

Chapter 14

Narrative Theory as a Pedagogical Strategy for Culturally Responsive Teaching at HBCUs

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ABSTRACT

Explication of how Walter Fisher's narrative theory may be utilized as a pedagogical approach toward culturally responsive teaching (CRT) communication-centric courses at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is shared in this reflective chapter. The fundamentals of this pedagogical lens lean heavily upon applied theoretical knowledge, scholarship, and the author's practical experiences in teaching predominantly Black students. It is argued that the everyday communication style and life experiences of Black students be routinely fused into the communication course curricula, assignments, and activities to improve learning student and engagement. While teaching students at HBCUs are highlighted in this chapter, it is argued that all marginal and minority student populations, at any college or university, can benefit from college classrooms where student narratives are woven into the learning.

INTRODUCTION

The author empathizes with Black¹ student perspectives of race and gender in America. As an African American female, assistant professor who has taught (communication courses) at historically Black college/universities (HBCUs) and predominantly white institutions (PWIs), the author's dual consciousness informs (DuBois, 1953) considerations of what it means to be a minority student studying communication in an American college classroom. While Black students should attend HBCUs and PWIs, well-supported student diversity and cultural expression may be challenged more at PWIs. Albeit, the author's undergraduate and graduate training was at southern PWIs, where culturally diverse material

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and representative elements of Black identity were not a staple in most of the course content. This gap in the author's college learning experience caused feelings of isolation and inferiority—an (unfortunate) common occurrence for minority students who feel marginalized in the classroom primarily due to their perceived difference in identity (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008).

However, today's communication courses reflect a sea of diversity, with students representing a mixture of identities which include: age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and nationality. Irrespective of diversity, higher education curricula still reflect homogenous cultural ideologies shaped by whiteness (Hussain, 2015). Often university teachers, regardless of their race, are ill-equipped to address the challenges presented by diverse classrooms (Stairs, 2007). This partially because some are either ignorant of issues of inequality, or hesitant to speak up about them (Jost et al., 2005). According to Maingi (2017), some White teachers are oblivious to matters of racial inequity and perceive issues of fairness differently. For many Black teachers, race is a notion reconciled daily. The continued need for consideration of cultural experiences of Black students provides exigence for this reflective discussion of ways to enact culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices today. Addressing CRT from one's own experience with it is nothing new. As Geneva Gay (2013), notable CRT scholar acknowledges:

My ethnic, racial, and cultural identity as African American is the primary anchor and explanation for what I emphasize in analyzing current educational realities and future possibilities for marginalized students of color. I know from personal experiences the transformative benefits of culturally responsive teaching, and the devastating effects of perpetual failure due to educational irrelevance and ineffectiveness...I am neither apologetic for these autobiographical nuances in my scholarship, nor do I pretend they do not exist (p. 53).

Accordingly, this chapter reflects on the author's culturally responsive instructive practices within undergraduate communication-themed courses at a southern private HBCU. Specifically, it focuses on the author's narrative-centric approach towards teaching and working with predominantly Black students. Professors and instructors of communication, particularly at HBCUs, seeking to improve multi-cultural student engagement, retention, and comprehension of course content may consider incorporating minority student narratives centered on their experiences and identities within the curriculum. Student narratives are valuable because "the cultural landscape is (always) changing and teachers at all levels must be better prepared to facilitate dialogues, deliberations, and discussions on issues of social injustice along the lines of race, ethnicity, and culture" (Maingi, 2017, p. 21). As facilitators of knowledge, college educators must demonstrate comfort with speaking about varied student experiences and applying them to the context of their class discourse.

Geneva (2002) describes essential tenants of CRT as (1) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity; (2) including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum; (3) listening to the silence of students; and (4) responding to ethnic and cultural diversity in the delivery of instruction. Therefore, educator goals must include encouraging and providing opportunities for minority students to think critically and freely about their culture and racial identity within the parameters of the communication courses we teach. However, as Maingi (2017) notes:

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