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Access Before Praxis: Lessons Learned About Critical Communication Pedagogy and Socioeconomic Barriers from 2020

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Communication scholars and professionals often turn to Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) to best reach college and university students of all backgrounds. One particular demographic category that reveals disproportionate levels of access to tools for success in the college classroom. In our essay, we first examine several fundamental dimensions of the theory and praxis of CCP and then explain how these aspects of both theory and practice were fundamentally challenged for instructors and exacerbated for students who lacked socioeconomic privilege and experienced food and housing insecurity since March of 2020.

Introduction

> *February 2020: An instructor is discussing a subject with students that challenges their positionalities. Essays are coming forth where students are showing growth in their personal journeys.*
>
> *Early March 2020: An assurance is made to the students that if we have to transition online, we will do our best to make sure that they will learn all they can, that the course will meet its outcomes, and we will keep a positive attitude.*
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> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor and mentions that their book is in a locked dorm room on campus and wants to know how to access the material.*
> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor from their phone and lets them know that they have limited access to the Internet.*
> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor to let them know that they are in-between living spaces.*
> *Late March 2020: A student lets their professor know that they are sorry that they have not turned anything in, but they just could not get motivated to complete the assignment.*
>
> *Early April 2020: A student logs into the learning management system for the last time with weeks to go.*

****The narrative experiences included are not verbatim interactions that any of the authors have experienced with students. These are hypothetical narratives designed to reflect the multitude of challenges that may resonate with instructors' experiences.*

Communication scholars and professionals often turn to Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) as a theory and practice for best-reaching college and university students of all backgrounds. One particular demographic category that reveals disproportionate access to tools for success in the college classroom is socioeconomic status. In our essay, we first examine several fundamental dimensions of the theory and praxis of CCP. Then, we explain how these aspects of both theory and practice were fundamentally

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challenged for instructors when dealing with students who lacked socioeconomic privilege and experienced food and housing insecurity since March of 2020. Finally, we offer strategies that instructors may employ to best connect with students who are experiencing challenges to meet fundamental needs.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

The goal (theory) of critical pedagogy differs from the praxis-based realities that instructors and students encounter on an ongoing basis. Education scholars first presume that the purpose of this approach to education must begin with critical theory and follows the premise:

> *Men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege.* The critical educator endorses theories that are, first and foremost, *dialectical*; that is, theories which recognize the problems of society as more than simply isolated events of individuals of deficiencies in the social structure. (McLaren, 2003, p. 69)

Fundamentally, critical pedagogy's function recognizes that social ills must be solved before larger goals of awareness, consciousness-raising, and ultimately, learning, can be achieved. Paulo Freire acts as a founding voice for many modern-day education scholars who study and practice critical pedagogy. His (1970/2000) work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* draws from experiences of having taught literacy skills to members of the laboring class in Brazil. It includes a theoretical foundation in regard to the relationship between teachers and students concerning the dimensions of power, equality, and reciprocity:

> A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. (p. 69)

A Freierean approach considers the relationship that teachers and students should opt to create through mutual dialogue to avoid a more traditional and oppressive monologic *banking* form of education that solely asks students to memorize and repeat information.

So, what is a Critical "Communication" Pedagogy? In terms of practice, critical pedagogy adds to Freirean assumptions about how teaching practices ought to occur in terms of symbolic action and connects the role that language has in constructing social barriers (Kahl, Jr., 2013). However, it is easiest to first reflect upon what communication actions are not critical forms of learning (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Rote memorization without meaningful goals, ignoring or invalidating individuals' experiences, and the silencing of voices are just a few aspects that are not critical pedagogies. In developing a few principles of how these actions occur, educators recognize that "in critical communication pedagogy, identity is constituted in communication" (p. 39); "culture is central to critical communication pedagogy, not additive" (p. 42); and "critical communication educators embrace social, structural critique as it places concrete mundane communication practices in a meaningful context" (p. 45).

For all of the actions and goals that go into building a framework for CCP, one major concern to consider regards the barriers that may exist before meaningful learning can occur. While all students will hold different standpoints in relation to identity, power, and privilege, we contend that one major factor that has become especially illuminated since March of 2020 involves the isolation of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. In contemporary times, the lack of affordability of a college education may cause students to take on insurmountable debt. Calling upon significant findings from the Hope Center at Temple University, we contend that the class divisions in higher education systems are architectonic to the continuance of inequities as an important mission of public universities should be giving access to students who can afford to enroll (Nasaw, 1979).

The Hope Center and Students from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds

The Hope Center (2020a) is expeditiously pioneering a national movement to unveil and mitigate the burgeoning crisis of basic needs insecurity in higher education. Since its inception in 2013, the Center has implemented scientific research to amend institutional policies that promote cultural injustices and impede students' academic success. This research is routinely transcribed into compact open-source tools for public access on the Hope Center's website. From book chapters and scholarly journal articles to instructional guides and webinars, the Hope Center (2020b) positions its work as "an easy to access library [for] researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and journalists" (para. 3). Their coalitional and co-intentional initiatives strive to revolutionize post-secondary class divisions that dehumanize students for profit through an approach that emphasizes public accessibility and distribution. One such resource is the #RealCollege survey, which is "the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs insecurity among college students" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 2). Baker-Smith et al. (2020) explain that the Hope Center distributes the survey as a primary means in its attempt to help rectify a dearth of federal knowledge regarding the harsh realities of students' inaccessibility to food and housing. The systemically ingrained pervasion of these realities is alarming. In its February 2020 report, the Hope Center estimated "that at least 6 million students are delayed or deterred on their path to a degree because they don't have a safe and stable place to live or enough nutritious food to eat" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 9).

Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have a "higher-than-average risk" of being unceremoniously derailed by this statistic (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 22). Bahrainwala (2020) maintains that the precarity incurred by some students regulates their non-citizenship in educational systems. Post-secondary infrastructures benefit "traditional students" from high-socioeconomic backgrounds who can afford a full-time education rather than "nontraditional students" from low-socioeconomic backgrounds whose employment and part-time enrollment jeopardize their access to learning structures. It has become increasingly clear that "the majority (70%) of students who experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are employed" and academically compromised (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 23). Basic needs pale in comparison to the financial requisites of collegiate participation, and students' divided attention and inculpable negligence inadvertently thwart their education.

Henry Giroux, a philosopher who examines many critical issues in higher education, has extensively recognized the long-standing concerns for students in poverty. Prominently, Giroux (2002) claims that "spiraling tuition costs coupled with evaporating financial aid increasingly put higher education out of reach for working-class and middle-class youth" (p. 427). From a structural standpoint, pre-pandemic educational access was already problematic. However, as the crisis has continued with a fluctuating job market, inconsistent government assistance, and schools' inability to drastically reduce costs, the barriers to access are growing. In the foundations of critical pedagogy, we discuss the importance of the Freirean approach of making education *co-intentional*. Although both teachers and students opt to see themselves as equally affected participants in systemic oppression, a stratification in participation still exists. As more instruction requires online participation, interaction, and methods that necessitate access to software, stable computers, and consistent Internet connection, the attempt to make education co-intentional may never begin in the first place.

> *August 2020: A student responds to a professor's welcome email that describes the format of the class and mentions that they live in a rural area, so meeting synchronously would be difficult as paying for data on a hotspot is very expensive. The professor responds that they could take an asynchronous section if one is available or could wait until the next semester when one is offered.*

Food and Housing Insecurity

Food and housing insecurities are often mutually inclusive. As the Hope Center's February 2020 report confirms, "students' overlapping challenges in the data demonstrate that basic needs insecurities are fluid and interconnected" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p.15). Yet, these experiences are distinct. Food insecurity is "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner" (p.11), ranging from mild (e.g., worrying about running

out of food) to severe (e.g., not eating for a day due to a lack of money for food). Housing insecurity involves all barriers that "prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live" (p. 12). Some examples include insurmountable increases in rent, defaulted accounts, or leaving one's residence due to a lack of safety. Homelessness constitutes a troubling facet of housing insecurity in which students do not have a consistent place to live. In most cases, "students who experience homelessness temporarily stay with a relative or friend, or couch surf" (p. 13). Regarding these challenges, the Hope Center's fall 2019 survey found that "39% of respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days," "46% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year," and "17% of respondents were homeless in the previous year" (p. 2).

With the onset of coronavirus, a revised version of the #RealCollege survey was quickly issued to colleges and universities in April 2020 (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020, p. 2). The Hope Center found that "nearly three in five students experienc[ed] basic needs insecurity" in various overlapping forms and struggled with their schoolwork (p. 19). Unsurprisingly, "nearly 70% of students who lost a job" and "63% of students whose pay or hours were cut" experienced basic needs insecurity at higher rates (p. 14). Inferentially, the pandemic exacerbated the basic needs insecurity that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds experience.

Food and housing insecurity are central concerns that also form barriers to access in higher education. However, these issues are even deeper and more personal than general socioeconomic barriers as they require a new level of self-disclosure from students. We return to the notion from Fassett and Warren (2007) that communication is at the center of how we make sense of our identities. In a two-way model of education, these identities are co-constructed and yet participants may come with experiences that are never revealed. Relationships are key in building trust, promoting student success, and making educational exchanges more meaningful (Goldrick-Rab, 2020a). Even more so, cultivating a "culture of care" in which collaborative interactions are commonplace is crucial to developing an understanding of student precarity, especially in a time when students are posed with a variety of insecurities (Goldrick-Rab, 2020b, p.3). Paulo Freire describes the type of praxis that we must consciously avoid when building a critical approach to education: "The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (1970/2000, p. 71). The core component is reality and how we seek to make sense of it *with* our students. The data from the Hope Center reveal that many students are food and/or housing insecure and this may not be a reality that is readily perceptible to all instructors. A lexicon for mutual dialogue goes underdeveloped when students' experiences of basic needs insecurity are structurally veiled and excluded from the course curriculum. This could explain why students have a hard time revealing the dire circumstances they experience. It is important for us to know that the identities we, both instructors and students, present may not align with the realities in which we live.

> *A future month: A professor emails a student to check in because they haven't logged into the course in a while.*

The basic needs insecurity that plagues students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds is often veiled by the idealized trope of the *poor college student.* The connotation of the phrase misses addressing the students who face real challenges of poverty. Our argument strives to recognize that educators who wish to engage in methods of critical pedagogy for a liberating educational experience also face a significant set of structural barriers that make starting the learning process difficult or nearly impossible. Instructors are understandably drained from the structural pressures of living and working amid a global pandemic. Westwick and Morreale (2020) explain that "the rapid transition to remote learning has had diverse impacts on professors, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants" (p. 217). Indeed, with an intensified convergence on their home environments, many educators are dealing with exacerbated family care responsibilities and personal hardships while copious others are facing the material insecurities of reduced income due to financial restrictions placed on their respective departments. In the face of these challenges, teachers are forging ahead and working overtime to maintain dialogue-based communication in remote learning environments that have significantly disrupted their personal and professional lives. Unfortunately,

the technology governing educational experiences has served to further subvert pedagogical goals oriented around instructor and student interaction (Swerzenski, 2020).

Martínez-Guillem and Briziarelli (2020) explain that remote learning has reduced communication with students to "technical questions of connectivity" because learning management systems (LMSs) tend to function as mere logistical tools of transmission thus normalizing a monologic approach to education. The conversion to online instruction has, in other words, undermined the learning process through its transformation of "social relations among people (i.e., instructors and students) into social relations between modules and their associated interfaces [where] co-constructed lived experiences are dematerialized and substantiated in colorful images on LMSs such as Blackboard or Canvas" (p. 362). The Hope Center suggests that teachers can begin to confront structural challenges that veil socioeconomic barriers by proactively encouraging students to engage with them comrades in the learning process (Goldrick-Rab, 2020b, p. 1). The capacity for instructors to provide support, especially when they have made themselves more accessible to accommodate student needs during the pandemic, is salient. As we move to the future months and years, we must understand that communication is the component in critical pedagogy that can allow for co-intentional learning to begin.

> *A future month: A student sends a reply asking if they can talk with a professor about some challenges they have been facing.*

Quotidian forms of communication, like email correspondence, can significantly help bolster student success. However, in a paradox, the pandemic has both centralized and abated the impact of this specific medium. Class emails are sent to all course participants to provide instructional support, boost morale, and spark interactions that can inform their educational enlightenment. The content of these messages is vital in a time when students are relying more heavily on instructional communication to help them survive college and the pandemic (Ao, 2020). Instructors are working hard to avoid non-critical forms of remote learning that invalidate students' experiences and induce stress. Yet, indiscriminate messages containing important information can seem impersonal and be disregarded by students who feel disconnected from learning structures in the virtual classroom.

Although email is a concrete and essential communication practice in educational settings, its use has become exceedingly mundane and ineffectual. A revision to *how* the medium is employed within course contexts could foster greater faculty-student engagement and create openings for students to receive the support they need to survive and learn. In their study entitled, "My Professor Cares: Experimental Evidence on the Role of Faculty Engagement," Carrell and Kurlaender (2020) introduce *light-touch feedback* as a critical intervention that advises instructors to send personalized emails to students at specific times throughout a given semester. Said emails can be tailored to any course but should generally include "(1) how [students] are progressing in the class; (2) how to be successful in the class moving forward; and (3) the availability of the professor and other supports" (pp. 6-7). By inviting students to engage in discussion about their performance through light-touch feedback, faculty not only demonstrate their dedication to student outcomes but also prompt further conversation regarding barriers that unjustly render students' basic needs security and education mutually exclusive.

To illustrate its potential, Carrell and Kurlaender (2020) found that students, in response to faculty feedback, revealed personal challenges impacting their course performance such as having to handle tuition payments and reconciling work schedules with coursework. This is an important discovery for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who suffer structural disadvantages and isolation. Here, we can perceive the promise of light-touch feedback to augment the alignment of basic needs security with students' educational success and persistence in college.

Light-touch feedback frames email correspondence within a scheme that allows educators to significantly co-construct meaningful survival *with* their students in academic environments. This is particularly true for contemporary online classrooms that are provisional and riddled with uncertainty. Light-touch feedback facilitates faculty-student reciprocity and co-intent on physically distant, virtual realities to identify (in)effective learning structures and barriers to access. Meaning is drawn from the

phronesis of this mutual engagement to mitigate fatigue, systematize a process of co-constructing self-efficient student identities, and offset pedagogical regressions that are typical of web-based conferencing platforms that allow participants to engage in self-silencing behaviors (e.g., muting audio and video). Taking some time to implement light-touch feedback can play a pivotal role in making colleges and universities more supportive places that recognize students as humans first.

The Hope Center provides educators with a succinct timeline for the implementation of light-touch feedback and resources for email templates, basic needs security statements to include in course syllabi, and welcome surveys as standalone tools and measures that can contextualize the use of the intervention (see Goldrick-Rab, 2020a and Goldrick-Rab, 2020b). Fundamental communication fortifies workable solutions to the barriers that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face. This is true even for instructors who are unable to send personalized emails due to large class sizes or other pressing obligations. Acknowledging students' basic needs can help empower them to seek various forms of campus and university assistance. From reaching out to academic advisors and connecting with health professionals or obtaining support from food banks, financial aid, emergency housing, and transportation services, cultivating a culture of care occurs at all levels in the educational structure. This culture can be prompted in the classroom through instructional communication. Teachers' incorporation of methods to effectively connect with their students can take everyday communication practices and not only construct a foundation for pedagogical innovation but create vital opportunities for support throughout the larger academic community.

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