Unraveling Communication Failure: Room for Revision

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Unraveling Communication Failure: Room for Revision

Introduction

Upon entering graduate school at the PhD level, I quickly remembered what it was like to sit in general education courses as an undergrad. Even in a specifically liberal-arts minded institution, I felt tugs of annoyance spending my tuition dollars on courses that weren’t immediately relevant to my specific major. The further I moved in my studies, the more I realized the benefits that come from all students receiving the same scaffolding as their peers, regardless of career path. General education courses present students with the opportunity to develop core skills that can enhance more career-specific goals like researching, presenting, and making a persuasive argument. I decided to bring this lesson to my general education public speaking courses as early as possible, so my students could sooner reap the benefits of being aware of this structure. I began intentionally assigning revisions. Regardless of students’ future fields—whether it be nursing, art, business, science, or communication—the process of revising their work has been invaluable. It has built my students' confidence in their ability to enhance their work even after submission and grading. This has led to significant improvements in their assignments, progress that the students can recognize and take pride in.

This teaching assignment explores the theme of "Failure in communication at both macro and micro levels" through a reflective analysis of a student's “lowest” speech performance during a semester. The assignment fosters an inclusive and empowering learning environment where the student can critically examine the societal influences that impact their personal communication dynamics. By understanding the specific circumstances that led to their less-than-desired performance, students participate in a feminist practice that leverages the classroom as a space to “challenge the production and distribution of hegemonic knowledge” (Von Wald, 2023, p. 1). The assignment prompts students to critically examine how power dynamics shape academic standards in communication. It also asks them to consider their own position relative to these established norms within the realms of academic performance, writing, and grading. By evaluating their place in this framework, students can better understand the role these elements play in their communication challenges. This understanding enables them to conduct a more informed analysis and develop effective strategies for improvement, while also discerning which aspects of their situation they can influence and which are beyond their control.

Rationale

For this assignment, I give credit for just the attempt at a revision, and this is an act of rebellion against the hegemonic norms of academe that prioritize a one-size-fits-all approach to editing. This subtle but crucial dive into feminist pedagogy empowers students who have faced overlapping forms of marginalization to have their understandings of power structures recognized and valued, in contrast to the broader undervaluing they often experience in university settings and society at large (Von Wald, 2023). In this assignment, the students are invited to set their own standards and then hold themselves accountable to meet them.

Allowing students to assess their work mitigates the replication of oppression that students encounter in their daily lives within the classroom environment (hooks, 2014). Without an understanding of how dominant power dynamics affect the perception of “knowledge,” its origins, and the deemed “appropriate” method of learning (Louise-Lawrence, 2014; Luke & Gore, 2014; McCusker & Gallos, 2017), students have limited scope to shape and enhance the way they are taught. Yet this constraint helps cultivate an advanced level of critical thinking that extends beyond the immediate educational setting and challenges conventional notions of valuable knowledge and learning (Duckworth et al. 2016). I view this
as a critical component of my role as an educator, opening students’ eyes to the possibility that current educational structures may need to shift to work in their favor as much as the students are expected to develop and learn themselves.

The essence of a participatory, feminist pedagogy is rooted in perpetual introspection and modification, which applies not only to everyday engagement in the classroom but also the overarching framework of the course—this includes navigating the dynamics of power, roles, capabilities, and available resources within the classroom and wider university environment (Palmieri & MacLean, 2022). At the heart of this adaptive process is the recognition of the significance of real-world experiences in forming an awareness of the indisputable links between knowledge and power (Patterson et al., 2016). Prioritizing these experiences is a crucial aspect of my teaching strategy and practice, especially when working with students in a general education course that may not receive the benefits of similar strategies in other courses (Silva & Scott, 2023).

Learning Objectives

Students will:

1. Analyze and critique their least successful speech performance of the semester through the lens of societal and hegemonic influences, demonstrating comprehension by explaining how these factors impact communication abilities.
2. Revise or enhance a previously unsatisfactory assignment, showcasing improvement and mastery in communication skills, as evidenced by specific criteria outlined in the assignment rubric, reflecting application of learned techniques.
3. Apply practical skills and analytical tools learned in the course to approach future projects in other courses with confidence, as measured by their ability to evaluate their own work and that of others, identifying strengths and weaknesses.
4. Incorporate personal perspectives and interests into their work, utilizing media examples they are passionate about to enrich understanding and engagement, demonstrating synthesis of diverse sources to create a cohesive message.
5. Demonstrate active participation in knowledge construction by developing and applying their own analytical tools throughout the learning process, as evidenced by contributions to class discussions, reflective journals, or peer-reviewed assessments, reflecting metacognitive knowledge and awareness of their learning strategies (Bloom, 1969).

These objectives aim not only to deliver tangible outcomes but also to cultivate an environment where students are actively involved in the construction of knowledge, encouraging them to bring in and develop their own analytical tools throughout the learning process.

Explanation and instructions for students

When presenting this assignment to students, it’s important to first establish its purpose and the pedagogical foundation upon which it is built. This assignment is not only about reflection; it is an exercise in critical thinking and self-awareness, steeped in the principles of feminist pedagogy. It challenges students to confront and dissect the societal and internal factors that impact their communication.

1. Selection and Summary: Ask students to identify what they felt was their least effective speech of the semester. Have them summarize the speech, detailing its purpose, the intended audience, and
the surrounding circumstances. This exercise sets the stage for deeper reflection by rooting their analysis in a specific context.

2. Reflection on Challenges: Encourage students to think critically about the moments during their speech when they felt unheard or misunderstood. Instruct them to document these instances, as acknowledging these feelings is the first step in understanding the influence of societal norms and personal biases.

3. Analysis of Societal Influences: Guide students to examine how societal stereotypes, audience prejudices, or their own internalized beliefs may have influenced their speech. This is where the core of feminist pedagogy comes in, prompting students to consider how broader hegemonic norms in communication could have affected elements like tone, body language, or content.

4. Strategies for Improvement: Based on their reflections, students should identify concrete strategies they can apply in future situations to better navigate these challenges. This part of the assignment moves from reflection to action, embodying the feminist principle of praxis.

5. Consolidation and Revision: Finally, have students bring together their reflections, analyses, and proposed strategies into a coherent document that includes their revised speech. This document serves as a tangible representation of their learning journey and becomes a part of their portfolio, demonstrating their growth as communicators and critical thinkers.

This meaningful learning process helps students understand the assignment but also provides a clear demonstration of how these practices can be applied to their own experiences.

Debriefing: Unraveling Communication Failure and Embracing Revision

Post-revision, a debriefing session should start with students revisiting the context in which their initial speech was delivered. This step involves acknowledging the societal and personal circumstances that could have influenced their performance. Encourage students to share their experiences openly, fostering a supportive environment where they can discuss the implications of hegemonic structures on their communication efforts.

The debriefing should transition into an analytical discussion of the revisions made. Students should present the changes they implemented and why they believe these adjustments constitute an improvement. This part of the debriefing is crucial for developing critical thinking skills and for students to understand the rationale behind their choices. Communication failures can be emotional experiences. During the debriefing, allow space for students to express how revisiting and revising their work made them feel. This emotional processing can help students deal with any lingering feelings of inadequacy and can transform those feelings into a positive understanding of growth and learning.

Use the debriefing session as an opportunity for collective learning. Students can learn from each other’s revisions and debriefing comments, gaining broader insights into the diverse ways communication can be impacted by societal norms and personal biases. This is optional and designed to best occur in small group settings. This collective insight can be powerful in challenging hegemonic knowledge and fostering a more inclusive learning space.

Encourage students to think about how the lessons learned from their revisions can be applied to future communication scenarios. Debriefing should be forward-looking, empowering students with the confidence to approach future communication tasks with a critical eye and an understanding that revision is a normal and beneficial part of the communication process. Conclude the debriefing by summarizing key takeaways and reaffirming the value of the revision process. Emphasize that the ability to revise and improve is not only about fixing past mistakes but is also about continuous personal and academic development.
Assessment: Honoring Individual Expression Beyond Hegemonic Norms

In rethinking assessment for this revision assignment, I step away from traditional metrics and instead celebrate varying examples of active participation and deep engagement that is unique to each student. This shift honors the individual's dedication to reevaluating and improving their communication considering their experience. Recognition is given for the students' efforts to navigate their communication challenges and the broader societal influences at play.

The response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. I've observed a heightened self-awareness in their reflections and a keen understanding of how external factors can shape communication. Many have shared profound realizations about their own internalized barriers, leading to noticeable improvements in their other courses. Others have become more energized to express their thoughts, showing growth in both the structure and content of their communication.

Students have embraced this assignment as a space for genuine exploration of their communication styles. For example, one student discovered how their limited experience with racial diversity influenced their public speaking, leading them to adjust their approach to better connect with varied audiences. Another found that addressing their anxiety about public speaking was the key to clearer and more confident delivery.

The assessment process is personalized, recognizing the diverse ways in which students engage with the task. Engagement is as varied as a detailed analysis of personal communication barriers or practical changes such as reordering speech content for clarity. The feedback I provide is carefully crafted to be constructive, focusing on guiding students toward greater self-awareness and mastery over their communication skills, not about reaching a “perfect” score.

The aim of this approach is to instill in students a sense of empowerment, equipping them to confidently navigate and challenge the hegemonic structures that shape communication. This assignment is not the end but a part of a continuing journey towards growth. By assessing the students' progress in understanding and counteracting these influences, I reaffirm the value of the learning process itself. It's gratifying to see students begin to recognize and assert their voices more powerfully, an outcome that underscores the transformative potential of this pedagogical approach.

While the principles of this assessment approach are rooted in communication studies and feminist pedagogy, its essence—honoring the learning process, personal expression, and critical engagement—can be applied across various disciplines. To implement this assessment framework in other courses, instructors should:

- Define what active participation and engagement mean within the context of their discipline.
- Develop criteria that value the process of learning and the application of critical thinking skills.
- Provide clear guidelines for reflection that encourage students to consider both personal growth and the impact of societal structures on their field of study.
- Offer constructive feedback that emphasizes the journey of learning and the development of independent thought and critical perspectives.

This is an invitation for students to become active participants in their education, pushing them to think beyond the traditional paradigms in their fields.

Conclusion

"Unraveling Communication Failure: Room for Revision" is more than a mere added classroom task; it challenges hegemonic discourses and recognizes learning as a continuous, reflective process. Students revisit their lowest speech moments not just to improve them but to question and understand the hegemonic standards governing communication and how they operate within or oftentimes outside of
these norms. Emphasizing participation, the assignment values each student's unique perspective and lived experience, fostering an inclusive academic rebellion against one-size-fits-all assessment. This educational practice nurtures students' agency, equipping them to dissect and navigate the power dynamics in communication. Ultimately, the assignment is not about achieving a perfect speech but about developing a critical consciousness and resilience that values growth and revision as integral to learning and self-expression: a highly feminist goal.

References


Patterson, A. N., Howard, A., & Kinloch, V. (2016). Black feminism and critical media literacy: Moving from the margin to the center. *Meridians, 15*(1), 40-64. https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.15.1.04
