Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

SPARK

SIUE Faculty Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

2019

Building a Diverse Curriculum: The Role of Diversity Across Communication Coursework

Martin Jason
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Deborah Sellnow-Richmond
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Michael Strawser
University of Central Florida

Follow this and additional works at: https://spark.siue.edu/siue_fac

Part of the Other Communication Commons

Recommended Citation

Jason, Martin; Sellnow-Richmond, Deborah; and Strawser, Michael, "Building a Diverse Curriculum: The Role of Diversity Across Communication Coursework" (2019). *SIUE Faculty Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. 115.
https://spark.siue.edu/siue_fac/115

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SPARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in SIUE Faculty Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of SPARK. For more information, please contact magrase@siue.edu.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Qualitative Research Reports in Communication

ISSN: 1745-9435 (Print) 1745-9443 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rqrr20

Building a diverse curriculum: The role of diversity across communication coursework

Jason M. Martin, Deborah D. Sellnow-Richmond & Michael G. Strawser

To cite this article: Jason M. Martin, Deborah D. Sellnow-Richmond & Michael G. Strawser (2019): Building a diverse curriculum: The role of diversity across communication coursework, Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, DOI: 10.1080/17459435.2019.1677750

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2019.1677750

Published online: 19 Oct 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rqrr20

Qualitative Research Reports in Communication
Vol. 00, No. 00, 2019, pp. 1–9

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Building a diverse curriculum: The role of diversity across communication coursework

Jason M. Martin, Deborah D. Sellnow-Richmond, & Michael G. Strawser

The present study utilizes student essays about diversity to examine ways in which students are exposed to diversity as communication majors throughout their coursework. Four themes emerged from this analysis. First, students became more aware and open-minded. Second, their understanding of different viewpoints and cultural differences increased. Third, they learned about diversity in an array of courses. Finally, their communication curriculum became more connected and relevant to their use and evaluation of media, journalism, and film.

Keywords: Capstone Course; Communication Education; Diversity; Pedagogy; Thematic Analysis; Transformative Learning

Diversity is a multifaceted and complicated concept that has the potential to impact and alter relationships, communities, and communication, both positively and negatively. It strengthens or hinders and can be polarizing or unifying. To some, it frightens and enrages; to others, it fascinates and enlightens. For each of us, it is an essential component of how we continue to evolve as communicators, in part

Jason M. Martin (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5100 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110. Deborah D. Sellnow-Richmond (Ph.D., Wayne State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 3113 Alumni Hall, Edwardsville, IL 62025. Michael G. Strawser (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is an Assistant Professor of Communication in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida, 500 W. Lexington Street, Orlando, FL 32801.
Correspondence: Jason Martin, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, MO USA. E-mail: martinjason@umkc.edu

ISSN 1745-9435 (print)/ISSN 1745-9443 (online) © 2019 Eastern Communication Association
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2019.1677750

because a greater understanding of and increased exposure to diversity can enhance the effectiveness, appropriateness, and range of our communication efforts.

Two recent articles explored how communication students define diversity (Ashby-King & Hanasono, 2019; Kvam, Considine, & Palmeri, 2018). Kvam et al. (2018) utilized critical communication pedagogy to explore stakeholder perceptions related to learning outcomes focused on diversity. They found that communication students articulated three general meanings associated with the concept of diversity. First, ideological diversity consisted of various ways of viewing the world and alternate values systems. Second, identity diversity represented race and ethnicity, geographic origins, sexuality and gender, and generational differences. Third, lived experiences related to diversity exposure that students accumulated in and out of the classroom.

Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) explored how communication students defined and explained diversity with an emphasis on neoliberal and critical lenses. They found that communication students defined diversity across four themes. First, students saw diversity as a mechanism for unifying communities. Second, diversity was defined as being an affirmation of individual differences. Third, students described diversity as being a harbinger of acceptance and equality. Fourth, they reported diversity as being a disruptive force that re-centers the voices of traditionally marginalized people.

The present study addresses limitations and recommendations for future research identified in these two studies. One of two limitations Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) discussed about their study was that their sample consisted of 80% white students. Kvam et al. (2018) did not report the demographic composition of their participants but identified their institution as predominantly white and called for future research at institutions that are not predominantly white. Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) encouraged researchers to investigate the role diversity plays in communication majors' "experiences in communication courses" (p. 7). The present article addresses this role and included more diverse research subjects.

While a multifaceted term that can have numerous meanings, in its simplest form, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) represent schools where more white students are enrolled than those from underrepresented racial groups (Bourke, 2016; Brown & Dancy, 2010). Under this definition, the institution where the present study was conducted would be considered a PWI. However, the institution consists of 60% white students with the other 40% identifying as international (more than 1,400 international students representing more than 85 countries), mixed race, or as members of a minority group. Our sample size represented this range of diversity, making it more diverse than Ashby-King & Hanasono's (2019) and, presumably Kvam et al's (2018). In response to Ashby-King's suggestion for future research, this study extends their and Kvam et al.'s work by considering the following research question: What role does diversity play in communication courses?

Method

Research subjects and context

Participants were senior undergraduate students enrolled in a communication capstone course during the Fall 2015, Spring and Fall 2016, Spring and Fall 2017, and Spring 2018 semesters at a mid-sized, public, urban, Midwestern university. The capstone class is required by the department's B.A. in Communication Studies program and is typically taken during students' final semester. Through various assignments, students are asked to critically think about their views related to diversity and ethics and experiences connected to their work experience, coursework, and extracurricular activities while reflecting on the comprehensive nature of their collegiate experience, in and out of the classroom, and especially their communication curriculum. The majority of class time is devoted to professional development and discussions related to students' cumulative experiences and future aspirations. Heavy emphasis is placed on having students explain what they learned from and, if applicable, how they were transformed by these experiences.

In total, 157 subjects participated in this study. Their average age was 23.6 years old (minimum 19, maximum 57, std. deviation 3.73); 69% were female (n = 108) and 31% male (n = 49). Participants identified themselves as White (62%, n = 98), Black or African American, (18%, n = 28), Hispanic or Latino (6%, n = 10), multiple races/ethnicities (6%, n = 10), Asian (4%, n = 6), or other (3%, n = 5). More than half of respondents (56%, n = 87) reported the highest education level of their primary caregiver as a bachelor degree (34%, n = 53) or graduate/professional degree (22%, n = 34) and approximately half (46%, n = 72) of their secondary caregiver as a bachelor degree (31%, n = 49, respectively) or graduate/professional degree (15%, n = 23).

Instruments and data collection

Data for this study consists of open-ended, out-of-class essays, titled Diversity Thought Piece, which were written as a course assignment. In the one- to two-page essay, students outlined their views on diversity, reflected on the multicultural nature of society, and engaged in self-reflection related to their personal biases and the impact their education had on their views related to diversity. Students were encouraged to "be thoughtful and critical" in their responses and to incorporate text material, as needed, to support their claims. This study was approved by the university's IRB, and only essays from students who granted the researchers permission to utilize their work were included in the data set, which consisted of 180 double spaced pages of text.

Data analysis

Student essays served as the units of analysis and were analyzed by thematic analysis (Ashby-King & Hanasono, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2006; Martin & Strawser, 2017; Otusanya & Bell, 2018; Schroeder & Modaff, 2018; Woolsey, 1986). The ultimate goal

was to produce "an analysis of thematic content, arrived at by inductive reasons" that created "a detailed, comprehensive, and valid description of the activity studied" (Woolsey, p. 248). Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2006) six stages of data analysis, the first and second authors read the data twice to become familiar with it before initial codes were generated and applied by both researchers. Coded data was individually reviewed and themes were developed, named, and defined collectively before quotations were selected to represent each theme and included in the final analysis and write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2006). Four themes emerged from the analysis. First, students became more aware and open-minded. Second, their understanding of different viewpoints and cultural differences increased. Third, they learned about diversity in an array of courses. Fourth, their communication curriculum became more connected and relevant to their use and evaluation of media, journalism, and film.

Results

More awareness and open-mindedness

A notable number of participants wrote about how their communication curriculum helped them become more aware of the role diversity plays related to its importance and personal bias, which resulted in students becoming more open-minded. They reported their communication courses surrounded them with "others of different races, backgrounds, and cultures," taught them "how to find information to educate (themselves)," and gave them "greater awareness of diverse cultures and (their) role in them." Students also "recognize(d) the culture barriers that may be present before they even present a large issue" and became "aware of the fact that even within (their) own social circle, there are cultural barriers that we have to overcome." As a result of becoming more open-minded, students become "more conscious and less judgmental," "really willing to learn," and "more understanding, and reflective on how to be more inclusive, and well rounded." Maintaining an open mind is important because, according to students, "there is always room for more knowledge" and doing so "can lead to: broadening your horizon, opportunities, and relationships."

Different viewpoints and cultural differences

The role of diversity as it relates to different viewpoints and cultural differences with which students are exposed throughout their communication coursework was a second theme that emerged from the data. Students explained that their communication education "honed (their) ability to critically think when it comes to different people and different opinions," and "helped (them) come to realize how and why we need communication with all groups of people. Not just to grow as people but to help others grow as well." It also allowed students "to get the experience that (they) needed in a short timeframe with a lot of different viewpoints" and "helped open (their) eyes to just how many viewpoints are out there and that each should be respected and not disregarded simply for not being what we would expect." Participants explained how, after studying

communication, they "take out the time to view things from (other's) and (their) own point of view to prevent from being narrow minded," and that doing so taught them "to respect people from different backgrounds" and "about the ways that people in different cultures interact." Finally, their communication coursework "encouraged (them) to seek out multiple points of view when [it] comes to intercultural topics," and provided "tools to better understand and recognize differences."

An array of courses

Students wrote about a range of courses within and outside of their communication studies major where diversity played a role, including enhancing diversity relations and communicating more effectively across differences. Diversity is a natural, obvious topic for courses such as Intercultural Communication and Interpersonal Communication, which were the most and second most frequently discussed classes, respectively. However, students also reported the role it played and how it is incorporated into many other types of communication courses. These included Cross Cultural Journalism, Intro to Film, Media Ethics, Press, Politics, & Public Policy, Principles of Public Relations, Group Dynamics, Organizational Communication, and Mass Media, Culture, & Society. Students also referenced classes from other disciplines: International Business, Sociology of Human Sexuality, Social Problems, Civil Rights Movement in Literature, Intro to Cultural Anthropology, World Literature [in English], Art History, Social Justice, and foreign language courses.

Media, journalism, and film

Finally, students wrote about how their communication curriculum connected the role of diversity to evaluating media (and understanding media bias), being a journalist, and creating (and analyzing) films. Analyzing media allowed students to explore "how the media plays a huge role in dividing society," "how much the media represents white people," "how other cultures are not represented well," "how the media impacts and increases our biases drastically" and that "the media may present a current group of peoples in a certain light, but research is always necessary to form one's own conclusion." Through various communication courses, students learned the significance of "analyzing critical events with journalistic viewpoints, such as protests, equal rights movements, and both domestic and foreign crises," and "the importance to tailor (their) messages [in] certain ways, depending on whom the message is for." Finally, students expressed ways in which the connection between these topics will be beneficial following graduation, including "being in the film and television field, it's important to me to be knowledgeable of issues of representation" and "as a journalist I have to do the research of other people and cultures before writing about them. I have to care and try and understand the cultures of other people."

Discussion and implications

Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) concluded that "communication instructors should reframe their approach to include diversity across the curriculum to help students move beyond the limitations of a neoliberal perspective and understand the influence power and structural inequalities have on the lives of their marginalized peers" (p. 8). Results from the present study indicated opportunities for such attempts are possible in a variety of communication classes and should not be restricted to courses in intercultural communication. This study's participants explained how diversity is addressed in multiple, if not most, communication classes. In order to maximize the potential for students to learn about diversity throughout our discipline, diversity related curriculum should intentionally be placed throughout all communication courses, beginning with the basic course and culminating with capstone courses. Furthermore, it is a topic that should be addressed in any first-year seminar and general education courses with which communication departments are involved.

Generally, instructors should incorporate diversity education into the broader curriculum, without assuming diversity content can be explored in one stand-alone topic session or module. Several existing instructional strategies can be enacted based on data represented here. First, instructors should create opportunities for civil discourse, dialogue, and reasoned debate. Similar to Kvam et al's (2018) findings, results here indicate that open-mindedness and awareness play a significant role in communication courses and, as such, instructors should continue to explore avenues to encourage open-mindedness by the sheer breadth of topics addressed and the format of communication courses. However, instructors must be mindful to strategically implement discussions. Instructors need not shy away from challenging topics but should, rather, explore ways to integrate difficult conversations, especially related to diversity, throughout the curriculum (Lee, Williams, & Kilaberia, 2012).

Second, when organizing group projects, instructors should create student groups across difference markers whenever possible. This should not be limited to race and ethnicity and other common demographic markers but also whether students are from urban or rural areas and their backgrounds as first-generation or transfer students and their socioeconomic status (Alt, 2017). By positioning group work as an opportunity for students to engage with diverse perspectives, instructors can encourage a holistic perspective on diversity and inclusion through group assignments, which also allows students to move outside of their comfort zone, a dynamic that Kvam et al. (2018) found was essential in student reflections on the importance of incorporating diversity in the classroom.

Third, instructors should connect diversity initiatives to communication courses across the curriculum and to the broader community, including societal and current events, something that Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) revealed as an essential component to the foundational definition of diversity. Educators today must appeal to student reason and logic in a trying political climate. Instructors, especially communication teachers, can use the totality of the communication curriculum to reinforce the need for students to be critical consumers of media and honorable

producers of content. By focusing on diversity in these initiatives, instructors can help students understand the value of diverse perspectives (Ralph & Masudul, 2009).

As students reach their culminating major-specific experience, typically in a capstone course, instructors should recognize the opportunity to engage students in critical reflection of their college experience both in and out of the classroom. As students articulate vocational orientations to university experiences (Coffman, 2011; Lehmann, 2009), instructors should embrace the opportunity to emphasize the role of diversity in future careers while connecting the need to understand and think critically about diversity in their lives moving forward. As universities become increasingly diverse, future research should continue to grapple with the role and facilitation of diversity content in communication coursework to provide understanding and perspectives from nondominant groups and prepare students for an increasingly diverse society.

There are always ways that the communication discipline, communication pedagogy, and communication curriculum can be enhanced to more effectively address diversity. While the overwhelming majority of this study's participants wrote about the positive impact studying communication had on their understanding of and views on diversity, some noted perceived shortcomings and suggested ways the discipline can improve. A sampling of these comments includes the following statements. "I do not think the major has been fruitful on introducing students to diverse populations." "The communication studies department has done a great job with teaching how to communicate with diverse populations. It was just not the best at applying those teachings." "We are taught that yes, everyone communicates differently and it's up to us to adapt our styles to each person, but never specifically for different ethnicities.„ "My only wish is that the communication studies department would take more of an active role in encouraging students to study abroad and expand their global experience. I think it could be really helpful in the long run." Even though these comments were outliers across the entire data set, they are noteworthy contributions.

While not necessarily a limitation, it is important to note that the department where this study was conducted contains three emphasis areas, including those for journalism and film. As such, several topics students discussed, and one of the themes that emerged from the data, was related to the range of topics covered and courses offered by the department's curriculum. Regardless, these are aspects of communication education related to diversity that should be addressed in all programs throughout the discipline.

Finally, like Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019) as well as Kvam et al. (2018), we position a call for additional communication-curriculum based on diversity-centered research. The current study has continued the conversation by more specifically focusing on the role diversity plays in communication courses, an evolution from definition-gathering studies. However, there are additional layers that must be explored. For instance, instructors must measure transformative thinking related to diversity and how students' beliefs, values, and thoughts about diversity have changed as students participate in their communication courses. In addition, we must continue to explore diversity-related studies in institutions, and with populations, that are diverse

themselves; while we believe our study's population is a step in that direction, there is still more to do by exploring diverse and predominantly nonwhite institutions.

Conclusion

This study extended a pair of recent publications that addressed how communication students define diversity (Ashby-King & Hanasono, 2019; Kvam et al., 2018). The results not only indicate the importance of diversity throughout communication curriculum but important topics that should be addressed pedagogically, including the double-sword nature of media, and variations in backgrounds and experiences as related to their impact on student viewpoints. Opportunities abound for addressing expanded notions of diversity, organizing learning environments, and addressing various ways of student learning. We challenge researchers and practitioners to work with and implement diversity-related initiatives and studies throughout the discipline.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the University of Missouri Research Board.

ORCID

Jason M. Martin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0095-8919

Deborah D. Sellnow-Richmond http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6179-0307

Michael G. Strawser http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5030-9266

References

Alt, D. (2017). Constructivist learning and openness to diversity and challenge in higher education environments. *Learning Environments Research*, *20*(1), 99–119. doi:10.1007/s10984-016-9223-8

Ashby-King, D. T., & Hanasono, L. K. (2019). Diverging discourses: Examining how college students majoring in communication define diversity. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 1–10. doi:10.1080/17459435.2019.1572645

Bourke, B. (2016). Meaning and implications of being labelled a predominantly white institution. *College and University*, *91*(3), 12–18, 20–21.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2.*

Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological (pp. 57–71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/13620-004

Brown, M. C., & Dancy, T. E. (2010). Predominantly white institutions. In K. Lomotey (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of African American education* (pp. 524–526). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi:10.4135/9781412971966.n193

Coffman, S. (2011). A social constructionist view of issues confronting first-generation college students. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, *2011*(127), 81–90. doi:10.1002/tl.v2011.127

Kvam, D. S., Considine, J. R., & Palmeri, T. (2018). Defining diversity: An analysis of student stakeholders' perceptions of a diversity-focused learning outcome. *Communication Education*, *67*, 287–307. doi:10.1080/03634523.2018.1465189

Lee, A., Williams, R., & Kilaberia, R. (2012). Engaging diversity in first-year college classrooms. *Innovative Higher Education*, *37*(3), 199–213. doi:10.1007/s10755-011-9195-7

Lehmann, W. (2009). University as vocational education: Working-class students' expectations for university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *30*(2), 137–149. doi:10.1080/01425690802700164

Martin, J. M., & Strawser, M. G. (2017). Transforming the capstone: Transformative learning as a pedagogical framework and vehicle for ethical reflection in the capstone course. *Journal of Faculty Development*, *31*, 1–10.

Otusanya, A. D., & Bell, G. C. (2018). "I thought I'd have more trouble with white people!": Exploring racial microaggressions between West African immigrants and African Americans. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *19*(1), 44–50. doi:10.1080/17459435.2018.1468808

Ralph, I., & Masudul, B. (2009). 2009 assessment of the status of diversity education in journalism and mass communication programs. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, *64*(4), 378–394. doi:10.1177/107769580906400403

Schroeder, S., & Modaff, D. P. (2018). Exploring employee engagement through communication. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *19*(1), 35–43. doi:10.1080/1745935.2018.1468807

Woolsey, L. K. (1986). Critical incident technique: An innovative qualitative method of research. *Canadian Journal of Counseling*, *20*, 242–254.