Teaching Communication Ethics and Diversity: Using Technology and Community Engagement to Enhance Learning

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Courses: Communication Ethics; Communication Ethics and Diversity

Objectives: To increase awareness of the relationship between communication ethics and life in a diverse society. To provide students with the opportunity to experientially examine their own understanding of communication ethics, diversity, and the relationship between the two.

Introduction and Rationale

The workforce in the United States is becoming more diverse and, over the next century, is expected to reach a point where Caucasians are in the minority. By 2050, Hispanics are expected to make up 24% of the workforce and the “white non-Hispanic share of the total labor force is projected to decrease from nearly 70 percent in 2005 to 51.4 percent in 2050” (Toossi, 2006, p. 36). Additionally, more retired people are taking on ‘retirement jobs’ (Brown, Aumann, Pitt-Catsourhes, Galinsky, & Bond, 2010), making the workforce more diverse in terms of age; by 2050, people aged 55 or older are expected to make up nearly 25% of the workforce, up from about 16% in 2000 (Toossi, 2006). Women make up more than half of college graduates (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006) and hold 51% of jobs in white-collar fields (Toossi, 2006). Immigrants to the United State from all over the world make up over 12% of the population (Grieco, 2010). As the United States and its workforce become more diverse, it is increasingly important for people to understand how to communicate ethically with diverse others.

To help students prepare to work and live in our diverse society, I developed a lower-division course called “Communication Ethics and Diversity.” After this
course, students should be able to: (1) define diversity and communication ethics; (2) understand a variety of approaches to communication ethics, including teleology, deontology, dialogic ethics, and post-modern ethics; (3) apply ethical theories to a variety of communication contexts, including the media, interpersonal relationships, political communication, and communication technology; (4) describe their personal code of ethics as it relates to communication ethics and diversity; (5) compare and contrast their beliefs about communication ethics and diversity to those of their peers; (6) justify their personal code of ethics based on ethical theories and terms; and (7) apply their knowledge of communication ethics and diversity to experiences they have in the community.

Over the course of the semester, students addressed these learning objectives through readings, class discussions, essay exams, and, most importantly, through an integrated set of assignments that linked students’ work in groups on a community-service-learning project with a group blog and an individual research paper. I will describe the assignments and how they relate to the learning objectives listed above; I will also provide a rationale for linking the assignments. The assignments relevant to this paper made up approximately 50% of the students’ final grade, with the other 50% of their grade coming from reading quizzes, exams, and short writing assignments.

Explanation and Rationale

Communication ethics and diversity can be very abstract and may seem irrelevant to students at relatively homogenous universities. Students at my institution tend to be Caucasian, middle class, and 18–22 years old (WSU Databook) and often have little experience with those who differ from them. In order to provide students with experiences where they might face ethical challenges related to communication and diversity, I placed students in work groups of five to seven people. The student groups worked on projects in the community that would introduce them to people who were different from them. For instance, one student group worked with a community group to advertise and carry out a Thanksgiving dinner for low-income residents of the community; another student group collaborated with an elementary school’s PTA to put on a fun night for children who come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Communication ethics ought to be a practical discipline; that is, students should learn about ethical theories and specific contexts where ethical theories related to communication might apply, and then thoughtfully consider, based on their own experiences, how they will make ethical choices now and in the future. In this course, ethical theories and communication contexts were considered in the context of diversity, since all the factors of human diversity may affect interpretations of communication and ethical theories (Makau & Arnett, 1997).

A group service-learning project was chosen as the foundation for all of the other major assignments because service-learning projects have been shown to have many benefits for students who complete them. Those benefits most relevant to this class are that, in a well-designed course, service learning helps to reduce stereotypes, increases
social responsibility, increases students’ abilities to apply what they know, and helps students work together more effectively (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

**Step One: Creating Diverse Groups**

This project and its assignments consist of a number of linked steps: creating groups, choosing a service-learning project, writing group blogs, writing individual blog responses, writing an individual final research paper, and doing a final group presentation. Each step is connected to the objectives for the course. The first step was to create groups. Since one of the goals of the class was to allow students to interact with others different than themselves, the instructor chose the groups, dividing people into groups based primarily on gender and major. Students with existing friendships were not allowed to be in the same groups, since pre-existing interpersonal dynamics could interfere with the group’s success (Michaelson & Sweet, 2008).

**Step Two: Identifying an Appropriate Group Community Service Project**

In step two, the groups chose their service-learning project based on the following parameters. The students needed to work with a local community group, each person in the group had to contribute 10 to 15 hours, the project needed to provide an opportunity to work with diverse others, and the project needed to include collaboration between group members. The groups had a week to choose the service-learning project upon which they wished to work.

The service-learning assignment requires advance preparation on the part of the instructor. Instructors may wish to contact the campus volunteer coordinator or service-learning office, if available, for assistance in creating a list of potential projects for the service-learning project. Because these assignments work best with a smaller class, the instructor’s personal contacts may be all that are necessary to provide the five or six group projects required. Newcomers in communities may wish to contact local PTA organizations, food drives, or on-campus, student-led projects, such as Sexual Assault Awareness month or Relay for Life. Students were allowed to seek out their own agency partner, if they did not wish to work on the ones made available in class.

**Step Three: Group and Individual Blog Posts about Group Service Project**

This group of assignments comprised roughly 22% of the final grade, including four group blog posts and two individual responses to other groups’ blogs.

In step three, each group created four group blog posts over the course of the semester that reflected on questions relevant to current course material. As Eyler, Giles, and Schmeide (1996) point out, effective reflection is continuous, connected, challenging, and involves communicating with others in the class. By using the blog format, students reflected on their group and individual experiences four times during the semester, making the reflection continuous. The blogs connected their
service to course work because each blog required students to apply ethical terms and theories from the course to the work they were doing. The blogs were also challenging because, as the semester went on, students were required to respond to questions of greater difficulty about their projects. Finally, because the students worked together to create the blogs and responded to other people’s blogs, blogging facilitated communication with peers.

The choice of a blog as the form for the group’s written work was deliberate. Students were asked to create blogs so that each of them would be comfortable with Web 2.0 technology and with the use of a public forum for their writing. Nearly all organizations use a website, blog, or other social media to communicate with external audiences, so having the experience of blogging for a class is useful for students as they prepare for the job market. According to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), nearly 75% of teens and young adults who spend time online have presented information about themselves via a social network such as Facebook. Since Facebook and other social networks focus on relationships with peers and friends, students may have little experience presenting themselves to a wider audience online. Fortunately, there are a number of free blogging sites available (e.g. http://www.blogspot.com and http://www.wordpress.com), so this assignment is low in cost for both the university and the students. Although it was unlikely that many people outside of the class read the groups’ publicly available posts, students were still aware that others from outside the class could read and evaluate their work, thus encouraging them to write more professionally. Additionally, using blogs made it easy for other students to comment on and critique the work of other groups.

The blog assignments moved the students from describing and defining what they did for the project to analyzing how their views changed. For instance, for the first blog, the groups were asked to explain with whom they were working, explain why they chose their project, explain how their project related to communication ethics and diversity, and define communication ethics and diversity. By the fourth blog, students were asked to explain how their group’s view of the relationship between communication ethics and diversity had changed, giving concrete examples of how their views changed and how they thought the ideas discussed in class since the previous blog affected their views of the best way to communicate in a diverse society.

In the blogs, students also reported on ethical challenges related to diversity; as noted earlier, diversity was defined in the broadest sense for this course. For example, one group ran a fun night for an elementary school and they faced an ethical dilemma when working with a parent who became angry when the student running the cupcake walk failed to call his child’s number. The student felt challenged by this issue because the parent was significantly older than she was, making it difficult for her to know how to respond ethically to the parent and fairly to the other children involved in the game.

For every blog, each group member then reflected on his or her personal experiences and related those experiences to three terms from the material currently being covered in the course. Every student also responded to another group’s blog at
least twice during the semester; they wrote their responses in the “Comments” section of the blog. Students based their responses on two of the following criteria. They could evaluate the terms and theories related to communication ethics used in the blog; suggest ethical terms and theories that might have been more appropriate and note why; suggest examples from TV, film, or literature and explain why they were good examples of communication ethics and diversity; provide links or pictures that enhanced the blog; or expand on the reflections in the blog by providing new insights or pointing out places where their peers may have been too superficial in their discussion of terms, theories, and examples.

Step Four: Individual Research and Reflection Project

As opposed to the group nature of the rest of the service-learning project, the final paper was an individual writing assignment, making up 18% of the students’ final grade.

In the next step, students used their individual and group blog reflections as a foundation for writing a six- to eight-page individual research paper, which focused on their personal credo for communication ethics. The idea for a credo comes from NCA’s “Credo for Ethical Communication” (1999), which was an assigned reading, along with National Communication Association’s (NCA’s) Credo for a free and responsible communication in a democratic society (n.d.). Individual students grappled with their own moral perspectives on communication ethics and diversity throughout the semester, building to the final research and reflection project. In their individual responses to their group’s blog, they discussed their beliefs and why they held them. Additionally, as part of the first exam, students wrote a 350- to 500-word personal statement laying out their beliefs about communication ethics and diversity modeled on essays from the “This I Believe” project done by National Public Radio from 2005–2009 (Gediman, 2009; see also Allison & Gediman, 2007). Students then incorporated the work they did on the blog responses and their personal statement from the first exam into their final research paper.

This research paper was probably different from most research papers students had ever written since it focused on analyzing and supporting their own beliefs. Given that this is a different type of research paper, it is valuable for students to have a chance to get feedback on their work prior to the due date. This feedback was provided through extra office hours and a rough draft review day. I also provided a very specific rubric for students so they knew what was expected in their papers. The rubric is summarized in the following paragraph.

The students’ credos were to be about a page in length and were to present their key beliefs about how they planned to interact with diverse others. The remainder of the paper (six to seven pages) explained their code. Students were to note each portion of their credo; then they were to (1) provide a detailed rationale, (2) explain the rationale in relation to at least three ethical terms discussed in class or from the class readings, (3) relate each portion of the code to specific experiences the students had while working on their service project, which they had already discussed in their blogs, (4) integrate...
two scholarly references for their codes, and (5) reflect on how their real-life experiences related to the code they had written, which they had already discussed in their blogs responses. Students were to use terms from different units of the class and had to include different ethical theories such as deontology, teleology, dialogic ethics, and virtue ethics, along with relating communication ethics and diversity to contexts like political communication and interpersonal relationships.

The research paper provided a final opportunity for students to reflect on their service-learning project and their own beliefs about communication ethics and diversity (Eyler et al., 1996). Drawing from their experiences with their group projects and their group and individual blog postings, each student has the opportunity to synthesize and analyze what they learned in the course.

Step Five: Group Presentation

This assignment made up 10% of students’ final grade.

At the end of the semester, the student groups gave a 15–20 minute presentation on their projects. During this presentation, each group described the organization with which they worked, the aspects of diversity they witnessed in their group and in their interactions with their partner organization, and what their group thought were the most important guidelines for communicating ethically with diverse people. While doing this, they were expected to integrate at least five specific terms from class materials or their own research. Much of what they presented was based on the work the groups had originally done on their blogs; for instance, the description of the organization and specific examples could be gleaned from the work they had done earlier in the semester. The presentation allowed them to synthesize their work and analyze their service-learning project based on all of the concepts and ethical theories they had learned during the semester. It allowed students to communicate with one another (Eyler et al., 1996) about the project and how it related to the course material.

Debriefing/Typical Results

Because the blogs were public and could be accessed by anyone, students tended to do a better job of proofreading and editing their work. The blogs also allowed students to interact with people from other groups in the class and offer constructive criticism to them. Because the final papers focused on people examining and defining their individual beliefs and then supporting those beliefs with rationales based on research, class materials, and experiences, they tended to be more effectively written. The final paper challenged some students, since it asked them to think critically about their personal beliefs and tie those beliefs to a thoughtful rationale. For instance, one student said, “Throughout the project and the semester, I was surprised to learn how many different systems of ethics there really are. To be perfectly honest, I had always assumed that we were all using the same, or at least very similar, systems, but I was surprised to learn how many ways you could approach the idea of ethical communication.”
Appraisal

Limitations

Several limitations exist for instructors wishing to format a class in this manner. First, the assignment is most effective if the instructor facilitates connections with community partners, which needs to be done before the semester starts and can be time consuming. Second, the instructor needs to spend time working on group dynamics in the course if the groups are to be successful. Third, the projects that students wish to work on may not be appropriate for the class. For instance, if a student group wished to work at a thrift store, that would not meet the parameters of the assignment because it would not involve significant group interaction, even though work at a thrift store might bring them into contact with many diverse others. If projects are not appropriate for the class, the instructor may have to suggest alternatives or extend assignment deadlines while the group searches for an appropriate project. Finally, this approach works best with a smaller class, given the number of writing assignments that need to be evaluated.

Variation

Students who believed that they would not be able to complete service hours because of their work and class schedules had the option to complete an alternative assignment that consisted of writing a literature review about a scholarly topic related to communication ethics and diversity. To be comparable in terms of time commitment and depth of analysis, the literature review had to use at least 15 scholarly sources and had to be 15 pages long, excluding references. If students did not know how to write a literature review, they were invited to meet with the instructor during office hours to receive one-on-one tutoring. Students typically preferred hands-on experience to writing a literature review; no students chose this option.

Summary

The assignments for this course take communication ethics and diversity away from the theoretical realm and provide opportunities for students to apply what they have learned to their own experiences and belief systems. Studies of service learning show that students have better academic outcomes, a greater commitment to service, and more significant identity development when they are involved in a well-planned service-learning experience (Eyler et al., 2001). Having students complete a service-learning project for a communication ethics course helps them to have a deeper, more visceral understanding of the code they say they wish to live by.

Note

[1] Detailed assignments and grading rubrics are available from the author.
References


