

**Педагогическа комуникация**  
**Pedagogical Communication**

**Best practices for incorporating race  
into the communication classroom**

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**Abstract:** Communication classes in the United States range from general education public speaking classes to complex discussion-based rhetorical theory and crisis communication classes, yet little has been written about how to incorporate race discussions into the classroom. To be sure, many scholars in many subdisciplines have written and presented about race, but it can be difficult to apply these insights across the communication studies curriculum. Students, particularly those at racially and ethnically diverse colleges and universities, often clamor for faculty to discuss race, yet this can be a daunting task for many. This article provides 10 suggestions for incorporating race into the communication classroom in order to help students think through the complex racial environment in the United States and abroad. These best practices are based on experience teaching everything from the introduction class to argumentation and debate to leadership and organizational communication at several United States colleges and universities over a number of years.

**Keywords:** race, rhetoric, pedagogy, communication studies, United States, teaching.

**Introduction**

Race matters across the United States and in elite private universities, community colleges, large state universities, and small religious institutions. No matter where one teaches, researches, and studies, race is present in complex and ever-changing ways. Changing demographics mean that even if a school serves a relatively racially homogenous area around the campus, admissions officials, student services professionals, and professors will need to address race on campus. The increasing importance of international students and the global economy all mean educators must work with students to think about race in productive ways in order to improve students' ability to interact with people different from

themselves. There is no time like the present to bring discussions of race into the communication classroom, as both communication scholars [1] [2] [3] [4] and our students begin to think more critically about race and the ways in which the communication studies curriculum may not address race as well as scholars and students hope.

Educators know that students learn about race and racism in the classroom [5] and are affected by increasing diversity in the classroom and on campus. [6] Students in general education public speaking courses, advanced seminars in rhetorical criticism, and intercultural communication are thinking about race both as it relates to activities on campus, as well as how students navigate social media posts, newspaper articles, and broadcast news segments about microaggressions, racial violence, migration, and political unrest. Students will find it virtually impossible to avoid discussions of race, and also impossible to not observe and experience its impact on students, faculty, and universities. [7] After graduation, a student's future employer might address issues of race in dealing with promotion, hiring, and client relations in ways that may benefit or harm student-employees. Students may wish to learn more about their own struggles with race or develop a scholarly basis from which to one day conduct graduate research. Importantly, some students and some of their parents do not want to talk about race (it falls under the nebulous character of politics, which can never be discussed at the family dinner table) [8], so the college classroom may be the first place they can engage in thoughtful discussions of race.

Given the centrality of race to students' lives, even if it is not immediately obvious to students, teachers should incorporate discussions of race into their classrooms. [9] The communication classroom is well positioned to engage these discussions. [10] Yet, communication classes often focus on traditional ideas and practical skills (e.g., logical fallacies, interviewing skills, corporate social responsibility, conflict resolution) or veer toward complex theoretical apparatuses that students often have difficulty applying to everyday interactions (e.g., pragmatism, dialectics, dramatism, framing). The problem is, however, that one can teach all of these concepts without every bringing up race. It came as no surprise to me that my willingness to discuss race was welcomed by students, and that they often expressed a desire to have other teachers discuss the issues that we incorporated into class. Students may not feel served by student organizations, student services, and other offices on campus, so communication teachers can help meet the needs of students interested in learning more about and expressing themselves with respect to racial issues. As such, communication teachers can help students thrive in a diverse world and make more meaningful connections

between communication skills, theory, and the world of student experience.

These best practices will not work seamlessly for every teacher in every class offered through every modality at every university. While these best practices have been successful for the author and many colleagues, teachers will need to take account of their specific abilities, situations, student populations, and institutions. Those teachers unfamiliar with race will need to do more background work than their colleagues who may be well-published in the area. Likewise, one should consider the racial makeup of one's campus. The teaching one does at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) may be different from the work one does at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) because the racial characteristics of a campus shape student understanding. Communication classes make sense as a venue for discussions about race because popular culture, argument, and current events are often included in various communication classes including interpersonal, rhetorical criticism, intercultural, and more. The first step will be teacher buy-in and the willingness to take some risks as race is a complex and confusing issue in the classroom and around the university. Teachers will need to study race, learn about terminology, locate offices on campus that can help, find colleagues doing work on race with whom to network and converse, and stay abreast of the ways teachers discuss race in communication studies and beyond. Teachers must also devote time to helping students understand why race is important, especially students of privilege, by discussing the ways race matters in politics, communities, employment, and interpersonal relationships at the very least. These best practices are designed to encourage meaningful discussions of race in the communication classroom, but variations may be needed as with any pedagogical approach.

### **Best Practice 1: Confront Your Fears**

An intrinsic impediment to changing curricula is a teacher's own fear of taking up new material. There is only so much time to read everything in one's own sub-discipline that taking up a new topic can be quite challenging. Luckily, teachers benefit from many of the basic forms of power (e.g., expert and legitimate) discussed in *Introduction to Communication classes across the United States*. [11] [12] Teachers, for example, derive power from their knowledge of subject matter (expert power) as well as power from their title as professor, lecturer, or instructor of record (legitimate power). Most people's students are not waiting to pounce on the unprepared teacher nor the teacher who makes a minor error. Even if students do pounce, prepared teachers know how to redirect criticism to class material or how to suggest teachers and students continue the conversa-

tion in a teacher's office or over E-mail. Quite often teachers, even those with considerable experience, suffer from imposter syndrome or related feelings of inadequacy, and those fears may be exacerbated when taking on something new like race. But, a thoughtful approach to race before a semester starts can reduce the risk of imposter syndrome arising.

Although not all schools have campus resources or professional development opportunities, teachers should work to find them. This may include formal opportunities through various campus offices or meeting with faculty in other departments. It may include observing classes or attending speaker series. It might involve a trip to the campus library or bookstore and an exploration of the titles available. No matter how large or small, well-funded or not, one's college, there will be opportunities to learn more about race, to learn about what students and faculty think about race, and what research is on-going on campus. Participating in these opportunities will help teachers manage their fears and indeed even dispel some as they become more comfortable with race.

### **Best Practice 2: Managing Disagreement**

Students will disagree about race. That is okay, of course, because teachers no doubt also have disagreements about race as well. The history of race relations and race theorizing have been riven with deep disagreements about how to address race, how to attempt to solve racial disparities, and how to think through race in productive ways. Those disagreements have created new theories for understanding race, challenged deeply problematic racial ideas, and pitted scholars and activists against each other to produce important debates in several academic fields. Disagreement is an opportunity for exploring problems students have on campus, the experiences they have on social media, and into the music they consume. In fact, disagreement can be a pedagogically rich experience, one that improves the overall classroom experience. [13]

Teachers will need to manage disagreement in productive ways, however. This will include having a plan for disagreement (taking “five,” mapping competing notions on the board, requiring students present evidence from the class text to support their position, asking students to switch sides on a disagreement, and asking students to discuss the argument of the other side they find most persuasive and why). These processes, which many instructors do in class on a regular basis, will make sure that disagreements about race are productive exchanges and explorations of competing viewpoints. Just imagine having two disagreeing students map their arguments on the board where the instructor could compare and contrast the evidence used and the style in which the arguments were constructed.

Imagine how powerful it is to explain the other side's argument (often after breaking into groups to discuss with an opposing person) instead of merely repeating one's own argument. These strategies can manage disagreement productively and ensure that students do not "dig in" to their positions without exploring others.

Communication classes like argumentation, debate, and political communication are effective places to manage disagreement because much of class is already spent thinking about disagreement from a number of theories and in a number of situations. Time spent on managing disagreement will also have value over the lifespan as students disagree with professors, bosses, parents, partners, and others. In this way, and perhaps because race is such a difficult issue for many, if students learn to manage disagreement on race, managing disagreement about less complicated ideas might be that much easier.

### **Best Practice 3: Encourage Students to Keep the Discussion Going**

Welcome students to E-mail you and to talk with each other after class about race so that students realize race discussions are not confined to the classroom. Communication classes often encourage students to continue conversations beyond the classroom, and not just in the application of theories and methods to research papers, group projects, or learning management system discussion boards (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle, Brightspace). Such outside of class conversations can improve student-teacher relationships and learning. [14] [15] Specifically, outside the classroom discussions about race can enhance classroom learning and provide safer opportunities to discuss a difficult subject. Students might feel threatened in class, so remind them that you have office hours and that they can always E-mail you with questions they do not feel comfortable asking in class. No matter where students fall in their understanding of race or where they are on the political spectrum, students can be nervous about sharing controversial ideas. This includes both #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter sentiments. That is okay. In fact, the subtle reminder that meaningful discussions of race are not the sole province of the classroom can be beneficial. Just as instructors teach students that argumentation happens not only in courtrooms and with one's parents or that health communication is more than one's relationship with one's doctor, utilizing non-classroom time can help students gain an appreciation for how race discussions exist beyond the university.

What one should not do is force students to contribute. Race is complicated, confusing, and impacts people in very personal ways. Forced sharing will only teach student that discussing race is uncomfortable and threatening. Rather than demand everyone participate, give students different ways to participate so that

students confused or scared have the opportunity to participate in ways that are not threatening.

#### **Best Practice 4: Think Beyond Blackness**

Much of the best writing on race has been completed on black people, slavery, civil rights, and critical race theory. Race is often reduced to blackness in United States media. That is, when media pundits discuss race, they are often not discussing Asian or Latinx populations, but only black populations. Yet, race is a complicated, changing, and contested phenomenon that is used to describe groups we generally think of as distinct races (Latinx and Asian populations) and groups where there is disagreement about whether the group is a race, ethnicity, or something else (e.g., Jewish populations). At HSIs, confining one's discussion to blackness may leave out some students, amplifying the effects of racism. Not surprisingly, the experiences of people of different races are different. As such, attempt to incorporate other ideas beyond the black-white binary into class.

Luckily, many scholars are working on Latinx communication with an emphasis on various themes: political communication and political organizing [16] and social trust [17], for example. This means that communication studies is increasingly exploring how race influences communication and what communication studies can tell students and scholars about all races and ethnicities. There are also options for studying rhetors of color, interracial relationships, arguments about Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous populations, and the impact of race on communication pedagogy. Teachers interested in moving beyond blackness will find many resources to use in class and to refine and expand their own thinking about race.

#### **Best Practice 5: Acknowledge Your Shortcomings**

Professors who are honest about their strengths and weaknesses are a tremendous asset to the classroom. If instructors are not experts on race, they can tell students that without losing their respect or control of the classroom. Research argues that admitting shortcomings can build trust and improve relationships. [18] Even people with expertise in a certain racial category or racial experience do not know everything about every racial category or experience. Be honest with students. Most students instinctively know that their teachers are not experts in everything, and there is no need to feign being an expert in everything. One strategy to acknowledge one's shortcomings is by introducing oneself as a fellow learner eager to go on this semester's educational journey with the class, therefore demonstrating one's openness to learning. This can be endearing and

powerful. It also helps students developing their racial knowledge in a place there everyone is also developing.

Being honest with oneself and where one needs to develop as a teacher improves credibility. Acknowledging shortcomings is not only a way to encourage discussion by being vulnerable to students, but also a way to help one think through the difficulties of understanding race and to continually improve as an instructor. This also means acknowledging bias. We all have them. Biases are a natural communicative process and one that is reinforced by friends, family, and media. A teacher's lived experience shapes their understanding of race, and that is true no matter what a teacher's lived experience is. This shapes the ways teachers study and teach race. Only when an instructor accepts that they do not know something and need to do more research can they really learn (just like our students!). This process will help instructors engage race in ways that are open to constant study, reform, and exploration in order to teach students in powerful ways. It will also help students understand how learning is an on-going process.

### **Best Practice 6: Think Glocally**

Some students will only respond to teaching about race if teachers can explain why it matters to them and their everyday life. Other students are actually much more concerned with big ideas, with challenging systems of oppression. Often times it seems teachers only think about their students as falling into one or the other position. Yet, many students share both interests. Communication classes encourage an exploration of both specific arguments, communities, and interactions and more theoretical discussions of proof, theory, and methodology. Most teachers will find students with a range of interests that span both local and national, if not international, issues. In today's complex economy, students will increasingly need an appreciation of national and international trends in politics, sociology, and communication, while also being able to articulate the connection of these trends to local issues. [19] The economy connects different races, ethnicities, and nationalities across borders through an increasingly complex world of communicative technologies (e.g., WhatsApp, E-mail, texting, video conferencing, Skype). Race and economics are often studied together especially in the context of intersectional frameworks [20] used in communication studies, sociology, law, and other disciplines as well as discussed together in public policy [21] and related classes. As countries become further connected, there is an increasing likelihood that students will come into contact with different racial groups and ideas.

Of course, explaining that to students is also important because it can be difficult to understand how global politics affect both small towns and big cities (as it is easy to understand both as insulated from larger trends based on size, space, economy, and more). This is the thrust of glocal thinking, appreciating the interconnectedness of local social and political issues with national and international social and political issues. [22] Glocal thinking helps students think critically about how their actions affect global issues and how global issues affect local denizens.

As such, it is important to explain why race matters locally. This can be easier in diverse universities and might be more difficult in PWIs or schools in rural areas. One way a teacher might explain the importance of race is to acknowledge that students may want to move to the nearest large city where racial issues will be present if not more appreciable. Even if one plans to return to a relatively homogenous county or suburb, race-related events will still impact that student's life, and introducing these events in class can help students make connections between their lives and the lives of others.

One might mention that regardless of one's experience with race, national policies that address race have local impacts. Today, a range of issues implicated race including military deployments to the U.S.-Mexico border, government spending, political elections, and healthcare. The rise of white supremacist violence is obvious on Twitter and in communities across the United States and world, and students may be harmed or even persuaded by these ideas. Race is not a problem in some distant metropolis; it is an issue that everyone is impacted by. Connecting students to these ideas by emphasizing the connections between local, regional, national, and international spaces will help students better think about race regardless of their future plans.

### **Best Practice 7: Talk About Words**

Words matter. Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to teach this to their students. Be direct with students about what words are useful and appropriate, what words are inappropriate (and why), and where there is room for debate. For example, there is and has been debate about which term, black or African-American, is better. I use black because many black people do not ascribe their ancestry to Africa and I often hear and read that black is a preferred term. Yet, some students may have differing ideas. It is important to think through what terms instructors use, what terms one's students use, and where debates about what words are used exist. Another interesting example is Hispanic, Chicana/o, Latin, Latinx, Latina/o, and Latin@ which are all ways of denoting

similar although perhaps not always the same group of people (this often depends on the user though). In intercultural communication, I teach Ed Morales's *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* [23], which discusses the importance of terminology in group representation. Students will appreciate understanding why these debates exist and what people beyond their social circle think. Similarly, the way people speak is often racially coded, so addressing the centrality of language to race can only help students understand the power of language in racial contexts. [24] [25]

Racial language and politics differ in other countries. [26] Teaching students about how language changes, how arguments are shaped by language, and how race and racism are impacted by linguistic choices will help them succeed in a world where race is often at the center of personal experiences and political discussions, yet discussed differently. These types of discussions can make communication class more interesting and can have direct impact on how students engage the world.

### **Best Practice 8: Chose Readings Carefully**

Not every piece of scholarship is attuned to difference. Many books leave out race or discuss race sloppily. Taking the time to choose readings carefully can help students engage in more meaningful conversations about race and can avoid conflicts with poorly written texts. Also, think about incorporating scholars of color into one's reading lists. No matter what one's interest in communication studies, there are scholars of color working on exciting ideas that can fit into all classes. Further, teachers can assign readings that put theoretical concepts to work on racial issues. If an article describes the same idea as another article but addresses race or is written by a scholar of color, then why not teach that article so students can appreciate how important communication studies is for understanding race?

Several examples from my own teaching include John P. Jackson, Jr.'s [27] study of *ad hominem* in racial science which explores the rhetoric of science in the context of the eugenicist Pioneer Fund. This study allows students to explore the often-under-discussed area of racial science while also studying the ways in which racial science was advanced argumentatively. Shanara Reid-Brinkley's [28] excellent study of racial scripts and media coverage of urban debate leagues calls into question how media covers inner-city argumentation practitioners. This work explores how argumentation is practiced in the real world and how those practices and practitioners are racially scripted. These are but a few of the ways

to include articles addressing race and argument. There are numerous other examples for every course in the communication studies curriculum.

### **Best Practice 9: Make the Classroom a Healthy Space**

In order to encourage the best possible discussions about race, teachers must make the classroom a healthy and safe space to have those discussions. Students rarely want to be lectured at, although they might have grown accustomed to this teaching method. If classroom discussions of race are not discussions, and students do not feel like their opinions, arguments, and experiences matter, then they will not feel comfortable sharing. Likewise, students must know that being wrong or making a mistake is okay. It may surprise many educators to learn that students in high school and college developed a fear of making mistakes because of not only the fear of embarrassing oneself in front of colleagues, but also the fear of how educators would respond. Not all educators encourage discussion nor accept and attempt to work through student mistakes.

Students of color may feel afraid to talk about race with white colleagues and white faculty for fear of micro- and macroaggressions. They might also not want to be tokenized in class or by media and communication professionals (public relations offices) at the college. There are many dangers in being a student of color, dangers that are even more apparent at universities that loudly tout their embrace of difference. Likewise, white students might be afraid to be called racist or might not feel that anyone cares about their racial thinking. Class should be an opportunity to think through racial issues in an environment that embraces discussion. Furthermore, teachers can learn from their students only when they let their students communicate. Including discussion, even for only 5-10 minutes in communication class, will encourage student expression and develop their ability to express, listen to, and engage in thinking about race.

Ways to build a healthy classroom environment include initiating discussion about complex issues like race instead of waiting for them to naturally arise. It helps when the teacher explains various sides to an issue so that students feel more comfortable discussing issues because they have an understanding of the different arguments and histories that inform current discussions. It also helps to explain how the classroom is a space for disagreement and not discrimination. These statements sometimes make their way into syllabi and occasionally into the first day of class's lecture, but it also helps to remind students before a potentially difficult discussion occurs in class. These practices will help build a safer classroom space.

### **Best Practice 10: Allow students to suggest texts**

Students are invaluable conduits for new readings and videos. They often have a better handle on current discussions of race than faculty mired in committee meetings, research articles, and other responsibilities. Allowing and encouraging students to contribute gives them ownership of their education. [29] It allows them to take an active role in learning about race, which is particularly important given race's complexity, history, and contentiousness. [30] This does not mean changing one's entire curriculum, but it does mean putting that 5-10 minutes that is often unscheduled in class to work on students' interests, experiences, and the media they consume. Such an approach will expose the class to new texts, the teacher included, and help students think through what they are already watching, reading, and listening to.

One productive class suggestion was exploring Taylor Swift's music video for her song "Wildest Dreams," which was widely criticized for whitening Africa and projecting colonialist fantasies. [31] [32] [33] Perhaps a bit afield from some communication studies classes, this music video helped my argumentation and debate class think through race, pop culture, and the responsibility of celebrities to express thoughtful racial messages. Inclusion of music, magazines, and tweets that students are consuming will help them think more clearly about race in their everyday lives.

### **Conclusion**

The benefits of discussing race far outweigh the risks. Teachers might empower students, might make them feel more welcome on campus and in class, and might address questions and ideas students were too afraid to ask for much of their educational journey, which will help students appreciate race's centrality in life as well as let students know that race is an acceptable topic of conversation and study. Even in an era where many colleges and universities are developing diversity and inclusion efforts, these efforts may struggle to meet student needs. Diversity and inclusion offices, in particular, may make race seem like something that can only be discussed outside of the classroom as an adjunct to the substantive content of the classroom or even worse as a white-controlled mechanism of exclusion and erasure. [34] Argumentation class welcomes disagreement and questioning; Interpersonal Communication can foreground difference; the Dark Side of Communication can include hate speech; and Organizational Communication can discuss workplace discrimination. Teachers can successfully teach the canon (whatever an educator might think that is), while also addressing the diverse world. While some teachers will always worry about the embarrassment of

being “bested” by students, the better framing of these types of interactions is that they are examples of students putting communication studies to work by testing argumentation, comparing evidence, and conducting scholarly research. In short, the benefits are far more important than potentially making a mistake.

Communication classes are uniquely situated for teachers and students to discuss race. Although every class and class population are different, trying these best practices will help students learn about race in different contexts and will help students use communication studies to address salient racial issues in the status quo. There are, for example, ways to incorporate race into discussions and debates about criminal justice reform, border policing, economic development, health care, scholarly citation and academic employment, and a host of other issues. By including race in communication classes, teachers will better prepare students for a diverse workforce, challenging graduate school environment, and increasingly interconnected world.

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*Manuscript was submitted: 18.08.2020.*

*Double Blind Peer Reviews: from 19.08.2020 till 07.09.2020.*

*Accepted: 12.09.2020*

Брой 45 на сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, октомври 2020 г. се издава с финансовата помощ на Фонд научни изследвания, договор № КП-06-НП1/39 от 18 декември 2019 г.

Issue 45 of the Rhetoric and Communications Journal (October 2020) is published with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund, Contract No. KP-06-NP1/39 of December 18, 2019.