Centering Activism and Social Justice in PR Education: Critical Communication Pedagogy as an Entryway

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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) research has centered activism to some extent, though a clear, collective commitment to center activism in the U.S. PR classroom is still lacking. Thus, educators have an opportunity to situate activism and social justice as an integral part of U.S. PR education and effect social change through their teaching. This essay outlines key considerations of activism research and the opportunities to concretize activism in U.S. PR education, presents critical communication pedagogy (CCP) as a framework to meaningfully include activism in PR curricula, and highlights why educators should consider teaching social justice activism topics. Ultimately, we argue that CCP—and its key concepts of identity, power, and social (re)production —provides a theoretical opportunity to purposefully and unapologetically integrate activism into the PR classroom while simultaneously advancing the field to realize its potential for social justice.

Public relations (PR) scholarship has meaningfully integrated activism into the body of knowledge through a strong line of critical/cultural research (Ciszek, 2015; Weaver, 2019) that transcends activists as organizational opposition. However, PR education in the United States has not followed suit. Many U.S. PR programs do not require or offer activism classes and often focus on technical skills at the expense of exercising these skills for a variety of social justice causes. For instance, Holtzhausen (2011) asserted "the emphasis on writing skills and journalism training is arguably the most dominant concept in the training of undergraduate public relations practitioners in the United States" (p. 112). Somerville et al. (2011), from a U.K. perspective, explained the need to balance the dominant vocational approach to PR education with opportunities to explore social issues through critical approaches so students can appropriately apply those vocational skills to global challenges. With the research developments for activism in mind, we outline a path to meaningfully and systematically center activism in PR pedagogy practices through a critical communication approach and argue that PR education has the potential to effect meaningful change for social justice.

In this essay, we first outline key considerations of activism research and the opportunities to meaningfully integrate activism in U.S. PR education. We present critical communication pedagogy (CCP) as a framework to include activism effectively and consistently in PR curricula and address social justice (Waymer, 2021). We conclude by arguing that PR education has consequences for social justice and provide support for integrating activism into all PR classrooms. Ultimately, CCP—and its key concepts of identity, social (re)production, and power—provides a theoretical opportunity to purposefully include activism into the PR classroom while simultaneously encouraging educators to consider the consequences of their teaching practices for students and society.

Activism in Public Relations Research and Education

In this section, we first present a socio-cultural definition of PR and specific social justice perspective of activism that complement each other and that we take on as educators. We also detail past and current research about activism with the understanding that teaching activism in the classroom should be informed by this body of knowledge. Lastly, we present pedagogical work at the intersections of culture and social justice to acknowledge this related and important work, although examples of teaching activism specifically are scant in PR pedagogy literature. Ultimately, we seek to equip educators with a view of the strengths and limitations of our understandings of activism to inform their teaching and set the foundation for using CCP to integrate activism into the PR classroom.

PR as Socio-cultural: Opportunities for Social Justice in Teaching

Many definitions of PR exist, but broad, non-functionalist understandings of PR allow for a more accessible incorporation of activism into the discipline (Edwards, 2012; Weaver, 2019) and into the classroom. Thus, we take on a socio-cultural definition of PR when considering activism. Edwards and Hodges (2011) described the socio-cultural orientation as one that recognizes PR as "a locus of transactions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings" (p. 4). This socio-cultural perspective of PR does not discount or erase the value of functional approaches to PR, but instead acknowledges the larger, socio-cultural context in which organizations exist (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). A socio-cultural perspective also acknowledges how power and resistance influence cultural meaning in ways that can center social justice as a specific type of social change that some activism seeks to inspire and that instructors can embody in their acts of resistance in the classroom.

Activism has provided PR education and research with an important connection to societal discourse, social justice, and social

change, bringing up questions of power, culture, and resistance. For instance, Zoller (2005) explained health activism as "a challenge to the existing order and power relationships" because it seeks to dispute status quos, existing dominance for groups and norms, etc. (p. 344). However, the nuances of activism are still up for debate and the examples of what counts as activism are sometimes unclear, particularly when "activist" efforts do not advance social justice per se (e.g., guns rights activists, anti-abortion activists, etc.).

We adopt a specific understanding of activism from a social justice perspective—as sustained resistance to and disruption of harmful inequities, norms, and practices that discriminate against and marginalize people to ultimately promote equity (Place & Ciszek, 2021; Weaver, 2019). Consequently, we draw from Demetrious (2013) and conceptualize social movements as "purposeful collective action which advocates with socio-political intent" (p. 34). Throughout this essay, we specifically refer to a type of social justice activism that seeks to intervene in and address inequity, oppression, and discrimination within society.

Conceptualizations of Activism to Inform Teaching

How we conceptualize activism will necessarily influence how we teach it, so we present a summary of the body of knowledge about activism. The state of activism research in PR represents a burgeoning area of study that has evolved from understanding activism from a predominantly managerial perspective to discussing the social and cultural elements of activism for society (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2020; Weaver, 2019). Although scholars have highlighted how activists have used PR for over a century (Ciszek, 2015), early PR literature focused on activists as pressure groups that posed challenges for organizations to manage to achieve organizational goals (Grunig, 1992). PR pedagogy often aligns with the latter perspective, while activism research has continued to explore socio-cultural realities.

For roughly two decades, scholars have explored how a variety of advocates and activists employ PR practices and how communication professionals influence social issues (Ciszek, 2015; Ciszek, 2017a; Greenberg et al., 2011). Rather than looking at activism as a separate or antithetical force for organizations, scholars have positioned activists as agents of social change that use PR to realize such change (Ciszek, 2017a). As Greenberg et al. (2011) explained, PR has contributed to a variety of solutions and policy for the climate crisis highlighting how PR is not "merely the handmaiden for corporate power" (p. 67). Relatedly, Smith and Ferguson (2018) described how activists organize and use rhetoric to define and resolve issues, shape identity for individuals and organizations, and establish legitimacy. In this sense, activists are not the opposite of organizations and in fact may be most effective when they fully organize (Smith & Ferguson, 2018).

Yet, the discipline still has limitations in the ways it researches (and consequently teaches) activism. Wolf (2018) pointed out that the move toward activism in PR research is nascent and rarely privileges an activist perspective. Weaver (2019) argued that it is important to avoid conflating activism and PR because activism necessarily includes efforts for social change while PR may not. With this in mind, we may think of PR as a tool used by a variety of groups and for a variety of purposes but should be careful not to conflate all activism as PR practice per se (Weaver, 2019).

Limitations of Activism in PR Education

This move toward including activists as strategic organizational entities and the recognition of PR as a socio-cultural force for social justice begs the question: how does our teaching complement these advancements? We suggest that U.S. PR education has not fully complemented these advancements. Activism and social movement focused classes are not required or even offered in many PR programs

in the United States. Furthermore, U.S. PR has been dominated by a corporate bent for much of its history as early conceptualizations of activism also trickled into PR education. Mules (2019) pointed out that if activism was covered at all, "most of the pre-2000 textbooks position activism and activists from an issues and crisis management perspective as a function of business," though newer texts within this analysis indicate some change in framing activism as liberative (p. 22). Dominant PR theories and paradigms that were developed in the U.S. have focused on how PR, as a corporate/organizational function, can support organizational outcomes and goals (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Edwards, 2012). From this perspective, activists are viewed as a type of public that an organization needs to exert power over to ensure said activists will not create a crisis for the organization (Ciszek, 2015; Ciszek et al., 2021). To earn their paychecks and keep their jobs, PR students—sometimes implicitly, other times explicitly— may be socialized to simply do as organizational leaders and clients ask particularly if their job is framed as a service to the organization first and foremost.

Although activism remains largely under-explored and under-utilized in U.S. PR education, there are instances of PR scholars applying critical perspectives to their teaching practices that connect to the socio-cultural and social justice opportunities we have presented thus far. For instance, Somerville et al. (2011) and Hodges (2013) have both argued for and applied critical pedagogy to their PR teaching. Madden et al. (2019) investigated postmodernism in the PR classroom (which involves a similar critical orientation) and Ju and Kang (2021) presented critical dialogical approaches to teaching cultural competence. However, Somerville et al. (2011) argued that PR education has privileged skills-based learning, which has biased learning resources and practices "to approach the subject from a managerial and technocratic perspective" (p. 549). Furthermore, scholars have argued that PR education is "sometimes

deficient" of critical-cultural perspectives (Hodges, 2013, p. 27) and does not necessarily prioritize activism in curricula.

To question the ways that PR education privileges managerial and skills-based learning in pedagogy, we must interrogate our philosophies about what truth is (ontology), where it comes from (epistemology), and how it is valued (axiology) (Simpson, 2010; Tracy, 2013). Particularly because these philosophical underpinnings privilege certain questions and worldviews (Simpson, 2010), it is important to not overlook the epistemological, axiological, and ontological perspectives of educators. We must consider the underlying assumptions that guide our teaching and consider what theoretical orientations lend themselves to social justice and activist topics to see which orientations align best with the teaching topic and goals at hand. CCP provides a foundational step in questioning some of the assumptions within U.S. PR pedagogy that often keep activism at the educational periphery and appropriately complements a social justice perspective. Next, we explain CCP's assumptions and major concepts, describe its utility in the PR classroom, and suggest that educators have an opportunity to contribute to society by teaching activism in PR classes.

CCP as an Entryway to Activism in PR Education

CCP is a framework that centers social justice in the teaching/ learning process (Fassett & Rudick, 2016; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Golsan & Rudick, 2018). As Simpson (2010) explained, "Critical communication pedagogues offer rigorous attention to the ways in which communication is socially constructed, embrace the constitutive and embodied nature of all communication, and foreground the significance of human agency within particular contexts" (pp. 361-362). Instructors working from this perspective challenge the normative banking approach to education that positions students as knowledge receivers that regurgitate information transmitted by their instructors (Freire, 1970/1993). Rather, when employing a CCP approach, instructors seek to collaborate with their

students to create shared knowledge and learn from one another (Fassett & Rudick, 2018). Ultimately, as an approach to teaching and scholarship, CCP seeks to use communication to create spaces of intervention into normative disciplinary and educational structures (Golsan & Rudick, 2018).

CCP represents a form of social justice-oriented teaching and learning (Fassett & Rudick, 2018; Frey & Palmer, 2014) that can cultivate critical thinking and activist skills for students and educators. CCP is social justice oriented because it calls on instructors to intervene in the (re) production of oppressive systems and teaches students to engage in critical reflection to diagnose how socio-historical phenomena institutionalize inequality (Fassett & Rudick, 2018; Frey & Palmer, 2017). Not only can CCP lead to students' understanding of social justice issues, but it also offers instructors the opportunity to support students in creating activist interventions through experiential and case study learning opportunities (Frey & Palmer, 2017). For instance, Kahl (2018) used CCP in a class activity that exposed students to the issue of fracking in North Dakota and encouraged students to consider activism as a potential response to the petroleum industry's hegemony. Thus, CCP offers PR educators a framework to promote understandings of how identity, power, and social (re)production function in PR practices and frames tangible learning opportunities about social justice.

Fassett and Rudick (2018) outlined three CCP commandments: "communication is constitutive," "social justice is a process," and "the classroom is a site of activism and interpersonal justice" (p. 5). Relatedly, Golsan and Rudick (2018) presented three central tenets of CCP based on these formative commandments: identity, social (re)production, and power. Next, we present these three concepts and their relationships to activism and PR, and then provide examples of how to apply these concepts in PR education.

Identity

CCP scholars and educators understand identity as an amalgamation of cultural, historical, and personal positionalities created and negotiated through communication (Golsan & Rudick, 2018). A CCP perspective considers how disciplinary knowledge, histories, and structures undergird course curriculum and that course content is shaped by identity and normative social structures (Golsan & Rudick, 2018; Hendrix et al., 2003). From this perspective, we come to understand ourselves and others in a dynamic, culturally embedded, and social way.

CCP also acknowledges that experiences of marginalization and oppression are not explained by individual, distinct identities but how intersecting identities contribute to specific experiences of marginalization. For example, Black women in the United States are both Black and women all the time and experience racism and patriarchy in ways that cannot be disentangled (Crenshaw, 1991). CCP's focus on identity encourages students and instructors to think about their own positionalities in how they view the world and how people communicate. Because CCP includes a variety of critical sub-pedagogies (feminist, trans-affirming, anti-racist, etc.; Fassett & Rudick, 2018), it allows educators to carve out understandings of how our identities shape what we know, value, and do and how identity intersects with expressions of activism.

Connecting Identity to Activism

In a PR education context, there are multiple, conflicting identities at play (e.g., organizational, practitioner, and public identity). Thus, identity is a complex concept in PR generally and for activism specifically. In the simplest sense, activism helps people make meaning of a variety of identity factors. For instance, Ciszek (2017b) presented activists as "producers" of collective identity for the LGBT community (p. 809). While collective identity remains fluid, activism serves as a mechanism to negotiate that identity (Ciszek, 2017b). Furthermore, researchers

have suggested that activists serve an important role in calling out and providing alternatives for harmful representations of identity (Ciszek et al., 2021).

In line with CCP's foundation of identities as intersectional and layered, scholars have also called for intersectional approaches to the key components of PR and activism (Ciszek, 2020b; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013). As Ciszek (2020b) argued, organizations must consider a group's "multiple intersecting identities," which includes a range of factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation, education, etc., and establish practices to account for identities as complex and influenced by history (p. 4). Activist organizations, just as corporate and nonprofit, must find ways to navigate and negotiate identity by tending to complex constellations of self-understanding.

A focus on identity also encourages students and instructors to question corporate practices in the context of (mis)representing identity and how activists resist those misrepresentations. For example, Edwards (2018) presented a 2015 case study about Scotland-based brewing company (Brewdog) and recounted its video advertisement that essentially mocked the experiences of unhoused and transgender people. The Scotsman (2015) reported that the actors in the Brewdog video "can be seen begging for cash on the street, selling themselves in a garage sale and cross-dressing as sex workers - soliciting passersby for cash" (para. 6). LGBTQ activists criticized the video and media outlets reported that 25,000 people signed a petition to remove the transphobic advertisement (Morgan, 2015). In response to the offensive advertisement, Brewdog launched "No Label – the world's first non-binary transgender beer" and donated profits to charities that support the LGBTQ community (Brewdog, 2015; Morgan, 2015). While some response to the "No Label" campaign was positive, some people did not appreciate what they saw as a co-optation of their identity for the organization's benefit and/or the lack of

acknowledgement of how binary expectations within society marginalize them (Edwards, 2018). From an activist lens, this example shows the centrality of activism in the negotiation of collective identity by resisting harmful representations of marginalized groups that often shape how their identities are understood in the public sphere.

Power

Central to a CCP approach to instruction is a complex understanding of power that examines how institutional, cultural, and judicial power influence the teaching/learning process, curricula, and perspectives about what counts as knowledge worth learning (Fassett & Rudick, 2016; Golsan & Rudick, 2018). In the classroom, power is about more than just the instructor-student relationship and compliance gaining. Rather, CCP approaches understand how power conserves and consolidates resources to uphold the status quo. Individuals are agents of systems, guided by ideology, who wield the power given to them by the system as they try to gain more themselves (Liu, 2017; Liu & Liu, forthcoming). Therefore, power is contextual, relational, and ideological. When considering power in this way, instructors can help students understand how communication upholds systems of power and how students and instructors can collaboratively critique those systems to (re) define the educational environment (Allen, 2011; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Golsan & Rudick, 2018).

Traditionally, PR has focused on individual/practitioner and organizational power as ways to understand power as ability or "capacity" to influence (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2013, p. 306). For instance, Berger (2005) provided a functionalist perspective of power and conceptualized three types of power relations all present for practitioners and within organizations: *power over* (control), *power with* (empowerment), and *power to* (resistance). Berger (2005) ultimately argued that the typical technician and managerial roles of practitioners

lacked explanatory power for the organizational activist role that some practitioners may need when balancing a variety of perspectives and interests. While this research suggests that PR professionals can serve as activists internally in an organization, the larger social context and the ways that activism intermingles with discourse, culture, and society are not prioritized from this perspective. In other words, this functional or capacity-based view of power lacks the nuance to prepare students and instructors to engage with power as seeped in a web of complex relations.

Socio-culturally and discursively, power is symbolic and shapes what we know to be true and who can create knowledge (Edwards, 2009; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2013). From this perspective, the fact that power is relational—that one entity's power influences the position of others (Edwards, 2009)—becomes clearer. Power can be thought of as meaning-centered because resources are valued and distributed based on the meanings that are assigned to them (Heath et al., 2010). In this meaning making process, discourses can become so common place that they go unquestioned and communicators must grapple with how these hegemonic ways of knowing are produced by them and for them (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2013). In turn, activism can draw from subaltern perspectives, outside of those hegemonic discourses, to push back and produce new ways of knowing (Place & Ciszek, 2021).

Connecting Power to Activism

Social justice activism represents a process to unearth power for marginalized groups and address hegemonic forces within society. While activists may push for more than symbolic power, a large piece of PR activist literature focuses on voice as a form of power and considers how activists gain resources and access spaces to share their perspectives (Place & Ciszek, 2021; Weaver, 2019). Digital and social media have changed the communication landscape and challenged the power that many media outlets and other gatekeepers can use to silence or erase activists.

However, new forms of media, although accessible, have not fully addressed the issue of expressing voice as a form of power for activists. Place and Ciszek (2021) noted that social media can drown out voices because of the sheer amount of information. Furthermore, the institutional power structures in place can still dictate important events to express voice and power. For instance, civic meetings were offered at times when activists in Place and Ciszek's (2021) study could not attend. Thus, social justice activism still faces challenges in expressing voice and leveraging symbolic power for social change, which serves as an important reality for PR students and educators to consider in their daily roles that often include access to voice and symbolic power.

Despite these challenges, there are examples of activism successfully resisting status quos and pressuring traditional sources of power for change in a variety of global contexts. Vu (2017) explained how grassroots environmental activists in Vietnam challenged governmental dominance in a country where activists are often silenced and oppressed. In this example, activists opposed the government's decision to cut down thousands of trees without consulting the public. In doing so, the activists were able to inspire leaders to change their course of action. Vu (2017) noted the importance of this success in that it allowed activists to critique a non-threatening issue of governmental power and "opened a new avenue for civilians in such authoritarian regimes as Vietnam to exercise contest" (Vu, 2017, p. 1200). Understandings of power that transcend a functionalist view ask for PR researchers and educators to frame power within a societal context and consider the physical, relational, and symbolic ways that we negotiate meaning and value within society. Such examples show the opportunities for marginalized voices and emphasize the responsibility that PR students and educators have to amplify these voices because of PR's proximity to symbolic power.

Social (Re)production

From a CCP perspective, educators consider how everyday, mundane communication functions to both "(re)produce and (de) construct" normative social systems and dominant ideologies (Allen, 2011, p. 106). Thus, it is important to examine how larger institutional and societal structures intersect with their classrooms and consider how the teaching/learning process is "power-laden, identity-driven, and culturally informed" (Fassett & Rudick, 2018, p. 5). Through a collaborative, dialogic approach to teaching/learning, instructors can work to intervene in the social (re)production of hegemonic norms and promote an understanding of knowledge and truth as socially constructed and contextual (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Within the context of PR, both educators and students must consider the roles they play in the (re) production of and/or resistance to harmful expectations, norms, and beliefs. For instance, students and instructors can consider the cultural consequences of communication materials they have produced.

PR is one of several professions that influences culture and shapes what is considered valuable within society via cultural intermediation (Ciszek, 2017a; Matthews & McGuire, 2014). Advertising, branding, PR, and other creative and promotional activities influence what people think is good, right, wrong, trendy, etc. (Hodges & Edwards, 2014). PR scholars have built on Bourdieu's work on cultural intermediation alongside symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Hodges & Edwards, 2014; Wolf, 2018) to consider the consequences of exerting meaning-centered power to (re)produce social reality. Similarly, PR plays a role in the cultural process and has been highlighted in critical-cultural theories such as the cultural economic model, particularly in how it influences the production and consumption of meaning within society (Curtin et al., 2016). Such social (re)production via cultural intermediation influences identity, opinions and beliefs about issues, understandings of

history and a variety of other examples through communication.

Connecting Social (Re)production to Activism

Social (re)production connects to activism by drawing attention to the ways that oppressive practices have been challenged and often changed by the work of activists. Activists often play a role in questioning what remains unquestioned in terms of social (re)production and symbolically violent practices (Wolf, 2018). Awareness builds throughout history and challenges the social (re)production that has indoctrinated certain beliefs and norms within society. For example, Banu Bıçakçı and Hürmeriç (2018) investigated Turkey's feminist movement to understand how activists challenged patriarchal norms. They found that feminist activists used protests, gatherings, and demonstrations to bring private topics into the public realm and encourage social consciousness and awakening about issues such as violence against women (Banu Bıçakçı & Hürmeriç, 2018). Such examples bring to bear the power of PR to produce meaning within a social context while considering dissent as a valuable part of civic life and as a valuable form of communication for students to learn.

The concept of social (re)production spotlights historic trajectories that have shaped the issues that PR practitioners will manage throughout their careers, such as racial justice (e.g., Logan, 2021), and asks how activists can provide alternative interpretations of those histories to intervene in social (re)production. For instance, Black Lives Matter and allies articulate the lineages of police brutality from a U.S. history of slavery that undergirds the oppression of Black people today (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Understanding how particular ways of knowing sustain over time and how they can be contested helps students and instructors imagine new expectations and norms that disrupt oppressive ideologies (i.e., white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism) to privilege social justice.

The Intersections of Identity, Power, and Social (Re)production

Although we discussed identity, power, and social reproduction

separately, the three concepts are not mutually exclusive. They connect to and overlap with one another. For example, Ciszek and Logan (2018) analyzed Ben & Jerry's Facebook posts supporting the Black Lives Matter movement to understand how dissensus emerged on digital media. They found that Ben & Jerry's disrupted the existing social order, thereby challenging the *social (re)production* of U.S. race relations and the norms by which an ice cream brand participates in social justice issues. The existing social order involved a history of white supremacy, which shows the *power* of white supremacist ideology that undergirded the backlash to Ben & Jerry's support/corporate advocacy. Lastly, the social media users who responded to Ben & Jerry's 2016 post in support of Black Lives Matter communicated conflicting beliefs and understandings of systemic/structural racism (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), which connects to the ways that those users' *identities* and lived experiences have shaped their worldviews. Therefore, social (re)production, power, and identity inherently connect to one another by influencing how one sees their own positionality in the societal web of power relations in which PR plays a meaning-making role.

In the classroom, the analysis above can be shared to articulate identity, power, and social (re)production in a case example and can be taken a step further by questioning how these key concepts challenge existing ideas about "good" PR practice. For instance, Ben & Jerry's approach to anti-racist advocacy on Facebook disrupts the normative logic in U.S. PR classrooms that effective PR should seek dialogue and consensus. As Ciszek and Logan (2018) suggested, centering dissensus in PR practice may foster social change. Using this example as a case study can help instructors intervene in the social (re)production of consensus driven PR and explain how organizations can use their power in the public sphere to communicate alongside activists and challenge whiteness. By engaging students with the concepts of identity, power, and social (re) production, educators can advance more robust understandings of identity

that could help future practitioners humanize and respect publics.

Bringing Identity, Social (Re)production and Power into the PR Classroom

In addition to considering activism and social movement examples and content (as may be inspired from the above discussion), we suggest three key strategies to bring identity, power, and social (re)production into the PR classroom. These three strategies allow the educator to essentially *practice what they preach* by bringing acts of resistance and disruption to their classrooms that exemplify social justice activism.

Considering Positionality and How it Influences Communication

By advancing a CCP approach to identity, instructors and students must grapple with their own identities to critically reflect on their positionalities and privilege to understand the forces that social justice activism seeks to disrupt. As a concrete example, analyzing PR materials to see how people in marginalized groups are portrayed (or missing entirely) may help students and educators question how we have shaped our identities within this larger sociopolitical context. We can ask questions, of our students and of ourselves, that unveil some of the ways that PR has contributed to marginalization when producing materials and campaigns. For instance, asking questions such as: why are all people in the photos of this strategic plan white? Why are all the expert quotes in this news release from men? How has my identity allowed me to ignore such representations? *Or* forced me to notice them? Such reflections may also spark conversations about how PR has, implicitly and explicitly, contributed to systemic racism, sexism, ableism, and other "isms" to work toward more identity conscious, socially just practice in the future (Fassett & Rudick, 2018; Waymer, 2021), and include the work of activists in such endeavors.

Furthermore, CCP advances a nuanced understanding of identity that can help instructors teach several PR topics in ways that

align with social justice activism. For example, segmentation and public characteristics are traditionally discussed as "discrete, single demographics that practitioners assume can be added together and easily separated" (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013, p. 280). This perspective reduces individuals with complex, multifaceted identities into a single monolithic group, which may also enable communicators to rely on harmful stereotypes and essentialize certain groups based on those discrete demographics. A CCP perspective highlights how our identities influence how we view the world, what we value, and how we communicate. Our identities are contextual and constructed in relation to larger socio-political and historical contexts (Golsan & Rudick, 2018; Hendrix et al., 2003). Students can consider the perspective that identities are not static, and not based on demographics, psychographics, or geography alone.

Changing the Power Dynamic Between Student and Educator

Historically, institutions of higher education have served as spaces that advance hegemony, which compounds issues of patriarchy, race, class, and other issues activists must disrupt when facilitating social change. From a normative perspective, educators are often seen as "experts" that know and produce knowledge that is then transmitted to student learners to be regurgitated (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Freire, 1970/1993). This approach to education has socialized students toward a managerial perspective of education where they function as workers doing what they must to get their degree and a good job post-graduation (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022). When educating from this perspective, instructors have significant power over their students that can be wielded in ways that remove student agency, limit learning, and hinder exploration in the classroom. CCP serves as an intervention, and an expression of activism itself, that allows instructors to develop shared knowledge with students by allowing students to question where and how knowledge is created and centering their agency in the learning process (Golsan & Rudick, 2018).

One approach to disrupting the educator-student power imbalance is giving students a voice in the process of determining learning outcomes, designing assignments, and deciding how they will be evaluated (Ashby-King et al., 2021; Stommel, 2020). By engaging in *ungrading* practices like these, instructors can give students agency in the process of determining what counts as learning in the classroom. In doing so, educators create classroom and assessment contexts that center students' needs, resist the notion that the instructor is the holder of all knowledge, and provide students with a voice in determining what it means to learn in the course (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Although a power dynamic will always exist between instructor and students, acknowledging it and considering how it may limit student learning allows instructors to reimagine their teaching toward social justice.

Providing Opportunities to Critique Discourses and Challenge Social (Re)production

As education has often constrained students toward specific ways of being and knowing, it has reinforced dominant ideologies and social systems both in the academy and practice. For example, scholars have documented how PR history has reinforced the dominant, managerialist approach, particularly related to the Excellence Theory (Fitch & L'Etang, 2017). Fitch and L'Etang (2017) acknowledged the limitations of this dominant perspective in that, "these ideas, in undiluted and unproblematised forms, have populated and re-populated numerous PR textbooks both in English and in other languages until they have been accepted by some as incontrovertible fact" (p. 116). By utilizing a CCP approach, instructors can intervene in the reinforcement of these perspectives to disrupt these status quos (Allen, 2011) and help students imagine and experience PR as a practice of social change in addition to a corporate or nonprofit practice.

Intervening in social (re)production allows instructors to help

students question assumptions and dominant discourses about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability and other facets of identity and work toward breaking the cycle of harmful norms and representations of marginalized groups. In the PR classroom, instructors could call students' attention to the role PR plays in mediating discourse in the public sphere. First, instructors could provide examples of how PR has been used in ways that promote harmful, hegemonic norms by centering some and marginalizing others (Logan, 2021). Instructors could highlight how PR is used during crises to focus on organizations or institutions and often ignores those most harmed by a crisis (Waymer & Heath, 2007). We suggest instructors also offer examples that show how PR practitioners can effectively influence culture to support marginalized people, such as how Alen Nierob constructed a humanizing discourse around Caitlyn Jenner's transition (Ciszek, 2020a). Second, instructors can counter the notion that PR is most effective when it is symmetrical and working toward consensus. By using case studies, such as the Ben & Jerry's example discussed earlier (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), instructors can show how PR can also be used by organizations to participate in democracy and promote social justice through dissensus. By intervening in social (re)production, educators can expand the responsibilities of and opportunities for PR, which offers a clearer avenue for discussing activism in the PR classroom.

A Call to Action: Why PR Educators Should Consider CCP

Throughout this essay, we have presented CCP as an entryway to discussing activism and social justice in the PR classroom and intervening in the reproduction of status quos through teaching. We have outlined how CCP's central concepts of identity, power, and social (re)production connect with activism and social justice and the ways educators can take content and practices into the PR classroom. Now we turn to answering the question, why? Why should PR educators privilege activism in the classroom? And why should they take a CCP approach when addressing

activism? We answer these questions by arguing that 1) PR educators should privilege activism in their classrooms because it can contribute to a more equitable society and 2) CCP is particularly compatible with activism for social justice.

Contributing to Social Justice: Activism in the PR Classroom and Beyond

Because of the inherent power in teaching future agents of social change, PR educators can contribute to a more equitable and just society by integrating activism and social justice into the classroom. Just as there is power in the work of PR professionals in shaping socio-cultural contexts and outcomes, there is power in teaching future communicators who will influence that socio-cultural reality. This point relies on the argument that teaching is not a value-free activity. Educators and the curriculum they teach have a specific "agenda" that privileges certain questions and ways of knowing (Simpson, 2010, p. 367). What we choose to teach and how we choose to teach it will have consequences. We suggest educators can choose topics and dialogues that promote PR as a practice that supports a more just society by amplifying examples of activists participating in social change and providing communication pathways to facilitate such change.

At its very core, activism provides a pathway to citizenship and civic engagement. Students can use the skills they learn to make positive changes to issues that matter to them and society. For instance, students have engaged in activism to protest government in Nicaragua (Witschge, 2018) and sexual assault on college campuses in the United States (Kyaw, 2021). When teaching PR, instructors are not simply preparing students to think about organizational interest. We are guiding them to develop skills that address today's global challenges, such as climate change. We are helping them hone the tools to contribute to the industries, topics, and issues that matter to them. We are encouraging them to think critically

about their own positionalities within a dynamic communication ecology with diverse experiences and viewpoints. We are preparing them to communicate strategically, build relationships, and play an active part in our society's discourses. Centering activism shows students that PR is more than a corporate function and demonstrates the role that the field plays in realizing a more equitable society.

Complementing a Social Justice Perspective

Effectively centering activism in the PR classroom requires instructors to look beyond traditional, functional approaches to PR and consider perspectives that complement social justice topics. Considering the philosophical assumptions embedded in our teaching is important because not all philosophical systems align with all perspectives of PR and the theories within. For example, as Tracy (2013) explained, positivists consider the world "knowable and strive to show the one true world" (p. 47). This perspective cannot be reconciled with the postmodern perspective that "meaning is partial and significant in its own way, but never holds the whole truth" (Tracy, 2013, p. 47). Relatedly, we see managerial and functional paradigms as well-suited for considering organizational effectiveness of any organization (corporate, activist, etc.), but ill-suited for considering activism as an expression of social justice and understanding socio-cultural context. Social justice activism's commitment to addressing inequity and calling out oppressive systems aligns with CCP's commitment to challenging dominant educational structures and giving students tools to engage with activism, if or when they choose to.

CCP and social justice activism challenge educators and practitioners to consider movement toward equity, inclusion, and justice. Activism provides the means to elevate and amplify marginalized and oppressed voices; CCP provides the framework to integrate such topics responsibly and reflectively by promoting reflexive teaching strategies and

nuanced concepts. Because teaching and learning are never neutral or free of consequence, we urge instructors to help students realize the possibility of a more equitable future and fuel this process by teaching PR skills with social justice in mind.

Final Thoughts

CCP is one of many pedagogical approaches instructors can use but it is an approach that provides a pathway to meaningfully discuss activism and PR in both content and praxis. Although useful, CCP has limitations. Simpson (2010) highlighted arguments that CCP does not explicitly critique how communication restricts access to voice, space, and agency. However, we still see great value in the approach, particularly because the key concepts and assumptions of CCP provide an accessible and useful framework for educators to engage with social justice topics. Even if instructors do not have previous experience with social justice or activism, they can invite students to critique how identity, power, and social (re)production influence equity within society and learn alongside students to further challenge traditional approaches to education.

It is also important to note that critical approaches to pedagogy do not remove the practical, skill-based learning that is essential to the PR classroom. As Somerville et al. (2011) clarified, a critical orientation does not mean that technical skills are not central to PR education. Rather, critical perspectives draw attention to the socio-cultural and political issues that frame the practice of PR with the goal of preparing students to use their skills effectively and ethically (Somerville et al., 2011).

We also acknowledge the U.S. and Western-centric nature of this essay. Though we have made a conscious effort to include global perspectives, a significant body of scholarly research and examples often originate from Europe, Australia, the United States, and other Western nations privileging these perspectives. As scholars and educators working in the U.S. context, we can speak most confidently from the perspective

we are embedded in. We encourage scholars and educators working across the globe to critique our perspective and adapt CCP to continue to push PR pedagogy toward social justice-oriented ends.

Conclusion

As activism has gained more scholarly attention in the discipline, PR's educational commitment to activism is still in flux and the time is ripe to expect activism and social justice to be included across PR curricula. We argue that CCP provides a framework and praxis that challenges normative models of PR education and provides key concepts central to integrating activism in the PR classroom. PR educators have an opportunity to privilege activism in their classrooms and contribute to a more equitable society by using CCP as a complementary lens. Ultimately, this essay is more than a call to teach activism topics, but a call to critically evaluate how we teach to continue to push PR education to realize its social justice potential.

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