

Called, Committed and Inspiring Activism: How Black PR Guest Speakers Experienced the PR Classroom During the COVID-19 and Racial Reckoning Academic Year of 2020/2021

David Brown, Temple University
Teri Del Rosso, University of Memphis

ABSTRACT

Through nine in-depth interviews with Black PR experts, this project explores how public relations professors can support and engage guest speakers from underrepresented communities during traumatic times; specifically the public health and racial violence pandemics during the 2020/2021 academic year. We suggest that by understanding the motivations and experiences of Black guest speakers, public relations professors can (better) implement an activist pedagogy practice.

Keywords: in-depth interviews, black pr experts, diversity, guest speakers, activist pedagogy

The spring and summer seasons of 2020 were an unexpected time of reckoning for many public relations professors. In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced many educators and students to their home to work, lecture, study, and collaborate; and faculty were regrouping after teaching, researching, advising, and mentoring digitally for the last half of the spring semester. Although the summer brought a degree of uncertainty, there was a familiarity with the accelerated, often already online, summer courses and research agendas.

Unfortunately, along with the familiarity of a faculty summer work schedule was another tragically familiar story for too many in the U.S.: the police shootings and murders of Black Americans. In May 2020, leaked video footage documented the February 23 killing of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who was gunned down by two White men while jogging in Brunswick, Ga. (Rojas et al., 2020). On May 11, 2020, Errin Haines (2020) reported on Breonna Taylor, a Black woman who was shot and killed in Louisville, Ky. on March 13 after police executed a search warrant.

The murders of Arbery and Taylor drew considerable traditional and social media attention (Brown & Ray, 2020; Specter, 2020); but the country took to the streets for weeks after George Floyd was murdered on Memorial Day (May 25, 2020) in Minneapolis. Floyd was killed after now former police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes.

The public reckoning of these three murders, in addition to the public health crisis, brought a question and call-to-action to the forefront: "What role can, and should communication education scholarship play in this racial justice movement?" (Waymer, 2021, p. 114). Professors, especially faculty of color, have grappled with this question prior to and since May 2020. Overall, many seemed to take Waymer's question as a call to increase diversity, and professors joined institutions in conversation

about how they can incorporate diversity into their own public relations classrooms.

The need to bring more diversity to the PR classroom is spurred by the lack of diversity among PR professors, who overwhelmingly identify as white, so much so that the profession was described as “a lily-white field of women” (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Many of these summer 2020 discussions concluded that a path to decentering whiteness was through rethinking references and media; and professors were encouraged to be diligent in facilitating relationships among students, guest speakers, and mentors of color. Unfortunately, this often resulted in emotional, unpaid labor for guests, mentors, and panelists.

This project explores how to engage more diverse guest speakers; and suggests that intentionally approaching this relationship can be a form of activist pedagogy. Using in-depth interviews, we spoke with nine Black public relations experts who spoke, taught, mentored, and supported public relations students during the 2020/2021 academic year. We focused on how they are processing the collective and individual trauma of 2020 and 2021, how they experienced the PR classroom, and how they felt PR professors can better support them and their students. These findings, which include templates and suggestions for outreach with guest speakers, will aid professors in creating a more activist-friendly space in the public relations classroom.

Literature Review

Although the inclusion of guest speakers in the classroom helps professors deliver professional world experiences to students (Craig et al., 2020; Davis, 1993), few studies in mass communication explore this topic. This literature review will outline activism and the public relations classroom, our theoretical lens of activist pedagogy, and the research on guest speakers.

Activism in the Public Relations Classroom

A shift in public relations scholarship began in the early 2000s when researchers began to study the relationship between public relations and activism. Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) posit that a postmodern approach helps scholars understand practitioners as organizational activists and change agents. Activists often take-on public relations duties in their work as well (Smith & Ferguson, 2001) and must consider how to budget, communicate, and reach publics (Kovacs, 2001; Taylor et al., 2001).

The scholarship on the role activism plays in public relations and vice versa has influenced and reinforced a need to teach activism and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the classroom. Scholars have explored activism in the classroom through the teaching of activism scholarship (e.g., Pascual-Ferrá, 2019), campaigns (e.g., Luttrell & Wallace, 2021), and writing assignments (e.g., Flowers, 2020). These activities acknowledge a need to prepare students to talk about social issues, which includes diversity, equity, and inclusion. One way to implement these issues in the classroom is to develop an activist pedagogy.

Activist Pedagogy

The dual crises have continued to expose a violent tendency in the U.S. around the dehumanization of marginalized people. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2005) writes how dehumanization marks “those whose humanity has been stolen” (p. 44). Around the world, people witnessed activists taking to the streets in the summer of 2020 to fight for their humanity, which was being threatened by police brutality and white supremacy.

Alongside protests on the streets, educators can also approach the revolution in the classroom. For Freire, a humanistic approach to teaching and pedagogy was a solution to the dehumanizing violence. Freire (2005) notes that the way to “surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action

they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 47). This idea, in many ways, serves as the foundation for activist pedagogy.

Activist pedagogy is the practice in which a professor “exposes, acknowledges and unpacks social injustices... and [commits] to personal and social change both inside and outside the classroom and academy” (Preston & Aslett, 2014, p. 514). This approach transforms the “classroom into a site for ‘doing’ as well as ‘thinking about doing’” (Preston & Aslett, 2014, p. 515). As we outlined in our introduction, scholars called on professors to imagine their classroom as a space to decenter privilege and promote the ideas and experiences related to BIPOC scholars and professionals. As the many workshops, webinars, and readings suggest, this is an active relearning and unlearning for many scholars and professors.

In their study to understand whether scholars and professors are decentering whiteness and promoting a more critical and nuanced understanding of (de)colonization, race, and diversity, Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) studied 25 syllabi and 16 curricula belonging to the top first-year communication and media studies doctoral programs in the United States. Of the 1,070 authors cited on first-year course syllabi, the 16 most assigned scholars were senior or emeritus scholars or had died. Of the top 16 most cited, only one was a woman and one scholar of color (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). In addition to these demographics (old, White male), most of these scholars were writing and theorizing on democracy without any attention paid to race or imperialism. This led Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) to conclude that there was a “communication theory whiteout” (p. 6).

What is taught and prioritized in doctoral programs is important to note because these graduate students go on to become journalism, advertising, and public relations professors (Sadler, 2020). As Sadler

(2020) notes, “decolonizing the curriculum is a vital step in giving students access to more scholars of color” and when professors do that, they encourage students to “critically assess the process of media strategy from the position of those it impacts [which] will better prepare [them] for the industry” (p. 60). Given mass communication and public relations’ role as culture creators, professors must seek “transformative pedagogical adaptations of course text, deliverables, and discussion” (Sadler, 2020, p. 63).

Embodying an activist pedagogy is embracing the classroom as a constant “work in progress” (Preston & Aslett, 2014, p. 515). Just as assignments and readings must be intentionally crafted, a guest speaker list has an equally important impact on students.

Guest speakers in Mass Communication

As we introduced, the literature on the use of guest speakers in mass communication is limited, although the practice is well implemented (Merle & Craig, 2017). Since Merle and Craig’s 2017 article, which originally stated that there are no empirical studies exploring the use of guest speakers in mass communication courses, a few studies have examined the relationship between the students and guest speakers.

Ji et al. (2021) concluded in their review of literature that guest speakers improve teaching outcomes and often lead to mutually beneficial relationships among students and professors (see also Zou et al., 2019). Professors recognize that building guest speakers into a classroom schedule can help bridge academics and industry, motivate students, provide information about positions, industries, and the field; and those guest speakers can go on to serve as mentors (Craig et al., 2020).

Research suggests that strong, successful guest speakers need to wear many hats, and should be smart, committed, and credible (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009; Farruggio, 2011). Effective guest speakers often develop their own teaching philosophy, which includes understanding

their audience (students), presentation preparation, and strategies for engagement and motivation (Lee & Joung, 2017). In addition to demographics and pedagogy styles, Ji et al. (2021) discovered that overwhelmingly, students prefer alumni as guest speakers because these guests provide “imagined future professional selves” (Ji et al., 2021, p. 63). The authors noted that international guest speakers were increasingly valued by students due to globalization (Ji et al., 2021).

While the previous study did not explore student perception of guest speakers outside of age and gender, Craig et al. (2020) concluded there was a significant need for faculty to be strategic when selecting guest speakers based on diverse lived experiences. Just as alumni help students “imagine their future selves” through a shared university experience, students are also looking for guest speakers to embody other diverse identities (e.g., racial, gender, first generation) (Craig et al., 2020).

The need for diverse guest speakers. When organizations embrace diversity, it signals to its stakeholders a set of values (Edwards, 2011; Muturi & Zhu, 2019). The 2017 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report notes that educators are a crucial voice in making diversity central (CPRE, 2018). Professors and lessons must reflect diversity in content and teaching due to the fact there is still a diversity challenge within the field. Public relations professors have a unique responsibility to diversity, given it’s a central standard for the two primary accrediting bodies: ACEJMC and PRSA’s Certificate in Education for Public Relations (CEPR). The report notes, “to deepen students’ understanding and appreciation of diversity, educators can invite speakers from backgrounds that differ in terms of ethnicity, religion, and other demographic and psychographic dimensions” (CPRE, 2018, p. 53).

One of the key recommendations regarding diversity is for professors to find ways to support underrepresented groups. This project takes a unique look at this call by interviewing Black public relations

experts about how professors can create an encouraging and nurturing environment for invited guests. This way of support complements and reinforces other CPRE recommendations such as student retention, teaching diversity and multicultural perspectives, and building and developing thought leaders.

As we outlined in this literature review, the scholarship on guest speakers explores how to best use guest speakers (see Haley & Blakeman, 2008; Spiller et al., 2011) and student perception (see Craig et al., 2020; Ji et al., 2021; Merle & Craig, 2017), but few studies explore the relationship from the guest speaker perspective. Additionally, many of the above cited studies collected quantitative data, which although helpful, lacks a deep, in-depth understanding of experience.

This project has two goals. The first goal explores the guest speaker experience in the public relations classroom during the 2020/2021 academic year and how they feel public relations professors can best support them. Our second goal centers around how these findings can be explicated to help public relations professors create and foster an activist pedagogy practice.

RQ1: How did Black public relations experts experience the 2020/2021 academic year as invited guests in the classroom?

RQ2: How do they feel PR professors can better support them in the classroom?

These research questions will help guide our discussion, which explores how understanding the experiences and motivations of Black PR experts can be viewed as a contribution to an activist pedagogy.

Methods

To understand more about the experiences of our interviewees and how professors can better support Black PR experts and guest speakers, we conducted nine in-depth interviews over Zoom. At first, we wanted to speak with any guest speakers who identified with a marginalized group

(e.g., gender, race, and/or sexual minority), but after realizing the weight of the dual crises (COVID and racial violence) in 2020/2021, we opted to interview Black PR experts to learn more about their specific experiences. The interview allowed us to understand more about the individual experiences in the PR classroom as they are lived and perceived by our participants (Englander, 2012).

Sample and recruitment tactics

After we received IRB approval to conduct in-depth interviews, we used a purposive and convenience sample to recruit our nine interview participants. Given our Broom Center for Professional Development for Public Relations grant, we sent an interview pitch to the Broom Center Speaker Bureau list and recruited from our networks. Participants were asked to fill out a form which focused on demographics (age range, pronouns, region) and guest speaker logistics (e.g., how many invitations, presentations, topics). Twenty emails were sent out and we received 16 interest forms. Taking into consideration gender, age, invites/presentations, and region; we extended the invitation to 10 participants. Of our original 10, we were able to schedule and conduct seven interviews, which we then increased to nine after another round of purposive recruitment via personal networks to increase our gender and age diversity. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym. In addition to their pseudonym, each participant was situated within a region and age range, but we did use their provided pronouns (Appendix A).

Procedure and Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews, with most lasting approximately 60-minutes. Given that we were talking to working professionals, often during lunch hours or right after the workday, sticking to the hour was very important for both researchers. Every interview was conducted over Zoom with both authors joining for the call.

After we recruited and scheduled the interviews, each participant

was emailed the consent form and the list of interview questions. We opted to share the interview questions to build trust and provide the interviewee with the opportunity to reflect on their year before the interview.

The first researcher facilitated the outreach, scheduling, and rapport building portion of the interview. She told the interviewee the goals of the interview and went over key takeaways from the consent form. After the short introduction, she turned off her audio and proceeded to take notes and ask the occasional follow-up question, while the second researcher conducted the interview.

Early in the project conceptualization, we both had an open conversation with our own identities and privileges. The two authors work as public relations professors at two large universities in urban areas, and one identifies as a White woman and the other identifies as a Black man. It was important for us to have the Black researcher conduct the interview with the White researcher observing and taking notes. In addition to building trust, the openness, transparency, and intentionality facilitated a more collaborative space to share stories, experiences, and exchange sentiments of solidarity, empathy, and concern (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). We recognized that the interview would not have been the same if the White researcher was the one asking the questions.

We recorded each interview and used the Otter.ai app to transcribe the interview in real time. We met after every interview to compare notes and start to develop the list of themes. From there, transcripts were read closely, and we developed more abstract codes and built connections across the conversations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Findings

Through our interviews we discovered many opportunities for public relations professors to support Black PR experts invited into the classroom. We found that understanding why a guest speaker takes speaking engagements is crucial to understanding the logistics around

support. Guest speakers identified a few key areas for professors, including clear instructions and connections to the course's outcomes and goals, in-depth background on the students' interests and personalities, the opportunity to bring one's authentic self, and approaches to compensation. In addition to these findings, we provided tangible materials for PR professors when working with guest speakers (see Appendix B-D).

“It's been a year”

Three weeks before the interviews began on May 18, 2021; Derek Chauvin was convicted of the murder of George Floyd (Levenson & Cooper, 2021). The anxiety around the possible not guilty verdict—and the following mixed feelings around realizing that Chauvin would be held accountable—was short lived when news broke that Columbus, Ohio, police shot and killed 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant that same day (Ludlow et al., 2021). Many guest speakers were still reeling from the aftermath of that, in addition to other personal and collective traumas around the dual crises. To make space for that, the first question posed was, “How are you?” Most guest speakers quipped, “Well... it's been a year.”

Danielle launched into the unrelenting events that encapsulated her 2020 and 2021. In addition to COVID and racial violence, Danielle was overwhelmed with the natural disasters and personal challenges so much so that she joked, “I'm waiting for locusts, frogs, and other plagues from the Old Testament to come. We've been through so much; it's just been overwhelming.”

Marvin didn't hold back, “Simply put... it mostly sucked.” Marvin hit a lot of personal and professional roadblocks in 2020/2021 and it took a toll on his mental health. As part of his reflection of 2020/2021, he did acknowledge that what was keeping him afloat was some of his work with students and universities. Marvin told us, “That would kind of be the highlight of my day even if I was really struggling or had to think about putting on a brave smile and face that day.”

For others, 2020/2021 existed in more of a gray area. Ena told us, “I think I’m doing OK.” Professionally, she acknowledged that it’s “a weird space to be in.” She continued:

As a comms professional, where you’re advising leadership to make statements or to take certain action, and then, you know, represent yourself as yourself. There’s some tension there and it can be difficult to reconcile. Especially in our job where we’re trying to influence and move the needle... you hit a wall with that.

Two of our more senior position interviewees, Wayne and Connie, took a more positive look at the events of the last year. Both held doctorates and worked professionally in leadership positions at their organizations. When asking them, “How are you?” Wayne and Connie talked about what they had done rather than the emotional assessment of the year. Wayne, who received his doctorate while working full time during the pandemic, spoke of that great accomplishment. He told us, “I’m balanced. It’s been good. You know, I’m the optimist so my glass is always half full.” Wayne did acknowledge that it’s not perfect, but overall “it’s probably been one of the most rewarding years in my career.”

In addition to understanding the experiences facing Black PR experts in 2020 and 2021, we were curious to learn more about their motivations and how they felt PR professors could make the classroom experience more transformative. A few major themes arose regarding how to better support: (1) understanding why Black PR experts go into the classroom, (2) the preparation around “the ask,” (3) an acknowledgment of compensation, and (4) the ability to bring one’s authentic self.

The Why: Representation Matters

Overall, the Black public relations experts interviewed went into the public relations classroom because they felt they were called, committed, and inspired to do so. This commitment was not to the professor, but rather they felt it was a calling to “be represented and be

counted.” April told us when she goes into the classroom, “It’s not lost on me that representation does matter. That just my presence, just being there and... having the type of career experience that I’ve had... the profound impact that has on students of color.” April continued:

When you don’t have proper representation, especially in the public relations field, how are our students going to be able to know what jobs are available? So, I think just being in the room... I think says a lot without saying anything.

Jas echoed April’s thoughts about the power of being in the classroom and having that influence, “I don’t take it lightly the ability to impact someone’s life in their trajectory... it’s an honor and privilege to be able to help shape opinions and thoughts.” Marvin agreed, “It’s about making a difference and that’s really the whole reason why I got into this profession.”

Wayne specifically talked about his experience as a Black man: Quite simply my motivation was this: I have worked in the field of communications and marketing for the better part of 30 years, and I’ve always wondered, ‘Where are the people who look like me and in particular, where are the Black men?’

Wayne realized that this was due to access and representation, and that Black men weren’t taught about strategic communication. Because of this, “I feel a bit of a calling, if you will, to share with anybody who will listen and is interested, but in particular students of color, what this field is all about.” Wayne continued, “I think it’s important for folks to know that there are men of color—Black men—who work in the field.” April mentioned a similar thing and noted that digital and virtual experiences can help, “There’s an exposure gap with students of color and through online engagement you can do panels—you can get them [diverse guest speakers] all in the room.”

The Ask

One of the most important things that public relations professors can do before their guest speaker arrives in the classroom is give them direction on how to best support the curriculum and information about the students. Overwhelmingly guest speakers shuddered at the “do/talk about whatever you want” approach. In addition to guidance around the professor’s agenda, guest speakers want to know more about the students’ interests, goals, and the personality of the classroom.

Understanding the course. For Jas it was “imperative that guest speakers support the curriculum.” When invited in, she wants to know “how can I support what you guys are working on? Are there any gaps you think I could fill?” Jas sees her role not rooted in personal thoughts, beliefs, or opinions, but rather “I’m here to make sure you are learning [and] that we are meeting the curriculum.”

When organizing and scheduling, Wayne wants to know how the professor conceptualizes success. Wayne went as far as purchasing the textbook so he could situate his discussion. Wayne told us, “That’s what’s always inspiring me anytime I can get in front of young students and say, ‘your textbook says this and let me help you bring it to life.’”

Marvin, who took over 10 speaking engagements during the 2020-2021 academic year, said:

There’s a lot of ways I can talk about my career... [what is] most important for me, if I want to keep doing this, is to add an understanding of what the class already knows. If you really want me to talk about how I can be helpful and supportive to the bigger picture, what you want your class to get out of talking to me.

An understanding of what was being covered and how she could best supplement that material was crucial to April, who saw her role as one that can bridge the academy and the industry, especially when it comes to trends and professional development (e.g., salary negotiation and asking

for flex schedules). April told us, “There’s a lot of disruption happening. It may not be in the syllabus or the curriculum, but it’s probably helpful to ask these guest speakers their thoughts on these things.” For Connie, knowing what and whom the students have been exposed to is helpful, especially as a Black woman who feels she surprises the students when her video joins the virtual classroom.

Understanding students. April talked about how professors tend to be too broad when it comes to explaining who their students are. Even if a request is coming early in the semester, April encourages professors to learn about the students, “If you know what your students’ interests are, that’s a really great time to inform a speaker so they can really read the room and speak to the things that are actually relevant and of interest to the students.” In all of April’s classroom experiences, missing this step is a lost opportunity and does not make things easier; “Making it generic is making it harder.”

Wayne first makes sure that he understands what the professor is looking for when he’s invited into the classroom and then his next step is for the professor “to tell me about your students, you know, the makeup of your class, what are they interested in, what are they not interested in. What are they particularly focused on with this class... help me understand the audience.”

If the class size and schedule allow for it, Ena prefers to hear from the students themselves: “If the group is small enough to hear who the students are, where they’re from, particularly what their interest is, why are you a PR major, where are you from... I always like that.” Knowing where the students are coming from helps Ena pick and choose what types of examples and stories to tell. For example, if she learns a student is into sports, she knows to tell her sports story.

Compensation

Overwhelming, guest speakers come into the classroom to give

back to students and to be the person who inspired them (if they had exposure) or to fill a gap (if they weren't exposed to a Black PR expert yet). A lot of the senior experts balked at the idea of being financially compensated for their time in the classroom. Danielle told us about the time she was asked to speak on a panel about compensation. Danielle laughed, "I was like, I can't be on this! I don't ask for money for most of my speaking engagements, I'm a horrible person to have on this panel—I need to be in the audience listening!"

Many of our Gen. Z and young Millennial professionals did bring up some degree of transaction for speaking engagements, with a few participants addressing financial compensation explicitly. Sam was very clear in that compensation (or lack thereof) should be addressed within the initial pitch; "My first question right out the gate is: "what is your budget?" This is all dependent on the work and the labor that you're expecting me to do." Sam likened the practice of not paying speakers to not paying interns.

Alex agreed that "it's a very important question and something I've had to think a little more explicitly about." Alex serves in a leadership role with PRSA which requires that they take engagements within a volunteer capacity. Alex noted, "I think my biggest thing about compensation is being mindful of the time." This means taking inventory of what is the overall ask. Is this person being invited to a small class or is this an event with all the students from the major joining?

Sam had ideas around how to compensate in what they termed "relationship compensation." Relationship compensation is the professor's ability to show up for guest speakers outside of the classroom. This could be recommending the guest speaker for paid speaking engagements or trading lectures, goods, or services. For example, Sam was invited to an unpaid panel with an event photographer. Sam negotiated five new headshots for their portfolio in lieu of financial compensation for

moderating.

Marvin agreed that if a professor can pay a guest speaker that it's the ideal way to compensate them for labor. He did recommend quite a few tangible things professors could do if they couldn't financially compensate for his time, such as writing a testimony or recommendation for his LinkedIn or website, and requiring students to complete feedback forms, which help him develop benchmarks and goals.

Bringing their authentic selves

Marvin recognized quickly into his guest speaking career that the key to a successful speaking engagement is his ability to bring his authentic self. He notes that Gen Z are hyper focused on opportunities that allow them to be their full selves. He said, "Gen Z. really appreciates that people are not sanitized and not being what you think that they should be... telling things like it is and being present with what you have." Sam, who multiple times referenced themselves as an "unapologetically Black, queer nonbinary Southerner," spoke at length about how they couldn't in good faith take on opportunities that didn't embrace who they are.

The topic of authenticity was a theme in our conversation with Alex, too. Bringing their authentic self into the classroom was a way for Alex to disrupt a conditioned urge to not be authentic. Alex told us:

There are definitely challenges [in bringing one's authentic self to the classroom] and I think that comes for any number of reasons.

A lot of times it's just the extent to which you've been conditioned to not be authentic, from elementary school, middle school, high school and at the start of college.

Alex acknowledges that because of this conditioning, for many marginalized identities, bringing one's authentic self into the workplace often results in people leaving or losing their jobs. That said, coming to the classroom wholly and complexly is part of their brand.

To build trust and acknowledge the nuances around bringing one's

authentic self, Alex's approach to creating this empowering space is to be upfront:

I tend to preface and practice those sorts of things as I am carving this space out for myself. Your professor or instructor invited me here, but you know, I'm not just reading the bullet points they gave me... I am bringing my experience to that.

For Danielle, keeping her authentic self-intact during 2020/2021 was difficult. Her roles and responsibilities had her handling a lot of administrative tasks and she was "putting out fires 85% of the day." At this point of her career, Danielle could be picky about speaking engagements; and as a leader in her organization, she often recommends others for those opportunities.

Wayne wants to know the parameters of the class and he is not afraid to decline invitations if he feels certain important topics, such as race, are off the table:

I'm at this age... stage... where there are some things that I'm not going to compromise on, and I'm doing the students a disservice if I did. If we can't, for the most part, have free and open dialogue and conversation..., I'm doing them a disservice.

Discussion

By critically examining Black PR professionals' experiences as guest lecturers and asking them how professors might best support them in these educational endeavors, we provide insight for PR educators interested in implementing an activist pedagogy. As indicated above, the emergent themes of authentic self and representation are critical to informing our understanding and practice of an activist pedagogy. This discussion explores how our findings contribute to activist pedagogy scholarship.

In an academy that is largely white, it's important for public relations professionals to continue to not fall into the trap of reacting

to seasonal and situational DEI efforts. Professors must promote and advocate for a diversity of experiences in the classroom. This is crucial to the health of the profession. To see the industry embrace diversity, it first must be intentionally centered in the public relations classroom (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Brown et al., 2019). Students and faculty alike recognize the importance of guest speaker diversity, and there are considerable efforts to bring public relations faculty and educators together to talk about how to better support faculty and students of color (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Race in the PR classroom, n.d.).

Our research questions about classroom experience and relationships with professors suggest that the 2020/2021 academic year was complicated for our participants. Many referenced the weight of the public health crisis, in addition to the racial violence, and how those dual crises affected their mental health. That said, the participants also spoke about the importance of meeting with young professionals and sharing their talents. Interviewees spoke about how representation matters and acknowledged the importance of students being able to see intersectional identities in the profession. The nine public relations professionals told us if professors wanted to better facilitate this classroom experience, they should be explicit in their ask (e.g., clearly outline course objectives, student body characteristics), create a safe space for them to be vulnerable and authentic, and consider compensation.

This discussion section explores how public relations professors can use this information to implement an activist pedagogy.

Decentering Privilege

From our conversations with Black PR experts, we concluded that one way to build an activist pedagogy is for the professor to decenter their own professorial and personal privileges. This includes demographics such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, but also includes institutional biases around pathways to expertise and approaches to education.

Freire (2005) critiques how many people come to understand “real” knowledge. This objectification of knowledge privileges institutions and the powerful (i.e., professors). Freire centered critical thinking, emotions, reflection, and experience as important ways of knowing, not just degrees. For public relations professors looking to adopt a more activist pedagogy, providing space for guests to speak authentically about their lived experiences can facilitate this type of humanistic learning.

As we’ve outlined, participants spoke at length about the value in their ability to bring their true, authentic self into the classroom and students should do the same. To allow a guest to bring their unique experiences to the students is for the professor to come to terms with their own limitations and the privilege associated with imparting knowledge and skills. To cede expertise and provide a space for speakers to talk candidly about their experiences (if they wish), public relations professors can decenter themselves and encourage these dialogues. Additionally, providing guest speakers with the detailed information about the students’ lived experiences, acknowledges that this relationship is often about building knowledge and meaning making together.

Authentic selves in the classroom. Freire (2005) calls on educators to blend practice with theory; and intersectionality can serve as a guiding theoretical lens for how and why it is crucial to provide a safe space for marginalized guest speakers to bring their authentic selves and experiences into the classroom. Just as Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (1990) proposed a both/and approach to identities, public relations professors must embrace that guest speakers from underrepresented communities cannot divorce their lived experiences and identities from their profession.

For example, activist pedagogy seeks to transform the classroom by exposing, acknowledging, and dismantling inequalities. The professionals we interviewed addressed how important it was to be clear

with the students about what it meant to be both Black and a PR expert at this time in history. As many participants pointed out, going into the classroom under this spatial and temporal context (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013), these identities shift given what is going on in the world (e.g., pandemics) and when it's happening (e.g., during an election year, while the students are virtual learning).

Professors as allies. As professors decenter themselves, they can more easily move into the role of ally. When this practice happens, students are exposed to new ideas, which can ignite their drive and activism (i.e., helps them see themselves in these roles) and facilitate a growth mindset. Diversity of experiences and approaches can help students inform their ideologies and help build their stories. In this way, DEI can serve as an ethical compass for professors seeking to center authentic lived experiences. This results in the intersection of theory and practice, which is crucial to activist pedagogy.

Tangible Tactics

Freire (2005) writes about how the oppressed struggled between freedom and authenticity; and that without freedom, the oppressed cannot live authentic lives. Freire notes that the tension around authenticity lies in the fact that an authentic human life is one that is created and nurtured through oppression systems and ideologies. As Freire states, “the oppressed have adapted to the structure of the domination in which they are immersed” (p. 47). When professors decenter their privilege and recognize the humanity of themselves, their students, and the guest speakers, it creates a space for oppressive systems, implicit and explicit, to be challenged and disrupted.

As our findings outlined, there are considerable efforts made by Black PR professionals to provide diverse stories, frameworks, and opportunities for public relations students. For many Black PR experts, there is no divide between the politics of the classroom and what's

happening in society. Black PR experts are still facing racism and racial violence as they come into the classroom to talk about, for example, media relations. For public relations professors looking to authentically engage with an activist pedagogy, they must consider the emotional, physical, and mental labor taken on by Black PR guest speakers.

Paying for labor. One way to do this in a very concrete and actionable way is to pay guests for their labor. We make a call on leaders and administrators to support activist pedagogy through systemic change at the department, college, school, and university level, and encourage leaders to take statements of solidarity and put those words into actions. Developing funds and resources for professors to offer financial compensation for guest speakers is a start, in addition to making sure that all courses and educators are prioritizing DEI initiatives, not just the social issue classes. This work often already falls on the shoulders of faculty identifying from underrepresented communities (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021), so there should be incentives and/or consequences to support a department-wide commitment to DEI and activist pedagogical approaches.

In addition to the actionable suggestions provided by our participants that provide direct support to invited guests (Appendix B), professors should see their classroom as a transformative site for justice, which will facilitate the opportunity for more authentic engagement (Preston & Aslett, 2014). In other words, it's not enough to bring in a few underrepresented guest speakers. Professors must radically change what is taught and prioritized, including the required texts, assignments, and the facilitation of discussions and lectures to support guest speakers (Sadler, 2020).

Future studies. In March 2021, after we conceptualized the scope of this study, Asian and Asian American communities experienced a horrific hate crime in Atlanta, which took the lives of six women and two men working at three spas and massage parlors. According to Stop

AAPICrimes.com, a national database and resource website collecting data on Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) hate crimes, Asian Americans found the increased hate and racism to be more stressful than the COVID-19 pandemic (Saw et al., 2021). Future studies could look at how Asian and Asian American public relations experts are navigating that dual crises, in addition to adding more intersectional identities into the conversation such as disabled practitioners, LGBTQIA+, international, first generation, and/or undocumented.

Conclusion

If faculty are nervous to ask professionals, especially professionals from underrepresented groups, to come into the classroom, April puts that concern to rest, “I think professionals don’t feel like we’re asked enough. People don’t ask us enough, they’re scared that they were too busy or, you know like, it’s a burden.” For April, this was a great opportunity to reflect on her own journey and pay it forward.

Overall, the 2020/2021 academic year “was a year” for Black PR experts who were invited into the classroom. Many of our participants were working through the joys and challenges cropping up in their professional, academic, and personal lives as they were joining classrooms, and networking and mentoring students. Adopting an activist pedagogy approach can equip professors to transform their classrooms to be an open, welcoming, and productive space for guest speakers. Providing detailed background on the class agenda and students, being upfront about compensation, and allowing guest speakers to bring their true authentic selves into the classroom, helps to humanize and will ultimately better the profession overall.

References

Bardhan, N., & Gower, K. (2020). Student and faculty/educator views on diversity and inclusion in public relations: The role of leaders

- in bringing about change. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 6(2), 102-141. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2020/08/13/student-and-faculty-educator-views-on-diversity-and-inclusion-in-public-relations-the-role-of-leaders-in-bringing-about-change/>
- Brown, K., Waymer, D., & Zhou, Z. (2019). Racial and gender-based differences in the collegiate development of public relations majors: Implications for underrepresented recruitment and retention. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 5(1), 1-30. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2019/01/31/racial-and-gender-based-differences-in-the-collegiate-development-of-public-relations-majors-implications-for-underrepresented-recruitment-and-retention/>
- Brown, M., & Ray, R. (2020, Sept. 25). Breonna Taylor, police brutality, and the importance of #SayHerName. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/09/25/breonna-taylor-police-brutality-and-the-importance-of-sayhername/>
- Chakravartty, P., & Jackson, S. J. (2020). The disavowal of race in communication theory. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 210-219. DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2020.1771743
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Harper Collins.
- CPRE. (2018). *Fast forward: Foundations + future state. Educators + practitioners: The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 report on undergraduate education*. <http://www.commissionpred.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/04/report6-full.pdf>
- Craig, C. M., Bergstrom, A. M., & Buschhorn, J. (2020). All guest speakers are not created equal: Diverse students require diverse speakers. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 24(2), 150-167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098048220956939>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity

- politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Davis, B.G. (1993) *Tools for teaching*. Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Edwards, L. (2011). Diversity in public relations. In L. Edwards & C. E. Hodges (Eds.), *Public relations, society, & culture: Theoretical and empirical explorations* (pp. 87-101). Routledge.
- Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 43(1), 13–35. DOI: 10.1163/15691621X631943
- Eveleth, D. M., & Baker-Eveleth, L. J. (2009). Student dialogue with online guest speakers. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 7(2), 417-421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4609.2009.00226.x>
- Farruggio, P. (2011). The effect of a virtual guest speaker in expanding the consciousness of bilingual education teachers preservice during an online discussion. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 38(2), 169-175. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2006.00622.x
- Flowers, A. A. (2020). Learning about diversity worldwide: How a social media writing assignment provides students with multicultural perspectives. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 6(1), 85-98. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2020/01/21/learning-about-diversity-worldwide-how-a-social-media-writing-assignment-provides-students-with-multicultural-perspectives/>
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Haines, E. (2020, May 11). Family seeks answers in fatal police shooting of Louisville woman in her apartment. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/11/family-seeks-answers-fatal-police-shooting-louisville-woman-her-apartment/>

- Haley, E., & Blakeman, R. (2008). Lessons from ad educators' experiences with guest speakers. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 12(2), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109804820801200207>
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2003). Active interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (pp. 67-80). Sage Publications.
- Holtzhausen, D., & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14, 57-84. DOI:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1401_3
- Ji, H., Jain, P., & Axinn, C. (2021). Student perceptions of guest speakers in strategic communication courses. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 7(1), 40-79. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2021/05/29/student-perceptions-of-guest-speakers-in-strategic-communication-courses/>
- Kovacs, R. (2001). Relationship building as integral to British activism: Its impact on accountability in broadcasting. *Public Relations Review*, 27(4), 421-437. DOI:10.1016/S0363-8111(01)00098-4
- Lee, K., & Joung, H. (2017). An examination of students' perceptions for guest speakers in hospitality and tourism programs. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 17(4), 300-312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2017.1361888>
- Levenson, E., & Cooper, A. (2021, April 21). Derek Chauvin found guilty of all three charges for killing George Floyd. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/20/us/derek-chauvin-trial-george-floyd-deliberations/index.html>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Ludlow, R., Knowles, H., Thebault, R., & Armus, T. (2021, April 21). Ohio police fatally shoot Black teenage girl just before Chauvin verdict. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

- nation/2021/04/20/columbus-police-shooting-16-year-old/
- Luttrell, R. M., & Wallace, A. (2021). Shifting the paradigm: Improving student awareness of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts through public relations campaigns. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 7(1), 200-209. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2021/05/29/shifting-the-paradigm-improving-student-awareness-of-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-through-public-relations-campaigns/>
- Madden, S., & Del Rosso, T. (2021). “We should have to take therapy classes”: The need for a trauma-informed approach to public relations education. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 7(2), 171-202. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2021/09/10/we-should-have-to-take-therapy-classes-the-need-for-a-trauma-informed-approach-to-public-relations-education/>
- Merle, P. F., & Craig, C. (2017). Be my guest: A survey of mass communication students’ perception of guest speakers. *College Teaching*, 65(2), 41-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2016.1232691>
- Muturi, N., & Zhu, G. (2019). Students’ perceptions of diversity issues in public relations practice. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 5(2), 75-104. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/2019/08/17/students-perceptions-of-diversity-issues-in-public-relations-practice/>
- Pascual-Ferrá, P. (2019). Thinking critically about fundraising: Using communication activism scholarship to facilitate brainstorming and reflection in a public relations course. *Communication Teacher*, 33(4), 239-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1575441>
- Preston, S., & Aslett, J. (2014). Resisting neoliberalism from within the academy: Subversion through an activist pedagogy. *Social Work Education*, 33(4), 502-518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.848270>
- Race in the PR classroom* (n.d.). Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved

- June 11, 2021 from <https://instituteforpr.org/race-in-the-pr-classroom/>
- Rojas, R., Mervosh, S., & Fausset, R. (2020, May 8). Investigators call evidence in Ahmaud Arbery shooting ‘extremely upsetting.’ *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-georgia.html>
- Sadler, J. (2020). Critical race theory as a pedagogical imperative in mass media. *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication*, 10(2), 59-63. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/critical-race-theory-as-pedagogical-imperative/docview/2523171392/se-2>
- Saw, A., Yellow Horse, A. J., & Jeung, R. (2021). Stop AAPI hate: Mental health report. *Stop AAPI Hate*. <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Mental-Health-Report-210527.pdf>
- Smith, M., & Ferguson, D. (2001). Activism. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 291-299). Sage Publications.
- Specter, E. (2020, May 8). Ahmaud Arbery’s death sparks an outpouring of grief and rage on social media. *Vogue*. <https://www.vogue.com/article/ahmaud-arbery-murder-social-media-protest>
- Spiller, L. D., Marold, D. W., Markovitz, H., & Sandler, D. (2011). 50 Ways to enhance student career success in and out of advertising and marketing classrooms. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 15(1), 65–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109804821101500110>
- Taylor, M., Kent, M. L., & White, W. J. (2001). How activist organizations are using the internet to build relationships. *Public Relations Review*, 27(3), 263-284. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(01\)00086-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(01)00086-8)
- Vardeman-Winter, J., & Place, K. R. (2017). Still a lily-white field of women: The state of workforce diversity in public relations practice and research. *Public Relations Review*, 43(2), 326-336

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.01.004>

Vardeman-Winter, J., Tindall, N., & Jiang, H. (2013). Intersectionality and publics: How exploring publics' multiple identities question basic public relations concepts. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2(3), 279-304.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X13491564>

Waymer, D. (2021). Addressing disciplinary whiteness and racial justice advocacy in communication education. *Communication Education*, 70(1), 114-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2020.1811362>

Zou, P., Sun, W., Hallowell, S. G., Luo, Y., Lee, C., & Ge, L. (2019). Use of guest speakers in nursing education: An integrative review of multidisciplinary literature. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 10, 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S196456>

Appendix A:**Table 1.****Interview Participants**

Participant	Pronouns	Age	Location	Years experience	Presentations during 2020-2021 (invited in parentheses)
Danielle	She/her	36-45	Gulf Coast	16-20	4-6 (11-15)
Alex	They/ them	18-25	Northeast	3-5	1-3 (4-6)
Connie	She/her	Over 56	Southeast	More than 21	4-6 (4-6)
Wayne	He/him	Over 56	Southeast	More than 21	4-6 (4-6)
Ena	She/her	26-35	Mid-Atlantic	11-15	7-10 (7-10)
Marvin	He/him	26-35	Mid-Atlantic	6-10	11-15 (11-15)
Jas	She/her	26-35	Northeast	11-15	4-6 (7-10)
April	She/her	36-45	Southeast	16-20	1-3 (4-6)
Sam	They/ them	26-35	South	11-15	4-6 (4-6)

Appendix B: Actionable Suggestions

Helpful tools or questions when working with a guest speaker:

1. Contextualize the class (Appendix C)
 - a. This includes surveying your students before the guest speaker arrives, inquire about:
 - i. Interests
 - ii. Career goals
2. Compensation (Appendix D)
 - a. Be upfront about your budget (or lack thereof)
 - b. How can you compensate your guest speaker in lieu of financial compensation?
 - i. Recommendations on LinkedIn
 - ii. Offer to write a testimony for their website
 - iii. Return the favor and offer to speak with their organization on a topic
 - iv. Recommend them for paid speaking engagements
 - v. Feedback form
3. Establish guest speaker etiquette
 - a. Camera policy
 - b. Asking questions
 - c. Connecting on social media or via email

Appendix C: Contextualizing the class (template and example)

Template:

1. What is the course?
2. Class content
3. How the guest speaker can support the class curriculum
4. Student profiles
5. Classroom atmosphere
6. Students' (dis)interests
7. Follow-up thoughts or expectations
8. How can you support the efforts of the class overall? (e.g., assignments, internship opportunities, tour the workplace, exam)
9. Contact information and headshot

Example:

1. What is the course?
 - a. This is an Introduction to Public Relations course (PR 100)
2. Class content
 - a. What we've covered so far:
 - i. You are joining us week 7 of the semester during the "social media content" week.
 - ii. So far, the students have studied:
 1. History of public relations and key figures
 2. Public relations theory
 3. PR ethics
 4. Media Relations
 5. Diversity
 - b. What we will cover next
 - i. After the midterm (week 8), we start to focus more on industry specific public relations (e.g., sports, entertainment, government)

- c. Why & what I'd like you to cover
 - i. Given your role as social media manager for ABC Industries, I'd love for you to address the following with the students:
 - 1. Social media engagement
 - 2. Brand voice
 - 3. PR wins and fails during your career
 - ii. Key concepts I'd like you to cover:
 - 1. The students will be assessed on the following concepts and vocabulary...
- 3. Student profiles
 - a. There are 40 students in the class. Most of the students are sophomores and most (70% are PR majors). The rest of the students are in PR-adjacent fields such as organizational management, nonprofit administration, and advertising. We have mostly women in the class (about 75%), but there are two students in the class who go by they/them pronouns. About half of the students are white and most of them are first generation.
- 4. Classroom atmosphere
 - a. Overall, the class is friendly and chatty. There are a few students who love to dominate the conversation and a few class clowns. A few students sit in the back very quietly. There is no phone or computer policy, but if they are very explicitly not paying attention, I often will cold call on them. Overall, they are a respectful bunch and enjoy the class.
- 5. Students' (dis)interests
 - a. Sports, fashion, and nonprofit public relations are likely the top three industries. The students do mini-presentations and many of them on those types of brands and organizations. They love TikTok and celebrity gossip.
 - b. There hasn't been a lot of energy around global/international

PR or corporate B2B brands. I think that's more due to a lack of exposure (we will cover after midterm)

6. Follow-up thoughts/expectations
 - a. There are a few PRSSA students in the class, including our VP of programming. I think they would like to speak with you about internship opportunities and interviewing you for the newsletter if you're OK.
7. How can you support the efforts of the class overall? (e.g., assignments, internship opportunities, tour the workplace, exam)
 - a. Overall, I will add parts of your lecture to the midterm. Additionally, the students have a case study group project due at the end of the semester. We have a few students who are seniors in the class, so if you have any job hunt advice, feel free to include that.
8. Contact information and headshot:
 - a. Please let me know which of the following I can share with the students and please include a headshot so I can create a promo for you:
 - i. Name and pronouns
 - ii. Email:
 - iii. Phone:
 - iv. LinkedIn:
 - v. Other social media accounts

Appendix D: Compensation email

Things to consider:

1. If you have a speaker budget:
 - a. How much?
 - b. What's the time and energy commitment
 - c. What are the expectations
2. If there is no budget, what can you offer in lieu of financial compensation?
 - a. What's the time and energy commitment
 - b. What are the expectations

Example 1: with a budget

Paragraph 1-2: includes the introduction and pitch

Paragraph 3: Budget

Due to a generous grant/department, I have a small budget of \$X for each guest speaker this semester that I can offer you for coming to speak with the class. As I outlined above, this is a small seminar class of ten graduate students. Although the class runs from 5:30-7 p.m., I need the first 30-minutes with them, so I only ask for an hour of your time.

Example 2: without a budget

Paragraph 1-2: includes the introduction and pitch

Paragraph 3: Budget

Unfortunately, I do not have the financial resources to compensate you for this speaking engagement. I value your time and labor, so I understand if this prevents you from joining us. If you are open to non-financial means of compensation, I can offer a few things. The first is that I see you have a

website, which includes client testimonials. I would be happy to write you a testimony and even record the video or audio for you. Additionally, I can endorse you on LinkedIn.

I know that you are also an adjunct lecturer at the local community college, so I would like to offer myself as a guest lecturer in your class, too! I am more than happy to talk about the following topics: X, Y, Z.

Again, I appreciate and value your work and time, so please do not feel pressure to take unpaid opportunities.