Commentary

Teaching for Social Justice: Bringing Activism into Professional Communication Education

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As a former secondary school communication teacher and recent graduate student in a professional communication program, I share insights in this commentary into how I have struggled for social justice and activist-oriented pedagogies in light of the growing “demand” for communication education to be responsive to the “need” for skilled communicators in the corporate workplace. Elementary and secondary school teachers often develop their practice by negotiating between mandated curriculum expectations, personal politics and teaching philosophies, and the needs and interests of students. Since my days in teacher education, I have been studying anti-oppressive education, exploring ways to introduce youth to social justice issues and engage them in community action and social change. In 2013, I joined an independent kindergarten to grade 12 (K–12) school that explicitly espoused social justice and feminist approaches to teaching. However, my excitement was short-lived—some students actively resisted and openly challenged my community-based, action-oriented, and student-centred pedagogy. During one particularly challenging month, a group of my students were growing more agitated with how our information and communication technologies (ICTs) course was designed—one recent unit required them to design and implement an awareness, outreach, and collection campaign for electronic waste recycling. This initiative challenged not only their critical and creative thinking but also required students to work on an environmental issue beyond a short lesson, written reflection, or one-off event in the school or community. In retrospect, I recognize they were looking for traditional assignments, tests, and exams for which they needed to simply memorize and regurgitate facts and formulas. I received mixed messages from my administrators, getting both support and admonishment for how I structured the course.

Growing a little frustrated, but increasingly clear about my pedagogical stance, I began a subsequent class with a conversation about my teaching practice. I shared the writings of Paulo Freire (2000) and bell hooks (1994) so my students could see that my work reflects established progressive teaching practices. In their written reflections,
an ongoing activity part of the course, some of my students commented that they have internalized the pressure to get good grades in order to be accepted into a reputable university and secure a well-paying job post-graduation. Since then, I have been thinking critically about the ways students engage in communication coursework, and the obstacles teachers face in advancing a social justice agenda. My students’ anxiety around progressive and liberatory pedagogies illustrates the pervasiveness of the banking model of education at the elementary and secondary school levels (Freire, 1983; 2000). As educators, how do we combat the notion that we are to simply deposit information into students and the view that their young brains are passive receptacles of uncontested knowledge? How do we awaken students and open their eyes to the injustices in our communities? How do we encourage them to take action? How do we teach them to think and engage critically in their education, and further, to respond to the public discourse propagating corporate market demands for labour?

During a workshop in Toronto on activism and communication scholarship in Canada, I shared some of these questions from my experiences teaching in K–12 communication classrooms. I also began to reflect on my current coursework in a professionally oriented communication graduate program. Given the increasing demand for skilled communicators in the workplace, communication courses and programs have been growing in popularity throughout North America (Frey & Palmer, 2014). In training students for the “real world,” K–12 teachers and postsecondary faculty are often encouraged by both students and administrators to support a type of education that values and prioritizes corporations, commodities, and consumers (e.g., Palmer, 2014). As learning increasingly becomes commodified and a postsecondary education is viewed as a valuable product in the workplace market, we run the risk of teaching in a way that “reproduc[es] the values, social practices, and skills needed for the dominant corporate order” (Giroux, 1988, p. 113). As a teacher and adult learner, I have routinely encountered secondary and university students asking “what’s the point?” or purpose of assignments. I recognize that we likely ascribe to particular, and possibly divergent, discourses about the purpose of education.

Indeed, since returning to graduate school, I have become highly critical of the rhetoric I encounter in the university classroom. Many of my peers interrogate the utility and usefulness of a project—if it does not directly support their work portfolio or develop a skill for a job, they are not interested in it. As David Palmer (2014) argues, in specific reference to applied communication education in the United States, “students flock to communication courses with the promise of parlaying their degree into a professional career, and, in general, they find an instructional field ready, if not primarily designed to accommodate their professional needs” (p. 46). From my perspective, Palmer’s claim is increasingly applicable in the Canadian context. While Robert E. Babe (2000) maintains that Canadian communication thought is distinctively “dialectical, critical, holistic, ontological, oriented to political economy, and concerns mediation and dynamic change,” and that certainly is the case in many quarters, my experience has been dramatically different. The recent emergence of professionally oriented communication programs, such as the Professional Communication Bachelor of Arts and the professional Master of Professional Communication programs at
Ryerson University, hint that there is a discernable move toward developing communication programs to respond to market and industry needs. Pepi Leistyna (2007), an American scholar, argues that communication course offerings and program descriptions often promote skill development and workplace readiness over critical and creative inquiry, two prerequisites for social and political action. I have heard many of my former students and classmates comment that in order to meet job market needs, they were eager to develop “in-demand” skills for communication tactics, such as graphic design, public relations, and social media marketing. For what purpose? On whose behalf? As Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee (2014), Frey and Palmer (2014), and Palmer (2014) maintain, communication educators and students should recognize the value of communicating with and for marginalized communities and non-profit organizations, and engaging in social justice, advocacy, and activist-oriented pedagogy and praxis. I am afraid that social justice causes and community needs fall through the cracks when communication education orients too closely to corporate demands and needs.

As bell hooks (1994) and Wenshu Lee (2006) have noted, students can be resistant to social justice curriculum and pedagogy, thinking that such learning is irrelevant. As communication educators and scholars, we must therefore critically examine our pedagogical practices in order to connect our courses and class activities with the significant social issues that confront marginalized and oppressed communities. Further, it is important to fight any opposition to this type of work and to understand student resistance as a natural response to being acclimated to traditional forms of teaching and learning. As scholar-activists, we must challenge the rhetoric of “practical skills” and “real-world learning” for the corporate workplace and connect communication theories and practices to civic and community needs. This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* indicates that many communication scholars are steadfast in their activism and social justice work; let us ensure it is mirrored in our classroom teaching.

References