and ontologies that "acknowledges all identities of personhood in an equitable, affirming, validating, and asset orientation, wherein honest two-way learning occurs that (re)produces critically reflexive knowledge(s) and communication" (Lacy & Chen, 2022, p. 371). In other words, critical consciousness raising begins with instructor's cultural and racial affirming teaching (e.g., interpersonal communication and culturally relevant readings).

The present study builds on previous research by examining more closely *which* types of pedagogical counterspaces instructors at AANAPISI/HSIs can strategically employ for Black students under CRP. Although researchers found benefits of counterspaces, less is known regarding Black college students' narratives as to *which* counterspaces can be employed at AANAPISI/HSIs. Thus, this study is guided by the following research question.

RQ: How do Black college students at dual-serving MSIs articulate ways in-class counterspaces can communicate positive racial support?

Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews of Black under/graduate students were used to collect data as "student testimonies offer a discursive and pedagogical space to cultivate public learning and a beloved community, an aspirational vision for a nation that seeks to reconcile legacies of oppression and close opportunity gaps" (Vue, 2023, p. 55). Here, we outline our positionalities, participant demographics, procedures, and data analysis.

Researchers' Positionality

Author one is a Black, cisgender, late-30, able-bodied male who is interested in the phenomenon of racial experiences in Black college students. Author one attended an HBCU for a year and a half, an HSI, an AANAPISI/HSI, and a PWI. His research interests are to investigate Black college student affirmation and social and academic successes which seek to provide restorative justice for underrepresented Black and Brown communities (Gormley, 2005; Milner, 2007). Author two is an Asian, cisgender, mid-40, and able-bodied immigrant woman faculty who has taught and mentored Black college students across two historically white universities, one HSI, and one HSI and AANAPISI. She brings to this project her research interests in co-mentoring, communicating marginalized cultural identities, and critical intercultural communication pedagogy. Author three is a Black, cisgender, mid-30, able-bodied male who has taught and mentored Black college students at an HSI and served as a program coordinator for an on-campus academic center focused on improving the retention and graduation rates of Black students. Author three is also a first-generation student who attended an HSI for his undergraduate and graduate degrees. His research centers on the nexus of rhetoric, race, media, and Black male studies.

Participant Demographics

Participants in this Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt study consisted of 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI on the US West Coast. Participants self-identified as Black, which we define as US-born, and descendants of US enslaved ancestry. Though we explain Black student experiences are not monolithic, nor should Black students be assumed to be lumped together as one singular expression of personhood; rather Blackness is a diaspora, and we investigated only US-born Black perspectives in this study as the majority of the sampled students were West Coast natives as 18 participants were born and raised on the US West Coast, 2 were born and partially raised in the US South and West Coast, and 1 participant was born and raised on the US East Coast.

Participants ages ranged from 18–45 years. Genders included 13 cisgender women, and 8 cisgender men. In total, 11 Black undergraduates and 10 Black graduates were sampled. Of the undergraduates there were three 1st years, one 2nd year, four 3rd years, two 4th years, and one 5th year. Participants' areas of study included communication studies, mass media/journalism, education, engineering, political science, pre-law, and psychology. All 10 graduate students were in masters' programs: six 1st years, and four were 2nd years. This study sampled both Black undergraduates and graduates to bolster findings which places an emphasis on the underrepresented community of Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs (Choi et al., 2023; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019).

Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, students were recruited through a university-wide research pool that required students to be enrolled in the university. The university-wide research pool allowed for convenience sampling, where students self-selected to sign up for the study. After student's signed up, they received a short 5-minute preliminary survey that culled demographic data to determine eligibility; students needed to be Black and a current student at the university to be eligible for this study. Eligible participants received an email containing a password protected Zoom link with a date and time. In addition to earning extra credit, all participants received a digital \$25 Amazon gift card upon interview completion, personally provided by author one.

Interview duration fluctuated from 35 minutes to 2½ hours, averaging 50 minutes. Interviews took place between February 2021–April 2021. Interviews were semi-structured and were informed by an interview guide which culled from Ladson-Billings’s (1995a, 1995b) CRP, particularly the idea of challenging the status quo and Yosso’s (2005) idea of cultural wealth. Author one conducted all interviews wherein participants were asked open-ended questions such as “based on your experience, can you share what makes an instructor supportive as opposed to unsupportive?” and “how can instructors best support Black students?” Questions sometimes evolved, and participants were asked follow-up questions for clarity (Tracy, 2020).

Data were collected via Zoom transcription and augmented with shorthand field notes in real time (Tracy, 2020) to provide rich context to each participant’s responses. The shorthand field notes were taken in the moment and added to the interview transcripts by highlighting body language and seriousness in participants’ voices. We employed tools such as NVivo to code and review interview transcripts, Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet to record codes, names, and definitions, and Microsoft Word to form participants’ narratives into thematic categories.

Data Analysis

After interview data were collected, transcribed, and sorted, we conducted the initial thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to interpret the data and make meaning across participants’ experiences. The analysis process consisted of a two-tiered examination (Tracy, 2020), wherein transcripts were coded and analyzed a total of four times.

The first tier of coding involved “open coding” which enabled author one and two to examine what each participant shared (Tracy, 2020). The second examination of transcripts occurred under the open coding process which enabled author one and three to identify secondary patterns that were present in participants’ responses (Tracy, 2020). Within tier one, authors used two separate readings of the transcripts to interpret overarching clusters of similar information to build themes (Tracy, 2020). For example, data were first grouped in a theme called moments of validation based on phenomena that emerged (e.g., responses related to affirming or validating communication).

The second tier of coding and analysis required a deeper examination (Tracy, 2020) of how overarching themes of validation were used in each given context with Black students. Tier two consisted of two additional rounds of closed coding, proposed by Lawless & Chen (2019) which enabled authors one and three to strengthen the saliency of each theme. Tier two was a process that refined clustered phenomena into more crystalized categories of findings.

Findings

In response to the posed research question, “how do Black college students articulate ways counterspaces can communicate positive racial support inside higher education classrooms,” our analysis underscore three themes concerning counterspaces: (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones.

Counterspaces That Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy

Theme one illustrates how Black students call for culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). For example, when asked what he would change about higher education, Vince, a 5th-year communication major emphasized:

I would change how professors start classes. And what I mean by that is, I think, professors need to have almost like an open house or some opportunity to formally meet their students, it can be difficult when you're teaching a large lecture, of course. But I think the professor at some point before the class starts need to look each student in their eye and get to learn their name—even if they don't remember it, you know? They need to get context, on what students are coming into their class with. What are their expectations how committed, are they to this class are you taking it because it's the "G," are you taking me because you need this class to graduate? By [the] time they start figuring out information about students is during course evaluations it's too late, by then, you need to know your demographic deeper . . . I think they need to be able to meet their students and get a general idea of who they are, and you know why they're there.

Vince challenges Euro centered pedagogy by signaling to instructors a need to foster community and personhood. Vince elucidates Ladson-Billings's (1996) pedagogical notions of the US's Euro centered lecture style that is used in most college and university classes, which promotes a minimization of student voice/input.

Continuing Black students' call to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy, Catrina, a 1st-year in psychology shared:

So, in my Africana Studies critical thinking class, my professor is [professor's name]. She does her class differently. She doesn't do points, she just has a contract that you sign in the beginning of the semester, saying that you have to do everything for a certain grade. So, she has listed what you need to get an A, and what you need for a B. What she has listed for an A, you like sign up at the beginning of the semester, and as long as you get everything done and you're actually learning. And she sees that you're learning you get the grade. I really don't think it will apply for a lot of classes, but I think that it could apply to some and that's really beneficial because she's lenient with students. Her classes are really personal, like she sees [understands Black students] and you can tell that she wants like the best for you. I don't think a lot of professors are the same way because I feel like a lot of the times it's just about the points it's not actually about the learning right.

Catrina was introduced to an African style of communal pedagogy early on, which she found stimulating and helpful in her learning illustrating Glocke's (2016) argument that Black college students at a PWI need and appreciate African/a (American) Studies due to the alternative pedagogical paradigms (e.g., Afrocentricity juxtaposed to Eurocentric pedagogy). Catrina challenges "points/percentage systems" as such tools are material capital and hierarchical notions of individualism and are not as liberative as her Africana Studies course (Asante, 2020).

Jayda, a 4th-year political science major was asked what, if anything, would she change about instructors, she stated:

I feel like some professors teach in a very white narrative and don't express the full truth, and aren't receptive to the truth, because they feel that they're so entitled you know. That's one thing that I would change [if given the opportunity], is the way race is discussed in class. Like how it's centered in whiteness. But still, I think they should make it a requirement for some [white] people to take some of these [race] courses because I feel like they're always preaching to the choir, you know? I'm taking a race and politics class of course I'm going to; you know [get it]. To me, you're teaching about my life. I mean that's why I get so offended when professors misrepresent me because it's like you're teaching me, and you're teaching other people about me, you know. But I mean you're teaching [it] wrong.

Jayda describes feeling misrepresented in classrooms, which leads her to challenge the standard Euro centered pedagogy that is employed in higher education, mainly by non-Black instructors. However, Jayda does not speak up and correct her instructors which continues (Lacy, 2024b). Jayda's experiences support Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), and Yosso (2005) which all indicate that US education racially and culturally misrepresents SOC. This theme illustrates three different ways Black students articulate desires to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy through the use of counterspaces to improve learning environments at AANAPISI/HSIs.

Counterspaces That Employ Black and Critical Scholarship

The second theme describes Black students' yearning for Black affirming curriculum in their classes. Chloe, a 3rd-year communication major was asked what she would change about her classes, and she responded:

I believe curriculum is easier to guarantee because sometimes these old white professors are just set in their ways. There's no way to guarantee that every professor is going to be accommodating to Black students, that they're going to stick to their word. You know, there's no way to track someone's every move, every class, it's not a guarantee that someone will speak up against it or be heard, so I feel like implementing better curriculum would probably be best.

Chloe's response illustrates how some Black students desire (critical) readings authored by scholars of color, similar to Simmons et al.'s (2013) findings. Chloe explains that some instructors may not "change" their beliefs or become social justice oriented for their diverse body of students, though, they would be more amenable to differing perspectives if readings, theories, and studies authored by Black scholars, along with race-related discussions and activities were an integral part of their school/department's mission similar to Lacy et al.'s (2024) proposed interventions.

Relatedly, Martin, a first-year master's student in mass communication stated:

Most of them [white instructors] are performative in a way, where they just don't do much. I do think when you like, promote Black excellence, professors should research Black scholarship too, and read the articles by both white and Black scholars so they're more accessible for everybody. Because there's a lot of Black journalist columns who aren't getting recognition for

their work, they write some good articles too, and actually we like always read the same white people's articles we're just like?

Martin desires to read scholarship produced by Black scholars but does not understand why Black journalists are excluded from course curriculum for the same recycled white authors. This illuminates Chakravartty et al.'s (2018) findings that show white-authored citations and assigning the same white authors in course readings perpetuate relevance amongst white authors in communication. Additionally, as a graduate student, Martin's experience with a lack of racial diversity in graduate communication curriculum illustrates Chakravartty and Jackson's (2020) findings that reveal communication graduate departments have not included diversity of racial readings which perpetuates Euro centered racial apartheid.

Similarly, Karissa, a 4th-year communication studies senior, recalls the impact two instructors had on her when they employed intentional critical curriculum:

The first Black professor I ever had, [professor's name] is the reason why I switched to communication. He's such an amazing professor, like everything that he did was inclusive, it was intentional. There was so much community built in his classroom, and then taking other people's [white instructor's] classes after taking his class, big difference. I just feel like, how do I say this, some professors they mentioned race or gender and class in a very specific pocket in their curriculum, so I don't really take it seriously if you're only going to talk about it once in a semester. I don't think you genuinely care, but [university professor] did spread it out all the way across his semester, and I had him for ethnography too. He wanted us to be very conscious of the way we interact with certain communities or research sites, and he wasn't afraid to approach things and he didn't tread lightly, so I really appreciated that from him.

Karissa's experiences with two of her professors highlights how instructors can make positive impacts on Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs with inclusive and intentional race-related reading. This idea is captured by Tichavakunda (2022) who addresses the numerous ways higher education, particularly PWIs, impede ways Black students can experience joy in higher education—even in the substance they read. Extending studies like Tichavakunda and others, this theme demonstrates a need for AANAPISI/HSIs to create counterspaces that are intentional and inclusive in terms of readings and curriculum.

Counterspaces That Foster Black Excellence Zones

The third theme highlights Black Excellence Zones we define as hyper-reflexive, interpersonal environments that are Black affirming in ways that acknowledge the humanness and full capabilities of Black identifying individuals in a loving, communal, and asset (not deficient) orientation. For example, Blue, a 2nd-year pre-med student, disclosed:

I took an English class last semester [at the university] and I'm not part of the LGBTQ+ community, but when we got in there the teacher was like okay everyone say your pronouns. It really didn't affect anyone in the class; everyone pretty much said their pronouns. But I just thought it was a way to accept everyone, if that makes sense. It's like getting the community to accept you, like who you are. It was, in my opinion, a very accepting way, even though that's not racial it really opens the door. You matter in the class.

Blue explains the importance of valuing students' identities and the importance of establishing and maintaining a class community. The idea for community is evident in Blue's excerpt as she herself does not identify as LGBTQIA+, but the mere idea of a community deeply affected Blue's perspective on the instructor and the class in a positive way.

Having a sense of community for Black students is imperative to their experiences in class (Lacy, 2022; Lacy, 2024b). For instance, Angie, a 3rd-year communication major shares how she interprets very initial displays of acknowledgment and validation,

You know in today's world that we live in, it is not enough to not be racist, you have to be anti-racist. So, I had a professor last semester my history class, and you know, her syllabus she made it explicit that she was like you know, I support this, I support that I support this, I support that. That's who I am you know, she was not Black, but she was like I support what's happening right now the Black Lives Matter movement. I support that full time here. So, like, acknowledgement I think that's one big thing.

Angie's narrative perspective exhibits how non-Black instructors can be validating by acknowledging Black student's realities and supporting their racial and social justice efforts from the very onset of class to foster community. This finding is similar to Huber et al.'s (2021) findings that Black graduate students at a Californian 4-year university were interpersonally validated in the wake of 2020 with interpersonal validation.

Likewise, Tiana, a master's student, shares the importance of interpersonal counterspaces for Black students:

We need supportive energy. Not even like checking into the beginning of class, but *just holding that space* and being like y'all got anything on your mind you want to talk about or if you don't want to talk about it now send me an email after. Maybe I'm getting more comfortable with emailing now because I'm a grad student, but like it's okay to email us. I know in large lecture classes, probably wouldn't you know be okay, but like they give us their cell phone numbers and working with us as far as due dates when we have to call in Black, you know.

Tiana articulates how Black undergraduate (and graduate) students look to their instructors for racially affirming spaces at AANAPISIs and HSIs, corroborating the idea that Black students look to such MSIs for perceived ethnic and racial diversity efforts with hopes to be racially validated (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Blue's, Angie's, and Tiana's recommendations align with Masta's (2021) findings which show Black college students require in-class pedagogy that mitigates Euro centered pedagogy and cultivates dialogue by providing voice, space, and racialized respite to/for Black students as part of their integration into the learning process.

Discussion

This study investigates the narratives of 21 Black college students' experiences at an AANAPISI/HSI on the West Coast with particular attention to the types of counterspaces that can be employed by instructors to better support Black college students' classroom experiences. As places to challenge dominant discourses and create a collegial learning environment (Solórzano et al., 2000), counterspaces

in this study are places where Black collegians at a dual-serving MSI can mitigate Eurocentric pedagogy, employ Black scholarship, and foster Black excellence zones. As part of our discussion, we consider inferences drawn from our findings and offer practical implications for instructors at MSIs and PWIs.

Mitigating Eurocentric Pedagogy. Our first theme challenges Eurocentric teaching at AANAPISI/HSIs and PWIs to advocate for a deeper connection in the instructor-student relationship and encourage instructors to adopt different approaches that Black students find to be beneficial to their academic success. Instructor-student relationships should contain a genuine concern for Black students' rationale for registering and attending courses (Hendrix & Wilson, 2014; Lacy, 2024b; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022). As Vince recommended, faculty can invest in the way courses begin their semester, trimester, or quarter. Here, faculty can get to know their students through an open house or instructor-student conferences from the onset because student evaluations are too late to make considerable change for the current class. Instructors should foster rapport early on, beyond the Euro centered lecture style and better understand students' identities and goals. For example, if instructors developed a connection beyond that of the lecture style with students, SOC who may feel marginalized on their campus may be prompted to increase their participation during in-class activities due to feeling a sense of interpersonal relatability with their instructor. By mitigating Euro centered instructor-student power dynamics like the standard lecture in a one-size-fits-all approach (Glocke, 2016), instructors can provide a counterspace whereby Black students and other SOC can be engaged from the first day of class.

Other students articulated a need to provide counterspaces that mitigate Euro centered pedagogy beyond how courses might begin. For example, Jayda articulates an overwhelming feeling of whiteness in her college courses which impacts her feelings of misrepresentation by white instructor's pedagogy. Black students like Jayda who feel misrepresented in higher education classrooms can experience a strong urge to challenge standard Euro centered pedagogy, though they may remain silent and not fully engage in the learning process in courses. By providing a counterspace for Black students to share their thoughts, or concerns, Black students like Jayda might be encouraged, though not required, to teach racial epistemologies and ontologies in a collaborative learning environment. This finding highlights Lacy's (2024b) study that illustrates why Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs will remain silent in college classrooms due to their underrepresentation, perceived instructor retaliation, and perceived peer repercussions. This finding also highlights Ladson-Billings's (1996) idea of challenging the US' Euro centered lecture style, a style that is common across all higher education, even though it encourages the marginalization of student voice/input, or a controlled input of student voices; that is, allowing student voices to be selected when called upon by the instructor through the act of showing/raising of hands or instructor derived cold-calling. The instructor platform provides such a power differential that SOC do not always feel comfortable interjecting their racialized experiences.

Encouraging students to be a part of the learning process is critical as it reduces a Euro centered pedagogy, and, thus, reduces control. For example, reducing the Eurocentric control was mentioned by Catrina as she spoke of an African style pedagogy that she found to be beneficial to her academic success. Specifically, Catrina's experience with a non-Euro learning environment illustrates how some Black students can be validated outside the false purview that the Euro centered model of teaching is "the only" or is "the best" way to teach an increasingly diverse demographic of college students. This finding is imperative as research illustrates that it is highly improbable to challenge a European worldview within a European centered pedagogy as the structure of the two not only embrace racism, white supremacy, and white privilege, but academia is specifically designed to work in the best interest of white students

(Asante, 2020; Glocke, 2016; Rudick, 2017, 2022). Hence, alternative paradigms of teaching like that of Afrocentricity can be employed to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy. Just as Catrina indicates by eliminating the use of a capitalistic-like points system, African/Africana and Black Studies paradigmatic structure operates differently because it is based on the African Worldview; uses an African Centered pedagogy; and contests racism, white supremacy, and white privilege, which greatly benefits Black students' in-class experiences in all of higher education (Asante, 2020; Glocke, 2016).

Employing Black and Critical Scholarship. In the second theme, participants described a need to provide curriculum-centered counterspaces (e.g., counterspaces that mitigate white Eurocentric readings that perpetuate whiteness), continue to keep white scholars and authors relevant, and also perpetually marginalizes alternative epistemological and ontological perspectives (Chakravartty et al., 2018). Some Black students like Chloe have little to no faith in white instructor's abilities to be racially affirming to Black students in their pedagogy; hence, they, Black students, feel their course readings, at the very least, should promote inclusion of diverse perspectives insofar as authors of color. This discovery is vital as instructors can glean the importance of providing diverse readings for Black students which is evident not only here, but also in Simmons et al.'s (2013) findings. Engaging Black students in critical scholarship in each respective discipline not only creates a curriculum counterspace for SOC, but it also showcases representation in each respective field/discipline which may broaden Black students' purviews into pursuing graduate studies with said authors of color thereby fortifying disciplinary pipelines (see Lacy & Chen, 2022; see also Waymer, 2021).

Black students like Martin feel a need for curriculum counterspaces in the field of communication due to an overt exclusion of Black scholars' works. Students like Martin seek Black scholarship outside of their graduate course materials due to the lack thereof on course reading lists. The need for this type of pedagogical counterspace highlights Chakravartty and Jackson's (2020) argument that graduate programs in communication reify Euro centered whitewashing of curriculum that they call a "whiteout." The communication "whiteout" refers to the white, male laden readings that microcosmically reify colonial notions of European privilege and domination in the field of communication (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). Students like Martin not only recognize the "communication whiteout," but they can also become disengaged in such learning environments. This idea supports Lacy's (2022) findings that Black students at MSIs need a culturally validating curriculum for their academic success, and also supports Pirtle et al.'s (2021) finding that Black students are ultimately underserved at HSIs. Yet the need for Black-centered curriculum interventions have long been salient since the wake of the landmark *Brown v. The Board of Education* case given the lack of racial relevance and its importance to the learning processes of Black students in US education post-integration (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935).

Racial and cultural readings can not only provide representation for Black students, but they can also provide Black joy. Analyzing Karissa's excerpt, she demonstrates how Black college students can be validated and inspired by curriculum and pedagogy when instructors are intentional about their interpretation/s of racial and ethnic realities. Karissa validates Tichavakunda's (2022) study that addresses the numerous ways higher education impede Black students' possibilities and sensibilities for joy, and Black affirming curriculum is one way Black students can experience joy. For instance, employing curriculum-centered counterspaces can increase Black students' positive learning experiences as studies like Huber et al. (2021) show that ethnic studies readings are affirming for Black students, and Lacy (2022) found that Black students desire culturally and racially representation in course readings. Illustrating a fervent commitment to Black students in such a way not only demonstrates inclusion of

Black-affirming curriculum but can exemplify how instructors, departments, and institutions can no longer remain passive/neutral on such matters. Such auspices will need to establish where they stand and when standing in solidarity with the increasing diverse student demographics, Karissa further explains how curriculum centered counterspaces should not be limited to one unit or week; instead, the intentionality of critical/race scholarship should engage students throughout the semester which corroborates Lacy et al.'s (2024) notion that anti-racism and social justice readings should be intertwined within curriculum at AANAPISI/HSIs as opposed to being delimited to one week, or one unit.

Fostering Black Excellence Zones. The third theme draws from LGBTQIA+ community's safe zones, as such spaces are also critical for Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs. Students in the current sample explain how they yearn for communal Black-affirming spaces within classrooms. For instance, Blue's narrative illustrates how Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs value community inside classrooms. Blue's narrative reveals how community and being acknowledged is paramount from the onset of classes for Black students at a time where/unarmed Black individuals are being murdered, and curriculum denounces Black experiences. Instructors' establishment of a classroom community is critical, even if it may not be a community that Black students identify with, which extends Wood and Newman's (2017) claim that the most integral predictor of faculty-student engagement is created and first fostered by faculty's genuine concern. Here, it is imperative that faculty initiate such counterspaces to enable Black students to (a) understand their instructor's position in terms of Black (and marginalized student) allyship, and (b) provide the platform for students to accept their instructor allyship.

However, declaring for anti-racism is critical as Angie recalled how her history professor, though not a Black instructor, explicated how she supports the Black Lives Matter movement using her syllabus to ensure her Black students were valued in the learning environment, while also providing notice to white (and other) students who may oppose the civil rights premise that the organization stands for. Angie's narrative highlights a tangible example of Kendi's (2019) argument of making active, antiracist acts, rather than the passivity of claiming non-racist stances, as the instructor committed to antiracist acts through the use of her syllabus. The use of a syllabus also builds on Huber et al.'s (2021) findings that show how "texts" like readings can be used to validate SOC, yet this finding extends how "texts" can include syllabi (e.g., typically the first text reviewed in a course). Angie expresses how such acts are not only memorable to her and other Black students but demonstrate a positive impact on Black students which enable for a more invested experience in the learning environment as compared to the instructor not establishing such a counterspace. Black excellence counterspaces do not merely mitigate Euro centered teaching or include Black scholars as part of the course reading list, but instead this type of counterspace demonstrates a Black-affirming interpersonal commitment above all other types of counterspaces. That is, employing Black excellence counterspace situates Blackness and Black affirming instruction above whiteness and Euro centered power dynamics.

Black excellence counterspaces require a holistic dedication to Black students. For instance, Tiana explained how flexible due dates and instructor empathy is critical for interpersonal success for Black students, but also the act of holding a physical and psychological space is where social-emotional learning can occur. The corroborate Masta's (2021) notion of creating counterspaces as they demonstrate a genuine concern for students' psychological well-being, and Zembylas's (2021) notion of employing anti-racism acts which simultaneously challenges neoliberalism in educational spaces. Tiana's words, "supportive energy" suggests a community where Black students' concerns are heard and valued. Moreover, Tiana

reflects on her time spent as an undergraduate and indicates that she is just now comfortable emailing instructors as a graduate student which could be helpful to understand Black undergraduates' perceptions at AANAPISI/HSIs. Tiana also mentions working with Black students when they have to "call in Black" following anti-Black events (e.g., police killing unarmed Black people). Instructors can provide equity to Black students with flexible due dates and having access to instructors beyond standard email. This finding supports Black students feeling underserved upon enrolling at MSIs (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019).

Pedagogical Implications

Based on this study's findings, we provide two practical implications for higher education instructors to employ for Black students' (and all marginalized students) in-class validation: (1) *Reimagining Syllabus Day and Beyond*, which addresses the need for interpersonal counterspaces, and (2) *Taking Black Scholarship Seriously*, which addresses the need for curriculum-related counterspaces.

Reimagining Syllabus Day and Beyond

First, reimagining syllabus day to thoroughly establish social justice understandings of systemic oppression can provide a much-needed counterspace for Black students that can establish trust and stands to prompt in-class participation from Black students (Lacy, 2024b). Similar to Glocke (2016) and Zembylas (2021), we argue that instructors must acknowledge that there are students who are privileged by societal norms and SOC who contend with racist discrimination, and as such, pedagogies should not ignore the deep emotional knowledge of their racial experiences in fear of potential backlash from maintaining a status quo. Providing a tangible example of what Kendi's (2019) argument of antiracist acts can look like in higher education classes, instructors can make the act of anti-Blackness an established in-class norm by placing it in course syllabi. Such endeavors can begin with racially validating and affirming statements along the lines of, "This is not 'my' classroom, this is 'our' classroom," and, "I stand with my Black students," and, "I believe Black Lives Matter." As Huber et al. (2021) asserts, affirming environments in higher education are critical for SOC. Simply uttering empty statements of solidarity with no follow-through should not be left to the notion that Black-centered (or social justice-related) words are the end-all, be-all; it should be self-evident that instructors still need to teach/communicate with affirming actions, and with the utmost ethical care. One way to move beyond performativity is to provide students with a number in syllabi that they can text (e.g., a google number). Such access can establish a safe zone for Black (and all) students. Hence, we argue that instructors should ask themselves, "Am I teaching to students, or am I teaching/learning with students?" Instructors should not expect (underrepresented) students to listen and learn when instructors themselves are not willing to listen and learn from their (underrepresented) students.

Taking Black Scholarship Seriously

Second, instructors can intentionally integrate Black scholarship into their curriculum. Like Lacy et al.'s (2024) study that illustrates social justice and anti-racism should occur across (1) readings, (2) land-use statements, (3) disability statements, and (4) faculty intervention at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs, we further contend that instructor reflexivity should be a starting point for including Black scholarship. As Lacy et al. (2024) asserts, instructors should ask themselves,

(1) What am I teaching? (2) To whom am I teaching “it”? (3) What does this material reify, support, or challenge? (4) Why should the material be taught to the next generation of thinkers? (5) How might I make changes in myself to serve and connect to students better through my teaching this material? (6) Are my instructor efforts working toward providing an equitable education? (p. 3)

However, extending these interrogatives, instructors should ask themselves, “In what ways am I communicating anti-Blackness through my selected readings for this course?” This concept is supported by Lacy’s (2022) notion of a “culturally relevant curriculum,” where Black students desired to learn from Black scholars. Corroborating both Nxumalo (2021) and Tichavakunda (2022), Black students deserve to read and learn about Black excellence and Black joy in their classes. The onus is placed on instructors to integrate such scholarship and perspectives for a democratic learning environment. Based on participants’ responses, including Black authors in course curriculum can do at least five things: (1) it can showcase Black excellence and scholarship, (2) it can help Black students articulate phenomena that may not be readily understood by dominant culture (Lacy, 2022), (3) it can stimulate areas of research for rising Black scholars (Lacy, 2023b), (4) it can increase the participation of Black scholars during in-class discussions (Lacy, 2024b), and (5) it can provide alternative epistemological and ontological perspectives to non-Black students (Chakravartty et al., 2018). Though Black authors’ work should be integrated throughout the course (e.g., weekly, or included within each unit/module) as opposed to one barrage of Black scholars at or near the end of the semester/quarter when students are mentally checked out to ensure an even distribution of readings and epistemological perspectives per topic/unit (Lacy et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study presents some notable limitations as it contained Black college students’ perspectives at one institution that is designated an AANAPISI/HSI in one US region. Although we define “Black” as US born, and descendants of US enslaved ancestry, we posit that all Black students’ experiences are not identical, nor should they be treated as such. Still, interviews from Black students at a singular higher education institution provides the lived experiences of part of the Black diaspora at one university. Future studies can include interviews from a multiple site approach in addition to non-Black classmates for their perceptions of how racial phenomena manifests within the classroom, with particular attention to counterspaces. Instructors and academic advisors should also be interviewed for their interpretations of racialized counterspaces inside and out of classroom contexts. Future studies can benefit from interdisciplinary partnerships between social sciences and humanities such as psychology, sociology, political science, public health, history, anthropology, Africana Studies, ethnic studies, communication, and other disciplines to garner a wide array of racial phenomena across courses and students.

Conclusion

In solidarity with the 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI in this study, we conclude by arguing that more research on Black student in-class experiences at MSIs like AANAPISI/HSIs is needed as Black students’ experiences at MSIs have largely been overlooked in higher education literature. Using CRP, this study extends research on counterspaces by answering: How do Black college students at dual-serving MSIs articulate ways in-class counterspaces can communicate positive racial support? We highlight three themes produced by our Black under/graduate participants that called for counterspaces

that, (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, which challenges transactional Euro-centric pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, which calls for the integration of Black and critical scholarship in course readings, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones, which are places/spaces where Blackness is not under attack, but is instead validated and nurtured to thrive. In other words, Black collegians at non-HBCU MSIs and dual-serving non-HBCU MSIs can benefit greatly from interpersonal in-class counterspaces that are initiated by their instructors, in addition to intentional race-based curriculum-centered counterspaces that are also provided in instructor syllabi. By creating and maintaining at least these two types of intentional pedagogical counterspaces, instructors at AANAPISIs, HSIs, PWIs, and dual-serving MSIs can provide more meaningful support both academically and socially to Black identifying students in higher education classrooms as such instructor-initiated interventions can positively affect Black students' recruitment, retention, and graduation rates.

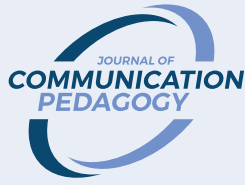
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Using a Career Research Project in the Introductory Communication Course to Develop Agency, Self-Efficacy, Self-Determination, and Adaptability in Career Exploration

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Keywords: career exploration, introductory communication course, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self-efficacy, self-determination, career adaptability

Abstract: Helping students make connections between the disciplinary study of communication and the development of student agency in career exploration can be an important part of the mission of the introductory course in communication. This study incorporates social cognitive career theory to examine the effects of a semester-long communication career awareness research project as an intervention in an introductory communication course at a large public university in the Midwest. Survey data from 83 undergraduate students were analyzed to measure perceptions of self-efficacy, perceived competence, autonomy support, and adaptability for career exploration. The results of paired samples *t*-tests found significant gains on all four dependent variables. These findings indicate the potential for such a project in introductory courses to promote career exploration agency.

Introduction

When students make relevant connections between course content and their core learning motivations, their learning experience is deeper and has a greater impact (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018). Connecting course content to a student's exploration of a future desired career is a powerful motivator as the broadening of job prospects and the pursuit of a career after graduation are primary motivations for today's undergraduate students to attend college (Chegg.org, 2021). This is not merely because undergraduate students require economic security but because of the personal journey Palmer (2000)

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calls *vocational reflection*: a lifelong process of exploring one's *calling* or discovering who one is meant to be in one's communities, based especially on one's talents and passions. While an occupation is not necessarily the most important component of vocation, it is usually a dominant component, and so merits careful investigation and preparation.

Despite the potential importance of career exploration for overall student academic success, many students come to college with limited knowledge of the importance of career exploration or how to conduct it. Due to the importance of career exploration for overall student academic success and satisfaction with the communication major, an important mission of the introductory course in communication should be enhancing student understanding of the relevance of communication concepts, theories, research, and skills for a successful career. Beginning and potential communication majors, as well as non-majors, enrolled in this course should have opportunities to connect disciplinary content to the development of a career identity and awareness of possible career pathways.

This study uses Lent and Brown's (2013) Career Self-Management (CSM) model, an extension of social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) as a theoretical framework for understanding how undergraduate students perceive their sense of agency regarding career exploration. SCCT builds upon the foundation of Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory (SCT) by applying SCT principles (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals) to better understand career outcomes such as interest development, career decision-making, career satisfaction). Utilizing this framework, a meta-analysis by Lent et al. (2016a) demonstrated that support, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations were linked to goals of career exploration and strongly predictive of career anxiety and career decidedness. SCCT posits that career development is influenced by a reciprocal interplay of three main factors: personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy), environmental factors (e.g., social support), and behavior (e.g., goal setting). Given that undergraduate students face career indecision and anxiety, the application of CSM may be especially helpful in facilitating how undergraduate students explore options and make career decisions.

Lent and colleagues (Brown & Lent, 2023; Lent & Brown, 2013) proposed several models that predict career-related performance, persistence, academic/work satisfaction, and career self-management. Among these models, SCCT specifically suggests that self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals are key variables in predicting interest development, career choice, and outcomes including performance/persistence and work satisfaction. *Self-efficacy* refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a specific task (Brown & Lent, 2023). These beliefs are domain-specific, malleable to intervention, and related to an individual's approach versus avoidance of a behavior. *Outcome expectations* refer to an individual's beliefs about the potential outcomes or consequences of their career-related actions and decisions. Similar to self-efficacy, outcome expectations are domain-specific, enhance motivation, malleable, and are also linked to a variety of positive outcomes such as persistence and performance (Lent et al., 2016b.) *Goals* refer to an individual's intention to engage in an activity (e.g., declare a major) or achieve a level of performance (e.g., earn an A in a class). Goals can also include aspirations related to career exploration, skill development, skill attainment, or job search. However, self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals do not function in a vacuum; contextual factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, quality of education) and individual traits (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, ability status) are also needed to explain career development. Overall, SCCT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding (a) how career and educational interests develop, (b) how people perform and persist in school and work, and (c) determining what choices people do and do not make.

Within the broader SCCT, the CSM model highlights within SCCT the dynamic and interactive nature of career development, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, goal setting, action planning, and environmental support. To begin to explore how this can be realized within the introductory communication course, we embedded a scaffolded career awareness research project based on Brown and Ryan Krane's (2000) meta-analysis to identify career development intervention components that are vital to students' career exploration through the integration of critical ingredients (i.e., written reflection, individualized feedback, word-of-work information, modeling, and attention to building support). Our overall goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of this multistage project as an intervention designed to improve career awareness and confidence in ways that might not only prepare students for future career exploration but also strengthen their satisfaction with the study of communication and bolster their academic success. For the current study, we examined the relationship between completing a career exploration research project in an introductory communication course and perceived gains experienced by undergraduate students in the areas of career research self-efficacy, perceived competence for career exploration, and career adaptability.

Literature Review

Career Exploration and the Introductory Communication Course

While introducing a systematic review of national surveys of the introductory communication course spanning a 60-year period, Morreale (2020) argues that this course, described by Beebe (2013) as the *front porch* introducing students and other stakeholders to the communication discipline, needs to consider answers to some important questions to remain relevant. Perhaps the most provocative is this: "[I]s the course providing instruction that is perceived as critical to an undergraduate education, considering declining enrollment in higher education (Fain, 2019) and decreasing funding and tight budgets? (Knox, 2019)" (Morreale, 2020, p. 101). The results of Morreale's review of 60 years of introductory course surveys indicate a number of historical trends; for instance, the dominance of public speaking courses versus introductory content survey courses and a clear preference for performance skills instruction over other content or forms of learning. Such findings are essentially replicated in LeFebvre and LeFebvre's (2020) meta-synthesis of these surveys over the same time period. Anderson and colleagues' (2021) examination of introductory course research from 2010 through 2019 reveals the narrow scope of current scholarship, particularly identifying a dominant emphasis on student characteristics and traits that affect communication, course structure approaches, and assessment of communication learning outcomes.

Morreale (2020) suggests that a shift in curricular emphasis from traditional public speaking to the introductory content course might better address the need to help undergraduate students achieve broader communication learning outcomes prioritized by employers as well as colleges and universities. She also suggests that more scholarship should inquire into issues important to the introductory course beyond a narrow focus on instructional communication. This call for more diverse and broadly relevant research is echoed by Anderson et al. (2021), who express the need to address the needs of other academic disciplines and campus constituencies as well as introductory course instructors and directors. Emphasizing the discipline's need to help students develop career-relevant communication performance skills will only be partially successful without meeting the more fundamental need to help students identify relevant connections between disciplinary knowledge and available career pathways in the first place.

Previous literature in career development assessment and intervention can inform our next steps forward. Spokane and Oliver's (1983) meta-analysis of 52 studies on the effectiveness of career interventions from 1950 to 1980 found that group and class-level interventions demonstrated larger effects on career-related outcomes than for individual counseling interventions. Results in more recent studies consistently support this finding (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Whiston et al., 1998). Because many students come to college with limited career information (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015), the opportunity to complete a career exploration course early in the undergraduate career is related to increased career self-efficacy and decreased career indecisiveness (Fouad et al., 2009). Thomas and McDaniel's (2004) similar research on a career planning course for psychology majors found that students increased not only their career knowledge but also their confidence in career decision-making.

In the only such article in communication research journals, Platt (2020) has examined the effects of a one-credit proseminar course for first-year Communication students on accelerating a sense of *professional socialization*. Platt examines her development of a proseminar course for first-year Communication majors that is designed to help students integrate their coursework, their professional goals, and the institutional resources available to assist them while accelerating their socialization into the discipline. While Platt's proseminar provides a promising model for a discipline-specific first-year student experience, three important limitations warrant attention. First, professional socialization is linked to the culture of the academic department rather than improved student perceptions of communication-related career prospects. Second, the results regarding student gains in socialization are limited by providing overall aggregate outcomes rather than paired-samples analyses that could observe changes in students over time. Finally, as Platt implies by observing that such proseminar content could be integrated into introductory courses, many communication departments have curriculum resource constraints that make offering an additional proseminar class impracticable.

Facilitating Career Exploration Through Career Research

Current college and university students are faced with conditions of uncertainty regarding the availability and stability of available career options a few years down the road. Mintz (2019) described the need for incorporating career exploration knowledge and skills more intentionally into the college academic experience as "an essential component of a 21st-century undergraduate education" (para. 21). Indeed, research confirms that proactive career behaviors—defined as "the deliberate actions undertaken by individuals in order to realize their career goals" (De Vos et al., 2009, p. 763)—contribute to the achievement of desired career outcomes and feelings of success. This intervention fits well within Lent and Brown's (2013) Career Self-Management model which explores the impact of how people achieve their own career objectives through career adaptive behaviors (e.g., career research; goal setting, planning, and decision-making).

One such career adaptive behavior students need to develop is *career exploration*: a process of "actively acquiring and accessing career-related information . . . that may help students choose a career path and reach their career goals" (Kleine et al., 2021, p. 1). Specifically, exploring potential careers in communication by conducting intentional research is an activity that can provide students with concrete, credible information about what such a career entails, the prospects for success in that career, and how one should best prepare to pursue that career. For undergraduate students with limited knowledge of and experience in this environment, career research can be an important component of effective career exploration. Of course, students who have never conducted such research before can benefit from

successful practice, such as through a scaffolded assignment in an introductory course. To optimize the potential of such a learning opportunity, a career research project should be designed in ways that encourage the likelihood that students will develop the intrinsic motivation to continue this exploration themselves once the course is over. The research project design, therefore, should be informed by research-based insights into the development of student agency in terms of their self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and career adaptability.

Student Perceptions of Agency in Career Exploration

The present study seeks to pursue this work by exploring how the introductory course might provide opportunities for undergraduate students to develop agency in career exploration. *Agency*, in this context, is the ability “to influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances” (Bandura, 2006b, p. 164). Bandura’s social cognitive theory identifies four defining components of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. In brief, the agent determines to take an action, sets goals and visualizes a future result of an action plan, self-motivates and self-regulates that action, and uses metacognition to examine their action. Bandura’s theory of agency provides a useful framework for exploring how student learning experiences might be crafted to support their autonomy development, particularly at a key moment of personal and cultural identity transition. When considering agency in terms of career exploration and decision-making, four concepts are especially relevant in research on career development: self-efficacy, perceived competence, autonomy support, and adaptability.

Career Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, originally articulated by Bandura (1977) as central to agency, involves “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). These beliefs are less about specific content knowledge than about one’s confidence that they can complete a task or meet a goal successfully. Such beliefs are developed through four primary sources: personal mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and emotional states (Bandura, 1997)—each of which can be developed via learning opportunities and autonomy support in the classroom. In Lent and Brown’s (2013) model of career-self-management (CSM), these four variables also contribute to *outcome expectations* (Lent et al., 2017). Together, self-efficacy and outcome expectations contribute to the formation of goal-setting and goal-related actions.

Accordingly, *career self-efficacy* consists of “beliefs about one’s ability ‘to manage specific tasks necessary for career preparation, entry, adjustment, or change’ throughout the life span” (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 561). Career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) is negatively related to career indecision and positively related to career exploration and decision-making attitudes and skills (Choi et al., 2012). Kleine et al. (2021) found that students who develop career self-efficacy and outcome expectations were more likely to engage in intentional goal setting, which can improve their career exploration. The current study sought to observe the potential relationship between a course research project and the development of career self-efficacy, leading to our first research question:

RQ1: How will the completion of a career exploration research project in an introductory communication course affect perceptions of self-efficacy to conduct career research in undergraduate students?

Self-Determination: Perceived Competence

Self-determination theory (SDT), another framework informing the psychology of agency, holds that autonomous motivation is more likely when one's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Meeting these needs promotes the intrinsic motivation that is required for self-determination, a sense of agency defined by autonomous decisions and actions (Reeve, 2002; Reeve et al., 2003).

Perceived competence involves the extent to which one recognizes ability and desire to meet challenges, experience mastery in a situation, and optimize their abilities (Shin & Johnson, 2021). Competence, as defined in SDT, appears to combine the two elements of self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to perform an action) and outcome expectations (belief in anticipated consequences of one's actions) required for goal-oriented action in Lent and Brown's (2013) CSM model. This important variable led to this study's second research question:

RQ2: How will the completion of a career exploration research project in an introductory communication course affect perceptions of perceived competence in career exploration in undergraduate students?

Self-Determination: Autonomy Support

Autonomy support is defined in SDT as communication intended to provide for another's needs in order to foster actions that are internally rather than externally motivated (Reeve & Jang, 2006). In an autonomy-supported environment, individuals feel empowered to make decisions that align with interests, values, and preferences. This supportive context encourages self-initiation, independent decision-making, and personal responsibility. Autonomy-support provides a proxy for contextual support within Lent and Brown's (2013) social cognitive model of Career Self-Management (CSM) framework, which states that people are more likely to set and follow through with goals when they are supported by their environment (see also Lent et al., 2016a). The importance of autonomy support for sustained career exploration led to this study's third research question:

RQ3: How will the completion of a career exploration research project in an introductory communication course affect perceptions of perceived autonomy support in career exploration in undergraduate students?

Career Adaptability

Adaptability as related to career exploration refers to "one's perceived 'capacity to cope with and capitalize on change in the future, level of comfort with new work responsibilities, and ability to recover when unforeseen events alter career plans'" (Rottinghaus et al., 2005, p. 11). Adaptability adds an important dimension to understanding agency to the foundations of self-efficacy theory and SDT. The concept of career adaptability was developed as an alternative to a focus on career maturity in earlier research in career counseling. While the key aspects of career maturity—planning, exploration, and reflection (Rottinghaus et al., 2017)—are admittedly important, the normative assumptions underlying career maturity do not consider the diverse concerns arising from the fluid and contingent nature of the career lifespan. Adaptability complements the elements of career maturity with an additional focus on coping with uncertainty. As described below, the Career Futures Inventory-Revised examines five factors important to career adaptability that contribute directly to a sense of career agency:

(1) *Career Agency*—Perceived capacity for self-reflection and forethought to intentionally initiate, control, and manage career transitions; (2) *Occupational Awareness*—Perceptions of how well an individual understands job market and employment trends; (3) *Negative Career Outlook*—Negative thoughts about career decisions and belief that one will not achieve favorable career outcomes; (4) *Support*—Perceived emotional and instrumental support from family and friends in pursuing career goals; and (5) *Work-Life Balance*—Ability to understand and manage responsibilities to others across multiple life roles. (p. 65)

Taken together, these five factors provide an important extension of prior scholarship focused on career self-efficacy and self-determination. This potential contribution led to our final research question:

RQ4: How will the completion of a career exploration research project in an introductory communication course affect perceptions of career adaptability in undergraduate students?

Study Context and Method

The present study surveyed undergraduate students in two sections of an introductory communication survey course regarding their self-perceptions of career agency. Data were collected both before and after student completion of a semester-long career research project to observe whether and how the project led to student gains in career research self-efficacy, perceived competence for career exploration, and career adaptability.

The Introduction to Communication Survey Course

The context for this study is an introductory communication survey course at a large public, Midwestern university. This course serves several undergraduate student constituencies, ranging from first-year to senior students: current communication majors, students considering a communication major, and non-communication majors taking the course to fulfill a general education requirement in humanities, social sciences, or behavioral sciences. The course is offered both in-person, as a large lecture format typically enrolling 140 to 150 students, and online, as an asynchronous course typically enrolling 25 to 30 students. This study examined one lecture section and one online section during the Fall 2022 semester taught by the same instructor with the same course content.

The Career Awareness Research Project

The Career Awareness Research Project is a semester-long, multistage assessment provided as a component of an otherwise traditional introductory communication survey course. Students are instructed to select a career path to research that they are interested in pursuing and that requires the application of communication concepts and skills as a significant component of the work done in that career. The careers that students select are typically professions that are widely recognized as communication-focused or communication-adjacent (e.g., public relations, social media management, marketing, political consulting, etc.). However, students (particularly non-majors) are instructed that they can select any career as long as they can make a case that communication is central to professional work. For example, students have selected careers as varied as attorney, clinical therapist, project manager, and real estate agent.

The project directs students to conduct research on their chosen career path in four areas important to their understanding of the career and how one might pursue it:

1. The nature of the chosen career—primary responsibilities and tasks, day-to-day activities—as well as connections to communication concepts and skills that are vital to successful work in that career;
2. the 10-year outlook for the career in terms of salary ranges and potential growth of employment opportunities;
3. specific qualifications, credentials, and/or required knowledge, skill sets, and dispositions necessary for success in the career;
4. specific academic choices (e.g., courses, major/minor/certificate programs), cocurricular (e.g., internships, work experiences), and extracurricular opportunities (e.g., student organizations, community involvement opportunities) for college students to prepare for this career.

Completing the project experience involves a sequence of four incremental assignments (See Appendix A):

1. A preliminary project plan establishing the career they have chosen to research and why they have chosen it, as well as project-related goals and a timeline for completing the project.
2. A selection of American Psychological Association (APA) reference citations and content annotations for potential research sources.
3. The research project itself. Students choose from one of three options, each of which involves the development of career-transferable skills: (a) an individually produced infographic; (b) an individually produced informational interview report, presented as a written blog page, an audio podcast, or a video vlog; (c) a team produced video.
4. A post-project self-assessment to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and goals for future extended projects.

The primary objective of the project is to provide students with an opportunity to engage in career research in an area of potential interest. In doing so, students discern the direct relevance of communication concepts, processes and theories learned in class to the world of work, develop a deeper understanding of what careers entail, discover how they can start preparing for careers during college, and contribute to a broader sharing of their findings with the entire class. Completion of the project and exposure to the projects completed by fellow students results in the opportunity to reflect on information about a wide, diverse variety of communication-related careers available to communication majors and non-majors.

Participants

A total of 152 participants completed the survey at Time 1, however, 7 cases were removed for missing >90% of the data. Of this sample ($n = 145$), a total of 83 completed the survey at T2, yielding a retention rate of 56.6%. Additional independent samples analyses were conducted to compare participants who completed T1 and T2 and those who only completed T1, which did not yield statistically significant differences between groups for any measure. The final sample ($n = 83$; 69.9% women, 28.9% men, 1.2% did not specify) included undergraduate students in two sections (one in-person, one online) of an introductory communication survey course at a public, Midwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 18–24 (98.8%) to 25 and older (1.2%). The sample included 13 (15.7%) identifying as Black,

Indigenous, or Person of Color (BIPOC), 68 (81.9%) as not BIPOC, and 2 (2.4%) who did not specify. Participants in this course included year classifications of 12 (14.5%) first-years, 17 (20.5%) sophomores, 40 (48.2%) juniors, and 14 (16.9%) seniors, with 74 (89.2%) in person, and 9 (10.8%) online. Of this sample, 19 (22.9%) students marked “Yes” to being first-generation students, 63 students (75.9%) as not being first-generation students, and 1 student (1.2%) did not specify.

Procedure

This single-arm pretest-posttest quasi-experimental study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018) was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were recruited through in-person and online sections taught by the first author. Informed consent was provided in a Qualtrics survey before completing the demographic questionnaire and was reviewed in class before completion of the survey. A paired samples *t*-test was used to compare measurements taken twice during the semester, once during week 2 (T1; before completing the project) and once during week 15 (T2; after completing the project). Survey results were assigned unique identifiers (e.g., deidentified numbers) which were used to compare T1 and T2 data points while assessing change at the participant level. The survey completion time depended on the participants but ranged from 10–15 minutes.

Measures

Demographic and Intake Questionnaire

The Qualtrics survey asked participants to provide information on the following demographic characteristics: age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, year in college, whether the participant is a first-generation college student, and whether the participant is Pell Grant-eligible. The survey also asked participants whether they have declared a major, majors they have declared or are considering, and potential careers they are considering. Finally, the survey asked participants whether they were enrolled in an in-person or online course section and which project option they had selected to complete for the course.

Self-Efficacy to Conduct Career Research

To answer RQ1, the Qualtrics survey included a 6-item Self-Efficacy to Conduct Career Research scale (hereafter SECCR) developed for this study based on Bandura’s (2006a) framework for self-rating of self-efficacy regarding specific career research objectives. The items were developed using standard procedures for developing self-efficacy measures using Bandura’s framework. Respondents reported their perceived self-efficacy to conduct career research on a 100-point scale ranging from 0 = “cannot do at all” to 100 = “highly certain can do.” Example items include: “Making connections between academic concepts and career work,” and “Describing ways to prepare for a career while in college.” Alpha coefficients for the current study are presented in Table 1.

Perceived Competence for Career Exploration

To answer RQ2 the Qualtrics survey included a 4-item Perceived Competence scale modified for career exploration from a similar perceived competence scale for managing diabetes (Williams et al., 1998). Respondents indicated their perceived competence to conduct career exploration on a 7-point Likert-type

scale ranging from 1 = “not true at all” to 7 = “very true.” Example items include: “I feel confident in my ability to explore a career with research,” and “I feel able to meet the challenge of exploring a potential career.” Williams et al. found internal consistency coefficients to be between .84 and .87 in their study. Internal consistency estimates for the present study are shown in Table 1.

Learning Climate Questionnaire—Short Form

To answer RQ3, the Qualtrics survey included the 6-item Learning Climate Questionnaire-Short Form (LCQ; Williams & Deci, 1996). Respondents indicated their perceptions of instructor autonomy support by indicating their agreement with statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranges from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.” Example items include: “I feel that my instructor provides me with choices and options,” and “My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.” Williams and Deci found an alpha coefficient of .96. Internal consistency coefficients for the current study are presented in Table 1.

Career Futures Inventory—Revised

To answer RQ4, the Qualtrics survey included the 28-item Career Futures Inventory-Revised (CFI-R; Rottinghaus et al., 2017). There are five subscales included in the measure assessing different components of career adaptability: Career Agency (CA), Negative Career Outlook (NCO), Occupational Awareness (OA), Support (S), and Work-Life Balance (WLB). Items are answered on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” Example items include statements such as: “I can perform a successful job search,” “I doubt my career will turn out well in the future,” “I am good at understanding job market trends,” “Others in my life are supportive of my career,” and “I am good at balancing multiple life roles such as worker, family member, or friend.” Rottinghaus et al. (2012) found alpha coefficients for the above scales as .88, .77, .80, .77, .75, respectively. Internal consistency estimates for the present study are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Estimates, and Cohen’s <i>d</i> (1988) Effect Sizes for Paired Samples <i>t</i>-Tests for Pre- and Post-Treatment for the LCQ, SECCR, PCCE, and CFI-R Scores								
Measure	Time 1			Time 2			<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α		
Learning Climate Questionnaire	6.04	0.82	0.86	6.38	0.64	0.87	5.19*	0.46
Self-Efficacy to Conduct Career Research	63.38	18.08	0.86	83.05	16.76	0.88	5.85*	0.73
Perceived Competence for Career Exploration	5.24	1.24	0.92	6.30	0.86	0.82	8.43*	1.00
CFI-R Subscales:								
Career Agency	4.01	0.52	0.85	4.29	0.51	0.89	5.20*	0.56
Negative Career Outlook	2.35	0.86	0.76	2.54	1.17	0.86	1.62	0.19
Occupational Awareness	2.37	0.84	0.82	2.68	0.70	0.74	4.32*	0.40
Support	4.19	0.80	0.80	4.42	0.66	0.82	3.76*	0.35
Work-Life Balance	3.81	0.79	0.79	4.11	0.73	0.84	4.19*	0.43

Note. * $p < .001$. $n = 83$.

Results

All data were entered into SPSS. Paired samples *t*-tests were used to examine mean differences between Time 1 and Time 2. Answering RQ1, the findings revealed a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy to conduct career research after completing the introductory communications course ($M = 83.05$, $SD = 16.76$), compared to before completing the course ($M = 63.38$, $SD = 18.08$), as evidenced by a paired samples *t*-test $t[82] = 5.85$, $p < .001$. Assumptions were met with participants being randomly sampled and data paired by a numerical identifier. Furthermore, self-efficacy to conduct career research met Cohen's (1988) convention for a medium effect size ($d = .73$), emphasizing the meaningful difference between pre- and post-test means and highlighting the substantial impact completing the career exploration project had on self-efficacy to conduct career research.

Answering RQ2, the findings revealed a statistically significant increase in perceived competence for career exploration after completing the career exploration research project ($M = 6.30$, $SD = .86$), compared to before completion of the project ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.24$), as evidenced by a paired samples *t*-test, $t[82] = 8.43$, $p = < .001$. Additionally, perceived competence for career research met Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect size ($d = 1.00$), emphasizing a meaningful difference on pre- and post-test means and highlighting the substantial impact completing the career exploration impact had on participant's perception of competence to conduct career exploration.

Answering RQ3, the findings revealed a statistically significant increase in perceived autonomy support in career research after completing the career exploration research project ($M = 6.38$, $SD = .64$), compared to before completion of the project ($M = 6.04$, $SD = .82$), as evidenced by a paired samples *t*-test, $t[82] = 5.19$, $p = < .001$. Perceived autonomy support in career research met Cohen's convention for a small effect size ($d = .46$), highlighting the impact completing the career research project had on participant's perception of autonomy support when exploring careers.

Answering RQ4, the findings revealed a statistically significant increase in career agency after completing the career exploration research project ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .51$), compared to before completion of the project ($M = 4.01$, $SD = .52$), as evidenced by a paired samples *t*-test, $t[82] = 5.20$, $p = < .001$. Career agency met Cohen's (1988) convention for a medium effect size ($d = .56$), highlighting the impact of completing the career research project had on participant's capacity to actively shape and navigate their career development. Furthermore, results from the CFI-R showed statistically significant increases for Occupational Awareness (OA), Support, and Work-Life Balance (WLB), whereas Negative Career Outlook (NCO) showed nonsignificant differences (see Table 1). Cohen's *d* indicates small effects for OA, S, and WLB.

Discussion

The present study identifies an important problem in the dominant pedagogy of the introductory communication course that has been heretofore unexamined in the research literature, provides a course-level intervention intended to address that problem, and studies the implementation of that intervention to conclude as to its potential for addressing that important problem successfully. The Communication Career Awareness Research Project was designed for use by instructors as a means for helping students make connections between concepts in human communication and relevant career options and develop skills and confidence in career exploration, using pedagogical strategies for improved academic success.

Students who completed the Communication Career Awareness Research Project in this introductory communication survey course reported significant gains in career research self-efficacy as measured by the SECCR (large effect size), perceived competence for career exploration as measured by the PCCE (medium effect size), perceived autonomy as measured by the LCQ (small effect size), and four factors of career adaptability as measured by the CFI-R: Career Agency (medium effect size), Occupational Awareness (small effect size), Support (small effect size), and Work-Life Balance (small effect size). These results suggest that this intervention may provide an important opportunity for instructors in the introductory course to begin facilitating undergraduate development of career exploration early in the core curriculum of the communication major.

Fostering Student Agency Through Transparency and Choice

These gains may have resulted from a range of possible student experiences during the semester-long course assessments not directly connected to the career research project itself, including content lessons and out-of-class study activities. However, given the intentional design of the series of project assignments, the effect sizes suggest a strong positive association between the project as a learning experience and the reported student gains. The incremental project assignments (and related in-class guest speaker visits) were constructed to enact best practices for student success aimed especially at developing career research self-efficacy, perceived competence for career exploration, perceived autonomy support, and career adaptability within a learning climate that supported student agency. These goals were accomplished through at least two means in the project assignment design.

The first means for fostering student agency during the project was providing a transparent assignment design using a modified version of the Transparent Assignment Template (Winkelmes, 2013). A wide body of research supports the positive relationship between providing transparent rationales for assignments based on learning objectives and significant gains in student learning and performance related to agency. This research is informed by SDT (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) as well as Self-Directed Learning Theory (SDL; Kim et al., 2014). The results of this study, which demonstrate significant student gains in career self-efficacy, perceived competence in career exploration, and career adaptability (particularly career agency) appear to be consistent with the gains in academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of career-relevant skills found by Winkelmes et al. (2016). Such gains contribute to the student's overall development as a self-determined agent of their career-related learning.

The second means for fostering agency in assignment design was providing students with the opportunity to choose assignment options. This form of flexible assessment for a set of common learning objectives is widely recognized as an inclusive teaching practice within the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework that boosts student engagement by giving them more control over how they communicate what they have learned (CAST, 2024; Hanafin et al., 2007; MacNaul et al., 2021; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Weimer, 2013). Students completing the Communication Career Awareness Research Project have a variety of approaches to choose from to report their discoveries (i.e., infographic, written blog essay, audio podcast, video vlog, or multimedia video production; see Appendix A). Each provides a distinct emphasis on a different set of career-relevant skills and dispositions that connect to specific Career Readiness Competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2024). At the same time, the variety of options provides students with an inclusive means to communicate their research findings and demonstrate mastery of the relevant course-level learning objective.

Career Exploration in the Introductory Communication Course: Key Takeaways

Introducing career exploration opportunities into the introductory communication survey course opens up exciting possibilities for instructors and their students, both in terms of promoting the relevance of the academic study of communication for students as well as promoting student success more generally. In addition to the use of transparent assignment design and the incorporation of student choice described above, we share the following observations as key takeaways for incorporating career exploration into communication pedagogy.

Promoting Relevance Through Integrative Connections

The hallmark of this research project is the opportunity to guide students intentionally in making connections between what they are studying in the classroom and the world of work. As students engage in career research throughout the semester, instructors can use career relevance as a regular touchstone for promoting the importance of learning communication concepts, theories, and models. Instructors can present students with frequent opportunities to integrate their learning by making these connections. The fact that students are conducting career research throughout the semester, as well as the requirement that they make such connections in their final project, increases the salience of these relevant connections.

Promoting Student Success Through Authentic Assessment

The scaffolded preliminary project assignments, the main project, and the post-project self-assessment are designed to guide students through a multistage process that is not only relevant to completing major projects but also to the core skills of student success. Preliminary project planning involves students in establishing goals aimed at success, anticipating possible challenges and identifying response strategies, and planning ahead based on achieving incremental benchmarks on a timetable. The research annotations assignment provides guided practice on collecting, organizing, and making sense of research sources. The various project options each require students to use skill sets connected to the Career Readiness Competencies developed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2024), ranging from the creative use of technology for communicating information, to the exercise of professionalism through networking communication, to the use of leadership and teamwork strategies for collaboration. And the final self-assessment activity closes the loop on the project by engaging students in metacognition through critical self-evaluation, personal reflection, and goal setting for the future. Framing the project in terms of the skills students require to succeed in academics and the competencies they require to succeed in the world of work makes these assessments feel relevant and worthy of effort for self-development.

Promoting Student Persistence Through Career Exploration

Students who lack a sense of “professional identity” early in their undergraduate career experience feelings of uncertainty regarding their futures and a lack of active engagement with the campus resources and programs available to them that assist with discovering this identity. They also experience a “struggle to see the value of their coursework, forgo involvement opportunities, and feel a sense of disconnect from others in their major, all factors that negatively impact academic performance and persistence” (Platt, 2020, p. 126). By contrast, when an undergraduate student discovers that their chosen academic major connects directly to meaningful career choices, then their satisfaction with their major is bolstered. For example, Nauta (2007) has found a positive relationship between satisfaction with the college major and

career decision self-efficacy, which in turn bolsters intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with courses. Komarraju et al. (2013) found that this positive relationship even improves student persistence and retention, particularly for underprepared first-year college students.

Given the connection between career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and academic satisfaction and persistence (Flores et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2019) the incorporation of learning opportunities to promote effective career exploration into communication courses both warrants our engagement as educators and demands further study. The instructional communication literature, particularly the work of Frymier (2002), has already identified the importance of course content relevance to personal and career goals as a factor positively related to student motivation (Frymier & Houser, 1998; Frymier & Shulman, 1995). However, this work focuses nearly exclusively on student perceptions of instructor behaviors.

Only two items on the relevance scale used by Frymier and Shulman (1995) involve student application of course content to personal interests, and only one asks students about assignments that connect course content to career goals. Frymier and Houser (1998) manipulated relevance in their experiment by framing examples used in an instructor presentation either as familiar and localized or as less familiar and abstract. Knoster and Goodboy (2021) conducted an experiment intended to refine the manipulation of relevance; again, the focus was exclusively on how instructors presented content during a lesson. Knoster and Myers (2020) surveyed students on instructors' use of four categories of relevance-enhancing strategies developed initially by Muddiman and Frymier (2009). Students reported that instructors use relevance-enhancing strategies categorized in terms of *teaching style relevance* and *inside-course relevance* (i.e., content is relevant to other things students are doing in the course itself) more frequently than they do strategies focused on *outside-course relevance* and *methods and activities relevance* (i.e., the use of course assignments and active learning opportunities) and, subsequently, students found that the former strategies were more effective at establishing relevance than the latter strategies.

We can draw two conclusions from this body of work that inform the practical implications of the present study. First, communication education research has examined student perceptions of relevance solely based on how instructors present content to students. Research has not yet focused on the potential for involving students in high-impact learning practices such as research projects on enhancing student perceptions of course content and disciplinary relevance. Second, the research so far has focused on relevance-enhancing instruction primarily on the use of illustrative examples during instruction and the extent to which those examples are connected to student familiarity. No discussion in this literature directly considers connection-making between course content and future careers as a potential contributor to student perceptions of relevance and to student motivation.

The communication discipline, moreover, has a dramatic dearth of research on the role of the introductory course in developing career self-efficacy in undergraduate students. The strong relationship between student perceptions of career relevance and satisfaction with the college major deserves more attention in communication education scholarship, not just for the benefit of our students but for our departments and the discipline more broadly.

The present study demonstrates the potential value of incorporating career exploration explicitly into the communication curriculum. The Communication Career Awareness Research Project helps students develop relevant career exploration skills while making direct and meaningful connections between

disciplinary content and post-graduation career opportunities. In this way students can benefit from a more meaningful and satisfying educational experience while communication departments expand the extent to which they meet the contemporary demands on higher education and demonstrate their importance to the institution. The results of this study are especially encouraging given the positive relationship between student perceptions of career relevance, satisfaction with the academic major, academic success, and student persistence. Communication departments seeking to demonstrate the continued importance of the discipline in general education programs (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020; Morreale, 2020) may find similar incorporation of career exploration into the undergraduate curriculum beneficial for their programs as well as, first and foremost, for their students.

Student outcomes such as overall academic success, major satisfaction, persistence, and retention are often the subject of inquiry in assessment efforts mandated by the university based on requirements from the federal Higher Education Act, state-level higher education legislation, and the requirements of accreditation bodies. It should be noted, however, that effective autonomy support for students and their learning requires that instructors implement interventions of the sort we suggest in a manner consistent with their teaching philosophy and course learning objectives, as well as program-level learning objectives determined on the department level by faculty. The student project examined in this study was not designed to provide a form of student outcomes assessment required by administrative mandate, and the authors discourage implementation of this project in such a manner. Such implementation could threaten instructors' academic freedom when it comes to pedagogical choices and might negatively impact the intervention's success for students.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings in this study highlight the importance of ongoing enhancement and exploration of career development interventions to empower students and increase their readiness to explore careers and secure employment. However, it is important to consider the limitations that may impact the generalizability of the findings. These include the use of self-reported data, which could introduce biases, and the quasi-experimental design without randomization and control groups, making it challenging to establish causal relationships. Readers should exercise caution in interpreting the results, considering the potential impact of various extraneous variables on the study's outcomes.

At the same time, examining additional variables (with a broader variety of data) beyond the scope of the present study provides fruitful future directions for this research. First, while Self-Determination Theory holds that autonomy support is a necessary contributor to the process of career goal setting and goal-related action along with perceived competence (Niemic & Ryan, 2009)—and the design of the project is intended to provide students with autonomy support—future study might provide a more complete and nuanced method for measuring this outcome. Subsequent testing should include additional scale options to measure autonomy support. One possibility is Reeve's (2002) Perceived Self-Determination (PSD) scale. This instrument focuses on the participants' perceptions of autonomy while completing a task, which would direct attention to students' perceptions while completing assignment tasks connected to the Communication Career Awareness Research Project. Another option is Moreno-Murcia et al.'s (2019) Autonomy Support Scale. This scale focuses on student perception of instructor behaviors rather than student activity. Data from this scale could be helpful in teasing out the relative importance of the project assignment design and the pedagogical style of the instructor.

Second, while the current results show great promise, future research should examine how different groups of students might respond differently to the intervention. For instance, subsequent study of this intervention should examine whether students who opt for individual or team projects experience different results regarding career self-efficacy, perceived competence, autonomy support, and career adaptability. The data collected in this first study were insufficient to draw conclusions between these groups of students; continued data collection over multiple semesters will make answering this question easier. As the introductory course is often taught in both in-person and online sections (as is the case in the present study), collecting additional data to explore whether in-person and online students experience the career project differently could yield important insights regarding whether the project needs to be presented and supported differently for different learning modalities. In addition, given the diversity of students taking the introductory course, determining whether student experience differs based on academic year (i.e., first-year versus more experienced students) or academic major (i.e., communication majors versus non-majors versus undecided students) might be valuable to tailor the project individually to different student constituencies.

Of course, specifying the results of the career project experience for first-generation, low-income, persons with disabilities, and otherwise underrepresented students could help us identify both benefits and challenges that this intervention provides to make the experience optimally inclusive. This is particularly important given what we already know about the impact that the specific student success strategies incorporated into this project (particularly transparent assignment design and student choice) have been shown to make for such students (Hanafin et al., 2007; Winkelmes et al., 2016), not to mention the broader importance of the career self-efficacy/academic major satisfaction relationship for improved student persistence and retention of underprepared students (Komarraju et al., 2013; Peterson & del Mas, 2001). Future research endeavors may explore additional differential effects of this intervention by examining other grouping variables such as gender, racial/ethnic background, or ability status.

Examining student perceptions of career self-efficacy, self-determination, and adaptability could be expanded in future study by examining qualitative data from students. The project already concludes with a reflective journal entry in which students describe their reactions to the project and their subsequent goals for their career exploration which could be the focus of thematic analysis to uncover possible explanations for the quantitative survey results. In addition, the Career Futures Inventory–Revised incorporates a workbook for career consultation clients, particularly in a university setting (Alexander et al., 2018). The workbook prompts clients to reflect in writing on such dimensions as career agency and adaptability, beliefs regarding career outlook, and sources of support for career exploration.

Finally, modifications to the current project introduction could make possible an examination of students' self-perceptions of and reflection on their individual strengths, interests, and values. Diagnostic tools such as Clifton Strengths, Focus 2 Career, the Strong Interest Inventory, and Knowdell Career Values are used frequently by campus career centers as a means for helping students match their personal characteristics with potential careers to research and explore. Incorporating some version of these tools into the semester experience might have a meaningful impact not only on the career paths students choose to research but also their perceptions of self-efficacy, self-determination, and career adaptability observed in future research.

Conclusion

The Career Awareness Research Project is a semester-long opportunity for incremental, scaffolded career exploration, designed using best principles for inclusive student success, created for students in an introductory communication course. This study found that the project yielded significant gains in students' perceptions of career self-efficacy, perceived competence for career exploration, and career adaptability. In addition to providing evidence of an effective pedagogical intervention for undergraduate students seeking future careers, this study illustrates the importance of pushing the boundaries constraining scholarship in the introductory communication course. As observers such as Morreale (2020) have noted, the continued relevance of such courses may depend on their ability to demonstrate that they can go beyond their traditional focus on public speaking and interpersonal communication skills, to meet the varying needs and demands of higher education to address the uncertainties and anxieties of our students regarding their working lives after college.

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Appendix A

The Career Awareness Research Project

The Career Awareness Research Project is a semester-long, multistage assessment. The primary objective of the project is to provide students with an opportunity to engage in career research in an area of potential interest. In doing so, students discern the direct relevance of communication concepts, processes, and theories learned in class to the world of work; develop a deeper understanding of what careers entail; discover how they can start preparing for careers during college; and contribute to a broader sharing of their findings with the entire class. The ability to research and report on professional career opportunities involving four focus areas of communication is presented as a course-level learning objective from the start of the course. Students are also presented with the following assessment-specific learning outcomes at the start of the course in the project's assignment description:

By the end of the project, you will be able to:

1. Conduct research about a particular career path you might pursue that is directly connected to or enhanced in an important way by the study of Communication concepts, theories, research, and skills.
2. Communicate effectively what you learned in your research with other Communication students using a medium of your choice.
3. Develop some experience in a career-related skill set that takes you somewhat out of your current comfort zone.

To achieve these outcomes, students can choose either an individual or a team project, as well as the format for the final project they submit during the last week of the 15-week semester:

- ▶ (For individuals) a visual infographic produced using a graphic design app;
- ▶ (For individuals) an informational interview report presented as a written blog essay, audio podcast, or video vlog; or
- ▶ (For teams) a multimedia YouTube video.

Each option involves at least one unique career-relevant skill (e.g., visual communication of data; networking and professional interpersonal interaction; group collaboration), enabling students to select an option that either complements their current skill set and/or helps them develop a desirable new skill.

Regardless of the students' selection of options, the project provides students with a series of incremental assignments that scaffold their successful completion of the project based on evidence-based strategies for student success:

1. During Weeks 3–4: Students hear guest presentations from the university's career center and the college's internships coordinator that provide career exploration-relevant information, including career research strategies such as using the university's career databases, conducting informational interviews, and attending career fairs on campus. These experiences lay the groundwork for autonomous student agency by providing and building awareness of easily accessible support resources at their disposal.
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2. Due in Week 5: Students complete a preliminary planning assignment in which students choose a career to research, set personal (or team) goals for project success, consider possible obstacles to success and strategies for surmounting those obstacles, and develop a timeline for completing incremental steps leading toward a successful research project at semester's end. Students in project teams engage in this planning through the development of a collaboration contract in which team members agree on mutual norms for communicating and working together over the course of the project. These assignments are designed based on best practices for promoting *self-directed learning* practices that empower and motivate students while they take responsibility for their learning (Kim et al., 2014).
3. Due in Week 10: Students complete a research annotations assignment intended to help them begin the process of locating, summarizing, assessing, and citing relevant information sources for their project. While students completing individual projects complete a small number of annotations to start the research process, project teams will work together on a complete annotated bibliography. These assignments are designed not only to encourage the start of the career research process but also to provide guided instruction both on the use of APA citation style and on summarizing and assessing the utility of sources through active reading. Each of these skills is vital to develop for continued student success during college (Writers' Center, 2021).
4. Due at the start of Week 15: The research project itself, which provides factual information on
 - ▶ the nature of the chosen career and its connections to communication concepts and skills;
 - ▶ the 10-year outlook for the career in terms of possible salaries and growth of employment opportunities;
 - ▶ qualifications, credentials, and/or required knowledge and skill sets necessary for the career; and
 - ▶ specific academic, cocurricular, and extracurricular opportunities for college students to prepare for this career.

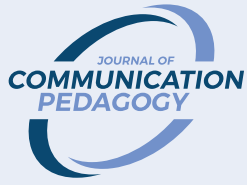
Researching and reporting information in these areas provides students an opportunity to develop occupational awareness and an understanding of how they can begin pursuing a professional career through currently available educational opportunities.

5. Due at the end of Week 15: a post-project reflective self-assessment of performance (for students completing individual projects) or a peer evaluation of self and peer performance regarding effective collaboration (for students completing team projects). These assignments are designed to promote metacognition in a manner that "encourages students to have ownership, voice, and direction of their own learning" (Kayler & Weller, 2007, p. 146).
6. Due at the end of Week 15: a brief reflective journal entry describing what they learned from projects produced by fellow students and suggesting next steps for their personal career exploration. This final reflection closes the loop on self-directed learning (Kim et al., 2014) that began in their preliminary project planning and begins the next stage of their vocational journey.

In addition, throughout the course students also completed journal entries at the end of each course unit that included consideration of how a key communication concept, theory, or skill from that unit might be relevant to their future career. This recurrent reflective activity introduces students to *integrative learning*, an essential learning outcome involving the student's developing disposition to draw learned

ideas together, “from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023).

Complete assignment descriptions and assessment rubrics are available to all through a **Creative Commons Attribution—Non-Commercial—Share Alike License** (CC BY-NC-SA). Interested parties may contact the lead author of this article to request online access to these resources.



Intergenerational Connections: US College Students' Attitudes and Expectations Toward Older Adults and Aging in an Online Critical Community Engagement Project

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Keywords: CIFCP, community engagement projects, dialogue, older adults, social identity theory

Abstract: We present a critically focused, semester-long community engagement project entitled *Intergenerational Connections* as a form of critical interpersonal and family communication pedagogy (CIFCP). The project utilized Zoom to connect small groups of undergraduate students in the US enrolled in a course on relational communication with older adults in a long-term care facility to dialogue about close relationships. We were interested in how dialogue across generations maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about communicating with older adults and analyzed student reflections before, during, and after the dialogues using a turning point analysis. The study was framed using Social Identity Theory (SIT) to show how young adults may label older adults as an outgroup contributing to negative stereotypes. We discuss two turning points related to *Perceptions of Aging and Developmental Changes* and *Understanding and Expectations of Relationships* and identify practical implications of the project for universities and communities.

Introduction

Many people hold misconceptions about older adults and aging that lead to stereotypes (Burnes et al., 2019). Young adults and older adults represent distinct identity groups who may view one another as different and part of an outgroup leading to interactions based on stereotypes (Lytle & Levy, 2017). To address stereotypes about older adults when held by young adults in US colleges, courses at the university

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can engage myths about aging and introduce students to older adults' life experiences (cf. Faulkner, 2022). Including community engagement projects in courses can facilitate interactions between old and young adults to address stereotypes (cf. Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019). In addition, technology is a tool that can be used to dispel myths about older adults and technology use and to connect young and old virtually, which was important during the period of COVID lockdowns when many older adults, particularly those in long-term care facilities, experienced isolation and loneliness (Seifert et al., 2021). In this article, we present a critically focused, semester-long project entitled *Intergenerational Connections* as a form of critical interpersonal and family communication pedagogy (CIFCP). The project utilized Zoom to connect small groups of US undergraduate students enrolled in a course on relational communication with older adults in a long-term care facility to dialogue about close relationships. Our goals for the project were (a) to facilitate intergenerational dialogue between young adult students and older adults, (b) to ease social isolation, and (c) to have students critically assess their stereotypes and attitudes about older adults through class readings, discussions, and interactions with an older adult. We were interested in how intergenerational dialogue maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about communicating with older adults and analyzed students' written reflections before, during, and after the dialogues.

Intergenerational Contact and Dialogue

This project connected older adults with college students for interaction that would benefit both generations through a critical community engagement service-learning project. Our project represented a collaboration between the university and community partners at a long-term care facility. The Director of Activities at the facility was a graduate from the university and expressed a need for residents to have social interaction, and the course instructor was looking for a way to engage students in an online course, so we co-created and implemented a mutually beneficial dialogue series. We chose to use online interaction via Zoom with older adults in this long-term care facility given the COVID lockdowns prevented in-person interaction. Many older adults who reside in long-term care facilities experience loneliness (Boamah et al., 2021), and they often report feelings of isolation due to limitations with their social connections and lack of access to technology for engaging with those outside their place of residence (Seifert et al., 2021). In addition, using technology to connect with older adults can also dispel myths that young adults might hold about the use of technology by older adults (Chase, 2011).

Research supports the approach that intergenerational contact is an effective way to dispel myths and stereotypes that young people hold about older adults and aging including older adults as boring, slow, conservative, uptight, and different (see, e.g., Burnes et al., 2019). Lytle and Levy (2017) conducted two online experiments that examined how education about aging and engagement with older adults impacted attitudes about older adults with 354 US undergraduates (study 1) and 505 participants from a national US sample aged 18–59 (study 2). Both studies demonstrated that attitudes toward older adults improved with increased education about aging and exposure to positive intergenerational interaction. In their meta-analysis examining 63 interventions that had been conducted to reduce ageism, Burnes et al. (2019) determined that programs that combined an educational component and intergenerational interactions had the largest impact on ageism. For both adolescent and young adult participants, this combined approach was associated with reduced ageism toward older adults. In another meta-analytic study with 713 independent samples, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that intergroup contact reduces intergroup prejudice. The type of contact does matter as Cadieux et al.'s (2019) research with young adults showed that positive contact with older adults led to inclusion of the outgroup with the self. Thus,

closeness, relationship quality, questioning of negative stereotypes, and positive interactions influence intergroup communication.

Critical Interpersonal and Family Communication Pedagogy (CIFCP)

Interpersonal and family communication (IFC) teaching and research remains dominated by “postpositivist standards of theory, research design, analysis, validity, and writing” (Moore, 2017, pp. 1–2). Given that contemporary classrooms are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally more diverse, they require flexible and inclusive approaches to meet student needs. However, the IFC curriculum has historically privileged “the perspectives, experiences, and bodies of the majority” (Droser & Castaneda, 2021, p. 232). As a result, IFC textbooks and materials exclude the perspectives, experiences, and bodies of historically marginalized individuals and/or groups, including older people. The current project infused critical material and community engagement into the IFC classroom as a constitutive approach to IFC; students not only read about older adults’ relationships, but they also reflected on their previous perceptions and expectations for interacting with them making sense of, critiquing, and building “better futures for their relationships and relating” (Faulkner, 2022, p. 1). We asked students to decenter what they thought they knew about older adults as “constitutive approaches to interpersonal communication studies allow students to connect the personal identities, relational interactions, and cultural understandings that are so vital to understanding the totality of interpersonal communication” (Manning, 2022, p. xiv). Moore and Manning (2019) make an argument for the use of politics in IFC work to develop the critical side. We adapted their idea of critical identity politics to highlight older people as a group worthy of study in the IFC classroom.

Thus, we used a CIFCP framework stemming from Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP; Fassett & Warren, 2007). Critical communication pedagogy gained significant attention in the Communication discipline in the 1990s. Educators who use a CCP approach “begin with a premise of equity, inclusiveness, and reflexivity—arranging paradigms for disciplinary spaces to foster advancements of theory and pedagogy in concert with each other” (Zoffel, 2016, p. 162). CCP urges educators to examine and adapt practices that privilege some identities and perspectives, and at the same time, marginalize others. CCP also asks educators to consider why and how broader cultural discourses such as gender, race, sex, sexuality, and age continue to support and normalize traditional pedagogical practices to create a more inclusive academic space (Zoffel, 2016). Given that classrooms—whether face-to-face or online—are relational spaces, CIFCP draws on the broader tenets of CCP and uses them to focus on three considerations: transforming the status quo of teaching, challenging the idea that public and private domains are mutually exclusive, and engaging in reflective practices to make education more inclusive (Moore, 2017).

We designed *Intergenerational Connections* using CIFCP to increase students’ critical consciousness about older adults and aging. In accordance with Kahl’s (2010) argument about the importance of classroom-community connection, this project applied critical communication pedagogy so that students could see how communication scholarship matters through community engaged service learning beyond the classroom environment. Using CIFCP as a basis for this project means that dialogue can be used “more directly to solve the problem of responding to power . . . it will be able to accomplish the important goal of helping to make students more critically engaged citizens who recognize hegemony and work to respond to its presence in society” (Kahl, 2017, p. 120).

As a guiding pedagogical framework, CIFCP provides a way for IFC instructors to address the limitations mentioned above and transform their classrooms in diverse and inclusive ways. By combining IFC teaching with a critical perspective, instructors can transform the curriculum in a way that explores the diversity of relationships, challenges existing systems of privilege, and reconstructs what students learn and how they learn it (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). Instructors do this by teaching to transform, creating reflexive classrooms, and abolishing the public–private binary (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). These ideas guided the *Intergenerational Connections* project and in the section that follows, we discuss how we critically oriented Social Identity Theory and how community engagement projects are a form of CIFCP.

Social Identity and Intergroup Contact

Scholars who want to engage in critical work can do so in a multitude of ways. Moore (2017) notes that one of those ways encourages scholars to merge the tenets of critical theory with existing theories. Therefore, we joined critical theory with Social Identity Theory (SIT) in this project. SIT focuses on how individuals identify with distinct social groups and seek to maintain positive self-concepts through a process of categorizing ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Hogg & Reid (2006), “people derive a part of their self-concept from the social groups and categories they belong to” (p. 9). CIFCP’s focus on dismantling the binary between public and private provides a unique lens to examine how one’s self-concept and sense of belonging are shaped by discourses that circulate in their lives. SIT assumes that (a) individuals seek a positive self-concept (b) based on their social identities, which are established by feelings of belonging to distinct social groups, (c) individuals want to belong to groups that bolster their self-concept and will change their perceptions of a group they can’t leave or join alternative groups, and (d) group members want to remain distinct and may exaggerate outgroup difference and ingroup similarities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Given the importance of reflexivity in CIFCP, we use SIT as a sensitizing framework in the current study and focus on how young adults may label older adults as an outgroup contributing to negative stereotypes and communication. In interaction, when individuals downplay the importance of intergroup differences, prejudice can be mitigated (Bigler & Liben, 2006). According to SIT, when an individual meets another individual, they use the other’s characteristics to determine if that individual is an ingroup or outgroup member (Giles et al., 1991). Relationship quality and closeness influence this process. For example, Pecchioni and Croghan (2002) found in their study of college students and grandparents that “knowledge of the other increases the likelihood that interactions will be more interindividual than intergroup, at least for an older individual who is not only well-known to the young adult, but also considered to be close” (p. 725). Thus, a critical approach to SIT allowed the researchers to examine the nuances of students’ perception of older adults as it related to their own respective identities. The *Intergenerational Connections* project was framed from a critical communication perspective to allow students to engage with cultural discourses and stereotypes about older adults and potentially transform their own expectations and attitudes about intergenerational communication.

Community Engagement Projects

Community engagement is a collaborative and reciprocal process in which members of an institution work with community partners to co-create and implement mutually beneficial activities. We argue that community engagement projects are an integral part of CIFCP as knowledge is co-created between the students and the community benefitting all those involved (cf. Kahl, 2017). Participating in community

engagement projects makes students active members in the community. Connecting the intellectual, social, and emotional facets of learning, such as in the *Intergenerational Connections* project, benefits students and community members (Pasquesi, 2020). Additionally, community engagement projects are beneficial to the university because they often reflect university goals such as “developing and sustaining community-university partnerships built on co-knowledge production, dissemination and utilisation [of knowledge]; and an ethos of trust, respect, equal voice and deliberation, reciprocity, solidarity and mutual benefits” (Mtawa, 2019, p. 1). Other benefits of community engagement projects are the real-life learning students experience and the potential for transforming staid and stereotypical assumptions.

Based on our interest in intergenerational dialogue between students and older adults as well as community engagement projects as CIFCP practice, we offer the following research questions:

RQ1: Did the experience of engaging in intergenerational dialogue with older adults transform students’ attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults? If so, how?

RQ2a: What expectations did students have about engaging in dialogue with older adults?

RQ2b: How were these expectations met, challenged, and/or transformed after engaging in dialogue with an older adult?

RQ3: How did students’ reflexivity about their communication with older adults disrupt cultural discourses about aging?

Method

Undergraduate students in a Relational Communication class participated in a community-based engagement project during Spring 2021 called “*Intergenerational Connections*” in which they met with older adults in a long-term care facility via Zoom for four themed 75-minute dialogues about close relationships (see Faulkner et al., 2022). The project was a collaboration between a gerontologist (fourth author), a communication professor (first author), and the Director of Activities at a long-term care facility. The team discussed the needs of residents and students for social interaction and collaboratively designed a mutually beneficial dialogue project. In addition, the instructor wanted students to get actual experience talking with older adults to make course content relatable and to infuse criticality into the curriculum. The director asked for volunteers at the facility and the instructor built the project into the course design. The first author randomly placed students in six small groups of four to five people and assigned them an older adult conversation partner ($N = 9$) from the long-term care facility. The themed dialogues, which reflected class content, included (1) Getting to Know You, (2) The Importance of Relationships and Communication, (3) Friendships, and (4) Romantic Relationships and Relational Maintenance. Before the first dialogue, students and older adults filled out questionnaires that they shared with one another to help build rapport. Sample questions asked about hobbies, vocation/career plans, favorite animal, and skills. Before the second, third, and fourth dialogues, in their small groups, students wrote out around 10 questions related to the dialogue theme that they could talk about with their older adult partners, though students were able to ask other questions and respond to the flow of the dialogue. This planning helped students to get conversations going and to feel more confident in the dialogue sessions. Examples of preplanned questions follow: Who is in your social network? How often

do you talk to those people? How would you describe an important relationship versus a less important one? Let's talk a little about your childhood. Tell me about your friendships when you were a child. How have you kept in contact with friends during COVID? How has that affected your relationships?

During the dialogues, students took turns asking questions and took notes to use in their reflections. For privacy, the dialogue sessions were not recorded.

As part of the Relational Communication course in which this project was situated, students read research about older adults and close relationships, older adults and social support, relationship processes in social networks, friendships, and romantic relationships and dating in later life. The fourth author, a gerontologist, gave a lecture on working with older adults and elderspeak (i.e., stereotypical age-adapted speech style) before dialogues began. Students used this material in class discussions, in the individual reflections they wrote after each dialogue, and at the conclusion of the project. We were interested in students' experiences of interacting with older adults in addition to their attitudes and expectations about older adults; therefore, we examined their reflections about their perceptions of the interactions and the *Intergenerational Connections* project. We obtained IRB approval to examine students' reflections. To conduct this examination, we downloaded student reflections from the online course management system and used a case number for each set of reflections to maintain student anonymity.

Reflection Journals

Given our interest in how dialogue across generations maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about older adults, each student wrote an individual reflection journal after every Zoom dialogue they had with their older adult partner. In these reflection journals, students reflected on the dialogue and on their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. When students wrote their reflections, they did not know we would ask to include these in a research project as we wanted to minimize social desirability. Before the project began, students completed the Fraboni Scale of Ageism (FSA) as an attitude pre-assessment (Fraboni et al., 1990). They also completed the FSA after the dialogues were over and used their scores on the scale and their reflections to critically examine stereotypes, expectations, and attitudes about older adults, noting how their attitudes about communicating with older adults were confirmed or challenged during the project.

In the reflections, they provided a dialogue summary, their expectations before the dialogue and if and how they were challenged, surprising occurrences, anticipated challenges and how they dealt with them, what they learned about the dialogue topic, and if they considered the dialogue to be successful. We asked students to provide details from the conversation through direct and paraphrased quotations and to reference research and class material to help them support their observations and assertions.

After the project ended, students wrote an individual final self-assessment reflection in which they discussed their experiences with the project and reviewed their four reflections. Specifically, students wrote about what they learned about relationships and their older adult partner, rewards and challenges, how the dialogues influenced their attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults, and advice they would give to students completing a similar assignment. In addition, students answered questions about their attitude change, change in perceptions about older adults, and if and how their expectations about interacting with older adults were confirmed or challenged.

Participants

We asked the 34 students in the Relational Communication class taught by the first author if we could use their five reflections from the “*Intergenerational Connections*” project. All students consented and received extra credit. Seventy-four percent of students ($n = 25$) completed a voluntary demographics survey; participants included 12 men and 13 women aged 19–25 years old ($M = 21.44$ years), and none of our participants had children. There were 10 third-year students, 13 fourth-year students, and 1 fifth-year student. Six participants identified as Black/African American, and 19 students identified as White. Twenty-one students identified as straight/heterosexual, two students identified as bisexual, one student identified as queer, and one student identified as asexual. Most students ($n = 23$) majored in Communication; one student majored in Tourism, Hospitality, and Event Management; and one student majored in Business Administration. These two non-Communication majors minored in Communication. There was one Army veteran in the class.

Analysis

We analyzed the five reflections (Journal 1 $N = 34$; Journal 2 $N = 33$; Journal 3 $N = 31$; Journal 4 $N = 32$; final reflection $N = 31$) using inductive thematic analysis, which is “the process of identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling primary patterns in data” (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2023, p. 71). This process entails discovering, uncovering, and creating meaning from data through a process of engagement. The authors met in three sessions to discuss analysis and coding. First, we engaged in an open coding procedure in which we used our research questions based on our theoretical framework as sensitizing concepts to guide our initial read-through of a set of 10 student reflections ($n = 50$) noting themes that could be used for further analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). “The analyst brings a sensitizing concept to the data to use as a reference point and directions for sorting through data; the concept helps guide a researcher by focusing their attention on how the concept is manifested in the data as they code” (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2023, p. 79). Using SIT as a theoretical framework, we focused on expectations that young adults—as a social group—have about older adults as a different social group. We asked if and how students’ attitudes and expectations changed after engaging in intergenerational dialogues and noted the topics that students discussed in the dialogues, their expectations, surprises, and what they learned about close relationships. We found that their reflections contained turning points, or shifts, in their attitudes toward older adults; therefore, we framed the analysis from a turning point perspective because it allowed us to illuminate student attitude change about communicating with older adults.

A turning point is a type of occurrence, situation, or event that relates to changes in relationships and centers on a critical moment or moments of importance (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Graham (1997) suggests that “turning points provide insight into important relational dynamics by bringing certain characteristics of the relationship into focus” (p. 351). Further, turning points can prompt individuals to re-evaluate what a relationship means to them. Through this re-evaluation and reflection, individuals can determine their continued role and investment in a relationship (Graham, 1997). By having students practice reflexive journaling throughout the duration of the project, we had a record of students’ perceptions on aging and relationships over time. Therefore, after doing open coding, we used the concept of turning points to identify and examine the moments of change that students experienced about aging and communicating with older adults in further coding. The identification and examination of these turning points allowed us to witness the evolution of students’ critical consciousness, which is necessary for social transformation.

During the second coding meeting, we used our initial coding and observations about turning points to develop a code book with theme definitions and examples. The codes included *turning point themes* (aging, relationships, expectations, developmental change) that involved *dialogue change* (a move from Q and A to more conversational), *experience with older adults* (past and present), *attitude change* (about older adults, ageism), *expectations* (aging, communication patterns, stereotypes and how they were challenged), and *developmental changes* (conceptualizations of relationships and aging). Using the turning points we identified, we developed the following three questions to guide our subsequent analysis: (1) *How have the dialogues helped students see themselves and their relationships in a different way?* (2) *What are turning point themes related to aging, relationships, expectations, and developmental change?* and (3) *What changes are present in student attitudes about communicating with older adults?*

Next, we coded the same set of 10 reflections from the first meeting using the code book and our three guiding turning point questions. In the third meeting, we discussed our coding process, compared our coding, and worked out any disagreements in discussion. We then divided the remaining reflections and conducted a turning point analysis to identify moments of transition (i.e., moments of surprise, challenged expectations) along with a spectrum of turning points ranging from broad cultural discourses and stereotypes related to aging and ageism to specific personal experiences.

Findings

During the dialogues, students had the opportunity to share their experiences with someone from a different age group and hear older adults' perspectives on friendships, maintaining relationships, death, children, dating, marriage, love, and the importance of close relationships over the years. Students talked with their dialogue partners about topics such as meeting friends and maintaining those relationships, how you know if you are ready for an intimate relationship, and the importance of taking chances to do the things you desire. For example, one student wrote that Louis talked about his wife, children, relationship advice and how to maintain a long relationship and what he did throughout his relationships to maintain them and keep a strong relationship. A few more subtopics were relationship advice on how to know if it is infatuation or love, weddings, and children (6461). Overall, students found the dialogues to be rewarding, challenging, and worth the effort as reflected in this student's comment:

The most rewarding part of these interactions is . . . how this . . . truly changed my mindset on the topic of building relationships with older adults . . . I will use these experiences and what I learned and connect it to my personal life to try and build better relationships with the older adults in my life. (692)

Many students told us that they intended to seek out opportunities to interact with older adults in the future after having participated in the dialogues. Their attitudes about communicating with older adults and aging changed to be more positive because of the engagement that the project provided.

We organize our findings around two turning points, which were moments when students experienced transition, surprise, and challenges to their assumptions and expectations about close relationships and communicating with older adults. These turning points were related to aging, relationships, expectations, and developmental change moving from broad cultural discourses and stereotypes related to aging and ageism to specific personal experiences.

Turning Point: Perceptions of Aging and Developmental Changes

We asked in **RQ1**: Did the experience of engaging in intergenerational dialogue with older adults transform students' attitudes about aging and communicating with older adults? If so, how? Students experienced turning points when they realized that some of their beliefs and stereotypes about older adults did not mirror their actual interactions. This turning point centered on how interaction with older adults challenged students' perceptions of age and aging and includes the themes of *confrontation and challenging of stereotypes* and *stereotypes of aging as barriers to developing close relationships*. Students found that older adults were not stereotypically boring, slow, and uptight; none of the students' stereotypes about older adults were confirmed. Over the course of the dialogues, students learned to enjoy the interactions with their dialogue partners as they discovered they shared similarities in interests, concerns, and emotions. They found that interacting with older adults who were not their grandparents was meaningful and different in positive ways. They wrote about the value of respecting older adults and their perspectives and embracing difference rather than being afraid of it or dismissive.

Confrontation and Challenging of Stereotypes

Students wrote that they learned to enjoy their interactions with their dialogue partners because they discovered that they shared similar interests and values, and they learned that their stereotypes of older adults were wrong. Students shared how they had stereotyped older adults as uptight, reserved, uninteresting, and different and were often surprised and delighted to discover how wrong they were. Their dialogue partners traveled, watched movies, and enjoyed hanging out with friends, just like they did. One student was surprised to learn that their dialogue partner, Anita, hated cooking and did not know everything about her grandchildren, crushing the stereotype of grandma baking cookies for her grandchildren.

The project prompted students to confront the stereotypes they held about older adults. For instance, one student stated that "I did not hold older adults to a very high standard before I took this class. I just thought they were old and could not do very much" (3999). Similarly, another student noted:

I had this mental image in my head that senior citizens were very uptight and reserved individuals that didn't want to tell complete strangers about their personal lives . . . I can safely say that my perceptions on senior citizens have changed . . . for the better after having four dialogue sessions with Carol. (1796)

Students wrote that spending time with their dialogue partners changed their negative stereotypes.

When we started the interview with Betty, I was not thrilled to talk to her. I thought that she would just express her opinions . . . and would be a snotty old lady . . . this attitude has changed. After getting to know Betty, I realized she was just like everyone else . . . an ordinary person with differences. (3952)

Some students claimed that their attitudes did not shift much as they liked talking to older people such as their grandparents before the project, though their attitudes became even more positive after the project. For example:

My attitude about older adults changed from the beginning to the end of the project because I had more sympathy and compassion towards them at the end. I had always talked to my grandparents but this was different to me . . . a complete stranger and getting to know him in his life. (6461)

Other students wrote that they found talking with older people was interesting and worth the time and effort and something they would seek out in the future. Their attitudes had changed for the better. No student indicated that their stereotypes of older adults were confirmed. One student wrote: “I learned that I find older people very interesting and enjoy talking to them about whatever it is that they want to talk about. I just find their history to be very interesting” (7834). Other students were interested to learn that older adults experienced some of the same vulnerabilities they did: “The experience of engaging in dialogue taught me that older adults are prone to the same things that younger adults are as far as emotions” (9692).

After confronting their stereotypes, many students learned to see the value in interacting and becoming friends with older adults. Students discussed how “old is just another label” (7633) and the benefit of seeing older adults as sources of knowledge because of their life experience. One student wrote that “we should be able to learn so much from them if they are given the opportunity to speak and the younger generations can actually take the time to listen to them” (7834). Another student stated that

the primary thing that I learned about older adults . . . is just how important and knowledgeable older adults are in our modern world. I feel that older adults . . . kind of get pushed to the backburner and deemed as irrelevant by society. (1736)

Once students recognized that they held these stereotypes, they experienced a turning point and started to adopt a more inclusive mindset relative to older adults. They learned to value their perspectives and see aging in a new and different light:

Some people judge and treat older adults a certain way just because of their age and I was one of them but that is not the right way to treat older adults . . . We must show them respect and I think we should always have an open mind while communicating with them. (3999)

In another example, a student discussed how their dialogues not only helped them question their perception of age, but also helped them form a new perspective:

I think that the most rewarding part about the interactions was being able to see someone who is much older than me share the same outlook on life as I do. I was always under the impression that most older people are largely religious, so seeing someone who was atheist/agnostic and thought about death the same way as I do was very eye-opening. It gave me a new outlook on getting older, and definitely gave me a new perspective of how some older people view life. (5395)

Stereotypes of Aging as Barriers to Developing Close Relationships

Students’ attitudes changed for the better over the course of the semester because of the time they spent together with their adult dialogue partners. Over time, students became more invested in talking with their partner and learning more about their lives. One student remarked that “I felt as if we were doing

good to her by letting her know she's not just 'old' and 'forgotten' to us" (2041). They got to see their conversational partner as a person. Students learned about ageism and discovered an appreciation for hearing about the lived experiences of older adults. This student observed:

I was surprised to learn that older people don't really play too big of a role in society. To me it seems that not a lot of people take them seriously most of the time, and just brush them off. Especially with COVID going on, they don't ever have any contact. However, it seems that whenever there is a sickness going around, the elders are put on the priority list, which I find to be a good thing, but in everyday life, it seems like they are not as acknowledged as they should be. (5331)

Additionally, another student reflected about how they felt comfortable talking to their dialogue partner even with the difference in age:

I learned how communicating with people based on age can be different, but it doesn't have to be. We expect age differences to greatly affect our form of speech and topic discussion like night and day, but I was able to talk to Louis about things I talk to friends and family about. (3949)

Through these dialogues, some students realized how stereotypes and assumptions from cultural discourse shaped their attitudes about communicating with older adults. One student wrote about how they formed opinions about older people because of those stereotypes and assumptions rather than the individuals themselves: "I believe that my attitudes changed due to the fact that I largely did not know the reality of what older adults experience." Another student wrote:

I think that my attitude changed because I was able to get a real experience that was enjoyable. Most of my perceptions and preconceived notions that influenced my attitudes came from societal stereotypes and lack of personal experiences, so when I was able to change that, my attitude changed as well . . . I would say my concept of "old" was anybody over the age of like 65, but then I got to meet John who is in his late 90's, and it changed my thought process. (4302)

Another example shows the power of media influences on stereotypes:

This entire experience has shown that there is nothing wrong with having different mindsets and experiences than someone. I often see in the media that old people are always portrayed as full of hate and anger towards the world, so while I was defensive and prepared for that possibility, it didn't inhibit me from proving to myself that there was no possibility of that. The whole time with Bob he just talked about life and left an impression that his ideology was similar to mine: It's important to be who you are, and to not hurt anyone while you do. (5395)

Turning Point: Understanding and Expectations of Relationships

We asked in **RQ2a**: What expectations did students have about engaging in dialogue with older adults? and in **RQ2b**: How were these expectations met, challenged, and/or transformed after engaging in dialogue with an older adult? We also asked in **RQ3**: How did students' reflexivity about their communication

with older adults disrupt cultural discourses about aging? Students experienced turning points when they experienced change in their understanding and expectations of relationships within and across generations after engaging in dialogue with an older adult. Students questioned their assumptions about relationships such as age differences being unusual and bad. They learned that building a relationship with their dialogue partners meant gaining trust and reciprocal self-disclosure. The dialogues challenged students' expectations, specifically the idea that older adults would share their experiences without a relational foundation and that interactions with people of an older age cohort would not be like interactions with individuals in their own cohort. Over the course of the dialogues, students shifted their view of them as just a course project to viewing the interactions as vital to developing relationships with older adults. This questioning of assumptions and expectations was a direct result of dialogue, which is a key component in CIFCP and community engagement where students develop their critical consciousness in actual interactions. Four key ideas emerged from this turning point: *relationships as a process*, *dialogue as a mutual endeavor*, *challenges to relationship assumptions and expectations*, and *transition from project-mindset to relationship-mindset*.

Relationships as a Process

The first thing that students remarked on was how building a relationship with their dialogue partner was a process that began with the first meeting and progressed through repeated interaction. By the end of this project students understood that building relationships takes time. Before the first dialogue, some students assumed that their first meeting would be full of self-disclosure and that their dialogue partner would just regale them with funny stories:

Going into the dialogue, I was expecting to have more of a conversation than we did. Norma took a little time to warm up to us and understand that we were there to have a conversation with her and get to learn about each other. (3913)

Students realized that they first needed to work to develop a relationship with their older adult and learn about one another before the relationship could progress. For example, one student reflected:

I feel as if my group members and I are starting to build a relationship with her. I can see the conversations with her flow more smoothly. At first the conversations were harder, sort of awkward, and dry. I can see so much growth with these dialogues from the first one to now. (3923)

In another reflection, a student explained how they began to understand the process of developing a relationship while embracing the differences between themselves and their dialogue partner:

I have been learning what it takes to build a true relationship with someone from scratch and what steps you should take to create that comfortability with each other that then can lead to a friendship. Betty and I are complete opposites. She is old, I am young; she's white and I am black. She grew up [with] a privileged life. I did not. She is a woman, I am male, and the list goes on. Despite us being opposites and living different lives, I have learned there are still ways to find commonalities between people who are different from you and ways to connect and build that friendship. (692)

Dialogue as a Mutual Endeavor

Students learned that dialogue is a mutual endeavor and that sharing their own experiences led to better conversation. After the first dialogue, students experienced a turning point when they realized they were expecting their partner to do all the relational work. For instance, students reflected about their decision to also be open about themselves during the dialogues by stating that “I am willing to share with her a bit about myself as well so that it won’t be so one-sided” (3923), and “I’d also recommend putting in the effort to make the conversation free flowing, as it helps the dialogues not seem as rigidly structured interviews and awkward” (3949).

In another reflection a student wrote about the evolution of their dialogues, specifically their shift to two-way communication: “I think we will keep making improvements when talking to Ms. Anita. My favorite part about it is that we share our relationship experiences with her as well, so it doesn’t just seem like an interview, more conversation-like” (3362). Similarly, we can see in the following reflection that this student gained a better understanding of the reciprocal nature of relationships: “I learned that relationships require work from both sides of the party and that it is important to keep in touch with the people that you really care about because you might regret it in the future” (6152).

Challenges to Assumptions and Expectations About Relationships

The dialogues challenged students’ assumptions about what a relationship looks like, from age differences to who can be friends. For instance, one student reflected about how the dialogues challenged their assumption that relational partners would be the same age: “I typically think that people are fairly close in age when they pick their lifelong partner, so it was surprising that there was almost 10 years between the two of them [dialogue partner and their spouse]” (4057). Students also learned that friendships could occur across generations. We can see this emerge in the following reflection excerpt:

I believe the dialogue was successful in terms of getting to know someone of older age and the experiences they went through. I think during these dialogues . . . [we] were able to teach some things to older people, and they taught us things as well. So, I think the dialogues were very productive and gave both parties the opportunity to kind of go out of their comfort zone and attempt to build a relationship with someone that is separated by years of age. (9692)

Students learned that while it is normal to have expectations of relationships, those expectations should not restrict the growth of the relationship:

The most important thing I learned about relationships from these dialogues is first how you should not judge how a dialogue will go until you put in the effort to talk and get to know the other person you are having a dialogue with. It is extremely important also to be open before engaging in dialogues attempting to build a relationship. It’s important to be open because everybody is different, and you never truly know how a person is until you attempt to learn. (9692)

Another student wrote about how relationships, and the roles of the people in those relationships, can change over time:

I do think that the relationship he shared with his daughter was one that will stick with me. He told us that he began to see his daughter differently over the course of their lives. At first,

he saw her just as his daughter, and showed her the love that came with a healthy relationship between a father and daughter. However, he told us that this changed over time, and as they got older, he started to see her more as an equal, and even as a friend. (5395)

The students' experiences with older adults prior to this project, such as their relationship with grandparents or a visit to a nursing home, influenced their expectations of the dialogues. For instance, one student reflected about how their relationships with their grandparents shaped their expectations about their partner prior to the dialogues:

Most of the older people that I have talked to, like my grandparents, seem to just love to talk about anything, everything, and sometimes nothing in particular. I expected the same kind of thing from Betty which is why I thought the whole thing would be much smoother. (4057)

In another example, a student reflected about how their expectations about the way older adults converse did not match the dialogue partner:

I always thought that older adults loved to talk about anything and everything, but I felt as if that was not the case with Anita. However, she did a great job at creating conversation with us, asking us our names, majors, and what we do for a living. (9692)

At the start of the project, students expressed feelings of nervousness about older adults, skepticism about finding value in the dialogues, and doubt about having similarities with someone from a different age cohort. One student wrote that "going into this whole idea of communicating with elders in a nursing home frightened me. I love talking and getting to know people, but there is something about older people that makes me nervous" (5331). By the end of the dialogues, one student realized that their expectations of their dialogue partner did not match up with reality: "These older adults are not as intimidating as you might think. They just want to have a conversation with you" (3952).

Students also learned about how relationships are influenced by various factors. These factors, whether situational or personal, can cause challenges that prevent a relationship from meeting one's expectations. For instance, a student reflected about how their dialogues helped them to better understand the complex nature of relationships:

I think the biggest thing that I learned about relationships from engaging in these dialogues is that sometimes they are hard, because of differences in proximity, differences of opinion, different likes and/or dislikes, but they always seem to be worth the work that you put into them. (4057)

Another student reflected on how their relationship with their dialogue partner ended unexpectedly because of health reasons: "I thought we would be talking with Betty until the end and the fact that she was put on hospice prior to us finishing the project was definitely unexpected and a little off putting and sad for me" (7834).

Transition From a Project-Mindset to Relationship-Mindset

As the project progressed, some students shifted from viewing the dialogue as merely a class project to viewing the dialogues as a means to develop personal relationships. Over time, students experienced less

nervousness and became comfortable talking with their dialogue partners. Many students wrote that they looked forward to the dialogue sessions and even enjoyed them. The class project became more than just a class project as this student noted:

I looked at the whole project as just a class project and nothing more. But after a couple meetings and actually just talking, it changed my attitude to wanting to know more in a way of all sorts of things instead of just staying on a script of questions and themes and talking about even other things like a casual conversation. (2041)

Looking back on the project, students realized how their mindsets changed from the first to final dialogue. One student reflected about how they initially did not have much interest in the project because of their other obligations, however, that perspective changed over time:

I was not too interested at the beginning because I had other things in my life going on with school and work and just my own social life. However, by the end of all this and even by the third meeting I started to enjoy it because not everybody just gets to be able to meet someone they have never met before with an age difference and learn things from them. (2041)

Similarly, a student reflected about how their approach to the dialogues shifted from uncertainty to excitement:

Going into the third and fourth meetings I definitely felt comfortable in talking to Carol, from there on out I knew we would have great conversations the rest of the semester. It was definitely a formative experience from the first two conversations to the last two. My opinion changed drastically, I went from being on edge and unsure, to being excited to see what we would talk about that day. (3932)

Another student described how much they gained from the dialogues despite their initial view of the dialogues as *just a project*:

I kind of just saw [this project] as another assignment that I was doing for class, and I'd have a decent time but that was all. However, now I feel that I was able to gain more knowledge objectively and subjectively when it comes to older adults and life. (3994)

Additionally, a student reflected about their investment in their relationship with their dialogue partner and how they wish that their relationship with their dialogue partner could continue:

Before I started the interviews with Betty, I was not looking forward to the interviews. I didn't think that anything could come from the interviews. I thought that they were just something I had to do in order to pass the class. By the end of the interviews, I realized that I learned a lot from them. I started to wish that we had more interviews. I didn't realize that we had invested ourselves in Betty. These interviews became something I wanted to do. I wanted to learn more about people, and to know other people's stories. (3952)

As these reflections show, the dialogues with older adults prompted students to alter their approach to the project as merely *class work* and really focus on the chance to connect with someone that they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to connect with in their day-to-day lives.

To summarize, we found that students experienced turning points in their assumptions and expectations about close relationships and communicating with older adults throughout the *Intergenerational Connections* project. These findings demonstrate that community engagement has the power to help people challenge and transform their perspectives about people they perceive to belong to different social groups.

Discussion

The goals of the *Intergenerational Connections* project were to facilitate dialogue between young adult students and older adults, to ease social isolation, and to have students critically assess stereotypes and attitudes about communicating with older adults. We were interested in how intergenerational dialogue maintained or altered students' attitudes and expectations about older adults and aging and analyzed student reflections before, during, and after the dialogues. We designed the project using the CIFCP goals of (a) teaching to transform, (b) creating reflexive classrooms, and (c) abolishing the public private binary to foster transformation by encouraging students to question dominant stereotypes of aging and older adults and their assumptions about close relationships (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). We also critically situated SIT to better understand the complexities of identity when communicating with individuals in different social groups.

Stereotype Challenges and Attitude Change

This project transformed the classroom space by allowing students to talk *with* older adults and not only *about* them. Given that older adults remain a primarily silenced group in the United States, this project centered the relationships and relational perspectives of older adults so that students gained a better understanding of the lived experiences of this marginalized group (Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019) as well as an increased awareness of ageism (Kogen & Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2018). *Intergenerational Connections* increased students' critical awareness about older adults and aging by having them engage with course content alongside real-life interactions. When students engaged in dialogue with older adults, they found there were more ingroup and outgroup similarities versus differences. For example, students were pleased to learn that their dialogue partners liked some of the same movies they did, and some even liked drinking beer. These dialogues helped students to challenge the stereotypes that they had about older adults which supports research by Burnes et al. (2019) that education *and* interaction together had the greatest impact on intergenerational interaction. In addition, this project supports findings that engaging in positive interactions with older adults can result in reduced ageism and prejudice (Lytle & Levy, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Over the course of the semester, the interactions that students had with older adults became more intergroup because of the relationships they developed (cf. Pecchioni & Croghan, 2002). Through these dialogues, students heard real-life stories about friendships and their importance for personal growth.

We identified and examined turning points where students experienced moments of change and the transformation of critical consciousness about aging and communicating with older adults. As the project progressed, students gradually experienced turning points or shifts in mindset and attitude. Students reported changes in attitudes that were *more positive*, even students who began the project with positive attitudes toward older adults. This supports research that the best way to dispel stereotypes is to have interactions with people who are members of the stereotyped group (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The main reason student attitudes changed was getting to spend time with an older person, learning about

their experiences, and learning that older adults are real people with whom one can have a relationship. Because the dialogues allowed students to dispel the stereotypes that they held about older adults through direct engagement with an *individual* rather than an *idea* (e.g., older adults are boring), students were able to critique their identity as a young person (ingroup) and the identity they initially ascribed to older adults (outgroup) (Giles et al., 1991). By breaking down the barriers of these perceived social groups, students were able to learn about older adults and their identities in ways that were not constrained by negative stereotypes.

Students learned about relationships from their own subjective interactions with older adults. The stereotype that older adults love to talk and share their experiences fueled some students' assumption that they would not need to work to make their dialogue partners comfortable. A CIFCP approach to community engagement teaches students that by being vulnerable and sharing in the discomfort of a new relationship with the dialogue partner "they showcase their humanity" which can encourage partners to do the same (Droser & Castaneda, 2021). Students discovered that they had to work to develop relationships with their dialogue partners and learn about one another just like with other relationships in their lives. Many students described how the first dialogues made them nervous and how they were sometimes awkward. They felt nervous about interacting with someone new, but even more, someone who was older. After a dialogue or two, students saw their relationships grow and conversations flowed more smoothly.

CIFCP and Community Engagement

As Johnston and Taylor (2018) note, one of the biggest strengths of community engagement projects is the ability to have students interact with disempowered and silent community groups for the greater good. Droser and Castaneda (2021) suggest that coursework that focuses on identity and implicit biases can collapse the public-private binary. Therefore, we asked students to reflect on their identity and examine the biases they held before interacting with their older adult as well as after each interaction and the end of the project. Many students acknowledged that they held biases against older adults. Community engagement projects can equip students with tools to confront these biases, such as self-efficacy, commitment to activism and service, and leadership (Astin et al., 2000). This project enabled students to confront their biases and dispel myths regarding aging and older adults (Chase, 2011; Martin, 2019). Many students remarked that older adults were more interesting, vibrant, and similar to them than they had thought. Overall, students learned about the importance of listening across age and experience, the benefit of connecting with those who are not your age cohort, and the fact that we all need connection to ease social isolation and loneliness.

Practical Implications

The *Intergenerational Connections* project collapsed the binary between classroom and community and bridged the gap between academic learning and praxis. Students connected with older adults in their community and created meaningful relationships which led to co-created knowledge between the students and their dialogue partners. Students challenged stereotypes about older adults as they began to see older adults as people and intergroup communication predominated. Given the importance of connecting classroom content with real-world issues, our findings can be applied in university and community settings. For instance, instructors can design intergenerational dialogue projects in person or online that encourage positive interaction and relationship development. Our project design of

education and interaction demonstrates how connecting relationally with someone of a different group can help individuals embrace the difference between those groups. By embracing these differences, people can identify similarities and question stereotypes. Beyond fostering positive intergenerational connections, instructors can implement this type of dialogue project in classes that seek to dispel stereotypes of other marginalized groups. In the community, instructors and community members can set up monthly dialogue groups where conversations can be used to confront the stereotypes that people have about other social groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

This project had several limitations. Given that students received grades for this project, it is possible that the self-report data reflected what students assumed their professor wanted to read. To mitigate this potential weakness, students were not graded on the specific content of their reflections, but the thoughtfulness and depth of their responses. In addition, students did not know we would ask to analyze their reflections for research when they were writing to minimize social desirability. Another limitation is that we only explored the stereotypes that students held about older adults. Future research can also examine the stereotypes that older adults hold about aging and young people and how these stereotypes inform their interactions.

Conclusion

The pedagogical purpose of the *Intergenerational Connections* project was for students to examine stereotypes, practice reflexivity, and apply class concepts outside the classroom. Students experienced how communication scholarship matters through community engagement beyond the class context (Kahl, 2010). Further, this project served the community by increasing interpersonal interactions to combat COVID-19 isolation and loneliness in individuals who live in long-term care facilities. This project allowed students to understand how their stereotypes provided the foundation of their interactions with older adults and to challenge and dismantle those stereotypes in real time, which is foundational to a critical communication pedagogy approach (Kahl, 2017). Students had a space to acknowledge and examine stereotypes and ways that they might manifest in their interpersonal interactions beyond the classroom. By bridging the gap between classroom and community, students reflected on how their own experiences, perspectives, and worldviews influenced their engagement with a marginalized population.

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You Don't Have to Be Their Best Friend: Complicating the Instructor-Student Relationship Through a Mixed-Method Typology

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Keywords: instructor-student relationship, instructional communication, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, typology

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the nuances of instructor-student relationships with a nationally representative sample of students. Participants were randomly assigned to describe relationships with their best, worst, and/or last instructor and rate their satisfaction with each relationship, and the level of closeness with the instructor. Coding of student descriptions revealed 13 themes, organized into six pairs of constructive/destructive relationship anchors and one neutral category (Professional Relationship). Importantly, professional relationships were not as close as constructive relationships but were equally satisfying, indicating the closeness in instructor-student relationships has diminishing returns. Results are discussed in the context of instructional communication research and pedagogy.

Introduction

The instructor-student relationship has formed a central focus of scholarship in the field of instructional communication, based on the foundational assertion that a positive relationship has a generally positive influence on student motivation and success in the classroom. This scholarship has tended to focus on instructor-student relationships as though they exist as a singular, all-encompassing association. Indeed, a 2017 *Communication Education* forum (Hess & Mazer, 2017) focused exclusively on the role of interpersonal communication in instructional settings, with most contributors focusing on student-teacher interactions as best understood as interpersonal or not—not the degree, kind, or type of

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interpersonal relationship that is negotiated (see Myers, 2017 for the exception). Certainly, past research has illuminated important ways for teachers to develop relationships that enhance their pedagogical acumen. However, there remains the question of the unique contours of student-teacher relationships as they are experienced in the everyday classroom.

Past scholars have addressed the trend to downplay the unique dynamics of relationship creation, negotiation, and dissolution in a variety of ways (see Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). Though some scholars maintain the inherently interpersonal nature of the instructor-student relationship (Nussbaum & Scott, 1980) and others argue that it may be more akin to an organizational hierarchy (e.g., superior-subordinate, Myers, 2017), we agree with Sellnow (2017), who denies the either-or dichotomy often embedded in how we discuss the relational nature and interactions between students and their instructors. Across the 2017 *Communication Education* forum, themes emerged focusing on the need for instructional scholars to consider context and situation in their research to help define and delineate the identity of our subfield. These calls match those found in relational and interpersonal scholarship, which has developed a robust understanding of relationships as processual, negotiated, and situational (see Baxter, 2011).

Characterizations of Student-Teacher-Relationships

The assumption that students and teachers share an interpersonal relationship is grounded in Nussbaum and Scott's (1980) foundational work, which demonstrated how communicator style, disclosure, and interpersonal solidarity correlated with perceived learning. Since that time, instructional communication scholars have come to agree that there is a uniquely interpersonal nature to the student-teacher relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000), and have investigated a range of variables connected to this premise including immediacy, power, influence, and rapport (see Houser & Hosek, 2018). Extant research has found that many of these variables, and more, share relationships with student affect for the course and instructor, indicating empirical support for conceptualizing the student-teacher relationship as interpersonal.

Despite the bevy of research that indicates that the student-teacher relationship can be understood as interpersonal, there is little investigating *how* it is so. Instructional communication scholarship has been slow to bring insights beyond its traditional interpersonal focus into its own research. Notable scholarship in this area has conceptualized student-teacher relationships either as a subordinate-superior relationship (Myers, 2017) or as a customer-service worker (Lawless et al., 2019; McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Furthermore, scholarship outside of instructional communication has conjectured the student-teacher relationship is akin to a patient-physician (Postman, 1988), athlete-coach (McEwan, 2007), or co-collaborator in dialogue form of relationship (Fassett & Warren, 2007). However, it should be noted that none of these ascriptions are empirically based; that is, none are rooted in an examination of how students understand or experience a relationship with their instructor. Rather, each of these ideas are metaphors used by scholars to highlight certain features of the student-teacher relationship to advance a particular program of research. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, it does beg the question as to what, if any, relationships students experience (or want) with their instructors.

Interpersonal communication research, for example, conceptualizes a wide range of relationship types, each with their own unique (and, sometimes, overlapping) sets of priorities, features, and communicative patterns. For example, interpersonal communication is shaped by context (e.g., workplace, family, or

romantic), needs (e.g., support), personality traits, and channel (e.g., F2F or online). These various factors can influence closeness, conflict style, face concerns, and other forms of relational dynamics (see Knapp & Daly, 2011). As a result, these different factors influence how individuals conceptualize their relationships with others and differentiate among terms such as family, friends, romantic partners, friends with benefits, acquaintances, or strangers. Frisby et al. (2024) examined the question of how instructor-student relationships compare to other types of interpersonal relationships through the lens of relational framing theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Solomon et al., 2002). Results indicated that students perceived multiple relational frames in their relationships with instructors, including affection, trust, composure, formality, and task orientation, as well as relatively low levels of dominance. Comparison with various other types of interpersonal relationships revealed similar levels of dominance and lower levels of affiliation between instructor-student relationships and other associations. Although instructor-student relationships may share characteristics with some other types of interpersonal relationships (Frisby et al., 2024), they may also work together in a unique way within the context of higher education.

To this end, in contrast with previous attempts to apply broad characterizations of relational frameworks (e.g., organizational, interpersonal) to the instructor-student relationship, or compare them to other types of relationships using a priori constructs, we hope to add to this literature and the insights provided by Frisby et al. (2024) through an inductive examination of students' descriptions of their relationships with instructors. We undertake this endeavor not only as a means of addressing the need for contextually situated and increasingly nuanced understanding of instructor-student relationships and interactions, but also to challenge assumptions inherent in the relational communication approach to instructional communication.

Specifically, there seems to be a general assumption in instructional communication research that forming meaningful attachments with students is universally desirable and beneficial for both parties. But what if there are students and instructors who feel no need for these connections (Rudick & Golsan, 2014)? Instructors for whom these relationships further issues of role strain, intrusive teaching, and care labor (Goode et al., 2020)? Or students for whom these relationships are inauthentic, forged primarily for the practical rewards they provide (Rudick et al., 2019)? We know that students and instructors can and do create genuine and meaningful relationships that can have a positive impact on their shared experiences that may persist beyond the time they spend in the classroom together (Frisby et al., 2019). In truth, our relationships with students vary based on myriad considerations, including the characteristics, preferences, and dispositions of the actors involved, as well as the larger institutional and cultural context in which these relationships are formed, enacted, and managed. The purpose of the present study was to provide space for students to describe their relationships with instructors, whatever they might look like, to address the following research question:

RQ: What types of relationships do college students describe having with their instructors?

Method

Participants

In an effort to capture the experiences of a wide range of students at a variety of institutions, and not just those at the authors' home institutions, participants were recruited through a Qualtrics research panel. Qualtrics engaged in quota sampling to recruit a nationally representative demographic sample from a variety of institutions, including public colleges ($n = 47$), public universities ($n = 73$), private colleges

($n = 7$), private universities ($n = 21$), community colleges ($n = 23$), vocational/trade schools ($n = 5$), and art and design schools ($n = 5$), as well as other institution types ($n = 7$).

Participants ($N = 188$) self-identified as male ($n = 88$), female ($n = 96$), female to male transgender ($n = 2$), or gender queer or nonbinary ($n = 2$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 ($M = 22.6$, $SD = 4.77$). Participants self-identified as White ($n = 115$; 61.2%), Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin ($n = 35$; 18.6%), Black or African American ($n = 24$; 12.8%), Asian or Asian American ($n = 8$; 4.3%), bi- or multi-racial ($n = 3$; 1.6%), and Native American ($n = 2$; 1.1%). Participants also self-identified their income level as low income ($n = 20$; 10.6%), lower-middle income ($n = 28$; 14.9%), middle income ($n = 90$; 47.9%), upper-middle income ($n = 38$; 20.2%), or high income ($n = 10$; 5.3%), with 2 participants (1.1%) preferring not to identify their income level. Participants represented first-year students ($n = 40$; 21.3%), sophomores ($n = 37$; 19.7%), juniors ($n = 34$; 18.1%), seniors ($n = 37$; 19.7%), and graduate students ($n = 38$; 20.2%). Two participants (1.1%) identified their class standing as *other*.

Procedure

Once approved by the institutional review board, Qualtrics recruited participants to take part in an online survey, allotted to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Participants read the IRB-approved cover page and chose to consent or exit the survey. Those who consented were directed to initial demographic items; if they qualified based on quotas set by Qualtrics, they were then directed to the study questions. Participants were randomly assigned to answer questions about two out of three instructor conditions: their best instructor, their worst instructor, or the instructor in the last class they attended. These conditions were created to capture relationships of all types and not just those that might be most prevalent in student recall. Upon completion, participants were thanked and received a monetary payment from Qualtrics.

Instrumentation

Instructor-student relationships. For each scenario, participants were asked to think about an instructor (best, worst, or last), and then provide three adjectives that best describe their *relationship* with this instructor. They were then asked, for each adjective, to provide at least three sentences describing a story or example that illustrated that aspect of their relationship.

Relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with their relationship using a single item ranging from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*extremely satisfied*). As would be expected given the prompts, participants in the best instructor condition rated their relationship satisfaction highest ($M = 8.44$, $SD = 1.74$), followed by last ($M = 7.55$, $SD = 2.34$) and worst instructor ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 3.11$).

Relationship closeness. Participants were asked to rate how close they felt with their instructor using a single item ranging from 1 (*not at all close*) to 10 (*very close*). As would be expected given the prompts, participants in the best instructor condition rated their relationship closeness highest ($M = 7.17$, $SD = 2.33$), followed by last ($M = 6.61$, $SD = 2.53$) and worst instructor ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 2.81$).

Data Analysis

For this research project, we used *taxonomic coding* (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) to develop our typology of student-instructor relationships. Taxonomic coding is warranted when researchers hope to gather the

tacit meanings people assign to a phenomenon (i.e., a *folk term*) and identify/label those meanings into structured and organized patterns (i.e., *analytic terms*) (see McCurdy et al., 2005). To do so, we followed Manning and Kunkel's *specific taxonomic approach*, where we focused on participant meaning as it related to the taxonomic form of strict inclusion (i.e., *X is a kind of Y*). In this case, *X* is a kind of student-teacher relationship (*Y*), where *X* is an analytic category that we generate through our examination of participants' folk descriptions.

To begin the process, we placed participants' three adjectival phrases and examples/stories in an Excel spreadsheet according to their referent of best, worst, or last instructor. To develop the codebook, the two researchers coded each set of responses (best, worst, or last) separately. In this phase, the team generated relationship types that characterized the data and ascribed a code to each of the three responses per participant singularly (rather than ascribing a code to encompass all three responses as a collective ascription). Our initial coding phase produced two broad relationship types (i.e., constructive and destructive) as well as our emergent categories within those trends. Based on this information, we created a taxonomic tree showcasing the strict inclusion relationships we developed. For example, the Inspirational Relationship (i.e., *sublevel*) is a type of Constructive Relationship (i.e., *middle-level*) which is a type of Student-Teacher Relationship (i.e., *domain*) (see McCurdy et al., 2005).

After the initial coding phase, we discussed the terms used to describe the relationships and developed a codebook based on agreed-upon terms, collapsing categories with synonymous phrasings and operationalizing each code. For example, the "Clear" relationship (i.e., one where students felt they could rely on the instructor to give clear directions, due dates, and syllabus) was collapsed with the "Clerk" relationship (i.e., one where students felt they could rely on the instructor to update the gradebook regularly, have clear rubrics for grading, and respond to emails promptly) to create the "Reliable" relationship since both codes address a relationship where students feel they can depend on the instructor to give prompt, unambiguous directives. We then re-evaluated the data with the codebook, generating six positive codes, six negative codes, and one neutral code that we then used to re-code all the data. Importantly, our analysis of the codes showed that no participant gave mutually exclusive codes to the same instructor. This finding, in addition to the finding that the composite scores aligned with their valence—constructive relationships ($M = 15.62$, $SD = 2.15$), last relationship ($M = 13.99$, $SD = 2.54$), and destructive relationships ($M = 7.45$, $SD = 2.96$)—on the two measures, indicated that the codes were valid descriptors of participants' ascriptions of their relationships with instructors. Finally, all adjectives/descriptions were compiled to understand students' ascriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor relationship.

Results

Our research question asked what types of relationships college students describe having with their instructors. There are three key analyses of the data to report. First, is the coding of participants' responses and the types of relationships they report experiencing with their instructors. Our coding of participant descriptions generated emergent themes representing anchors on a continuum exemplifying, on one side, constructive relationships, built upon teacher behaviors and pedagogical practices lauded by instructional communication scholars, and on the other side, destructive relationships built upon a range of instructor behaviors that devalue students and/or teaching responsibilities. In line with this trend, resulting inductive themes are presented in pairs representing two ends of a relational spectrum. These themes and pairings emerged naturally through participant responses and were not imposed

by a priori design. Second, we analyzed participants' ascriptions of their relationships to understand if and where there was variation when referencing the same instructor. This analysis showed that participants used the same theme repeatedly (i.e., less variety in descriptions) to describe a destructive relationship than when they reported on constructive relationships. Finally, we offer a post-hoc analysis of participants' relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness as they relate to the inductively derived categories. The analysis supports the differentiation of the codes into constructive, neutral, and destructive relationship types. See Table 1 for frequencies and percentages for each theme across student descriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor.

TABLE 1
Category and Theme Frequency for Best, Worst, and Last Instructor Conditions

	Best Instructor (<i>n</i> = 309)	Worst Instructor (<i>n</i> = 270)	Last Instructor (<i>n</i> = 271)
Theme	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Constructive Teacher Relationships			
Caregiving	110 (35.60)	12 (4.44)	67 (24.72)
Friend/Family	44 (14.24)	3 (1.11)	29 (10.70)
Mentoring	24 (7.77)	2 (0.74)	21 (7.75)
Inspiring	28 (9.06)	0	24 (8.86)
Reliable	40 (12.94)	6 (2.22)	30 (11.06)
Edutaining	32 (10.36)	7 (2.59)	27 (9.96)
Neutral Relationship			
Professional Relationship	27 (8.74)	8 (2.96)	50 (18.45)
Destructive Teacher Relationships			
Bullying	0	68 (25.19)	10 (3.69)
Superior	0	14 (5.19)	1 (0.37)
Taskmaster	2 (0.65)	47 (17.41)	4 (1.48)
Tedious	1 (0.32)	20 (4.41)	0
Unreliable	0	64 (20.70)	5 (1.85)
Unsocial	0	18 (6.67)	3 (1.11)

Inductively Generated Thematic Pairs

Caregiving vs. Bullying Relationships. The first pair of themes involves interpersonal behaviors. *Caregiving Relationships* (*n* = 189) provide individualized support, interpersonal warmth, and emotional help for students, developing a relationship whereby instructors communicate care for students both personally and academically and want students to succeed. For example, one participant wrote, "She would ask me how my day was. She would compliment me in basic things like how I did a task. And she always made sure we were mentally okay in her class." Another participant talked about how their instructor communicated this ethic of care in their response:

They saw I was having trouble and actually reached out to me. After hearing me out, they helped come up with a custom due date schedule tailored to the extra time I might've needed for each assignment. They even accepted a decent amount of very late work because they saw that I had actually done the work and decided to give me a chance at passing.

These types of responses showed general agreement among participants that they recognized pro-social, care-oriented communication. In contrast, relationships that were characterized as *Bullying* ($n = 78$) involved interpersonal and often targeted communication, but these messages and behaviors are inappropriate, unhelpful, or intimidating. Instead of providing warmth and support, these relationships are characterized by destructive connections and, at times, harassment. For example, one participant wrote, "My instructor was really mean and disrespectful . . . [they] always picked on me and made me feel stupid." Other participants recounted identity-based discrimination, such as one participant who described how their instructor "made subtle racist comments about me." These types of communication were viewed by participants as intentional uses of anti-social or aggressive communication rather than messages that came from ignorance.

Friend/Family vs. Superior Relationships. The second pair of themes differ in power distance, familiarity, and both range and quality of interactions. *Friends/family Relationships* ($n = 76$) are characterized by their focus beyond academics and into realms more traditionally viewed as friendship, including shared interests, mutual benefits/reciprocity, and treating students as equals. For example, some participants recounted, "I would often stay after class to help my instructor with grading and work. We would often have many different conversations. This was the highlight of my time in school," "Our relationship was a jovial one that involved getting beers after work," and "I love her. She was always there to help me with work or just to have some girl chat!" Some participants viewed instructors more akin to family due to their level of support, consistency, or help with basic needs. These participants described important facets of their relationship with instructors, giving examples such as, "They gave me food and shelter and helped me financially in my time of need," "She is a mother figure to me and I call her every week to ask how she has been doing," and "We bonded very well and he was like an uncle to me . . . He always looked out and cared for me in and outside school." Either as friend or family, participants often downplayed the role-oriented features of their relationship (i.e., instructor-student/superior-subordinate) in favor of terms that connoted low social distance or perceived power imbalance. Conversely, students who shared a *Superior Relationship* ($n = 15$) with instructors characterized their interactions as lacking regard for students' needs or desires (e.g., mental health, well-being), emphasizing instead instructor power, social distance, and institutional authority, often through a condescending communication style. For example, one participant stated, "He portrays himself to be high and mighty," and another said their instructor "Had a condescending nature that made me feel unimportant and that my ideas were always flawed." In these cases, participants felt that their instructor foregrounded their superior status in the superior-subordinate relationship to the point to where they were associated with destructive values such as pride/arrogance, condescension, or conceit.

Mentoring vs. Taskmaster Relationships. Participants described *Mentoring Relationships* ($n = 47$) as being developed through instructors' efforts to encourage students outside of class, provide advice, guidance, and resources to support students' work toward future goals and opportunities, and to protect students. In these relationships, participants view instructors as both expert and caring. For example, participants characterized these types of relationships in the following ways: "My instructor gave me great college and career advice," "He was always there to protect, guide and also give me advice whenever

I needed,” and “[They] taught me a lot about life and how the world worked and I really enjoyed my time there.” Here, we see how participants foregrounded instructors’ advice-giving function—within and beyond the classroom—which characterizes how participants, in turn, relate back to them. Conversely, *Taskmaster Relationships* ($n = 53$) were depicted as those where instructors impose overbearing or unreasonable workloads, often without educational or pedagogical purpose, on students. Instead of helping to guide students to and through meaningful experiences, these relationships are characterized by meaningless work and a low level of caring from instructors. For example, one participant complained about “The way he loads us down with homework. Then your papers are due the next day. You get a F if you don’t have it completed.” Participants felt that instructors who did not make themselves available for guidance in the classroom reduced students’ desire to seek advice from them for issues that went beyond the classroom.

Inspirational vs. Tedious Relationships. This pair of themes was heavily focused on emotional contagion, with relationships and motivation levels built off the emotional tone set by instructors. Students who characterize their relationships as *Inspirational* ($n = 52$) described their instructors as experts in their subject matter who provide intellectual stimulation and inspire joint exploration of course content with students through their passion and enthusiasm. One participant wrote, “You could tell he had a drive for mathematics. He loved teaching it, and it was evident in the way he spoke of it. Never was a question too hard, it was always just out of reach.” Another described the impact their instructor had on their academic pursuits:

One professor inspired me to pursue an area of study, Classics, that I wasn’t familiar with at all, but he was so passionate about it. His breadth of knowledge blew me away and sparked a passion for learning. He was also instrumental in convincing me to study abroad for a summer. I had a fantastic experience that I will never forget. I can never repay him for all the experiences he made possible.

Participants who characterized their instructors in this relational category often recounted instances where their academic or scholarly trajectory was changed (e.g., changed major or went to graduate school) due to their relationship with their instructor. In contrast, participants viewed relationships as *Tedious* ($n = 21$) when they felt their instructor engaged in behaviors that indicated that they did not like their job or care about their students. Far from being passionate in these relationships, they seemed to perform their jobs with ill-humor. One participant described an instructor who “always had a bad demeanor. Looked mean anytime he spoke. Seems like he hates his job.” Another stated, “There was always a sense of hate on her. It was like she hated her job and the students. Everything was a problem.” The recurring utterance that an instructor seemed to “hate their job” often accompanied descriptions of poor relationships with students in this category, in contrast to those instructors who infused passion into their classrooms.

Reliable vs. Unreliable Relationships. These relational anchors are characterized by differences in communication clarity and consistency and the impact on students’ uncertainty and motivation. *Reliable Relationships* ($n = 76$) were developed by instructors focusing on material care through instructional help, availability to students, willingness to answer questions, and clear and effective instruction that were generally viewed as facilitating students’ learning. For example, one participant characterized their instructor relationship positively, stating, “They did a great job at explaining course material.” Instructors also built reliable relationships through the clerical side of teaching, maintaining their relationships with

students through fulfilling responsibilities such as posting grades or feedback quickly, being consistently responsive to students, and articulating well-defined expectations (e.g., assignment guidelines, rubrics). One participant summarized this clearly in their description: “I could always count on her to make sure she would respond constantly, she was always around, she would always keep grades updated.” Participants’ emphasis on the role-oriented function of the instructor indicates that accuracy, reliability, and timeliness are important dynamics of these instructor-student relationships. In contrast, *Unreliable Relationships* ($n = 69$) were characterized by unclear (e.g., “It was hard to understand. I don’t know why I didn’t get full points on my assignments”; “Talked fast. Confusing notes. Never reviewed anything.”), inconsistent (e.g., “They were really flaky. They wouldn’t show up to class on time. Sometimes they missed a whole class”; “He did not show up to class at least half the time.”), unpredictable (e.g., “I always was anxious because his class was very unpredictable.”), or complete lack of communication (e.g., “They didn’t talk and they didn’t show up”) from instructors. These relationships lack well-defined boundaries and instructional goals, making it difficult for students to know what to expect or what was expected of them, which ultimately impeded their ability to learn or succeed.

Edutaining vs. Unsocial Relationships. *Edutaining Relationships* ($n = 66$) were premised on how instructors engaged with students through humor and fun activities. One participant wrote that their instructor was, “Always cracking jokes. Let us play games every now and then. Very cool,” while another stated, “She loved making us laugh and seeing our smiles. She enjoyed our company and when we were with her, we would always have a great time.” The way that participants combined education and fun—whether as a tool for learning or alongside it—indicates the power of humor and games in developing a positive relationship. In contrast, *Unsocial Relationships* ($n = 21$) were awkward in ways that made students uncomfortable or hesitant to interact or ask questions. Descriptions often associated these instructors with being socially inept, ultimately failing to engage students or facilitate positive emotion and engagement. As one participant observed, “We never interacted much. They weren’t great at social interaction. I never felt very content and comfortable around them.” Importantly, participants’ descriptions of this type of relationship foregrounded feelings of discomfort and anxiety due to their instructor rather than simply a lack of fun or humor. These relationships seemed to have inverse impacts on the general learning and environment and student engagement.

Professional Relationships. In addition to these positively- and negatively-valenced anchors, one neutral theme emerged, encompassing instructor-student relationships that were akin to acquaintances or professionally distant associations—what we would call a *Professional Relationship* ($n = 85$). These relationships were characterized by politic communication (i.e., role/context appropriate; Watts, 2003); participants described instructors as engaging in communicative interactions that were role-appropriate and thus non-noteworthy. Participants described clear roles and boundaries, with emphasis on respectful and/or professional interactions. For example, one participant noted that “I wasn’t his best friend. He showed up to work, I showed up to class.” Another noted that their relationship “was okay because we didn’t really talk or interact.” Thus, relationships in this category were not viewed positively or negatively but conformed to proscribed roles to the point of unremarkability.

Constructive and Destructive Instructor Relationship Groupings

To analyze the various dimensions of participants' relationship descriptions, all responses with three adjectives/descriptions were compiled to understand students' ascriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor relationship. This process resulted in 270 descriptions for best instructor, 234 descriptions for last instructor, and 192 for worst instructor. Analysis proceeded in two ways. We first reviewed the three ascriptions for best (90 sets), last (78 sets), and worst (64 sets) instructor as a set. In the instructor data, a participant's three responses were assigned a number code using the 13 descriptors: Caregiving (1), Friend/Family (2), Mentoring (3), Inspirational (4), Reliable (5), Edutaining (6), Professional (7), Bullying (8), Superior (9), Taskmaster (10), Tedious (11), Unreliable (12), and Unsocial (13). For example, those whose three descriptions of their relationship were coded as Caregiving, Friend/Family, and Mentoring was coded as a "1-2-3." Results showed that the most often appearing sets of relationship terms for constructive relationships in the best instructor category were 1-1-1 (all Caregiving; nine sets), 1-1-2 (Caregiving and Friend/Family; six sets), and 1-1-5 (Caregiving and Reliable; six sets). Overall, 63 of the 90 coding sets (70%) were a combination that included Caregiving. Conversely, findings demonstrated that the most frequently appearing sets of relationship terms for destructive relationships in the worst instructor category were 8-8-8 (all Bullying; 10 sets), 8-13-13 (Bullying and Unsocial; five sets), and 13-13-13 (all Unsocial; five sets) (i.e., 8- Bullying and 13-Unreliable Relationships). Furthermore, 31 of the possible 64 sets (48.44%) contained at least one indicator of Bullying.

Interestingly, there were more instances of repeated codes in participants' understanding of their worst instructor (e.g., "8-8-8" or "13-13-13") than for their best instructor. For the best instructor relationships, participants used three different descriptors 32 times, repeated one descriptor 42 times, and utilized the same descriptor in all three responses 16 times in their ascriptions (i.e., participants repeated a descriptor at least once for 64.44% of the sets). Conversely, participants utilized three different descriptors 10 times, repeated one descriptor 29 times, and utilized the same descriptor in all three responses 25 times in their ascriptions for worst instructor relationships (i.e., participants repeated a descriptor at least once for 84.38% of the sets). This finding suggests that students may view their constructive instructor relationships as encompassing many communicative and relational forms or dimensions, but students seem more inclined to seize upon a particular violation or behavior pattern and ascribe that as the primary identity of the destructive student-instructor relationship.

We then reviewed the three ascriptions as associations in relation to each other rather than as a grouping. So, for example, an ascription of 8-Bullying, 9-Superior, 10-Taskmaster was coded as 9 and 10; 9 and 11; and 10 and 11. As seen in Table 2, results revealed that the most variation of codes (i.e., constructive, neutral, and destructive codes were all used) was in the last instructor condition, which is expected since that category was not inherently valenced.

TABLE 2
Last Instructor Co-occurring Code Frequencies

Relationship Code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
1. Caregiving	23													23
2. Friends/Family	12	10												22
3. Mentoring	3	11	7											21
4. Inspirational	12	5	5	3										25
5. Reliable	15	2	1	4	7									29
6. Edutaining	14	2	2	5	3	5								31
7. Professional	7	2	2	1	12	2	29							55
8. Bullying	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5						7
9. Superior	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0					1
10. Taskmaster	3	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	1				9
11. Tedious	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			2
12. Unreliable	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0		4
13. Unsocial	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	3	3	0	0	0	1	12
Total	91	34	17	17	25	7	34	11	3	1	0	0	1	241

Code combinations for the best instructor condition are displayed in Table 3. We found that for constructive instructor relationships, the Caregiving code (1) was the most repeated code (i.e., the 1-1-1 code was used 47 times) and was the most connected code to other codes (a set contained at least one Caregiving code 57.41% of the time). These findings suggest that instructors may utilize a variety of relational indicators when developing constructive relationships, as long as the instructor primarily cultivates a caregiving relationship.

TABLE 3
Best Instructor Co-occurring Code Frequencies

Relationship Code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
1. Caregiving	45							45
2. Friend/Family	24	12						36
3. Mentoring	13	9	3					25
4. Inspirational	29	6	6	7				48
5. Reliable	19	5	5	8	6			43
6. Edutaining	27	4	5	9	8	8		61
7. Professional	13	6	1	4	0	3	5	32
Total	170	42	20	28	14	11	5	290

The converse was true for the worst instructor condition. Specifically, as seen in Table 4, the Bullying code (9) was the most repeated code (i.e., associations of 9 to 9 were used 37 times) and was the most connected to other codes (a set contained at least one Bullying code 42.19% of the time). That is, students' high frequency of including the Bullying Relationship in their descriptions of destructive relationships may indicate that most of their destructive relationships are based on bullying behaviors or that bullying is so threatening that it may overwhelm other indicators within those relationships.

TABLE 4
Worst Instructor Co-occurring Code Frequencies

Relationship Code	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
7. Professional	3							3
8. Bullying	0	34						34
9. Superior	0	10	1					11
10. Taskmaster	1	11	5	19				36
11. Tedious	0	3	1	3	8			15
12. Unreliable	0	1	0	3	4	8		16
13. Unsocial	1	17	4	13	7	6	26	74
Total	5	76	11	38	19	14	26	189

Post-Hoc Analyses

In order to explore further the differential relational outcomes associated with different instructor-student relationship themes and the conceptual organizational scheme developed in our qualitative coding process (i.e., dichotomous anchors), a series of independent samples *t*-tests were run to investigate differences in relational satisfaction and relational closeness between each pair of anchors. Results are displayed in Table 5 and confirm the significant differences between each pair of relational anchors in students' satisfaction with the instructor-student relationship and their self-rated closeness with their instructor.

TABLE 5
Results of Independent Samples *t*-tests for All Theme Anchors and Student Ratings of Relational Satisfaction and Closeness

Anchor	Dependent Variable	<i>t</i>	df	Cohen's <i>d</i>	Positive Anchor		Negative Anchor	
					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Caregiving vs. Bullying	Satisfaction	12.67	89	2.88	8.33	1.91	2.61	2.17
	Closeness	11.17	89	2.54	7.54	2.05	2.39	1.99
Friend/Family vs. Superior	Satisfaction	5.81	36	2.79	8.73	1.72	3.60	2.61
	Closeness	4.31	36	2.07	7.64	1.83	3.60	2.70
Mentoring vs. Taskmaster	Satisfaction	9.91	21.97 ^a	3.30	9.46	0.97	3.00	2.45
	Closeness	10.39	27.56 ^a	3.63	8.38	1.19	2.71	1.80
Inspiring vs. Tedious	Satisfaction	8.72	23	3.74	8.18	1.85	1.75	1.39
	Closeness	6.31	23	2.70	7.41	1.97	2.00	2.07
Reliable vs. Unreliable	Satisfaction	9.53	47	2.73	7.92	1.85	2.70	1.99
	Closeness	7.59	40.22 ^a	2.10	6.77	2.55	2.35	1.43
Edutaining vs. Unsocial	Satisfaction	4.68	36	1.73	7.82	2.16	3.80	2.78
	Closeness	3.55	36	1.31	7.07	2.24	3.80	3.16

Note. All results significant at the $p < .001$ level. ^aEqual variance not assumed.

In order to explore how the neutral category of Professional Relationship compared to the positive and negative relational themes that emerged in participant responses, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted for each of the dependent variables. Results were significant for both satisfaction, $F(12, 293) = 40.81, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .63$, and closeness, $F(12, 293) = 27.68, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .53$. Examination of the Tukey post-hoc comparisons, specifically for the professional category, revealed some interesting results. With regard to relational satisfaction, Professional Relationship ($M = 7.28, SD = 2.14$) was significantly different from all of the negative anchors (Bullying, Superior, Taskmaster, Tedious, Unreliable, and Unsocial), but none of the positive anchors (see mean and standard deviations for all anchors in Table 1), indicating that students perceive these role-oriented relationships equally as satisfying as all positively valenced relationships, and more satisfying than all negatively valenced relationships.

Results for closeness were mixed, with students rating their Professional Relationships ($M = 5.16, SD = 2.60$) as significantly less close than Caregiving, Friend/Family, Mentoring, Inspiring, and Edutaining Relationships and significantly closer than Bullying, Taskmaster, Tedious, and Unreliable Relationships. However, no differences emerged in closeness between Professional relationships and Reliable, Superior, or Unsocial relationships. These results suggest that role-oriented instructor-student relationships are viewed as closer than those with instructors who violate basic norms and expectations of their roles (e.g., professionalism and respect, reliability, availability to students), as would be expected. Closeness is perceived as similar, however, to those other relationship types where instructors fulfill basic role functions (e.g., reliable) without necessarily engaging in further interpersonal interactions (e.g., unsocial). Overall, these results support the structure and conceptualization of the themes and framework that emerged in our study.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to complicate past characterizations of the instructor-student relationship concept. To do so, we inductively examined students' descriptions of their relationships with instructors and developed a relationship typology that was unique to their experiences, context, and goals. Through our qualitative analysis, we generated 13 relationship types: six were constructive (i.e., Caregiving, Friend/Family, Mentoring, Inspiring, Reliable, and Edutaining Relationships); six were destructive (i.e., Bullying, Superior, Taskmaster, Unreliable, and Unsocial Relationships); and one was neutral (i.e., Professional Relationship). These themes address a wide range of relationship types based on behaviors, contexts, settings, and dispositions. Additionally, the analysis of the description sets shows students may view their constructive instructor relationships as encompassing many communicative and relational forms or dimensions (i.e., students perceive that many dynamics can go into a Constructive Relationship), but students seem more inclined to seize upon a particular violation or behavior pattern and ascribe that as the primary identity of the destructive student-instructor relationship. Additionally, students' frequency of describing Bullying Relationships may indicate that most of their destructive relationships are based on bullying behaviors or that bullying is so threatening it may overwhelm other relationship indicators. In either instance, it is in instructors' best interests to eschew behaviors that may induce students to characterize their relationship as a bullying one since it is associated with poor outcomes.

In addition to the qualitatively generated dimensions of student-instructor relationships, the analysis of students' reports of satisfaction and closeness offer empirical support for their conceptual differentiation

and organization into binary pairs. Furthermore, although constructive relationships were associated with higher reports of satisfaction and closeness than destructive relationships, they were not found to be significantly higher than the neutral relationship (i.e., Professional) on ratings of satisfaction (but were, intuitively, generally higher on closeness). Collectively, our findings show that a significant contribution to the conversation surrounding instructor-student relationships is that students reported being just as satisfied with instructors whose relationship with them was characterized as simply fulfilling their role-oriented tasks/communication (i.e., the Professional Relationship) as those in constructive relationship types. These findings offer a more complex view of instructor-student relationships as well as complicate pedagogical advice to instructors. Thus, we offer practical and theoretical implications for instructional researchers and higher education instructors.

Practical Implications for Instruction

Our qualitative findings indicate that there are a range of communicative ways to build constructive and neutral relationships with students. The quantitative results demonstrate that students generally find these relationships as equally satisfying, suggesting that instructors have a great deal of latitude in choosing what kind of relationship they want, and how they cultivate it, with students. The first implication of this finding is that instructors should not feel pressured into developing close relationships with students under the auspice that relational closeness and effective teaching are synonymous. Although certainly a student may perceive, for example, a Caregiver as more relationally close than an Edutainer, students (as a whole) do not differentiate greatly among the various constructive relationship types. Certainly, instructors should avoid instructor misbehaviors (e.g., antagonism, Bolkan et al., 2022; Goodboy et al., 2018; classroom injustice, Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004), or discriminatory language/actions (Vallade et al., 2023), which characterize destructive relationship types and were associated with lower levels of satisfaction and closeness. Our finding suggests that if an instructor wishes to establish and maintain a constructive relationship with students, then they are free to choose which type of relationship best suits the needs, communication styles, motives, attitudes, and resources involved. Students seem to respond positively if they perceive that the instructor is engaging appropriately and instructors are best served being the type of instructor that fits their talents and dispositions, instead of feeling pressured to conform to a particular communicative style. These findings, and continued investigations to more fully understand how we communicatively constitute relationships in our classrooms, may offer a rebuke in the face of increased expectations being put on faculty (particularly female faculty and faculty of color, see Lawless, 2018) to engage in the emotional labor of managing students' mental and personal wellness, which can increase feelings of role strain and care labor in the form of "required relationships" and intrusive teaching (Goode et al., 2020, p. 58).

Interestingly, participants who provided three descriptors for their best student-instructor relationship were more likely to give responses that required different codes than those who gave three descriptors of destructive student-teacher relationships. In other words, it appeared that participants were more likely to focus on one dimension of a destructive student-teacher relationship as the reason why the relationship was negative. This may indicate that students' relationships with their worst instructor are based on the actuality that the instructor consistently engages in destructive communicative behaviors or it may be that a transgression in that relationship was of a magnitude so large that it eclipsed other potential relational evaluations. Indeed, Vallade (2021) found that there are some instructor misbehaviors that students view as impossible to reconcile or recover from, thus becoming the dominant and lasting influence within that instructor-student relationship. As Goodboy et al. (2018) note, "a single antagonistic episode,

or one bad day of teaching, can potentially ruin a student's perception of the instructor by diminishing affect" (p. 320). Vallade (2021) also found that students reported the most common instructor response to perceived misbehaviors, such as antagonism, in the classroom was to ignore or disregard the behavior altogether. To mitigate the potential impact of a particular transgression on the way students view and enact relationships with instructors, we should more consistently address these events through instructor accounts (Vallade, 2021).

Implications for Instructional Scholarship

Our hope is that these results and the typology presented here provide a foundation and a framework for future scholars to investigate the nuances of instructor-student relationships in more depth. Previous scholars have called for increased specificity and depth in research on traditional instructional variables (e.g., instructor misbehavior, Baker & Goodboy, 2018). We contend that this is true for classroom relationships as well; as researchers work to delineate instructional communication as a distinct subfield, we have the opportunity to provide a more contextualized and comprehensive understanding of the relational dynamics present in our classrooms and how they function within societal and academic systems.

In addition to the framework and relational labels offered here, each theme provides a targeted way to frame and investigate dimensions of student-instructor associations, such as caring, emotional support, and emotional/care labor (e.g., Caregiving vs. Bullying), power (e.g., Friend/family vs. Superior), passion, emotional contagion, and burnout (e.g., Inspirational vs. Tedious), and role-based communication (e.g., Professional). Communication scholars (e.g., Hendrix et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2023) have called for greater attention on the ways that race, class, gender, and sexuality influence student-teacher relationships. Combining our findings with these calls raises important questions, such as how do mentor-mentee relationships develop when the mentor/mentee are from different identities or how do dominant group students' discriminatory beliefs predict their perceptions of destructive relationships with faculty from marginalized identities? Finally, scholars should work to connect the ways that states' laws and regulations shape and constrain instructors' abilities to support students (Rudick & Golsan, 2014). For example, state laws that do not support gender-affirming practices may harm student-instructor relationships because instructors are regulated to make choices that trans students may perceive as destructive (e.g., Bullying). Future research may further investigate the interplay of these dynamics through both qualitative and quantitative methods to determine how and to what extent they influence the relationships we form with students and their subsequent impact on the experiences and outcomes of all parties involved.

Limitations and Future Directions

These results must be interpreted within the limitations of the study design. Because we were trying to elicit a range of descriptions from a representative sample of college students, our prompts were designed to access breadth, not necessarily depth in student experiences. The resulting typology may provide a useful framework for future research to home in on particular categories, relational anchors, and additional means of examining the nuance of instructor-student relationships, as well as what they mean to and for those involved. Interviews would provide the opportunity to probe these relationships further and gain valuable information about the role and impact of instructor-student relationships.

Further, it is important to note that participants in our study primarily reported on smaller classrooms. Although this is not necessarily a limitation of the study, it is nevertheless important to interpret the results within this context; perhaps future research could more purposefully target instructor-student relationships in large lecture courses to build upon our understanding of student-instructor communication and dynamics.

Additionally, the quantitative data in the current study was included primarily as a means of examining differences among relationship types but consisted of simple single-item measures. Future research should replicate and extend these results using more robust and diverse measurements and methodologies. Finally, because some participants did not heed instructions and seemed to identify adjectives and descriptions relevant to more than one instructor (cases that, when explicit, were removed from analyses), the resulting themes may not be mutually exclusive. For example, an instructor could be both reliable and a source of caregiving. Future research could elicit student descriptions more clearly focused on one instructor, and then themes could be analyzed to see whether they group together to form a more comprehensive relationship typology. Ultimately, these results indicate that relationships between students and their instructors involve variance, supporting the need to examine these associations in more depth, not only through the lens of existing interpersonal or organizational concepts, theories, and frameworks, but situated within their unique contexts and functions.

Conclusion

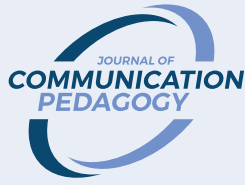
We undertook this project to address the need for contextually-situated, empirically-based, and holistically-nuanced research concerning instructor-student relationships (Baxter, 2011; Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). In the same way that interpersonal literature has complicated concepts such as friendship (i.e., close, casual, expedient, or familial) or romantic (e.g., friends with benefits, back burner, infidelity, or committed) relationships, student-teacher relationships are multifaceted and can be characterized by issues such as power distance, role emphasis, quantity and focus of interactions, individualized care, multiple types of support, task-goals, culture, context, face needs, and abilities/resources, all of which are communicatively constructed and enacted. This study provided an initial attempt at addressing this complexity, with participant descriptions providing a rich portrait of the type, depth, and outcomes associated with different student-instructor relationships. We look forward to future research that builds this work by developing methodologically precise and theoretically robust understanding of student-instructor relationships.

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"So Sorry Your Grandma Died. Get That Paper In.": Graduate Teaching Assistants' Experiences of Student Grief in the Communication Classroom

Jessica Cherry and Carly Densmore

Keywords: grief, student grief, graduate teaching assistants, critical grief pedagogy

Abstract: Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are faced with managing how to respond to student disclosures of grief in the classroom but often lack grief training from their universities when these instances occur. Good and Mad grief, and Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP) are the frameworks for which this study is positioned. Through interviews with GTAs in the United States, we explore their experiences when engaging with student grief disclosures and revealed three main themes: *regulations and boundaries*, *transactional exchanges in institutions*, and *the classroom being a human space*. We also discuss how GTAs use CGP to manage these interactions. We further suggest that GTA training should include CGP to help prepare future instructors for student grief and welcome grief into the classroom.

Introduction

Grief is defined as a human communicative process that varies according to the person and the loss experienced (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Grief can be experienced and expressed in a variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive ways (Doka, 2016). However, in the Western part of the world, norms surrounding grief expect people in general, and students more specifically, to keep grief hidden. With the COVID-19 pandemic, grief and loss were illuminated in the classroom. Students and teachers were faced with having to manage their grief and communally cope with what was occurring in the world (Craw & Bevan, 2022). Pre-pandemic, and in the post-pandemic world, grief is ubiquitous; anyone at any moment might be coping with various forms of grief. Societal expectations to keep grief hidden can make it difficult to engage in all aspects of life.

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In this study we explored the experiences of grief in higher education through Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) experiences. Scholars argue that grief is rarely focused upon in pedagogical research, therefore quieting individuals experiencing grief in academic spaces (Zink, 2009). We apply Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP), which allows us to break through the notion of *good* grief, where grief is controlled, privileged, and hidden. In doing so, we then can engage in Mad Grief where we resist good grief practices and welcome loss (Poole & Ward, 2013). It is essential to challenge academic narratives that silence grief because they are governed by rules that are "grounded in systems of power . . . all of which affect and reflect where and how we grieve, who can grieve, and who or what we are allowed to grieve" (Willer, 2022, p. 3). Higher education is a space where grief is discouraged, and not considered *normal*. Currently, we do not have language to talk about grief in the classroom; however, one framework to explore this is through good and mad grief.

Good and Mad Grief

Grief is a normal, yet challenging emotion that everyone experiences. Currently, the Western concept of normal grief has a clear set of expectations. A normal expression of grief follows a linear timeline, where the individual experiencing grief will go from disorientated to productive (Foote & Frank, 1999). In fact, the medicalization of grief has been added to the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), stating that normal grief will take place within 2 to 12 months and clearly delineates what makes grief (ab)normal (APA, 2013). However, this limits and restrains one's grief experiences.

Medical prescriptions of grief are troubling because there is no time limit to grief. Grief does not exist in a one-size-fits-all fashion and can be experienced in a variety of ways (Doka, 2016). Restricting experiences of grief to what is medically and societally acceptable denies and silences the range of experiences that accompany grief. We are disciplined to show grief in a way that is considered normal and good. According to Poole and Ward (2013), in their work on storying grief and resisting the practices that silence experiences of loss, they define good grief as,

quiet, tame, dry, and controlled . . . It does not make a scene . . . It does not sweat, race, wail, smash, and howl. It does not tell the truth about itself . . . It has a time limit and a limit on the range and intensity of moods, behaviors, and emotions that may be displayed. Good grief is gendered, staged, linear, white, and bound by privilege and reason. (p. 95)

These rules for what constitute normal or good grief present challenges within the classroom. Grief is not limited to the loss of a loved one, it can be experienced during a breakup (Robak & Weitzman, 1995), a divorce (Doka, 2016), loss of a pet (Packman et al., 2014), and more, which is what students often experience. This is troubling, since there are many ways that grief can enter instructional spaces, making it important to find ways to give voice to grief in academia. Poole and Ward (2013) give voice to Mad grief defining it as "a resistance practice that allows, speaks, names, affords, welcomes, and stories the loss that comes to us all" (p. 95). In their study, Willer et al. (2021) engaged in a collaborative ethnography which documented the authors' experiences working with the Scraps of Heart Project and connected CGP to student learning through communication assignments and research. Willer et al. (2021) invites others into Mad grief by sharing stories of loss within the classroom, allowing students to witness vulnerability and "be moved to break open their own grief, but also to invite others into a circle

of Mad griever” (p. 41). We agree with Willer et al. and argue that the classroom is a space to engage in Mad grief. Presently, instructors might not be prepared to embrace grief in the classroom.

To engage in Mad grief in the classroom, students must first engage in self-disclosure surrounding loss. Self-disclosure is defined as intentionally sharing personal information about oneself that others could not learn elsewhere (Derlega et al., 1993). Within the present study we conceptualize grief disclosure as individual(s) intentionally sharing their grief with chosen others. This concept of grief disclosure goes against the notion of Good grief, since “good grief is productive, never interfering with the business, the family, or the community . . . it never goes public” (Poole & Ward, 2013, p. 95), therefore limiting what is thought to be acceptable within the classroom (Hurst, 2009). Grief disclosure instead fits within the essence of Mad grief, speaking about the grief experienced and allowing loss to be witnessed and heard. Given the potential for grief to enter the classroom, it is important for instructors to provide outlets for Mad grief, creating space within instructional spaces for grief disclosure.

Due to the interpersonal dynamic of the student-teacher relationship, there is potential for students to engage in grief disclosure with their instructors. However, when students sought support or disclosed emotional experiences, instructors were unsure how to respond both personally and professionally (Goode, 2023). Instructors witness student trauma and the implicit assumption is that instructors are to provide a solution and/or support for the student, causing potential emotional distress to the instructor (Goode, 2023). Instructors are often left unprepared to manage student’s emotional disclosures (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021), which can place an even larger burden on instructors beyond typical instructional tasks. If this is the experience of faculty, it is important to explore how GTAs just starting their teaching careers manage student grief disclosure.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) account for a large population of undergraduate instruction in higher education (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). GTAs are graduate students that receive funding to pursue their advanced degree usually by teaching courses in their department. Before entering the classroom, GTAs often receive teacher training (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990) (i.e., how to create a lesson plan, grade assignments). Through training, GTAs are being educated on how to teach their course(s) and are being socialized in the higher education space (Anderson & Hosek, 2022). The mentors and instructors GTAs engage with are the socialization agents that may influence how they engage with students. Since GTAs are learning and being trained as they move through their teaching careers as GTAs, this population is important to research because of their new experiences and identity formation (Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021).

GTAs are usually new to teaching and training plays a large role in their experience and in the classroom. Furthermore, GTAs are an imperative population to examine when it comes to student grief disclosures because undergraduate students relate more to GTAs than professors because of the similarities in age and their social status at the university (Gardner & Jones, 2011). Previous research has noted that undergraduate students find GTAs to be more “engaging, organized, relatable, respected, and understanding than faculty members” (Kendall & Schussler, 2013, p. 93). Therefore, students were more likely to seek out support from their GTA(s). Due to the unique nature of GTAs regarding their age, relatability, and more, it is important to understand their classroom experiences. This is especially

important regarding how they manage students' grief and their own emotions due to the little support GTAs receive when they complete their teacher training.

Emotional Labor Expectations

Instructors are not given the space to allow grief from their students, or themselves. When grief is hidden and ignored, it makes it challenging for instructors to manage their role and emotions. Emotional labor is "the development, management, and performance of affective work" (Lawless, 2018, p. 86). Hochschild (1983) makes note that emotional labor is when individuals put on a happy face and are to avoid communicating the negative emotions they may be feeling. Emotional labor is often demonstrated as "sympathy and empathy, one-on-one attention, supportive communication, counseling, general development of personal relationships, and making a person 'feel good'" (Lawless, 2018, p. 86). Often, emotional labor can lead to job dissatisfaction or alienation in the workplace (Tracy, 2005; Way & Tracy, 2012). Individuals that hold a role in an organization, company, or an institution may be faced with challenges of emotional labor. One institution where employees face emotional labor includes spaces of higher education.

Willer et al. (2021) unpacks how higher education silences grief. Institutions require instructors to follow a US American cultural script for bereavement: "to 'keep going,' 'keep functioning,' 'be normal,' and 'go back to work as soon as possible'" (Granek, 2009, p. 45, as cited in Willer et al., 2021, p. 28). When looking at higher education as a good or service, emotional labor in the classroom is not a rare entity. Through these expressions, instructors need to respond, provide resources and support, and manage how to move forward. Unfortunately, due to lack of training, instructors feel as though they are not adequately prepared to handle grief disclosure. Consequently, teachers feeling as though they are not prepared to handle student disclosure led to feelings of worry and the potential to fail (Goode, 2023). High school instructors also feel a lack of preparation and understanding of how to best address death and grief in the classroom (Case et al., 2020). Instructors felt as though having formal death education training can help them feel more equipped to manage death in the classroom; however, age and personal experience helped teachers deal with disclosure and made them feel more prepared (Case et al., 2020).

When emotions enter the classroom, teachers must navigate their own emotions and identity (Wolff & Costa, 2017). Much of the labor that teachers experience, specifically emotional labor, goes unrecognized. How to manage emotional labor is rarely discussed and can lead instructors to feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Waldbuesser et al., 2021). One way instructors can manage their emotions and students' experiences is through critical grief pedagogy.

Critical Grief Pedagogy

One of the ways scholars have come to resist grief expectations within academia is through critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 1). Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) steers educators toward the creation of a more collaborative and supportive learning environment. Extending beyond CCP, Willer et al. (2021) propose Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP), which "responds to cultural and institutional silencing of grief and loss in academic spaces that reflect broader Western norms" (Poole & Ward, 2013; Willer et al., 2021, p. 28). CGP pushes us beyond the structured expectations of grief.

CGP has four main tenets, “(1) Demedicalizing ‘inappropriate grief’; (2) Unpacking systems of power that delimit grief; (3) Embodied witnessing of grief narratives; and (4) Developing compassionate communication skills” (Willer et al., 2021, p. 30). This type of pedagogy was proposed in response to the limited focus on grief in the classroom (Willer et al., 2021). The first two tenets challenge the linear and structured nature of grief, highlighting how the medicalization of grief fails to capture the true nature of grief, as well as breaking down the systems of power that further bind grief in such a structured way. The third and fourth tenets build off the demedicalization of grief, giving voice to stories of loss that break from *good grief* and ask students to develop compassionate communication skills. Overall, we seek to extend CGP by exploring GTAs’ experiences with grief. In this study we argue that GTAs wrestle with responding to student disclosure and future GTA training should include practical application CGP to help prepare future instructors for the inevitability of grief disclosure in the classroom. To address this, we ask the following question:

RQ: How do graduate teaching assistants respond/experience/engage with students about grief disclosures through the lens of CGP?

Research Practices

To address the aforementioned broad question, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with GTAs in the field of communication. A thematic analysis was conducted to interpret and make sense of the data. In this section, we outline demographics and procedures utilized in this study.

Participants

Participants within this study included GTAs who were 18 years or older, currently earning a PhD, active within their graduate programs, previously taught or currently teaching course(s) for their university and were teaching and residing in the United States at the time of the interview. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (Approval Number 22-E-210), a total of 21 semi-structured interviews were collected. Participants were located in the Midwest (13), South (5), Northeast (2), and West (1). Participant ages ranged from 21 to 37 years of age, with 26 years as the average age. Participants gender identity included female (16), male (4), and nonbinary (1). Participants sexual orientation was straight (12), bisexual (4), lesbian (2), gay (2), and queer (1). Participants were White/Caucasian (18), White/Middle Eastern (1), White/Latina (1), and African/Black (1).

Research Processes

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data regarding GTAs experiences with students’ disclosure of grief in the classroom. Interviews allowed for follow-up questions that gave depth and breadth to the responses provided (Tracy, 2020). Participants were recruited through the Basic Communication Course Listserv and the National Communication Association (COMMNotes) Listserv. Once participants emailed the researchers with interest in participating, researchers sent the consent form to the participants to complete, and an interview was scheduled. Twenty-one interviews were conducted via Teams, Zoom, and in-person. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes to 1 hour, 9 minutes, averaging 38 minutes. Demographic questions were solicited first, followed by questions regarding students’ grief experiences in the classroom (i.e., “Tell me a story about the time when you experienced student grief in instructional spaces”), and graduate teacher training (i.e., “What training, if any, have you had in dealing with student grief?”). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

Research Positionality

Both authors have experienced various student expressions of grief. We attended teacher training at the beginning of our programs but had not heard of GTAs receiving guidance when it comes to experiencing grief in higher education. After conversations regarding how to support students, how to adhere to GTA roles, and what the university expects from GTAs, we decided to explore how GTAs manage grief in the classroom, an area that is under researched.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A thematic analysis was utilized using Tracy's (2013) Phronetic Iterative Data Analysis. This form of analysis was utilized because it allows for past literature to frame the study and provides space for organizing the data. First, primary coding was done independently to generate themes and to pull narratives. We individually engaged with the data, reading through all transcripts post data collection. We each spent time with the transcripts, getting to know all participants through their responses. Becoming familiar with transcripts was important for interviews we did not conduct ourselves. After the initial read through, we discussed our thoughts on the transcripts and first impressions reading through the data. We made note of words and potential codes we had documented when reading through the data, such as *transactional*, *human*, and *power*. Once we had established a significant overlap in our observations and initial perceptions, we moved to secondary coding.

Before our second meeting, we individually coded themes. For example, secondary codes from Author One included, "teacher flexibility as response to student grief," "grief as acceptable in the classroom," and "grief blurring boundaries" while example secondary codes from Author Two included, "Power dynamic and instructor authority," "grades and grief," and "promotion of resources." After reviewing the transcripts once more and completing this secondary coding process, we discussed our secondary process and agreed on the final secondary codes. For example, we both noted similarities in primary and secondary coding relating to the emotional labor that GTAs felt. Author One had labeled a theme as "The emotional labor of grief in the classroom" and Author Two had labeled a theme as "Support outside of one's pay grade and role." Through discussion, we realized that both themes addressed how GTAs felt about the amount of work it took to manage emotion in the classroom. Finally, we created a final codebook, agreed on the exemplars selected, and description of the final codes.

To ensure the rigor of our analytic process, we engaged in reflexivity throughout each stage. We constantly asked ourselves what we found shocking or fascinating, and reflected on how participants shared their experiences and the language used. We engaged the data numerous times and had multiple discussions to explore participants' responses as a whole. Next, we will describe what we found throughout participants' narratives.

Findings

GTA narratives revealed experiences and practices surrounding their student's expression of grief in academic settings. The shared experiences shed light on how GTAs manage and resist practices that silence grief in academia. Demographic information including race, gender, program year, and how many courses taught at the time of the interview is provided for each participant quoted. The three main themes include *Regulation and Boundaries* (see Table 1 for themes and exemplars), *Transactional*

Exchanges in Institutions (see Table 2 for themes and exemplars), and the *Classroom as a Human Space* (see Table 3 for themes and exemplars).

Regulation and Boundaries

The first theme explores the navigation of the regulations placed on GTAs in the classroom. Participants discussed university policies and boundaries they need to adhere to and the challenges they faced. Sub themes include emotional labor experiences and drawing from personal experiences of grief.

TABLE 1 Regulation and Boundaries		
Sub Themes	Description	Exemplars
Emotional Labor in the Classroom	GTAs feel that they have to negotiate power dynamics in the classroom and how they respond to student disclosure of grief and loss due to the emotions that are expressed and felt by them and the students.	<p>"I actively encourage them to be open about what's going on in their lives, because that then helps me as the instructor know, what can I ask them realistically to do today?" (Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses)</p> <p>"But I was also scared that I was like I am a grad instructor. My entire career is ahead of me if I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or handle this the wrong way. I am just in so much trouble." (Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses)</p>
Drawing From Personal Experiences	GTAs shared the lack of training they received, making them pull on their personal experiences to help students manage their grief.	<p>"I think I've been privileged enough to grow in a family that has a lot of emotional intelligence and like, has instilled that, but none of that has come from any of my academic training." (Honor, a White, female, third year, who taught 20 courses)</p> <p>"I was like, I get what you're going through, you know, I've been dumped before I'm a young instructor. So I can relate to that." (Lana)</p>

Emotional Labor in the Classroom

Participants emphasized that there is emotional management that goes into being a GTA. It is understood that instructors in higher education are often faced with displays of grief from students. When students share what is going on in their lives, it can elicit an emotional response from the instructor; emotional labor is a part of the job. When instructors learn about what their students are experiencing it pushes them to reflect on the emotional labor it takes to negotiate power dynamics in the classroom and how they respond to student disclosure of grief and loss.

GTAs are considered instructors but do not hold the same rank as professors. Many GTAs shared how they feel about their power and role they hold. Even though GTAs might be instructors of record or have autonomy over their courses, they occupy the liminal role of both student and teacher. This blurs boundaries and expectations that come from the university and department. Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses, shared, "The context is a little difficult where the instructor role traditionally doesn't really count for emotional interactions . . . It's not in our job description as much to provide emotional care."

GTAs find themselves at a crossroads, contemplating how to appropriately care for students. This can impact how GTAs interact with their students, emphasizing their lack of power and authority. When students share their experiences, it can lead to positive outcomes. However, GTAs still think about fulfilling and enacting their role appropriately. Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, shared her experience with a nontraditional student:

I think she understood that I understood she was a human. And I was not this like Kid Robot that like was putting a class together . . . I think seeing each other than as human beings helped us both understand each other better, and let go of some of those power differentials that we were struggling with.

GTAs feel like their role is to conform to the roles and regulations placed on their position. This creates power tensions and gives them little autonomy in their classroom. GTAs feel bound by the power structures within academic institutions which connects to the second tenet of CGP, resisting the systems of power that limit our experiences of grief (Willer et al., 2021). Responding to student grief in a way that GTAs felt was meaningful for the student confronts the systems of power within academia that limit power and expression of emotion in the classroom.

Additionally, GTAs also reflected on the emotional labor it takes to respond to students. Many GTAs are not aware of the emotional labor that may come with teaching in higher education. Natalie, a White, female, second year, who taught eight courses, stated:

I had no idea of the emotional labor that this position would be . . . there was a lot of me learning that I can only do what I can control . . . , but these emotional situations are not in my control.

Natalie shares how she is left grappling with what students share with her and how she manages her emotions. GTAs must manage the significance of what is being shared while also thinking about how best to respond to students. Many participants shared that this leaves them feeling uncertain when responding. Lana, a White, female, first year, who taught five courses, shared:

You got to know what to say and how to say it without you know, making it worse on the student or you have to be aware of how to handle that situation. Sometimes as a teaching assistant it feels a little bit above my paygrade, but I still feel as though I need to be that person for my students.

Lana, and others, noted how they must think about how to attend to their students in the right or appropriate way. Whether GTAs felt prepared or not to respond to student grief, they felt as though they needed to acknowledge the grief shared. This attentiveness to student grief was recognized as emotional labor and challenged GTAs as they worked to respond compassionately and practice witnessing grief. Responses to expressions of grief should be provided in a manner the respondent thinks are best, rather than providing what might be considered an acceptable response (Willer et al., 2021). GTAs strive to respond in a manner they think fits their teaching style and the student's grief. However, this can present further apprehensions for GTAs given their lack of professional experience managing such circumstances, in addition to managing their lack of power and autonomy within academic institutions. Instructors feel this tension and are often left to manage the situation, leading them to utilize their own experiences.

Drawing From Personal Experience

GTAs also shared about the lack of training they received, making them draw from their personal experiences to help students manage their grief. Alex, a White, non-binary, second year, who taught nine courses, stated that, “It makes me think of my own experiences . . . I just think on, back on my own experiences and what how I felt that in that situation and how I would want my students to feel.” When students share their grief with an instructor, the GTAs’ university may not have prepared them for this interaction. The lack of training did not stop GTAs from practicing compassionate communication around student grief. As Alex expressed, they drew from personal experiences with grief. Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses, shared:

I’ve had my own family health scares, and so we were able to talk about that a little bit . . . I can really relate in a lot of ways of feeling like you have to grow up a bit faster, have different priorities than your peers.

Nicole provides empathy and understanding when students share their grief through her own experiences. Nicole breaks from the notion of *good grief*, connecting with students over shared experiences rather than keeping grief *quiet* and *controlled*. However, not all situations are relatable to the GTAs. Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses shared a disclosure from a student who experienced a miscarriage, “I could sympathize with her, but I could never even try to empathize because I have never known that type of pain. And I just I was at such a loss.” Some situations are not relatable, but GTAs utilize what they know and how other experiences can lend themselves in helping in various situations. GTAs’ use of personal experiences to respond to student grief was essential to crafting a compassionate response to students. CGP argues that compassionate communication skills should be done by finding the right fit rather than a prescribed response (Willer et al., 2021). GTAs still felt as though they were unprepared for these expressions, especially if they did not share a similar experience. Participants often felt that the lack of training from their university left them unprepared to craft such responses. Overall, participants shared that behaviors and responses to students were influenced by their family, personal experiences, and upbringing. In addition to their personal connections, participants reflected on the transactional exchange of emotion in higher education.

Transactional Exchanges in Institutions

The second theme addresses the transactional nature of the teacher-student relationship. Many participants commented on the transactional nature of the classroom, negotiating the amount of flexibility they could provide after student disclosure, and the (in)effective and (un)available support resources that GTAs are instructed to provide.

TABLE 2

Transactional Exchanges in Institutions

Sub themes	Description	Exemplars
(In)flexibility	Many GTAs reflected on trying to remain flexible when students disclose grief while still having to follow university guidelines and expectations.	<p>"I think sometimes in-person interactions can be more meaningful, where you can really have a presence there with them . . . the online interactions can be a bit more planned out a bit more purposeful, thoughtful." (Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses)</p> <p>"Because I keep myself flexible, and I'm not always great at it. I want to emphasize that very heavily because sometimes you're just not going to do it right. But as best I can help the problem, help the person and it just makes it easier to deal with if you keep the flexibility going and just understand that you're not always going to do it right. You're just doing the best you can." (Herb, a White, male, fourth year, who taught 14 courses)</p>
(In)Effectiveness, (Limited) Availability and Access to University Resources	GTAs noted they were required to push students toward university resources that provide professional support for student grief, and discussed how helpful and harmful they find those resources.	<p>"Because that's what we're told 20 times over is to not engage with the students but to give them counsel like, you know, the counseling services and I was like, you know, if you want to talk or anything I can listen." (Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses)</p> <p>"Because all then I can really do is be like, well, I know that this exists, but I also just tried to get into the Counseling Center and I know that it's going to be a two month wait, so Are you suicidal? Because then you have to wait two months. So I don't really know how to help you beyond this." (Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses)</p>

(In)flexibility

Many GTAs reflected on trying to remain flexible when students disclose grief; working within the institutional guidelines. Some GTAs stated that documentation was required by their universities to provide accommodation; which felt indecorous. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses, explained, "Do I ask for a pamphlet from your grandfather's funeral? No, so inappropriate, but like I need documentation because that's what the syllabus says like, how do I get documentation?" For Alan, it was challenging to request documentation, and felt it was inappropriate to ask for proof of their loved one's death. This challenged his university's documentation requirement. Alan struggled to be flexible in the face of university policy.

The university request for documentation further seeks to dehumanize the experience of grief; responding to grief in a tidy and staged manner. Seeking documentation follows these principles of good grief and does not provide space for witnessing or having compassion for those experiencing grief. GTAs rejecting university policy when accommodating grief, in their own way, seek to de-institutionalize grief, challenging what is acceptable and institutionally appropriate to request when experiencing grief in an institutionalized setting.

Other participants tried to work with the institutional guidelines and practices. Shelby, a White/Middle Eastern, female, second year, who taught four courses, was aware of how tragedy might impact students, and therefore worded a section of her syllabus:

My sincerest condolences to those who may experience tragedy through the semester. I know from personal experience that a death takes an immense toll to student success. Please reach out to me if you're experienced a tragedy during the semester and feel emotional, physical or mentally unwell. I can help accommodate your needs.

Shelby worked with the university's requirements, while acknowledging the transactional nature of the classroom through official documentation. For others, it was not only important to try and be flexible when students miss class or coursework, but also consider how disclosure in an assignment might impact the grade earned.

Many participants experienced disclosures of grief in assignments and considered how to acknowledge vulnerability while providing the appropriate grade earned. This was challenging for Clark, a White, male, first year, who taught nine courses, who shared, "Because of the disclosure of grief in the speech, I felt fear giving a bad grade. But I also didn't want to give him a better grade because this was disclosing something . . ." Clark struggled to validate the student's disclosure while also providing the earned grade. After careful consideration, Clark provided feedback as to why he assigned the student's grade and commented on the student's bravery sharing with the class. Overall, GTAs are doing their best to provide support and accommodation to students in a system that does not provide flexibility due to grief. However, due to an absence of flexibility and the recommended exchanges, GTAs prefer more controllable mediums for expressions of grief.

Many participants revealed that their students share their grief over email. The online medium can provide instructors and students the space to process a response. Lana, a White, female, first year, who taught five courses, expressed:

Honestly, I like it better when they express grief over email . . . it gives me time to formulate a proper response and helping them and it doesn't put me on the spot like in a face-to-face setting would, and I think it's easier for the student too because they're not seeing me when they're telling me these things . . . I have found it to be beneficial over email for both parties.

Disclosure over email can make the situation less uncomfortable for the teacher and the student. Email lends itself to being transactional and less emotional. Participants felt that email gives them the ability to support students easier and provided the potential for students to share more detail and less emotion.

GTAs expressed that receiving emails about grief is preferred because they can control the response and how to support their student. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses shared, "Being flexible via email is the best response I've found." According to Willer et al. (2021), "Embodied responses can include both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication . . ." (p. 31). Through email, students can disclose what they wish. When responding to email disclosure, GTAs have more time to craft a response, more control over how they choose to respond, and practice witnessing the grief narrative

being presented. For many participants, because of the various options provided by email, it appears to be their preferred method to practice compassionate communication surrounding grief disclosure. It also gives instructors the space to be able to share university resources and connect students to campus services.

(In)Effectiveness, (Limited) Availability, and Access to University Resources

GTAs also remarked on the encouragement to refer students to university resources that provide professional support for student grief, including how helpful and harmful they find such resources. Many GTAs were informed to refer students to counseling services, provide links to crisis hotlines, or follow mandated reporter guidelines. Frankie, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, stated, "Everything was basically just about, you know, be professional. It's not your job to help them, send them to resources." For some, having these resources was helpful and made them feel as though they would make a difference. This was shared by Natalie, a White, female, second year, who taught eight courses, "I typically respond to them with hey, I want you to know that you're cared for. I'm not necessarily equipped with the right skills to help you through this, but there are people who are equipped for these skills." While student disclosure was often overwhelming to Natalie, knowing she could provide helpful connections was important to her. In these instances, the academic institutionalization of grief was beneficial. GTAs felt ill-equipped to manage student grief and emotion and felt that relying on the medicalization and institutionalization of grief through referrals to university resources helped them care for their students.

For other GTAs, handing students over to other services was not enough. Many remarked on how they cared for their students, and having an interpersonal relationship with their students was important, rather than engaging in an exchange of services. For many, institutional resources were inadequate at providing help to students. While GTAs understood the importance of the services, they felt that they did not always provide the help students needed at the time. GTAs remarked on the long wait times to access the counseling centers, making them ineffective. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses, expressed frustration:

And I think that's a lot of it is like structural barriers to you know . . . students get six sets of free visits, essentially a semester to the counseling center. It is very difficult to get into the counseling center. It's like a two or three month wait, if not longer . . .

Alan felt it was important to understand the university resources, not only to refer students to them, but also to understand when they might cause more harm than good. Due to university structure, providing such referrals might place the student in more distress, which is alarming considering the encouragement to use such measures. These resources embody good grief practices. Having referral resources provided gives a clear structure for how to manage student grief. There are strategies instructors can choose to address the disclosure, resolving their involvement in the interaction and directing students to professionals more qualified to address their needs. GTAs' feelings and experiences with institutional resources are mixed. Referring students to these resources is not as clear and *tidy* as it might seem on the outside.

Classroom as a Human Space

The final theme highlights the complexity of human emotion that can enter the classroom. Many participants described the classroom as a human space, where emotions will enter for students and GTAs when least expected. Connecting with students when they are experiencing such emotion can lead to interpersonal relationships and learning opportunities.

TABLE 3

Classroom as a Human Space

Sub themes	Description	Exemplars
“School doesn’t exist in a vacuum”	When students enter the classroom, they cannot leave the outside world behind them; their grief and emotions may affect how they engage in the classroom, with course materials, and assignments.	<p>“I think it’s hard to completely separate what’s going on in your home life with school, especially as college students as graduate students as well . . . I think that grief has its place in the classroom setting, because I wouldn’t expect students that are experiencing grief, to be able to completely separate themselves from that grief to fully participate in class.” (Polly, a White, female, first year, who has taught two courses)</p> <p>“Maybe focusing a little bit more on the outside factors a student deals with because the student that just drops everything in the doors, as a student in your class, like no, but a lot of students live on campus. You know, like that. That’s their home.” (Shelby, White/Middle Eastern, Female, 2nd year PhD student, who has taught four courses)</p>
Working With and Learning Through Grief	When grief entered the classroom, it provided an opportunity for students and instructors to connect interpersonally and create meaningful relationships beyond teacher-student.	<p>“I think grief can be used as not necessarily a learning tool from my end, but possibly a learning tool . . . I mean trying to take your experiences and apply them to the communication theorems and concepts that we’re talking about.” (Polly, a White, Female, first year PhD student, who taught two courses)</p> <p>“I want my students to like me and work with me because I feel like when we have a sort of dynamic relationship . . . I feel like that helps me run my class better because we see each other both as human beings and it’s not a power differential.” (Claire, a White, Female, second year PhD student, who taught six courses)</p>

“School Doesn’t Exist in a Vacuum”

When students enter the classroom, they cannot leave the outside world behind. Many participants feel as though instructors are not willing to admit how much the outside world enters the classroom and how insignificant course materials and due dates might mean to someone having trouble. Jay, a White, male, fourth year, who taught two courses, shared:

So many teachers are so reluctant to like, admit that students are human and we’re human. I think it takes a certain amount of like humbleness to acknowledge, hey, our class is, not the most important thing in the world and it’s probably not even like on the top 10 of these, students’ important lists.

Expecting students to separate their lives and emotions is unrealistic. Many GTAs remarked on the importance of being aware of what students might be managing outside of the classroom. Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, stated,

I think it's important to know that school does not exist in a vacuum . . . I think it is foolish to say that you can leave whatever you have at the door and then only exist in the classroom. Because there are a lot of things that students will still bring into the classroom.

When students experience emotions, such as grief, it might not be possible to compartmentalize their lives and emotions. Participants expressed a desire for instructors to embrace the messiness of grief and loss; it is not clean-cut, nor does it follow certain guidelines. Instructors cannot help it when grief blends into other aspects of their lives, and the classroom is no exception. Willer et al. (2021) states, "such pedagogical vulnerability can be the stitch that weaves us Madly together" (p. 29).

Instructors cannot expect students to resolve their grief along an academic time frame. Shelby, a White/Middle Eastern, female, second year, who taught four courses, reflected on her experiences as a student stating, "I felt like a lot of my professors were missing the point that grief is continuous. It doesn't end." Even as students process their emotions, grief can impact students at (m)any time(s) throughout a class. This aligns with demedicalizing *inappropriate grief* and the idea that grief has a clock attached to it. GTAs recognized the institutional desire for students to resolve grief so it does not interfere with course work. From this perspective, grief not resolved within the academic time frame is a hinderance to academic success. When grief is addressed, and acknowledged, it can create learning opportunities and human connections.

Working With and Learning Through Grief

When grief entered the classroom, it provided an opportunity for students and instructors to connect interpersonally. Participants felt that they were able to work with students, share in their vulnerability, and create meaningful relationships beyond teacher-student. By dismantling the distinct roles of *student* and *teacher*, many participants felt it created a better classroom environment and relationship with students. For many participants, welcoming grief and opening discussion to work with students' grief was important to their course structure and student success. This was important to participants like Jay, a White, male, fourth year, who taught two courses, when he stated how honored he felt when students want to work with him:

I was very grateful that he, like was actually, open with me and transparent about what was going on. I just felt like it was a, it was a privilege, right? For him to be like, I'm going through this thing instead of being like, either ghosting or, I can't be there. It felt really profound that you know, he expressed that with me.

Jay felt that the student's choice to disclose to him was very significant. Instead of not completing work or missing class, this student was open, something that Jay found to be a *privilege* in a space that does not value expressions of grief. Being a witness to student grief challenges the notion of good grief and creates a stronger instructor-student relationship.

This was also true for Molly, a White, female, second year, who taught 14 courses, who saw value in reciprocating vulnerability. She shared, "She was vulnerable with me and I in response was vulnerable

with her. I think my empathy towards her, and compassions probably built like a powerful relationship and not like power dynamics, but just like a strong girl relationship.” When students and instructors can manage emotions such as grief together, it creates an opportunity for students to connect with their instructors. Having students be vulnerable with instructors, and vice versa, can allow for relationships that might not have been previously possible.

Furthermore, connections can also be formed between course concepts, theory, and grief experiences. The classroom is a place of learning, but grief will inevitably enter in one form or another. When it does, it does not have to be something that impedes the learning process. Since grief is not an emotion that can be kept out of the classroom, embracing its entrance can provide instructors with opportunities to provide a safe and supportive space for students. This was key to Yasmin, an African/Black, female, second year, who taught three courses who stated:

I think if properly handled, it creates a unique opportunity for students to learn how to communicate in a very different and uncomfortable setting where they can offer support, where they can practice some of the skills that they’ve learned to navigate this uncomfortable situation.

For many participants, when handled with care, it creates an opportunity for students to cope and apply course concepts to their grief experiences. By being open and welcoming to narratives around grief and loss in the classroom, instructors can create opportunities for students to connect course concepts to help process their grief. Inviting grief into the classroom lets students learn how to communicate about difficult experiences and apply concepts on a deeper level.

Academia is not accepting of emotions in the classroom. Many GTAs were aware of this and how it may act as a barrier for students to feel comfortable enough to share how their emotions might be impacting them in the classroom and coursework. While grief experiences might not always be a learning experience, the classroom can still be space that allows students to work through their grief. If expressions of grief do not harm others, or distract from others learning, participants felt that grief in the classroom was appropriate, creating a more human space that academia does not always allow.

Discussion

Critical pedagogy has been a way for individuals within the academy to resist the structures placed in universities across the United States. Through the extension of CGP, the classroom can be a space where students are called to share their grief and loss. These practices resist the academic norms that silence grief (Willer, 2022). Overall, our study explored how GTAs practiced the tenets of CGP when responding to student grief. These findings show how CGP can be applied to how GTAs respond to expectations of student grief in the academy and welcome grief in the classroom.

The prevailing societal expectation of grief is to keep it hidden and that it will follow a certain set of rules (Doka, 2016). How GTAs learn about and respond to student grief adds to the acceptance of silencing of grief in academic spaces. According to Willer et al. (2021), grief is silenced not only by institutional practices, but through our teaching practices as well. Our findings show that GTAs are aware of their institution’s expectations of grief expression in the classroom. The transactional nature of higher education provides an orderly way of approaching grief, through controlling interactions via

email, providing resources that may or may not be effective to students, and limiting the amount of flexibility GTAs have when responding to grief. We suggest using CGP to break down how institutions treat what they view as "inappropriate grief" and "unpacking the systems of power" (Willer et al., 2021) to prepare GTAs for how to respond to student disclosure. GTAs illuminated the disciplining of grief in the classroom, the struggle to find ways of managing expectations, and witnessing grief in academia. By examining how GTAs approach expressions of student grief, we can attempt to challenge university structures that limit grief and embrace emotion by training GTAs using CGP.

Additionally, institutional practices further discipline grief through the boundaries placed on GTAs. GTAs are aware of their lack of power and status in the academy. Institutional practices make it difficult for GTAs to fully witness and take part in student grief, since it is not part of their *role* due to the limits of their abilities and fear due to a lack of power. Instructors are often hesitant to welcome grief into the classroom due to the emotion it may provoke (i.e., crying), meaning GTAs are not trained therapists, and can fail to provide the support needed (Willer, 2022). Grief will enter the classroom, whether it is wanted or not, often resulting in a significant amount of emotional labor. Emotional labor is an unspoken part of academic life (Lawless, 2018), and one that GTAs were not prepared for. Research has shown that many instructors are not prepared for the emotional labor that comes with managing student disclosure (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021). To better equip future instructors for the disclosures they may encounter, institutions should prepare GTAs for student emotion. By introducing CGP during GTA training, and recognizing the barriers that confine and discipline grief in the classroom, we can introduce GTAs to the emotional labor they may encounter.

Grief is a human experience, one that cannot be disregarded because one enters the classroom. Based on the experiences of GTAs, scholars can use CGP to invite instructors to break through the neoliberal expectations of grief in academic spaces and take part in grief narratives. It can also create a space for students to learn how to process emotion and apply course concepts. Sharing narratives of grief and loss can improve "recall, affect, and attention" (Kromka & Goodboy, 2019, as cited in Willer et al., 2021, p. 42). By creating a space in the classroom, where instructors engage with student and personal grief, instructors can hopefully reduce the loneliness of the experience (Willer, 2022), embrace humanity, and resist the transactional expectations of higher education.

Practical and Pedagogical Implications

Based on the discussion we outlined, we offer a variety of practical implications for GTAs and the academy. To move past the structures of higher education, university officials need to recognize that grief, emotional labor, and university expectations play a huge role in navigating and supporting the well-being and success of students. Instructors in higher education do not get the support for their emotional labor. Institutions need to be aware of the time and dedication it takes for instructors to manage student grief in the classroom. GTAs are learning at the start of their careers just how much emotional labor goes into being an instructor in higher education, and that grief enters the classroom in various ways. As argued by Lawless (2018), a way to push these structures forward is to think about how we can change it, and if we cannot change it, we should be compensated for it.

Looking at the pedagogical implications, teacher trainings need to focus on the experiences that GTAs may face in the classroom. Goode (2023) suggests trauma informed workshops and other support networks should be in place for faculty. We argue that these should start at the graduate level and suggest

that graduate programs and departments give training or resources that can aid in navigating difficult conversations. Participants noted that their institutions train them to connect the student with the counseling center, and to not attempt to handle certain situations. This falls into the neoliberal structure of higher education, that the student is a customer, and the teacher/university is the service (Lawless, 2018). However, when the student discloses grief, the instructor is then an owner of the information and the grief. Programs and teacher training could prepare GTAs for the grief and emotional labor that comes with being a GTA and instructor in higher education. By having training and giving the preparation for grief in the classroom, it can limit instructor burnout, as well as making universities, and the classroom, more of a human space.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insight into how the neoliberal institution of higher education influences how GTAs experience grief in the classroom, there are still some limitations that should be considered. Our sample was limited, whereas the participants were all domestic GTAs, mostly identified as female, mostly identified as White, and were located at universities located in the Midwest region of the United States. These limitations are not representative of the GTA population. Future research should aim for broad demographics that represent the GTA population, allowing for greater understandings and experiences to be shared.

Future research should further explore how GTAs feel about the teacher training they received regarding student grief in the classroom and how it did or did not prepare them for experiences of grief from students. Future research should also explore how students feel about grief disclosure with their instructors. This study explored the perspective of GTAs and their experiences with student grief. Exploring what influences students' disclosure and how they feel about sharing grief with instructors can provide valuable insight into grief in the classroom. Additionally, future research should explore how communication faculty react and respond when grief enters the classroom, if communication faculty are introducing grief in the classroom, and how grief is taught in the communication classroom and faculty responses to it.

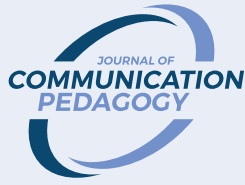
This essay examined GTAs experience with student disclosure of grief and how CGP can be seen in their responses to student grief. When grief is expressed to GTAs, they experience regulations and boundaries placed on them by the institution, the transactional exchanges in institutions, and the notion that the classroom is a human space. We uncovered the challenges and experiences that GTAs have in the communication classroom. By applying the tenets of CGP to the experiences of GTAs, we can see how GTAs worked to provide a space for grief in the classroom yet struggled to make sense of the disclosure in the face of academic expectations. This piece seeks to illuminate the challenges that GTAs face and how including CGP into GTA training can better prepare graduate students for grief disclosures.

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What Is the Goal of Defining Family? Best Practices for Teaching Family Communication

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Keywords: definitions, family, values

Abstract: Family Communication is an inherently value-laden class. When students walk into the classroom, some of them come with a very negative view of family, whereas others walk in with an extremely narrow view of family. By prioritizing and facilitating the importance of multiple definitions of families, instructors can move through more complex topics over the course of the semester knowing that students have an understanding of why defining family is important—even if they are hesitant to change their definition. In this article I present eight best practices for teaching family communication. This set of practices provides a foundation for educators to broach a value-laden topic while building classroom rapport.

“Families have long been viewed as among the most essential and universal units of society. This sense of the shared experience of family has led to an often unexamined consensus regarding what exactly constitutes a family.” (Franklin, 1990, p. 29)

Introduction

When I was getting my Masters in Communication Studies, I was constantly asked if it was a broadcasting and journalism degree. So when I was working on my PhD I was thrilled that I could tell people I was getting a degree in family communication. Surely that would be something everyone could understand, but I was wrong. The question shifted to “oh so you are going to be a marriage and family therapist.” It seemed that regardless of the specificity I attached to my degree title—no one was quite sure what it was I studied. I think it is easy for us to forget that our students, even ones majoring in Communication

Studies, often do not quite understand what the class is about when they walk in the door—especially when it comes to families. Thus, much of the legwork we do when teaching family communication is explaining what they will and will not get out of this class. Building a strong foundation at the beginning is critical to facilitating a wide array of conversations in the family communication classroom. There are a variety of scholarly readings on “what is family” or defining “family communication,” yet students often don’t see the value in defining abstract terms outside of the classroom framework. With the diversity of family definitions and the wide reaching implications of those definitions on research, law, clinicians, and policy (Floyd et al., 2006; Franklin, 1990; Galvin, 2006; Medalie & Cole-Kelly, 2002; Smolkat, 2001), learning one textbook definition does a disservice to students and families.

The process of just memorizing one definition for the purposes of the course discourages critical thinking, results in short-term retention of the material, and fails to challenge students (Cox, 2023). Thus, when students are provided with a definition of family without a framework for interrogating that definition, the rest of the course content loses the complexity attached to family communication theories and topics. Focusing on key concepts, such as family “helps to develop understanding by offering opportunities to link, review and put knowledge into context” (Cambridge Assessment International Education Teaching and Learning Team, n.d., para. 24). Thus, careful planning and preparation is needed when approaching what defining family means, regardless of how the course is taught. Given the variety of ways to teach family communication courses (Wang & Child, 2019), it is clear that a set of best practices is needed for laying the foundation of defining family. In the following I present eight best practices for creating a solid yet malleable foundation for the study of families.

Best Practices #1: Construct the Boundaries

Before the class even starts use your LMS platform to introduce yourself, your role in this class, and invite questions. Start by introducing yourself, it helps students understand who you are and gives them the opportunity to know who you consider family. If we expect our students to be vulnerable, we must also be vulnerable in sharing more about our own lives, especially when it comes to families. I find that when teaching family communication, it helps for students to know more about how I grew up and who I consider family on a personal level. Next, establish a foundation for the class by explaining elements of the course. First, I tell students,

This is a research class, meaning we will talk about a lot of research related to family communication, and we will entertain a lot of “it depends” questions. In other words, families are super complex, and often the answer to your question is “it depends.”

Often students walk into classes assuming that there are right and wrong answers because that’s what our testing method would suggest; however, with families they vary so much just in the structure alone that there are rarely right answers, but instead better and worse answers. Second, remind students of your role in this class.

I am not a therapist, I am a researcher and a teacher, and with that comes some information about how I approach this class. I want you to be able to take the information from this class to become a more competent communicator in your current family, your future family, and a more understanding individual as it relates to all things family. What I can promise you is that you will learn a lot in this class, what I can’t do is provide quick fixes to family dilemmas.

Too frequently students enter the family communication classroom expecting that it will solve all of their family communication problems and that they can “fix” their family members. The process of establishing what type of class it is and is not also opens the door for questions about the meaning of family and why we are often confronted with “it depends.” This is particularly important as students look for family answers in this class in a way they are unlikely to in persuasion or small group communication for example. This personal connection to the course content is what makes the family communication course both easy to connect with and challenging for students to acknowledge what is outside their experience and values.

Best Practice #2: Reflect on Their Own Definition of Family

Prior to any family readings or class discussions about defining family, have students write a brief essay on (1) how they define family, (2) what they view as the essential components of their definition of family, (3) how they define family communication, and the (4) essential components of their definition of family communication. They should complete these essays prior to any reading for class, and they should bring their essays with them to class. This enables them to carefully reflect on how they conceptualize family and family communication free of the constraints of the readings, instructor influence, and peer influence. I find that this also invites more questions and discussion as students come to class ready to provide their definition.

Best Practice #3: (Re)Conceptualize Family

Now that students have had a chance to write their own definition of family and read for class, in class ask them to draw their family tree. They can draw these however and with whomever they want to include or exclude. Tell students that their trees are up to them, and that you have no say over who does or does not get included in the tree. They can draw them as trees, stick figures, portraits, anything goes for this activity. Although students have already written their definition of family, this process asks them to think about family in a different way with a different prompt. I find that students use a different definition of family for this drawing than they do for the written assignment, and they come to realize that even they do not have only one definition of family. This creative process enables students to critically reflect on and (re)conceptualize who they count as family.

Best Practice #4: Challenge Family Definitions

Now that students have their written definition and a drawing of their family, have them compare the two. If their family tree does not match their definition, have them add or remove people to bring their drawing in line with their written definition. The majority of students have to change their drawing in some way to fit their written definition of family. This leads to a discussion about our individual views of family, and how context and the way we are asked about family changes how we think about who is family. This is an opportunity to discuss (1) what they liked about their definitions, (2) how if at all they would change them, and (3) similarities and differences across student definitions. Finally, remind them of the value-laden nature of family, specifically that (1) family often has a very personal meaning, and (2) not everyone sees family as a good or positive thing. This is key for providing a space for students who do not have a positive family experience and reminding students that they all come from a variety of different backgrounds and understanding of family.

Best Practice #5: Scholarship Often Determines Who Counts

Now that students know how they define family, it is time to start thinking about the implications of defining family. “Family becomes whatever family scholars study” (Floyd et al., 2006, p. 22), for all of us who study families this statement can feel very heavy. For students, thinking about how scholars choose to define family impacts what they take from the textbook and the readings. In other words, as researchers we decide who family is by who we study, and for our students this knowledge becomes critical as they consider who we have decided is family in the research presented to them. In the process of helping students to recognize this concept, it also helps them discern what the implications of that definition are for those individuals. Through the process of studying families—each study has the potential to dismiss more discourse dependent families (Galvin, 2006), or perhaps make claims about all families with a mostly white sample (Soliz & Phillips, 2017). This discussion is the perfect introduction for students into both the implication of defining family and the variety of ways that scholars define family.

Best Practice #6: Definition Superstore

Often as faculty we provide students with a singular definition of a concept, and for some things this works, not to mention students like this definitive clarity. However, for complex terms like family—one definition only provides one viewpoint with each definition inherently including some and excluding others. So instead of a niche boutique, we can travel to the definition superstore, where you can find any kind of definition you wish. In the following table, I’ve provided just a few of the ways in which family has been defined.

TABLE 1 Family Definitions	
Definition	Source
“A multigenerational social system consisting of at least two interdependent people bound together by a common living space (at one time or another) and a common history, and who share some degree of emotional attachment to or involvement with one another”	(Yerby et al., 1994, p. 13)
“An organized, relational transactional group, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time”	(Pearson, 1993, p. 14)
“Families as constituted in communication”	(Floyd et al., 2006, p. 23)
“A self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and external boundaries; and it evolves through time: it has a history, a present, and a future”	(Turner & West, 2002, p. 8)
“Families as constituted in discrete relationships”	(Floyd et al., 2006, p. 23)
“Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future functioning as a family”	(Galvin et al., 2018, p. 8)
“A group of people consisting of one set of parents and their children, whether living together or not”	(<i>Family, n. & Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More</i> Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.)

"A group of two or more people related by blood, marriage or adoption"	(U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1981)
"Traditionally, the law defines a family as a group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption"	(Smolkat, 2001, p. 630)

Note: For a broader view I've included definitions from outside of the field of family communication as well; however, for the purposes of your class discussion you may choose to limit your list.

This list is just a sampling of family definitions, with the medical field acknowledging the value in having multiple types of definitions. For example, the type of definition that holds the most value changes based on the reason for clinical treatment: (1) Census definition (blood, marriage, adoption), (2) biological, (3) household, (4) functional, (5) crisis, (6) bereaved, (7) cultural, and (8) relationship (Medalie & Cole-Kelly, 2002). Moreover, the definitions most commonly used in North America might be limiting when it comes to Indigenous families (Tam et al., 2017) or families with other cultural backgrounds. Thus, how we define families and the definitions we introduce students to carries weight beyond research.

Best Practice #7: Explore the So What

So what? Why should we care about the definition of family beyond the walls of this classroom? At this point students can recognize the variety of definitions of family, and they can see how personally those definitions impact who they consider family. Yet, there is still a disconnect between the various ways we can define family and the impact of those definitions on them personally. One way to address this is to provide students with real-world examples of how definitions of family impact law and policy. I use news stories to illustrate how the way family is defined impacts the way policy is implemented. Below I've included some topics to consider:

- ▶ FMLA rules and how and when they are applied
- ▶ 9/11 survivor benefits
- ▶ Medical privacy starting at age 12
- ▶ Medical decisions and children over the age of 18
- ▶ Supporting aging parents
- ▶ Maternal and baby care for teen moms
- ▶ The Safe Haven law
- ▶ FAFSA and college payment responsibility
- ▶ Adoption and foster care

These are just a few topics to consider when presenting students with news articles. In groups of two to four I give students a news article about a law or policy that is implemented based on a certain definition or understanding of who counts as family. I have found this to be one of the most impactful portions of the semester, as not only do students recognize many ways in which how family is defined has the potential to impact their lives, but also understand the importance of this class as a whole. This process provides the foundation for students to ask hard questions throughout the semester and critically evaluate the material presented to them.

Best Practice #8: Embrace It Depends

All roads lead to “it depends”; there are no quick fixes in family communication, no perfect answers, and despite the patterned behaviors we are able to observe, all families vary. They vary in structure, in role, in identity, and in their communication norms (Phillips & Soliz, 2020). So why bother studying families in the first place? To increase understanding, to continue building on the knowledge we have, and because the complexity of family is what makes them interesting. By the time you have finished making the case for defining family, students can start thinking about why it depends, and how communication behaviors in families might depend, on additional information, such as how racial/ethnic background influences family processes and what constitutes “good” communication behaviors in families.

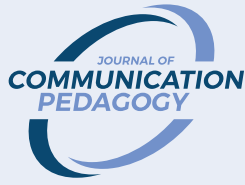
Conclusion

Although these practices might often feel commonplace, the practice of thinking critically about the terms we use in class, and the structure we provide for them, is often foundational to what students walk away with at the end of the semester. These practices are critical in teaching family communication because it is such a value laden class; however, I hope that instructors in other areas of communication also find value in these practices. They are certainly not limited to only family communication, but have the potential to also be used in a variety of other classes. Whether you are teaching a family communication class, or an organizational communication class—definitions mean something and we need to make sure that our students understand the value and utility in those definitions, above and beyond being able to answer a test question. As we embrace the teacher-scholar model, we must also be able to facilitate that dichotomy for students as they navigate how they have always thought about family and how they might think about it moving forward.

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Post-Truth's Effect on the Brain and the Future Self: A Critical Communication Pedagogy Response

David H. Kahl, Jr. 

Keywords: post-truth, neoliberalism, critical communication pedagogy, cognitive load, temporal discounting

Post-Truth Messages and the University

The university was designed as a place to examine ideas and seek truth. Throughout most of its history, the university has largely been able to attain this goal. However, seeking truth has become more difficult in the past decades due to the proliferation of post-truth messages. Post-truth refers “to content featuring the style of conventional news intended to deliberately misinform” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1866). These messages are carefully constructed pieces of disinformation that appeal to people’s previously existing beliefs. Although many people are affected by post-truth, students are one group that is especially impacted by these types of messages (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). Although all students are susceptible to being influenced by post-truth messages, this discussion will focus on traditional college-aged students, the group with which university faculty have the most contact. Hegemonic forces in society recognize that they can have success in crafting messages directed at this particular demographic because students often experience difficulty differentiating between messages grounded in truth and fiction. College-aged students also comprise a group whose brains are still developing and are malleable (Abrams, 2022). While this is a positive trait, young people’s developing brains may make them more susceptible to ideas that are not factual.

Additionally, college-aged students are avid users of the internet, social media, and similar outlets. Thus, organizations recognize that they can reach large numbers of young people by producing disinformation on these platforms. Because of this, students are exposed to a vast array of post-truth messages on an unprecedented scale. They are exposed to persuasive messages that hegemonic forces carefully craft to manipulate students and make them believe falsehoods. These messages are communicated in ways that

appeal to their previously held beliefs, which students hold as sacrosanct. Because neoliberal capitalism has inculcated contemporary learners with the idea that they are all rational consumers of products and information (Kahl, 2018), they falsely believe that they are equipped to make rational decisions regarding the veracity of (post-truth) messages. As a result, “students today favor anecdotal evidence and beliefs over facts and evidence” (Hilton, 2019, p. 3).

Persuasive messages are designed to accomplish many goals. Some of these goals are innocuous, in that they simply are developed and communicated in ways that encourage people to make choices, make purchases, or change/alter their ideologies. These messages are not created with nefarious intent. Rather, they are crafted to encourage people to make changes in their lives, with their minds, or through their economic choices in order to produce benefit for individuals. These messages generally have individuals' well-being in mind. Post-truth messages, however, run counter to the goals of ethical persuasive messages. Post-truth messages are inimical in nature and intent. Post-truth messages are created to mislead individuals so that they will make choices that work against their best interest. Post-truth messages are designed for one purpose—to maintain or to increase power for hegemonic groups in society.

The coal industry represents an example of a group that develops post-truth messages. In an attempt to deny the climate-related dangers of burning its product, the industry produces post-truth messages by utilizing a rhetorical technique called “corporate ventriloquism.” Like a ventriloquist, the industry “throws” its voice through front groups in the attempt to make it appear that many organizations support its actions (Schneider et al., 2016). This type of message propagates falsehoods and is often successful in creating doubt in the minds of people who are unsure of the effects of burning coal on the environment. Additionally, the side effect of these types of messages is that other groups become marginalized in the process, such as organizations fighting against climate change. Because of the nefarious ways in which post-truth affects students, examining post-truth and how it is communicated becomes an important area of examination in the classroom. Post-truth messages affect how young people think about ideas, how they respond to critiques of those ideas, and how they analyze messages in an educational environment.

Overview

The following sections will build upon the ways in which post-truth messages are communicated and why they are effective in creating doubt and encouraging disbelief of information that is factual. Specifically, two cognitive phenomena will be presented that explain the reasons that people, especially college students, can have difficulty discerning messages that are inherently false. Finally, the article will present critical communication pedagogy as a means by which instructors and students can dialogue about post-truth messages with the goal of recognition and resistance.

How Post-Truth Is Communicated

Numerous entities construct post-truth messages. Although individuals can create these types of messages, the most destructive messages are created by powerful groups, such as governments, corporations, special interest groups, and religious groups who possess the power, both cultural and economic, to influence large groups of people through their messages. Because of this, these groups have the ability to advance their agendas by communicating in ways that confuse and mislead students

to acquiesce to power's needs and wants. Although not all powerful groups create hegemonic messages, some groups develop wide-ranging post-truth campaigns to gain compliance from the general public. Many of these messages are directed toward young people because of their connectedness to the internet. Specifically, many post-truth messages are directed at post-millennials, who have been digitally connected for their entire lives (Nee, 2019). Thus, a multiplicity of messages on traditional social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) and also visual and private messaging apps (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) are created to influence this group.

Why Post-Truth Messages Are Effective

All people, including students, are prone to believing and internalizing post-truth messages for various reasons. Two important phenomena exist that prevent them from recognizing and resisting these messages. These reasons impair students from adequately processing and communicating about post-truth messages. Additionally, they prevent young people from thinking too far into the future to consider how making choices about post-truth messages today will affect their future selves. Because of this, students who internalize post-truth messages can become marginalized by them when they adhere to the false ideas they present. These phenomena, cognitive load and temporal discounting, will be discussed in the following sections.

Cognitive Load

Social media, especially when consumed in excess, is cognitively taxing. When people consume social media in excess, they are more likely to be influenced by it than those who have consumed smaller amounts. This phenomenon, called cognitive overload, makes social media users mentally exhausted to the point that they become “easy prey for advertisers” (Pittman, 2023, para. 1). This occurs because the information overload they receive makes students more prone to believe false information because they no longer possess the cognitive energy to fully examine the message for its veracity (Pittman & Haley, 2023). Like advertisers, producers of post-truth attempt to “sell” an idea to weary consumers of information who have been overwhelmed with information and not able to examine it clearly and rationally. When post-truth messages cause learners to exceed their cognitive load, they are more likely to fall victim to them as their capacity for clear and rational thought is decreased. Producers of post-truth messages create cognitive overload to propagate false messages more easily into students' minds. Thus, the technique of message bombardment is quite effective because young people experience a form of cognitive impairment and are more likely to adopt the message or comply with it.

For example, students are bombarded by post-truth messages relating to climate change on some right-leaning news outlets and social media. These messages suggest that no action is necessary to curb carbon emissions and that burning fossil fuels is a harmless procedure. The proliferation of these messages often cloud their minds, making clear dialogue and discernment about the issue difficult in an educational setting. In this case, cognitive overload becomes an important pedagogical problem because careful, well-reasoned critique of ideas becomes much more difficult when learners' minds are overburdened and overtaxed by this type of disinformation. Because of the cognitive load that post-truth places on students, the communicative goal of becoming an effective consumer of communication becomes more difficult to reach. In this way, young people become marginalized by post-truth messages.

Temporal Discounting

Another reason that students experience difficulty resisting post-truth messages is that they often do not think about how these messages will affect them in the future. People are affected by a phenomenon called temporal discounting (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009). When students, who are usually young, consider an action that will not affect them until much later in life, they often discount the action because they feel connected to their current self and view their future self as they would a different person. Thus, people are prone to discount what their future self needs in favor of the needs and wants of their current self. Because of this, people actually display a lack of empathy for their future selves—a byproduct of neoliberalism (Kahl, 2023) and its emphasis on post-truth.

Post-truth messages often relate to problems that may not become extremely serious until a future date. For example, although the effects of climate change are currently occurring, many people do not directly see or experience many of them. Thus, they may not view them as deleterious in the current moment. Thus, post-truth messages about climate change are effective for two reasons. First, temporal discounting makes young people more prone to accepting post-truth messages that state that climate change is not real (or not influenced by humans), oil production should continue and grow, electric cars are superfluous or even negative, and liberally minded politicians are working against the common good by limiting the burning of fossil fuels. Because young people feel less connection to their future selves in 50 years versus 5 years (Pronin et al., 2008), they are less likely to desire to make a change that may not affect them for many decades. Therefore, the temporal discounting phenomenon can make college students unable to recognize, or care, how their future selves will be affected by a problem like climate change.

A second, related reason that post-truth messages about climate change are effective is that students, who hold opaque views of how climate change will affect their future selves, are more susceptible to the persuasive strategy of benefits (Kahl, 2012). People are psychologically susceptible to accepting persuasive messages that promise pecuniary (or other non-monetary) gain. The neoliberal society in which they were raised exacerbates this problem. Post-truth messages about climate change often focus on the benefits of not addressing the problem. Instead, they emphasize the short-term benefits of increased oil production. Young people, who often lack financial resources, are likely to be persuaded by messages indicating that they could spend less on gas if production were increased. Harari (2016) explains this process: “When the moment comes to choose between economic growth and ecological stability, politicians, CEOs and voters almost always prefer growth” (p. 20). Post-truth messages purporting monetary gain psychologically influences students to not only make the choice that benefits them, but also crave more (Harari, 2016). Because temporal discounting causes people to “consider the future self as a stranger” (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009, p. 85) they tend not to think about how current actions will affect them. Thus, when they do not think of a possible future in which the environment is much worse due to action that could have been taken now, students are more likely to fall victim to post-truth messages today.

As mentioned previously, post-truth communication has pedagogical significance because one of the university's primary goals is to aid students in examining messages, evaluating them, and seeking truth. Post-truth messages, however, hinder the university's goals in doing so. The discipline of communication is well suited to undertake the task of aiding young people in learning to recognize and resist post-truth messages. The discipline's rhetorical tradition, along with its emphasis on message evaluation, allows

it to be on the forefront of resisting post-truth through effective pedagogy. To counter the problem of post-truth, a pedagogical approach is necessary that involves both effective communicative practices that promote dialogue about post-truth/hegemony. The following section will discuss how critical communication pedagogy can function to help students to recognize and resist post-truth messages and the cognitive impairments that they cause.

Resisting Post-Truth Messages Through Critical Communication Pedagogy

Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) is a response to power through instruction. Unlike other forms of pedagogy, it is focused on learning by emphasizing the ways in which knowledge can be used to ameliorate hegemonic relationships in society (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Thus, it works to help students to acquire knowledge and apply that knowledge to reduce marginalization. CCP is situated at the intersections of critiques of power (critical), the meaning of messages that promote hegemony (communication), and sound instructional practices that can be used to resist power (pedagogy) (Kahl, 2021). CCP is predicated on praxis. Thus, it does not simply challenge people to learn about power; it also challenges them to take action to ameliorate its presence. When utilizing CCP, learners engage in dialogic interaction in order to reach understanding and develop action.

Resisting Cognitive Load Through CCP

The proliferation of neoliberally driven post-truth messages causes recipients to become overwhelmed and experience a kind of cognitive fog that prevents them from evaluating these messages clearly. As discussed previously, the myriad post-truth messages crafted by the petroleum industry that claim that burning fossil fuels have little to no impact on the Earth's climate can cause students to temporarily lose their ability to critically evaluate these messages, even though the science overwhelmingly concludes otherwise. Unlike the mental drain that post-truth messages cause, CCP presents a means for learners to approach information with calmness and rationality. CCP challenges students to carefully examine specific post-truth messages and dialogue about them. In doing so, they can (1) evaluate intent of the message, both hidden and overt, (2) discuss the communicative techniques the hegemonic creators of the messages use to exert power by making consumers acquiesce to their desires, and (3) determine ways in which to respond to these messages to reduce their hegemonic power.

Instructors can challenge students to apply CCP in this way by presenting them with a message created by a hegemonic force such as the petroleum industry. Following the three steps outlined above, instructors can begin by asking students to analyze the message in groups, working to determine if the message is an example of post-truth with covert and/or overt intent (step 1). If the message is deemed to be an example of a post-truth message, instructors can ask students to dialogue about the ways in which the creators of the message have falsified information to obfuscate the truth. Further, students can discuss how the communicative techniques employed by the petroleum industry might make consumers of the message take a certain action or take no action (step 2). Finally, instructors can discuss with students about ways that they can resist the message. For example, students might discuss how they can dialogue with others who may have been influenced by such messages. In this way, they embody the Freirean (1970) principle of conscientization/engaged action (step 3). This reflexive process asks students to evaluate post-truth messages calmly and deliberately, such as those related to climate change, in order to counteract the overwhelming and rapid pace with which they are presented with them. Doing so gives them a clear mind which they can then make well-reasoned decisions about the veracity (or lack of) of the messages.

Resisting cognitive load through the process of dialoguing about the post-truth messages and their hegemonic intent, CCP asks learners to “disrupt the expected” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 104). This disruption is a way in which learners can, through dialogic interaction, act rationally by clearing their minds from the cloud created by post-truth messages and examine their “participation in power” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 103) as well as ways to resist it. In this way, CCP acts as a type of communication activism which “provide opportunities for students to exercise (action) within and beyond the classroom” (Golsan & Rudick, 2018, p. 18).

Resisting Temporal Discounting Through CCP

Post-truth messages also cause students to consider only the present and how they can benefit from decisions made about today. Because of this, post-truth messages inculcate them to ignore tomorrow and how today's decisions will impact their future selves. This type of thinking is a hallmark of neoliberalism and its pursuit of immediate monetary gain in the present. Thus, it rewards immediate pecuniary success. Neoliberalism also punishes economic failure, as people cannot profit now from decisions that do not show benefit for decades.

CCP acts as a response to the temporal discounting that neoliberal post-truth messages encourage. Unlike the temporal immediacy that post-truth fosters, CCP challenges learners to “slow down, to subject our experiences to critical examination, to expose life's mundane qualities for how they illustrate our participation in power” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 103). Thus, instructors can employ CCP to challenge students to slow down their thinking about post-truth messages and the concomitant decisions they make because of it. Encouraging young people to dialogue about the long-term benefits of decisions versus the ramifications of short-term, and short-lived, gains allow them to consider the benefits of long-term thinking about themselves, their decisions, and how their communicative actions will affect their future selves. For example, instructors can apply principles of CCP by dialoguing with students about how taking immediate action regarding climate change will affect their future selves encourages longitudinal thinking, rather than myopic thinking that neoliberal post-truth encourages. Instructors can facilitate such conversations by asking students to engage in short reflexive writing in which they compare and contrast a future world in which no action has been taken to ameliorate climate change versus a world in which each person took some action. Then, groups of students can share and dialogue about their visions. This action can result in “applied forward reasoning,” an approach to addressing problems today instead of having to look backward when it is too late to do so (Levin et al., 2012, p. 123). Neoliberal post-truth messages ask students to ignore the future in order to mitigate the chances of immediate failure. Alternately, CCP as a form of reflexivity, challenges students to consider how past and current action can affect future action. When they learn to think about future action conducted by their future selves, they can begin to consider sustained action toward change (Fassett & Rudick, 2023) instead of inaction in the present.

Conclusion

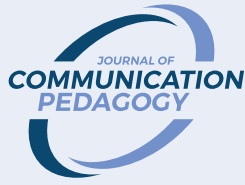
Post-truth messages have been present in our society for centuries, but their prevalence has become greatly exacerbated in recent decades due to the ease in which they can be disseminated throughout society. Neoliberal entities carefully craft these messages to accomplish economic goals and employ nefarious tactics when disseminating them. This can result in cognitive overload and temporal discounting for

recipients such as students, a group that is especially susceptible to believing and internalizing these messages. These messages can have harmful effects on the mission of the university because they interfere with the pursuit of truth. However, despite the challenges these messages present, CCP presents a means by which young people can learn to interact with these messages in a calm and reasoned way. Well-reasoned dialogue about these messages can have the effect of better meeting the Communication discipline's goal of utilizing pedagogy that evaluates messages to effectively judge their meaning and veracity. When students learn to overcome the cognitive overload and temporal discounting that post-truth messages create, they can begin to resist them and enact meaningful change in society.

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Engaging Impasse: Nurturing a Culture of Dialogic Engagement on a University Campus

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Keywords: dialogue, community engagement, organizational communication, instructional communication

Abstract: Universities have historically fostered spaces where students, faculty, staff, and administration can fruitfully engage in discussion around contentious issues. Current political divisions have had a chilling effect on these discussions inside and outside the classroom. To nurture a campus culture of dialogic engagement, the communication studies department in collaboration with the DEI office began a campus dialogue project that invited faculty, staff, students, and administration to participate in monthly dialogues focused on cultural impasse topics. This 5-year project has demonstrated that university communication studies departments can be instrumental in helping community members cross organizational boundaries to engage in challenging dialogues when they are focused on engagement, facilitated by students, intentionally welcoming, and predictably organized.

Introduction

Not for the first time in US history, freedom of speech is under attack on university campuses (Cole, 2024). Public and private universities around the country are launching initiatives designed to reinvigorate free speech and civil discourse. According to Cole (2024), “The academic enterprise demands a commitment to open debate and free inquiry” (p. 6). In his article, Cole referred to an incident that took place on the Yale campus in 1974 where students shouted down physicist William Shockley. According to Lewis (1975), Shockley, known for his view that Black people are genetically inferior, was invited to speak at Yale. During his remarks, students shouted so loudly, Shockley was unable to be heard. In response to

the incident, Yale convened a committee comprised of students, faculty, administrators, and alumni to reexamine its position on free speech (Lewis, 1975). The outcome of the committee's work was a recommitment to free speech. The committee wrote: "The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable" (Cole, 2024, p. 6).

In recent months, protests on university campuses are once again testing the limits of free speech. Local and national politicians are using the unrest to further a legislative crackdown on university faculty and academic freedom. In the wake of the recent resignations of Harvard President Claudine Gay and University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill over their responses to anti-Semitism on their campuses, House Republicans are ramping up investigations into top U.S. universities (Karni, 2024). Karni writes, "the investigation is disturbing to many academics who fear that Republicans are merely trying to legitimize a broader attack on higher education by rooting it in a concern about antisemitism" (par. 12). Irene Mulvey, president of the American Association of University Professors, responded on social media, "I know weaponized Congressional hearings and the politicization of academic standards to advance a partisan political agenda when I see it" (Karni, 2024, par. 13).

In 2023, Dr. Neil Buchanan resigned his position at the University of Florida only 4 years after he was hired. He described the climate at UF as, "hostile to professors and to higher education more generally" (Saul, 2023, par. 2). Buchanan is part of an uptick in faculty departures from Florida's public university system. The school of arts has been particularly hard hit as they, "struggle to hire and retain good faculty and graduate students in the current political climate" (Saul, 2023, par. 9). Dr. Buchanan indicated that the University of Florida's decision to establish a post-tenure review process would limit academic freedom. Buchanan remarked, "It's not just that the laws are so vague and obviously designed to chill speech that DeSantis doesn't like. It's that they simultaneously took away the benefit of tenured faculty to stand up for what's right" (Saul, 2023, par. 37).

The politically motivated measures to restrict discursive freedom in Florida's public education system have inspired legislatures and universities around the country to take aim at discursive freedom on university campuses (Mazzei, 2023; Nierenberg, 2022). Many universities are responding to student protests by creating policies they describe as "protecting free speech and student safety," but in fact "limit speech on campuses" (Hicks, 2024, p. 3). University of California at Davis law professor Brian Soucek suggests, "colleges often attempt to keep the peace rather than foster important conversations" (Hicks, 2024, p. 3). Soucek continues:

It's common that when faced with controversies, universities and other institutions will default to order over expression. It's just easier. It's less costly for them. It really takes some commitment to decide no, we're going to stand for our First Amendment principles even when they mean that campus will be a little more unruly and disruptive than we're used to. (Hicks, 2024, p. 3)

Framing legislation as expanding intellectual diversity, the Republican-led Indiana Senate passed a law that will require public college faculty to be evaluated on how and whether they espouse "intellectual diversity" (Zahneis, 2024). The law allows college boards to deny tenure or promotion to faculty they consider "unlikely to foster a culture of free inquiry, free expression, and intellectual diversity within the institution" (p. 1). The board could also deny tenure or promotion if they determine that a faculty

member is “likely to subject students to political or ideological views and opinions that are unrelated” to their discipline (p. 1).

Challenging the notion that faculty should stay in their disciplinary lane, Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) contend that communication courses should encourage challenging dialogues around impasse topics like immigration, race, social class, and sexuality to help university students develop skills for engaging across difference. “Communication courses provide a unique, yet potentially challenging opportunity to use curricular goals as a backdrop for healthy and inclusive discussions of these complex topics” (p. 134).

Inviting the entire campus community to come together in dialogue may help participants complicate the narratives they attribute to those who hold opposing views. “Pressed by the Supreme Court decisions diminishing rights that liberals hold dear and expanding those cherished by conservatives, the United States appears to be drifting apart into separate nations, with diametrically opposed social, environmental and health policies” (Weisman, 2022, p. 1). Restricting freedom of speech in schools limits our ability to bridge the sociopolitical divide. This essay describes the way one communication studies department at a small liberal arts university in the Midwest has been using a campus-wide dialogue project to nurture open communication between students, faculty, and staff.

In her 2018 essay, Anna Wiederhold Wolfe argued that the

reification of *us* versus *them* binaries and the rigidification of narrow conceptions of in-groups and out-groups cultivates conditions in which authoritarianism can flourish. Through the construction of an enemy *other* who threatens the security and prosperity of the idealized collective, authoritarian regimes gain support for their promises to reinstate order, control, and clear boundaries.” (p. 10)

Wiederhold Wolfe suggests dialogue and deliberation can “foster the disruption and reorganization of rigid group boundaries” (p. 10).

These calcifying group boundaries motivated Arlie Hochschild (2018) to move to a small town in Louisiana to try to understand the fractures exposed during the 2016 Presidential election. She described an “empathy wall” that is preventing those with different beliefs and social circumstances from empathizing with one another. Paulo Freire argued,

poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination are not natural traits of our humanity. Instead, these conditions exist as *naturalized* aberrations invented within history by human beings. And because this is so, oppression in all its faces can be *reinvented* out of existence.” (Miller, 2005, p. 31)

The Dialogue Project

In the spring of 2019, a communication studies department at a small, private, Midwestern university began a collaboration with the campus DEI office to encourage inclusive and candid conversation across university boundaries. The goal of the dialogue project was to nurture a culture of discursive engagement around critical issues so we could move from a reactive to a proactive model of crisis communication. The dialogue project was motivated by three key concerns. First, like many universities, we were in the

habit of fracturing ourselves into resentful enclaves when critical issues were raised on campus. Although we were not facing any critical issues on our campus when we developed the dialogue project, we were aware of issues on other campuses in the Midwest. We did not consider our campus to be immune to the challenges faced by our regional colleagues. By hosting regular dialogues focused on impasse issues, we hoped to nurture a habit of coming together rather than fracturing during crisis. We also hoped to encourage community members to consider a dialogic approach when addressing contentious issues in their departments. Second, the University developed a process to respond to bias incidents and hate crimes on campus. When students, faculty, and/or staff reported an incident, members of the Bias Response Team (BRT) reached out to the accuser and the accused, but the broader community was not a part of the learning. This was problematic because there were often witnesses to the incidents, but confidentiality dictated that the process be private. The effect was to cultivate an atmosphere of suspicion and anger. We planned to use the dialogues to explore issues around bias and marginalization. Finally, the author of this essay was involved in a Public Dialogue & Deliberation roundtable discussion during the 2018 Salt Lake City NCA Convention where participants lamented the tendency of their universities to reach out to them for dialogue facilitation only when there was a crisis on campus. Stephen Hartnett, former president of the National Communication Association (NCA), challenged NCA members in 2017 to consider how they could use their understanding of communication to better serve their communities (NCA, 2017). The communication studies faculty embraced that charge by collaborating with university colleagues to nurture a culture of dialogic engagement between students, faculty, staff, and administration so we might be in relationship before we are faced with a future, yet unknown, campus crisis.

Nurture a Culture of Engagement

Collaborating with the DEI office helped the communication studies faculty better understand the issues facing our campus community, strengthened ties with our DEI colleagues, and offered our department a way to use our communication training to serve our campus community (NCA, 2017). We were ready to launch the Dialogue Project (DP) in the spring of 2020, but the pandemic put our plans on hold. We finally hosted our first dialogue in February of 2021 on the topic of racism in the United States. By establishing a habit of dialogic engagement around controversial issues we hoped to encourage faculty, staff, and students to reflexively turn to dialogue to address any campus conflict or campus crises. Nagda et al. (2009) conducted a study examining the impact of dialogue on university students' ingroup collaboration. They discovered that "It is not simply enough to bring students and the community members from diverse backgrounds together. These communicative interactions must be structured and facilitated in productive ways" (p. 54). We knew we would need to design a dialogue process that would invite participation across organizational boundaries (students, faculty, staff, and administration). We were further aware that the process would need to be well structured, so the participants understood the value of the dialogues and would commit to continued participation.

Public policy scholar Oliver Escobar (2011) stressed that "the purpose of dialogue is learning, exploring, and building relationships" (p. 27). Once relationships have been established, community members may be better able to engage one another honestly around challenging issues. Paulo Freire (1970) understood authentic relationships as foundational to effective dialogue, "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship in which mutual trust between dialoguers is the logical consequence" (p. 80).

Escobar (2011) stressed that individuals will opt out of participation in public forums to avoid confrontation with those who espouse opposing views. He went on to differentiate between conflict and confrontation, asserting that confrontation often inhibits a healthy exploration of ideas, “Confrontational communication . . . hinders mutual learning, fosters shallow exchanges, accentuates polarization, and leaves the issues underexplored” (p. 14). Conflict, on the other hand, is seen as a “point of departure” requiring “further exploration through collaborative investigation” (p. 14). According to Escobar, these collaborative investigations can emerge through dialogue, so the community is ready for deliberation. This dialogue project was designed to encourage participants to embrace conflict as an important part of building understanding.

We facilitated dialogues on Zoom from the spring of 2021 through the spring of 2022 to protect participants during the pandemic. These early dialogues were well received by staff and faculty (typically attracting 23–27 participants), but student participation was low until we moved to in-person dialogues. We suspect the students participated less in the virtual dialogues due to pandemic-related Zoom-fatigue. We hosted our first in-person dialogue in the fall of 2022. The topic was abortion/body autonomy which attracted 30 participants, evenly split between students, faculty, and staff. Ordinarily we would have introduced the topic with a 6-minute video we sourced on YouTube, but we were not confident we would be able to identify a video that would effectively welcome all participants into the dialogue. For this dialogue we agreed that it would be better to have a member of our history faculty situate abortion access in a historical context. The information helped participants feel competent on the topic without establishing a position on the issue. After the short lecture, participants moved into small dialogue circles with a student or faculty facilitator and addressed two questions: Who or what has shaped your opinion about abortion? What is your reaction to the politicizing of the issue of abortion? After a 20-minute small group dialogue, the student facilitator brought the entire group together with the following questions: What did you discuss in your small group that you are still thinking about? Did your breakout group discuss any questions you would like the entire group to consider? What have we not discussed that you think is important? The abortion dialogue inspired strong emotions, particularly in faculty and staff. The dialogue nurtured a space where we were able to “relax ridged group boundaries” (Wiederhold Wolfe, 2018, p. 10). The student facilitator nurtured a space that allowed participants to share their grief on the subject without dominating the discourse.

We are still working to encourage participants to embrace conflicting ideas when emotions run high (Escobar, 2011). In response to some participants’ feedback, we have added to the community agreements a specific instruction to embrace conflict (Appendix A).

We have been building attendance since that first in-person dialogue with a peak of 75 participants for the dialogue on Critical Race Theory in February of 2023. Recent dialogues have averaged 25–30 participants. We have never had fewer than 25 participants.

Inviting Participation

The Role of Student Facilitators

We made a couple decisions early in the planning that have served us well. The most impactful was the decision to have every dialogue facilitated by trained student facilitators. The student facilitators

are trained in a course we designed called Communicating Through Dialogue. The course balances a philosophical and practical approach to dialogue. The primary texts used in the course are Bojer et al.'s (2008) *Mapping Dialogue: Essential Tools for Social Change* and Oliver Escobar's (2011) *Public Dialogue and Deliberation: A Communication Perspective for Public Engagement Practitioners*. Students learn how to facilitate and participate in a variety of dialogue models. The dialogue course instructor sends an email to all faculty notifying them that student dialogue teams are available to facilitate 45–50-minute dialogues in their courses in the fall. Faculty respond to the email if they are interested in hosting a facilitating team. Most faculty ask student teams to facilitate dialogues on course content. In the case of first-year seminar faculty, facilitating teams are often asked to lead dialogues focused on how new students are adapting to college life. Before they facilitate dialogues in the campus community, each student will have participated in and facilitated several dialogues in the classroom. Once the students have experienced at least six facilitation models, they begin facilitating dialogues in other classes on campus or at the all-campus DP events. We discovered that faculty and staff make themselves more vulnerable when a student facilitates. We avoid the kind of grandstanding typical of faculty meetings because the student facilitators hold a gentle space for participants to share honestly and listen with curiosity. The student facilitators have been a valuable part of the project's success, and the experience has also been valuable for the facilitators. Several student volunteers have emailed to thank the organizers for the opportunity. One student facilitator remarked, "This has been such an incredible experience so far, and I am so grateful to be part of it. Thank you so much!" A second student facilitator wrote, "Thank you so much for this opportunity and for helping guide us through these dialogues!" Following several of the dialogues, faculty and administrators have approached the organizers to remark on the positive impact of the student facilitators on the dialogue experience.

The Invitation to Join the Conversation

Second, we send an email reminder to the entire campus community 1 week before the regularly scheduled dialogue (Appendix B). The invitation reminds participants to enter the dialogues ready to listen with curiosity and share generously. We assure them that we work to nurture a space where everyone feels heard and respected. Since this project is intended to build relationships across organizational boundaries, we structure the dialogues to nurture Freire's (1970) notion of "horizontal relationship" (p. 80). We remind every participant that they have something valuable to share. One of the community agreements read at the beginning of each dialogue specifically states, "Whether you are student, faculty, staff, or administration, you bring a piece of the puzzle. Share from your experience and listen with curiosity." Many of the faculty have already been nurturing this style of engagement in their courses since, at the communication studies department's urging, we have a discourse instructive component in our general education curriculum. Faculty buy-in increased after the communication studies faculty presented workshops to prepare faculty from every discipline to teach discourse instruction in their courses.

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion publicizes the dialogue in their weekly email and on Instagram. Posts are typically created by a work study student increasing the appeal to a traditional undergraduate audience. Finally, we intentionally welcome participants when they arrive and avoid surveillance. We do not require participants to RSVP, and we do not take attendance. The dialogues should be a free space where everyone is welcome, but no one is required to attend.

Predictably Organizing the Dialogues

The process we developed begins with the DP team planning the agenda for the dialogue (see Appendix C). The planning team is comprised of three communication studies faculty, two DEI staff members, and two student facilitators. We use the same format for each dialogue to help regular participants relax into the routine. One week before the scheduled dialogue, the facilitating team (student and faculty facilitators) meet to discuss the upcoming dialogue. Topics for the dialogues have been developed in two ways. First, each semester the DEI and communication faculty members of the DP team reach out to students in their area to solicit topic suggestions. Second, the DP team narrows the list of suggested topics and identifies the three that will be used for the semester. Finally, the full faculty are notified about the topics and schedule, so they can include it in their syllabi. During the 5 years since we launched the DP, we have revisited four topics because we believed there was still energy in the community for engagement. At the end of each dialogue, we remind participants that this is just the beginning of conversations on the topic. We invite each participant to continue the conversation in their residence halls, offices, and classrooms. The goal of our project is to nurture a habit of engagement rather than identify solutions for the issues. We are working toward Wiederhold Wolfe's (2018) notion of fostering "disruption and reorganization of rigid group boundaries" (p. 10). In recent months the community has expressed interest in expanding the project to include longer dialogues in the evening to explore campus-specific issues.

The DP was designed to be nimble so we would be able to shift topics if a particularly important issue bubbled up during the semester. In April of 2021, the Derek Chauvin verdict came in 24 hours before our scheduled dialogue on immigration. Emotions were running high, so the DP team decided that the community needed to discuss the verdict. We announced the change in topic 20 hours before we facilitated the dialogue on Zoom. We had 34 participants for an emotional and cathartic dialogue. This was our hope when we designed the dialogue project. We wanted to normalize this type of engagement when the community was struggling.

Once a topic is selected, the team chooses a short (6-minute) video to expose participants to a common text. The designated student facilitating team, the DEI team members, and the faculty in the communication studies department search for short, but informative videos online. We all review the videos and come to consensus on our selection. If we cannot identify a relatively nonpartisan video, we will reach out to a faculty expert to offer a 6-minute lecture on the topic. Students in our dialogue-instructive courses often cite a limited understanding of the topic as the primary reason they choose not to participate in classroom dialogues. We include the short information component, so every participant has a basic understanding of the topic. Once we have the video selected, the facilitating team will develop the breakout group questions and large group questions. One member of the team will prepare the written agenda and bring several copies of the agenda to the dialogue, so each facilitator has a copy of the questions for their breakout group facilitation. Each student facilitator is paired with a faculty member in the communication studies department. In the early days of the project, when we were facilitating on Zoom, three of the communication studies faculty members would partner with a student facilitator in the Zoom breakout rooms, unless the groups got too large, forcing faculty members to facilitate separate breakout rooms. Initially, we made this decision because we did not know how the campus community would receive the dialogues and we wanted to support the student facilitators. Since we moved to in-person dialogues, the numbers have typically demanded that each member of the team facilitate their own breakout group.

Our DEI collaborators reserve the space, order snacks, produce student-focused advertising, and begin each dialogue by sharing our community agreements regarding respectful engagement. Now that we are consistently meeting in-person, we hold the dialogues in the same place every time. We are working to remove any barrier to participation by scheduling at the same time and location each month. Every community member should know where we will meet and how long we will be together. The dialogues always begin at noon and end by 12:50 p.m.

When participants arrive, they are greeted at the door and invited to make a fruit/cheese plate before they take a seat. Many of our participants arrive alone and we want to assure them that they are in the right place, and we are pleased they will be joining us. We hope to ease any concerns that the dialogues are exclusive.

Community Feedback

Since fall 2022, participants have received an anonymous online survey seeking feedback regarding their experience. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, but we have addressed some concerns to make participation more accessible. For example, one participant brought his lunch to the dialogue and asked that we set up some tables for those with a sack lunch. We added two tables to accommodate those with a lunch. Another participant experienced the informational video as biased, writing,

CRT was introduced via a WashPo video that showed only pro-CRT content from informed, calm CRT proponents, and only anti-CRT content from reactionary talking heads and state legislatures. Informed, thoughtful criticisms of CRT are certainly out there—and I share some of those—but those were not portrayed. A more thoughtful sharing of reasoned viewpoints across the scope of this issue would have helped it feel like less of a ‘cheering session’ for CRT overall.

This comment has reminded organizers to take more time when selecting videos. We want participants to see their views represented in the content, but we don’t want to suggest there are only two sides to these complicated issues. This DP is intended to help students, faculty, and staff develop habits of mind that allow them to resist simplistic answers to complicated questions. The 50-minute lunch hour schedule makes it possible to attract participants, but constrains the potential impact of the dialogue. We remind participants that this is the beginning of these important discussions, and we encourage them to continue discussing the issues with their friends and colleagues. The tight time limit prompted one survey respondent to express frustration that the small and large group prompt questions did not address their interests. We modified the small and large group prompts by concluding with the question, “What have we not discussed that you think is important?”

The feedback survey also offered an opportunity for participants to describe how they were feeling during the dialogue. One question asked how we could help participants feel more comfortable sharing their views and listening to others. A student participant responded, “I think my discomfort was around the topic itself, which is what I was aiming for. I was not uncomfortable as in I didn’t feel safe in the space, but rather felt uncomfortable in the way the conversation and environment encouraged. It is nerve-racking being in that situation because of course I don’t want to say anything ‘wrong’ but want to learn and correct myself to grow.” Another student wrote, “Our group was very good about understanding each other’s perspectives and making sure we are asking follow-up questions to further understand each other. It was a

great experience to be a part of.” Although we asked faculty not to require participation, the CRT dialogue fit well into the course content of an education department course, so student teachers were required to participate. Most of the feedback from the students and the instructor indicated that they found the experience enlightening. However, one student indicated, “I don’t think there is much anyone could really do, it is basically just me not being comfortable with talking with a large group of people.”

Most staff members indicated that they felt comfortable during the dialogues. One staff responded, “Just having such a large group join and demonstrate openness to the discussion helped me to feel comfortable.” Another staff member described her experience this way, “I’m pretty confident already and I welcome being uncomfortable.”

The faculty responses were more disparate with responses ranging from “I found the dialogue inclusive” and “I felt comfortable” to

I feel clumsy discussing race. I’m conditioned to feel that it is the kind of topic where one can mistakenly say ‘the wrong thing’ and cause offense. I don’t believe any particular individual at [the University] has made me feel this way, but some kind of communal verbal agreement that we are all here to learn, there are no stupid questions, etc. could lessen the tension somewhat.

Faculty with more conservative views described feeling less welcome to share their perspectives. One faculty member reflected on his experience during a dialogue where the driving question was, What does diversity mean at this university?

While I want to be open and welcoming to all kinds of people who are different from me in important ways, that doesn’t mean that I “approve of” all kinds of behaviors, lifestyles, religious beliefs, or moral claims; or consider them equal in value. Rather, I think some lifestyles are morally problematic and some truth claims are incorrect! But I wasn’t comfortable disclosing that in my small group. I don’t mean focusing on specific things I disagree with, but rather just having space to discuss that “embracing diversity” doesn’t mean “affirming everybody’s beliefs or choices” (as opposed to affirming their humanity and worth). There was a missed opportunity in this dialogue, either in opening remarks or in choice of small-group questions, to get into that challenging corner of diversity: respecting others in their difference, without embracing or perhaps without even respecting every difference itself.

When we asked participants what they valued about the experience, many indicated that they appreciated that the dialogues included participants from every part of the university. One staff member wrote, “I was impressed by the participation of students, faculty, and staff and the fact that we were all coming together for this event. I wish this could happen more often on campus.” Another staff member appreciated the diversity in their breakout group describing it as, “made up of students, student teachers, staff and someone from another country.” Finally, a student marveled that members of the Administrative Council (including the President and the Provost) joined the dialogue. They valued “The willingness of some to share. I liked that people like [the President] were there to share their thoughts on the topic.”

We specifically asked participants to describe any challenges they faced during the dialogue. Two staff members wished the dialogue was longer. Several of the student participants were frustrated that they could not find the perfect words to articulate their point. One student described their frustration this way,

Everybody is either nervous to speak or doesn't want to cut anyone off. It would be good to find a way where there would be an assigned person to speak first in the group each time, or some sort of way so that we don't stare at each other waiting for someone to speak up. I am a White person. I didn't want to cut off the Black people in my group and speak over them. I also didn't want to sit there and make them feel like they have to do the work of "educating" me. Silence is fine but I think everyone wanted to get the conversation going after each question but didn't know how to without overstepping.

Faculty members cited practical challenges related to the quality of audio-visual equipment and the room setup. But one faculty member was frustrated by the tendency of participants to unite around one perspective.

There wasn't room or time to discuss nuance. Some of the large-group sharing about facing the reality of racial issues seemed to me to conflate "CRT" with "any and all honest discussion of the challenges of racial issues interracial interaction"—which I think is a gross mischaracterization.

The feedback from the community has shaped the way we developed the 2024 dialogues in three specific ways. First, the planning team is careful to frame the issue in a way that does not exclude conflicting perspectives. In one case, we invited an expert on the topic (gun violence in America) to introduce the topic with gun violence research rather than using a potentially polarizing video. Second, several of our larger dialogues included large groups of students from courses that allied with the dialogue topic. The feedback we received from those students indicated that they valued the experience even though they were not originally planning to participate. In the spring of 2024, we experimented with partnering with an academic department to connect our dialogue topic with their annual lecture series. The scholar invited to speak at the lecture introduced the topic at our dialogue and then participated in the dialogue with the larger group. Following the dialogue, organizers received an email from the visiting scholar reflecting on her experience:

What a wonderful program you all have—from the intentional welcome to each participant to the amazing round-room chair circle at the end. Every bit of it exactly the kind of conversation modeling I wish more of us knew how to do. Thank you a thousand times over for including me.

The collaboration was very successful, and we will plan another connection in the 2024–25 academic year. Finally, the survey feedback indicated that the reason participants chose to return to the dialogues was because they felt welcome. We will continue to provide snacks, welcome participants at the door, and help them to find their voice in the small group dialogues. Hospitality that seemed natural to the communication studies students was a primary reason participants returned.

The dialogue project has been well received by the campus community and we have a full schedule of dialogues for fall 2024. We will use the data we gathered from the post-event surveys to inform the path forward. The planning team is currently exploring the possibility of expanding the dialogue project to focus on specific issues facing student, staff, or faculty populations. This may offer the opportunity to facilitate longer dialogues with a deliberation component.

This dialogue project is still young. We are pleased with the way the campus community has embraced our efforts but will bring the team together again in the fall to discuss how we can better meet the needs of our community. Our experience over the past 5 years has taught us that our dialogues are most successful when we nurture a welcoming space where participants feel their voices are heard. To nurture a habit of engagement, dialogues must be predictably organized so community members can relax into the routine (Nagda et al., 2009). Inviting trained student facilitators to guide the experience has allowed faculty, staff, students, and administrators to engage with conflicting ideas rather than confront individual participants (Escobar, 2011). Our goal has been to help our university community become comfortable discussing difficult topics across organizational boundaries. We did not know what to expect when we started this project, but we have been pleased with the results. One of our regular staff participants recently accepted a position at another university. Before she left campus, she sent the following email to the organizers:

I don't expect our paths will cross before I leave campus but wanted to send my thanks for your work on these events—I love them and will definitely miss them and the value that they add to my reflection process. The world needs more of these!

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Appendix A

Community Agreement (modified March 2024)

Speak from the “I” perspective: Avoid speaking for others by using “we,” “us,” or “them.”

Listen actively: Listen to understand, not to respond.

Step up, step back: If you usually speak less, challenge yourself to bring your voice forward in the conversation. If you usually speak up, challenge yourself to listen with curiosity before you contribute.

Respect silence: It is not necessary to fill silence. Relax into the silence and open a space to think and process.

Share, even if you don’t have the right words: Suspend judgment and allow others to be unpolished in their speaking. If you are unsure of their meaning, then ask for clarification.

Uphold confidentiality: Treat the candor of others as a gift. Assume that personal identities, experiences, and perspectives shared in this space are confidential unless you are given permission to use them.

Lean into discomfort: Learning happens on the edge of our comfort zones. Push yourself to be open to new ideas and experiences even if they initially seem uncomfortable to you.

Embrace conflict: The best dialogues give us a chance to stretch our understanding and create something new together. Treat conflicting ideas as an opportunity to enrich your understanding.

This is a community dialogue. Whether you are student, faculty, staff, or administration, you bring a piece of the puzzle. Share from your experience and listen with curiosity.

Appendix B

Good morning,

You are invited to participate in the final dialogue of the fall on **Wednesday, November 8, at noon**. The DEI office has collaborated with the Communication Studies Department to facilitate campus dialogues on critical issue. All faculty, staff, and students are welcome to participate! The dialogue will begin with a quick video to help participants better understand the topic. Our topic this month: Race in America. Student facilitators will open a space for participants to engage honestly in dialogue.

We ask participants to enter the dialogues ready to listen with curiosity and share generously. Please join us and encourage your friends and colleagues to join us. We work to nurture a space where everyone feels heard and respected. Please bring your own drink, **snacks will be provided.** 😊

Topic: Race in America

Date and time

Gathering location

Best,

Dialogue team members

Appendix C

Agenda for the Dialogue Project

Facilitator Instructions

Thank you for helping our community engage these challenging topics in a healthy way. We will be discussing **Gender Fluidity**. Arrive 10 minutes early to welcome participants. If you want to encourage participation in your breakout groups, you might ask, “Does anyone have a similar view?” or “Who has a different understanding?”

Agenda

1. 11:50: **Student facilitating team** (both): Welcome participants as they arrive. Let them know they are in the right place. Encourage them to get snacks and get seated in the theatre-style seating.
2. 12:01: **Student facilitator** will officially welcome participants.
3. 12:02: **DEI representative** will share the community agreements.
4. 12:04: **Communication faculty** will show the video: (video link)
5. 12:09: **Student facilitator** will explain that we will be in small groups for 20 minutes and then come together as a large group. Use the singing bowl to illustrate what they will hear when they have 1 more minute to finish their conversation.
6. 12:09–12:33: **Student facilitator** will invite the participants to move into breakout groups. **Student facilitator** will watch for late arriving participants and welcome them to a group.
7. 12:33–12:45: **Student facilitator** will invite the group to come together as a large group to discuss ideas inspired by the breakout dialogues. **Student facilitator** will facilitate the large group. Ask for the final comment at 12:44.
8. 12:45: **Student facilitator** will thank participants and ask them to continue the discussion after this event. Next dialogue will take place on Wednesday, November 8—Do you have a right to health care?
9. End by 12:50.

Questions for the breakouts—Ann will bring the questions and singing bowl.

Facilitation questions for the first breakout:

1. What resonated with you in the video?
 2. What questions do you still have about gender fluidity?
 3. How do you think college students will talk and think about gender in 20 years?
-

Questions for the large group (You may only need one of these questions)

Student facilitator: Help the group gather in a large circle unless the group is too large, then encourage them to stay in their small group. **Student facilitator** will facilitate the full group discussion by posing the first question:

1. What did you discuss in your breakout that you are still thinking about?
2. Did your breakout discussion inspire any questions you would like the entire group to consider?
3. What have we not discussed that you believe is important?

Student facilitator will conclude and thank participants.

Communication faculty member will remind participants that this is just the beginning of the conversation so continue the conversation in classrooms, offices, and residents halls. Participants will be invited to join the next scheduled dialogue.



Maintaining the Complex Personal and Professional Elements of Our Lives in Academe

Sydney Elaine Brammer , Ryan J. Martinez , and Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter 

Keywords: academic burnout, boundaries, mindfulness, technology dependency, work-life balance

Abstract: This reflective essay offers several practical suggestions for scholars and professionals who are looking for ways to sustain abundant personal and professional lives in a discipline that encourages workaholic tendencies and requires many to engage in hybrid working arrangements. We discuss the tensions experienced by many communication teacher-scholars in academe and how various types of boundaries can aid in the maintenance of rest and work.

Introduction

For communication students and faculty, staying connected with others in-person and online is an essential part of academic life. However, as researching and teaching in hybrid or online situations has become increasingly common (Almpanis & Joseph-Richard, 2022; Singh et al., 2022) and a *workaholic* lifestyle—one in which an individual's time is largely consumed by work and/or work-related tasks—continues to maintain a steady presence in the discipline (Kotini-Shah et al., 2021; Ugwu et al., 2023), balance can seem further and further out of one's reach. How does one turn off their *work brain* if the only difference between work and one's personal life is the closing of a laptop or moving from a desk to the kitchen table? Further, if one's regular interactions with colleagues and students serve as the only guaranteed social encounters for the day, are such interactions not also fulfilling a personal life need through a work function? When the 9 to 5 workday is not enforced, how are working versus nonworking

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hours determined? For these reasons, academics must reassess the complex intertwinement between their careers and personal lives.

The physical and psychological boundaries between parts of our lives have become even more flexible and permeable in recent years, a merging that was exacerbated by advances in technology (Lavigne & Grawitch, 2023; McCloskey, 2016). As many have likely experienced firsthand, boundary theory suggests that conflict can happen when our boundaries shift or blur, such as when boundaries shift to accommodate a change in work-life balance (Park & Jex, 2011). Similarly, Kreiner et al. (2009) asserted that everyone must determine what balance is desired or needed for their specific situation and time. Thus, shifting one's perspective from *balancing* separate pieces on a scale to *maintaining* a unique, complex system may mitigate some boundary-related conflict and make it easier to navigate and sustain busy, intricate lives.

First, one of the most frequently identified agents of work-life boundary blurring is mobile technology because people seem to become endlessly accessible (Sayah, 2013). Despite the fact that mobile technologies can enhance workplace efficiency, technology can also introduce higher expectations regarding response time and intrusions of work-related conversations on family time (Dhillon & Lambertz-Berndt, 2023; Duxbury et al., 2013). Not only does this feeling of being *on academic call* make it difficult to separate oneself from work fully, but technology decreases one's efficiency because it encourages multitasking, which increases stress levels. Hence, one must set specific times (e.g., only between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. or nothing after 7:00 p.m.) when it is appropriate to attend to work-related calls and messages and nonwork-related communication, even if both kinds of messages are arriving in one's inbox at all hours. Utilizing different devices to establish a greater separation between different sources of messages (e.g., no email on one's phone) may help with maintenance as well (Fleck et al., 2015). Decide what technology boundaries work best and try to maintain them; apply the same mindset to respecting others' working hours and offline periods too, including those of your students.

Second, taking the time to perform tasks that are necessary to keep one's body and mind healthy is essential for all areas of life. Though one may find it tempting to sit and work through a mealtime to beat writer's block, eating regularly and taking breaks from sitting at the desk can do wonders for one's health. Prolonged sitting has been shown to have long-term negative effects on functions such as circulation (Dunstan et al., 2012), and skipping meals—especially breakfast—has been linked to lower energy and low blood sugar (Goldschmidt, n.d.). Further, some mealtimes may serve as quality time with others, so whether it is with the coworker down the hall or with family, sharing a meal with someone else is a nice way to step away from screens and re-engage socially (Hartmann, n.d.). In the same vein, getting an appropriate amount of sleep will give one a chance to reset and prepare for whatever the day holds (Worley, 2018). There are specific apps that can help one balance out sleep, exercise, and food intake. Taking more mindful approaches to behaviors such as these may seem like an obvious suggestion, but they are often the first thing to go when the tasks on one's plate become overwhelming. Prioritizing them will help prevent burnout and unnecessary stress. Encourage your students to consider these same points.

Third, structure and planning can help eliminate some of the chaos of juggling too many things at once. Academic lives come with many time stamps and deadline. However, some tasks such as writing a book chapter that has been difficult to start, running errands, or setting up a coffee date with a friend seem to get lost in the shuffle because they do not come with externally imposed deadlines. Scholars

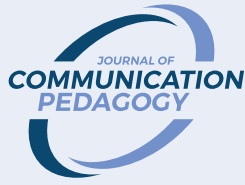
who study self-directed learning recommend “benchmarking,” which is establishing a timeline with checkpoints toward the completion of one’s own tasks (Robinson & Persky, 2020). When one creates benchmarks for personal and/or professional tasks, they can be held at equal importance (e.g., blocking off time to celebrate a family member’s birthday would be maintained at the same level of importance as time blocked off for an advising meeting). It is important to schedule *me* time into one’s schedule, as sustaining balance plays a significant role in the performance of effective relational maintenance behaviors as well as relational and job satisfaction (Dhillon & Lambertz-Berndt, 2023). The authors can attest that building structure into seemingly nebulous time will ultimately result in more efficiency, more purposeful time with the people in one’s life, and intentional rest. For those practicing communication pedagogy, the products of such rest will encourage a more engaged, energetic classroom presence in the long run.

By making conscious decisions about when to plug in, resisting the urge to put productivity over wellness, and using time management tools to build structure into all areas of one’s busy life, some of the stress and burnout that can be caused by low work-life maintenance can be eliminated. Demonstrating work-life maintenance behaviors and being transparent about what one needs can also be a form of allyship for one’s colleagues. By taking care of oneself, it becomes easier to enter the classroom with energy, be accessible to one’s students and colleagues, and be present for loved ones.

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#politicalcommunicationsowhite: A Call for Considering Race in the Undergraduate Political Communication Course

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Keywords: political communication, race, course design, undergraduates

Abstract: The field of communication has been working to reconcile its historic omission of race from research (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and pedagogy (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). The subfield of political communication has begun this process in its research (Freelon et al., 2023) but has yet to consider the implications of race missing from pedagogy. This essay offers an argument for including race in the political communication course, in the form of more focus on race in course content and more work by scholars of color. We offer reasons for these inclusions, ways for instructors to begin this incorporation, and what considerations instructors must be mindful of throughout the process.

Introduction

Problems of race and citation politics have gained considerable attention recently. The #communicationsowhite movement gained momentum with evidence offered by Chakravartty and colleagues (2018) that journals underrepresent and authors undercite work from scholars of color. This underrepresentation of race manifests in student experiences and the larger academic literature. Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) analyzed graduate communication theory syllabi and found race was largely absent from the coursework experience. Since many academics rely on their coursework as a foundation, and this coursework largely ignores the work of scholars of color and thorough discussion of race, it is unsurprising that related research has shown little regard for either of these subjects. Ultimately, these trends lead to a reinforcement of structural discrimination that omits both the labors

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of scholars of color as well as lessons about race overall. These two practices are distinct, but both contribute to larger racial inequity in the field.

Digging deeper into the communication discipline, we want to focus our attention on political communication for this essay. As a field, political communication focuses considerably on the foundations of political behaviors and expression. Work has shown the role of identity in political behavior, but race has been the subject of less investigation, despite its foundational influence on our political system (Coles & Lane, 2023). Freelon and colleagues (2023) documented that political communication journals were less likely to include substantive discussion of race than generalist and critical communication journals. Academic discussions have been sparked about how to settle this issue at the level of research (e.g., Brown & Searles, 2023) and discussions of these subjects have occurred at the graduate level (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). This essay extends this discussion to undergraduate coursework and concludes by providing ideas for a path forward.

Race in Political Communication

Calls to consider race in political communication have been made for a variety of reasons. The first major reason is segregational. By underciting or not citing relevant work from scholars of color, academic domains disregard their labor and award it less importance than White scholars' work. This practice is worsened by the expectation that scholars of color should be the sole voices of racial advocacy and change (Chakravartty et al., 2018). These practices make academia a hostile, unwelcoming environment for scholars of color, and their work, because it can create barriers of entry and limit upward mobility if potential and current scholars of color see their labor and contributions sidelined. Further, discriminatory practices can lead to siloed knowledge, with unconnected academic domains that are not in conversation with one another. Creating silos diminishes scholarship and its ability to provide comprehensive knowledge.

This leads to the second reason, which is epistemic. Coles and Lane (2023) keenly note, "Despite the centrality of race and ethnicity in social and political life, they are often absent from studies of the urgent questions in contemporary political communication research" (p. 367). Scholars such as Bohman (2007) and Kreiss (2022) have argued that inclusiveness is essential to truth-seeking. Accounting for race provides a more thorough understanding of political communication actors who are considered crucial to a course on the subject (e.g., the role of media, see Brown & Harlow, 2019). In turn, failing to recognize the critical role of race in political communication could result in incomplete and even faulty knowledge. Therefore, continuing to not grapple with this omission could also result in the discipline losing contemporary relevancy. A holistic understanding of our political landscape must account for the impact of race or it cannot be comprehensive.

As Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) argue, this incomplete experience is present in the classroom as well with course syllabi. They note that a syllabus "powerfully represents the field to future scholars" (p. 2). Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) argue that syllabi socialize graduate students and provide "implicit and explicit messages about what constitutes model work—and which scholars do that work" (p. 101). In turn, the syllabus is a "social document" that familiarizes students with new academic communities (Parson, 2016) and provides standards for those communities. In addition to contributing to power dynamics in terms of who and what gets included, syllabi also assert professors' authority and power of assessment, as well as symbolize, in part, how a professor has cultivated their professional identity (see

Parson, 2016). Research has found that professors from underrepresented backgrounds assign a higher number of readings from scholars with underrepresented backgrounds, suggesting they may be more aware of issues around representation and power (see Smith et al., 2020). Thus, syllabi constitute a rich site of study that communicate more than the practicalities of the classroom.

Though Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) and Smith et al.'s (2020) analyses focused on the graduate level, we argue their points also extend to the undergraduate experience. Before an individual decides to become a formal educator, they are first a student, and their experiences in the classroom are crucial to developing a sense of who and what are deemed legitimate and worthy of inclusion. Underrepresenting work on race and scholars of color on the syllabus perpetuates the problems of segregational pedagogy and implies racial issues, and the work of scholars of color are not essential enough to be included in a course. These omissions are dire as a student's coursework is one of their most formative pedagogical experiences. Further, for students of color, a lack of descriptive representation in course materials may signal to them that they do not belong in academia and inhibit their ability to progress into future scholars. This lack of representation may potentially feed the "leaky pipeline" scenario and help explain the lower rates of faculty of color (Asare, 2019). Just as children of color need to see thoughtful depictions of people of color in pop culture, students of color need to see scholars of color in their classrooms and syllabi. Doing so also socializes students of all backgrounds to understand that diversity is valuable.

A Way Forward

There is an undeniable difficulty in getting scores of academics to recognize a problem and incorporate bodies of scholarship in the classroom when such discussions or scholarship were not a formative part of an academic's pedagogical experience. However, this is no excuse for perpetuating the practices we have discussed. As scholars, we should be constant students with no endpoint to our learning. We need to continue to update our pedagogical approaches, materials, and conversations in the classroom to ensure that we are being comprehensive and reflective of the contemporary field. Needed change does not translate into easy change so it is important to acknowledge the difficulty that comes with addressing this problem and find ways to start implementing a multipronged approach to change in a rigorous way. This essay is not just a critique of our existing political communication pedagogy, it is a critique that comes with proposed solutions. Some of these solutions have been previously suggested by other scholars such as Brown and Searles (2023), we rearticulate them here, in addition to our own offerings, to provide clear steps forward.

Before one begins making changes, we recommend being mindful of several risks and pitfalls. The first risk is overly taxing or retraumatizing students of color. An insensitive incorporation of race can cause students of color to be immersed in traumatic situations. For example, instead of offering a "content warning" before showing a graphic video in class, such as the death of a person of color, instructors should question whether such depictions are truly necessary for a meaningful pedagogical moment. Could other, less graphic depictions, such as an image of the mirror casket during the BLM protests, be employed instead? Second, be wary of adopting a White savior mentality that sidelines voices of color. Professors need to be cognizant of their positionality and know when other voices need to be elevated and heard to help "destabilise the normalised politics of knowledge production" (leurs, 2017, p. 145). For example, White faculty should avoid offering a lecture on race without incorporating perspectives from people of color. Third, instructors should be cautious of using the material in a way that reinforces existing racial problems rather than helping to solve them. To address this concern, we recommend

looking at literature on difficult conversations (e.g., Chen & Lawless, 2018) to find ways to ease the friction of these conversations and make them manageable.

With these three considerations in mind, we suggest faculty begin by taking stock of your syllabus and assessing the racial makeup of the authors. This plays the crucial role of bringing conscious awareness to the problem and its severity. To do so, resources such as syllabusdiversity.org (Millard-Ball et al., 2021) can help instructors check the authorial composition. This can also serve as a meaningful moment for self-reflexivity, noting how one's syllabus came to be this way and why. Such answers may help faculty better identify contributing factors and seek to mitigate those for future syllabi.

Next, assess the role of race in your syllabus's existing topic areas: Is it present? How is it present? What voices and experiences are being privileged? What more can be done to expand the scope or voices included, add more nuance, provide more historical and/or contemporary context? Depending on your answers, you may consider one or more of the following five strategies:

1. Introduce a dedicated unit in the course that focuses on race. One example here might be to include the role of race in media and political behavior. This approach highlights race as a part of the course material, but it may also connote that race is a topic that can be easily bound and gives race less attention than other approaches on this list. As such, it would be advantageous to combine this approach with others below to create a more integrated approach to race in political communication.
2. Interlace race throughout the course as a lens for examining and discussing a range of topics. For example, use identity as a lens for understanding different topics in political communication, such as representation or issue publics.
3. Introduce assignments and activities that encourage students to grapple with the role of race in political communication contexts so students are active in the desegregating/decolonizing process. Doing so is a pivotal part of interracial communication and can offer a more applied and pragmatic strategy that teaches students how to navigate race in politics. One assignment for students could include having them help generate topic areas inclusive of race. Instructors can leave spaces open in their syllabus, then have students work in groups to develop what questions they have concerning race and political communication. The instructor and students then work together to refine the list (e.g., grouping similar ideas), and the instructor can incorporate diverse readings, lectures, and discussions covering these areas. Taking this approach could help ensure the course stays in step with contemporary issues and reflective of students' perspectives, which may generate more engagement.
4. Consider the role of methodology in this reflection. While the field of political communication leans quantitative, this methodological slant may be insufficient for revealing the underlying issues of race in our political system (Coles & Lane, 2023; Delli Carpini, 2013). Freelon and colleagues (2023) noted that many critical journals were more likely to offer discussions on race, thus incorporating them in a syllabus, offers another opportunity to equalize the citation gap and address some of the methodological siloing that occurs in the field (See Delli Carpini, 2013). Another approach might include other methodologies that consider race beyond a demographic category (e.g., Grover & Kuo, 2023). Doing so requires unpacking work that captures identity in deeper manners than the traditional approaches in quantitative methodologies. Additionally,

instructors can offer students multiple definitions of politics and show how one's definition of politics affects what we consider to be political behavior. Combining this approach with rhetorical, social scientific, and critical perspectives on political communication could offer a more holistic view of the field and how race exists within our political realm.

5. Consider offering a course on politics and race. This approach offers a pedagogically richer opportunity, though we recognize it must be considered in consultation with departmental policies and local politics. Introducing courses can open a bureaucratic labyrinth, and state legislation banning discussion of race-based issues can further complicate this solution. Despite these hurdles, a course like this would provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of politics and race. Further, pulling on resources for difficult conversations (e.g., Chen & Lawless, 2018; Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019) can provide instructors with additional tools for facilitating discussion on topics as they apply to race. Unfortunately, these resources are still underdeveloped for covering topics on political communication and race. As we discuss below, if scholars can assist each other by submitting their resources to these online repositories for others' consideration, it would help lift our academic community.

To assist with these changes, we also recommend that relevant academic organizations create spaces dedicated to furthering these practices. Two such examples include the National Communication Association's Teaching and Learning resources and the American Political Science Association's Educate initiative. Both resources have begun consolidating syllabi and recommendations for effective practice, but neither of these archives have resources for political communication courses and extraordinarily little exists for incorporating race. We call on fellow educators to provide these materials for their peers and suggest these spaces as a starting point.

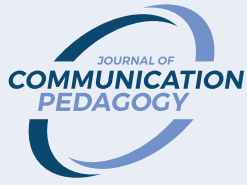
Before we conclude, it is important to highlight that the path of progress should not be paved only by scholars of color or students of color. This essay serves as one response of many to the call from Chakravartty and colleagues (2018) that scholars of all identities should begin to incorporate race into communication scholarship in a more inclusive way. Marginalized scholars should not bear the unequal burden to "do" diverse scholarship or "be" markers of diversity; rather, what is required is a collective engagement with work that addresses racial antagonisms as central features shaping modern communicative practices. As such, while it can be valuable to invite scholars of color to deliver guest lectures (e.g., increasing descriptive and scholarly visibility), such decisions need to be weighed against how this creates more labor for these scholars and may "outsource" the practical labor of putting together thoughtful materials, as well as outsource the emotional labor of engaging in potentially difficult conversations. To create change, we must all do the work.

Conclusion

Race is a foundational part of our political life, and it should play a foundational part in our pedagogy. Our proposed changes require labor, said labor requires effort, and said effort requires conviction. While individuals can and should take up this effort, we hope that it feeds into a collective effort across our field to correct what has been incorrect, and unjust, for far too long. Scholars start their careers as students, and pedagogy shapes a student's view of the things they decide to study. If we want to improve our field, the classroom is an ideal starting point.

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Accented and Silenced Voices

Ahmet Atay 

I guess we have to start from the beginning in this story to understand my relationship with the Central States Communication Association (CSCA). I was introduced to the CSCA a year before attending my very first CSCA conference. I spent the Spring of 2003 being the research assistant for Dr. Roberta Davilla, who was the First Vice President of the CSCA at the time. Since she was the program planner of the conference, she tasked me to proofread the program and cross-reference the presenters. I met so many scholars (whom now I call as my colleagues and friends) on paper before I had formally been introduced to them. Unfortunately, I did not attend the conference that year. It was 20 years ago in 2004 when I attended my very first CSCA conference and presented my work in Cleveland, Ohio, only 60 miles away from where I wrote these notes. Although I was intimidated by the scholars whose work I read in different classes, it was a welcoming environment. Being there felt right. As an international student, I felt I belonged.

Twenty years later I arrived at Grand Rapids, Michigan, as the President of the CSCA, the very first transnational President of an organization that I considered as my academic home for the last 2 decades. A lot has changed within those 20 years. The shy but academically curious young international student grew up and decided to run for the President of CSCA in 2019. Often people like me, who are accented, do not occupy these positions; hence, we do not see our reflections. We are often overlooked or considered as an underdog. It is not easy to make a space for ourselves in academia. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, academic places are often not created for marginalized “others”: Black, Indigenous, BOPIC, scholars of color, queer, or accented. Those who find enough courage and perhaps enjoy some academic recognition and visibility either step up and step in to these positions or become mentors for others by opening doors that are tightly chained or brutally unwelcoming. Therefore, when I decided to run for the President position, I wanted to do it not only for the community that supported me and nurtured me, but I wanted to do it to empower the voices of historically marginalized voices, especially accented and queer ones. These ideas framed my time as the President of CSCA.

Even though I see the CSCA as a homeplace and my CSCA family, colleagues, and friends as my extended family, I also know that like all families we also have our share of issues but I think the last several years the members of the Executive Committee, a number of ad-hoc committees, and new initiatives that are implemented are helping us to have informed and honest conversations and also finding solutions to some of our issues or concerns. I am deeply grateful for everyone who worked on these initiatives or engaged in these conversations. I know that we still have work to do but at least we started to make some meaningful progress.

When I left Grand Rapids and drove away from the city, I was content. I felt like I achieved what I set out to do. Of course, there is more to do and people after me will continue to engage those, but I have to say that I am proud of spotlighting the lives, stories, issues, and research of people who have sat on the sidelines, or their voices are not heard, or they did not have enough courage to narrate their stories. Our voices matter and the CSCA is stronger because of these eclectic, different, queer, and accented voices.

Just like my friends and the two CSCA Past-Presidents before me, I did not expect or envision to face challenges that forced and encouraged us to reimagine the spaces we occupy. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath impacted my time when I occupied different positions in the Executive Committee. As Dr. Alberto Gonzales pointed out, due to the circumstances, we paused the rotation of the officers for a year. That meant, as Dr. Debra Ford explained, she ended up planning two different conferences. This is also true for me as I planned two consecutive pre-conferences, virtual in 2021 and in-person in 2022. It is not accidental that both of these pre-conferences engaged with issues about diversity and equity. While the 2021 pre-conference, *Decolonizing the Discipline: Race, Ethnicity, and Postcoloniality in Communication Studies*, attracted about 100 participants, it helped us cultivate a discussion about decolonizing our own discipline. The 2022 pre-conference in Madison, *Diversity, Emotional Labor and Survival in Academia*, furthered our discussion by helping us to focus on academic labor and survival strategies in higher education. The purpose behind both of these pre-conferences was spotlighting issues around diversity and generating conversations with directions about positive and meaningful change. Working on these pre-conferences was a tremendous joy. I really hope the conversations we have had will find ways to intertwine with our future conferences and discussions.

I spent a great deal of time to conceptualize the 2023 CSCA conference. Since I knew that I only got one shot at this important responsibility, I wanted to choose a conference theme that focused on silenced voices. Hence, *Intersections, Transitions, and Silenced Voices* came about. I wanted the theme to allow us to reflect on the current status of our discipline but also encourage discussions about how to be more inclusive. I wanted to empower historically marginalized scholars and spotlight their voices. Although Dr. Tiffany Wang, the Executive Director of CSCA, and I spent several days and weeks planning this conference, it was a great joy to witness so many rich conversations, exciting panels, and interactions among people. At the 2023 conference, I stepped into the role of the CSCA President. I had big shoes to fill because of the work the past Presidents completed, especially the work that Alberto Gonzalez and Debra Ford were engaged in. Since I had good mentors, stepping in to this role was not daunting. However, I knew that I wanted to do the best work I could because although I wanted to make my CSCA family proud, I wanted my accented, immigrant, queer, and historically marginalized colleagues and friends prouder.

Although I completed several important tasks during my presidency, I could not make those happen without my wonderful colleagues in the Executive Committee. We named the new editor, Dr. Sandra

Faulker, as the new editor of the CSCA's flagship journal, *Communication Studies*. I am excited about the vision of our editor and what Dr. Faulker will bring to the journal. We also named Dr. Sarah Baker Bailey as the Inaugural Creative Director of the CSCA. We are excited about the creation of this position for various reasons. After all we live in a highly mediated and visual culture and as CSCA we need to visually craft our mission and story to our own members but also attract new ones. We believe that the creation of this new position will help us to achieve this goal. During my presidency, we also named the next CSCA Executive Director. Dr. Debra Ford graciously agreed to perform the role and continue to do the amazing work of Tiffany Wang and the work of our other former Executive Directors. We are truly excited about Deb Ford's new position.

As part of the President's responsibilities, I performed the planner task of the CSCA's Undergraduate Honors conference. Students across the region applied and were competitively reviewed by several reviewers. I am grateful for their work because often we forget our instrumental reviewers are for our organizations and conferences. Although reviewers perform such crucial tasks, the task is often overlooked in our academic culture. I want to extend my gratitude to those who not only reviewed for our Undergraduate Honors conference but also reviewed for our Interest Groups and Caucuses. Our undergraduate presenters made us proud and they truly shined during their presentations. I also want to take a moment to recognize our faculty mentors and thank them for encouraging our undergraduate students to attend CSCS and other conferences.

Although these are visible tasks that I performed during my presidency, there was also behind-the-scenes or invisible labor that I performed. I am mentioning this not to spotlight myself but instead I want to recognize that several of us, especially those of us who are part of historically marginalized communities, step into the role of mentors or perform tasks and duties that not many recognize or do not know. The invisible work matters, and it is important that we make it visible, so our work is acknowledged and valued. As part of this work, I carried so many conversations with so many of our members about so many things that we individually or collectively care about. We are part of supportive academic family, and these conversations, or invisible work that we perform, matter for not only the continuation of the organization, but also for creating a supportive and productive environment. These conversations are also instrumental to achieve a meaningful change in which we cultivate a community where diversity is valued, people with accented voices are not forgotten, and other marginalized scholars find a home and achieve a sense of belonging, and finally, be part of our community.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to acknowledge the work and support of my colleagues in the Executive Committee. Thank you for serving. I want to thank Deb and Al for their mentorship and friendship. I appreciate your support. Finally, I want to thank Tiffany who has been my champion and friend and who has supported me during every step of my journey. Thank you.

It is true that my role as the President of the CSCA is completed, and I will always be a supportive member of our CSCA community. I hope the work that we started or carried on will not be halted. I hope that the momentum that we caught in meaningfully engaging with the inclusion, diversity, equity, and access work will continue. I hope that the work of the marginalized voices is still part of the heart of the CSCA. I hope that we will continue to value queer and trans lives, and the work of our LGBTQIA+ scholars. I hope that we will continue to acknowledge the hard work of international scholars and their labor in our field and organization. I hope that we will still make the CSCA a home for accented and marginalized scholars. Your work matters. Your scholarship matters. You are seen and heard.

To conclude, I want to thank all of you for allow me to dream, follow my academic dreams, and actualizing them with me. And for those of you who have been afraid of dreaming in academia, keep dreaming because your dreams could come true. We are here to support you. And for me, I will continue to chase my academic dreams, regardless of how big or small they are. I know that enough of you will stand by me, with me, and carry on our academic dreams together.

Reference

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