INTEGRATING ETHICAL LEARNING INTO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CLASSES

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Communication scholar Martha Cooper has written that, for her, the ethical agent enacting responsibility in communication is something that is created by the agent in an ongoing manner, not something that is once possessed. Yet many of our field’s textbooks do not integrate ethics learning modules throughout the various concept sections, if at all. In ‘special’ classes, such as Argumentation, a single section discussing ethics may be included but it is not the standard. As communication educators, we provide to our students the foundational and latest scholarship on the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of human communicative behavior. In essence, we supply the tools necessary for our students to use their communicative knowledge with or on other people. However, we are not discussing the ethical parameters of the use of that knowledge as much as we could be. Additionally, assumptions cannot be made about the positive use of communication skills. These skills are often used with good intention but end with a negative consequence. In Rhetorical Studies, we say it is the difference between two of the twentieth century’s most successful communicators, Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King, Jr.

My goal in Arizona State University’s Lincoln Polytechnic Teaching Fellowship was to develop learning modules for integration of the teaching of applied ethics into communication classes. I have selected Intercultural Communication (IC) as the first course. It is very popular with non-communication students and easily makes its capacity expectation every semester. Frequently it is the only contact with communication studies that an ASU student may have in his/her academic career. Hence, I believe it needed to be more inclusive of ethically-based knowledge and activities than current IC textbooks deliver. This class discusses in an ongoing manner delicate issues such as power, oppression, hegemony, discrimination (of any type), and dominant cultural influences. Additionally, the class is conducted more
along the lines of a Socratic Dialogue. Hence, I frequently stress that there are not necessarily right and wrong answers per say, that all persons’ and their perspectives are honored and respected and that we are engaging in an exploration into human communication and the ethical consequences of engaging in communication. The modules developed for this class could be adapted to other communication classes. My aim was to find ways to integrate applied ethics exercises into each element of the teaching of these classes so with each classroom discussion of the application of a particular communication skill, an evaluative activity centering on ethics would take place seamlessly. The learning goal would be to have ongoing modeling of ethics applications so that this activity would seem to be merely another step in the communicative process. The benefits of this seamlessness between ethical and communicative considerations would, hopefully, be to reconstitute students’ ongoing daily communicative process.

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

To begin developing, the choice was made to use the case studies approach in which there would be one scenario introduced at the beginning of the class and developed throughout the semester reflecting the various themes of discussions. So far in the course we had discussed: what makes up a culture, how humans migrated and became culturally diverse, how language conveys and defines cultural identity, and we looked at one of the most powerful of cultures: religion. This scenario was a part of the class that focused on how the human brain functions with all the information it encounters every day by using Cognitive Schemas which we defined as those sets of rules that organize our current knowledge and provide a framework for future understanding such as, academic rubrics, stereotypes and social roles. Additionally, we talked about how schemas can be in conflict internally and externally, how schemas can be changed by new information and new experiences, and we looked at the specific type of schema known as stereotypes or cognitive bias. Finally, we talked about how stereotypes can be positive or negative and once learned are usually self-perpetuating. I suggested three basic guidelines when dealing with our own or others stereotypes. First is “ask, don’t tell.” Next is to gather new information. Last is to seek common ground. Then the scenario is introduced for the students to practice the three base guidelines.
THE TWO-DOOR SCENARIO

The simple scenario was shared incrementally and discussed step by step.

Scenario Info: Mary and James live next door to each other in a college dorm.

Discussion: What could be some of James’ Schemas? What could be some of Mary’s Schemas? About college? About living in dorm; maybe away from home for first time? About differences such as, Where they come from and where do they see themselves going? What don’t we know?

Scenario Info: James and Mary consider themselves to be friends.

Discussion: What could some of their Schemas or expectations of friends be? What makes up the implied social contract of friendship? What does it mean to be a friend?

Scenario Info: Mary puts up a “Yes on Prop 8” poster on her dorm door, showing her support for banning gay marriage.

Discussion: Why in her schemas would that be ok to do?

Scenario Info: James is gay.

Discussion: What could James’ Schemas or expectations be? About cultural stereotypes on homosexuality? About possibly being the first gay man Mary has known? About friends? About gay prejudice?

Scenario Info: James finds the poster offensive and demands of Mary that it be removed.

Discussion: How does James weigh the value of Mary’s freedom of speech against his personal objections to the poster? Would it be ethical for James to demand the removal of the poster? Would it be ethical for Mary to leave it up after she learns it offends James? Why could it be important for Mary to leave the poster up after learning that it offends James? What responsibility does Mary have regarding the poster after she learns that it offends James? What, if anything, should the university do in this situation? Does the university have a responsibility to protect James & his sexual orientation and/or Mary and her personal right to support a particular perspective in public?
Introducing this scenario went quite well. The only issue involved was the need to keep coming back to the first of the basic guidelines: Ask, don’t tell. For example, when asked what James should do, students frequently answered with statements that started with, “He should TELL.” This language can be difficult since it can be perceived as conveying power and could provoke a defensive response. That type of exchange only further entrenches positions instead of exploring them. However, I believe that with incorporating this case study throughout the entire semester and having the semester to repeatedly practice the basic guidelines, this issue would be resolved.

**Incorporating Ethics Case Study More Fully**

To incorporate ethics throughout the class, I decided to revise three additional learning modules, based on the ones that previous students seemed to like the most. The resulting four modules tend to fall around the quarter marks in the class so they are well distributed throughout the semester and able to continually allow us to stay in touch with the ethics in communication. The first module will be Perception, in which we shall discuss how each person’s perception is unique unto him/herself and judgementality is a conscious choice and effort; not a fact. The next learning module will be Ethnicity, in which we explore power, power over, oppression, and hegemony. Third, the module detailed previously, will be Stereotypes/Cognitive Schemas in which we further explore how a person’s cognitive processes are both physiological and psychological. We might not be able to control the physiological processes but we can be conscious choosers in our psychological processes. The last module, a favorite among students, will be Conflict Resolution in which we bring it all together to identify types of conflicts and strategies to deal with cultural conflicts.

I am going to endeavor to incorporate an enactment or performance aspect to the process of integrating ethics into the communication class. Let us explore how this performance aspect might be constructed in the classroom for the Conflict Resolution module. The first step is the students watch the movies “A Raisin in the Sun” and “Walkout” outside the classroom. The first classroom exercise after viewing the movies will be a modeling session on how to identify which of the five types of conflict is being enacted and then on how to manage it using the five basic conflict management strategies. Conflict situations from the two movies will be identified by students, who will then explore
how the movie characters handled the conflict. The second class on conflict would then use this same model to explore the ethics case study as it had developed over the semester. Students would review the Two-Door Dilemma discussions we have had and identify some of the conflicts that occurred both in the dilemma and in our discussions. Next students break up into four stakeholders groups (the number of groups depends on how many students are in class and the stakeholders who have developed over the semester’s discussions). For example, there would be a Mary Group and a James Group. There may be an Authority group that includes Resident Advisor, University Officials, etc. and a Peers group that includes other students on the hall, friends of Mary & James, etc. In these groups, the students work on identifying the types of conflicts & potential resolutions from the perspective of their group identity. Then we come back to the whole from groups and students enact/share their group perspectives with other groups and the various stakeholder groups respond to ‘others’ perspectives.

After hearing other perspectives, students regroup to determine how ‘others’ perspectives affect their group perspective and its ability to resolve the conflicts. This process can be repeated or variation could take place such as, switch group members around or switch around which stakeholder group identifies with students, each time, enacting the perspective and needs of their group’s perspective. This model is sufficiently flexible so that when it is incorporated into a class, it should be adaptable to the specific needs of any particular group of students. This flexibility should only strengthen the ability to construct strong ethically-based conversations among the students.

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