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The Practice of Nonviolence: Teaching an Undergraduate Course in Nonviolent Communication

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Abstract: This Best Practices article outlines 10 tips relative to teaching a course in Nonviolent Communication (NVC). It outlines suggestions for readings, activities, and projects throughout a semester-long undergraduate course. The article addresses how students can learn both the theory and practice of nonviolence by means of readings and activities that address social problems such as sexism, racism, bias, and violence against oneself and the earth. Specific suggestions are provided for creative ways in which students can be engaged with readings so that they have ownership of their in-class experience. Details regarding an independent long-term project providing freedom of creativity in out-of-class work are included, as well as suggestions for interactive, face-to-face activities in class.

In 2012, my faculty dean asked me to teach a fourth-year (senior-level) course titled "Communication and Conflict." Given my research and training in women's studies, spirituality, and learning with technology, I responded that I would prefer to teach a course on communication and . . . well, *anything but conflict*. I held this conviction in part because I embrace a positive approach to communication (Socha & Pitts, 2012; Pitts & Socha, 2012), and also because I am keen to teach with the intent of promoting peacemaking, nonviolence, and activism. A course including the term "conflict" and without the term "resolution" felt anathema to my objectives as an academic, trained yoga instructor, mindfulness practitioner, and most importantly, engaged citizen. However, I understood the request, as my institution's undergraduate communication curriculum includes teaching students to engage with, defuse, and transform conflict, for such skills are key to any communication professional's personal and career success. While previous research (Baesler & Lauricella, 2013) has demonstrated the efficacy of a course in learning

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about peace and nonviolence, this Best Practices essay outlines 10 specific tips gathered from engaging with the challenges and solutions that I have employed after 7 years of planning, teaching, and learning from a nonviolent communication course at a large, secular public institution in Canada.

The Communication and Conflict: Nonviolent Communication (NVC) course seeks to describe the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to a number of social problems. Thus, careful choice of readings forms the backbone of the course. I began planning this course by considering McCarthy's (2014) 8-week peace course that he has, with much acclaim, taught at universities, prisons, schools, and churches. A longtime pacifist, peace activist, journalist, and teacher, McCarthy wrote columns for the *Washington Post* for nearly 30 years and has taught over 7,000 students in his peace course. A version of the course is available for free online (http://peacecenterbooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/classofnonviolence12jan.pdf). Although his online course served as a start in identifying readings with which my students and I would engage, I found McCarthy's reading list too male, too white, and too steeped in religious underpinnings to suit the progressive public institution at which I teach. To that end, the first five tips aim to help construct a meaningful, semester-long reading list that serves to address the notion of conflict in intrapersonal, interpersonal, political, and global communication. The second five tips provide direction for activities that can be incorporated during class, together with assignments that students can complete outside of class meeting times.

Best Practice #1: Ensure That Issues Associated With Women and Conflict Are Addressed

McCarthy's 8-week reading list includes pieces from 22 men and eight women, two of whom were second authors. I revised my syllabus to include significantly more female authors, including Chimamanda Adichie (2016), Luvvie Ajayi (2017), Julie Bacha (2017), and Greta Gaard (1993). I included readings by or about two transgender women: CeeCee MacDonald (Erdely, 2014) and Leslie Feinberg (2014). All of these readings are essential to illustrating course themes (i.e., gender conflicts, taking risks, the concept of otherness) while avoiding tokenism. Moreover, to ensure that women in the syllabus are not merely symbolic or perfunctory, the readings are essential to understanding the key concepts in each weekly theme. The inclusion of female authors is of particular importance to me given that the student population in the Communication program at my university is comprised of about 65% women.

Best Practice #2: Address Issues Associated With People of Color and Conflict

In August 2016, Nyasha Junior, scholar of race, gender, and religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, tweeted "Instructors, as you are preparing for the fall, review the books you have assigned #syllabussowhite." Junior's tweet invited faculty in all academic disciplines and at all levels to carefully consider the race and ethnicity of authorship for assigned books and course readings. To this end, I considered critically the race and ethnicity of readings in every week of the syllabus. Materials in the course include classics from Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Eknath Easwaren, and Muhammad Ali, as well as the aforementioned readings by and about Adichie, Bacha, Ajayi, and MacDonald. All such readings addressed course topics such as civil rights, independence, and family life. One of the most meaningful experiences that I have had in teaching this course is when I showed the 30-minute film, *Right Here, Right Now* (Gandhi, 2003). This Hindi film (with English subtitles) demonstrates the potential outcomes of support, attention, and positivity over criticism, ignorance, and negativity. After showing the film in 2017, a Southeast Asian woman in the course e-mailed to tell me that this was the first time in her

university education that an instructor had shown a film that was directly relative to her culture. As the United Nations named Toronto the most multicultural city in the world, I was surprised that—especially as a fourth-year student—this student had not been given the opportunity to engage with material that represented her background or culture. I therefore continue to use this film and receive positive feedback from students.

Best Practice #3: Address Historical Events and Figures

In my experience, many communication students do not know the historical basics of Gandhi's Salt March, the roles of John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement, the main tenets of feminism, or the historical background of apartheid. Although students have certainly *heard* of Muhammad Ali and know him exclusively as a boxer, they know nothing of his involvement in social and political activism. Rather than assigning a reading that addresses the civil rights movement, students are invited to watch a documentary (Dalaklis Media Enterprises, 2015) about Muhammad Ali and his personal struggles as a successful Black athlete in the United States. To avoid experiencing a holistic perspective on King's teachings of respect, students read King's (1957) sermon about loving enemies and discussed questions such as (1) What is love?; (2) What is the difference between eros, philia, and agape?; (3) What did King mean when he said to love your enemies?; and (4) How do we do (or not do) this in our own lives? It is this close interaction with King's work that can enhance students' understanding of King's historical importance beyond the "I Have a Dream" speech.

Best Practice #4: Include Religious and Spiritual Diversity

The history and practice of nonviolence is, in many cases, tied to religious or spiritual philosophy and practice. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist clergy member and Muhammad Ali's history as an activist is tied closely to religious discovery and transformation. Given that I teach at a large public (state) university, I must be mindful of the religious and spiritual background of both figures in the course and students in the classroom. Diversity of readings addressing religious/spiritual issues is essential to being aware and inclusive of the depth and breadth of nonviolent practice across a variety of traditions, which ensures that the course is not overwhelmingly representative of any one spiritual tradition. Similarly, nonviolence is not limited to the religious/spiritual arena. Conflict transformation occurs in struggles where religion does not play an underlying role. For example, interpersonal communication strategist Marshall Rosenberg (2003) employed peacemaking skills in desegregation of schools and reconciliation in economically depressed and politically discordant communities. The university at which I teach attracts students from a diversity of religious and spiritual traditions, particularly due to the multiculturalism of the region east of Toronto where the university resides. I therefore include a diversity of religious/spiritual backgrounds with a focus on inclusion of nonreligious nonviolent philosophical work by individuals with a primarily secular philosophy, including, for example, Robbins (1992) and Sharp (1973). Another important and related topic is intercultural communication, but because our university requires all communication majors to take an intercultural communication course, this topic is not included in the NVC course.

Best Practice #5: Spare Students the Cost of a Textbook

A key tenet of nonviolent communication is to understand the needs of those individuals with whom one is communicating. Having taught in higher education for nearly two decades, and with teaching this course for 7 years, I know that students at my university struggle financially. Sparing students the cost

of a textbook is a prime example of "walking the talk" of NVC and acknowledges a main tenet of nonviolent communication: honoring another's needs. Further, I have not yet found a textbook that meets the needs of this creative course. However, it is beautifully suited to free, online readings that meet the needs of students in a way that is meaningful to them. These materials not only are free, but also serve to provide them with dynamic course materials which suit their desires for multimedia learning tools. The use of YouTube videos, online documentaries, and other sources relative to nonviolence, activism, and political crises are updated constantly, and thus make the textbook delivery mode rather outdated.

McCarthy's (2014) free online course was the launching pad for course readings and content, though as aforementioned, I have used less than half of McCarthy's reading list and replaced the other portion with readings sourced online. For example, Adichie's (2016) "How to Raise a Feminist Daughter" is available for free via Facebook, where she originally posted the manifesto; its status as a public post qualifies it as part of the public domain and thus qualifies under Canadian and U.S. Fair Dealing and Fair Use, respectively. Similarly, *Rolling Stone*'s article about CeeCee MacDonald is available for free online, is a publication that students find readable (and I find stylistic and rigorous enough to assign for class), and also qualifies under Fair Dealing and Fair Use terms. While it can be argued that texts such as Rosenberg (2003) or Lasater and Lasater (2009) would be inexpensive and suitable for this course, I find that the breadth and depth of readings sourced online provide a more robust and meaningful introduction to the principles and practices of NVC.

Best Practice #6: Assign Journal Entries to Emphasize Personal Relevance

Subsequent to completing the readings each week, students use the course learning management system to respond to the readings. They are asked to choose one quote or line from the assigned readings that is important to them, and then write a two-paragraph journal entry that explains (a) why the quote is meaningful (one paragraph) and (b) outlines how they might apply something from the reading to their everyday lives (one paragraph). These entries are graded using a 10-point rubric with criteria including writing style, clarity, thoughtfulness, and thoroughness of approach. These journal entries take the course away from the imaginary and into the practical. Because often at the start of the term, students will respond with vague sentiments such as "I will not hate my enemies," or "I will consider nonviolent responses during conflict situations," they are encouraged to go beyond the hypothetical or theoretical and move toward an applied, personal response. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1957) sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, invites the opportunity to discuss what "loving your enemies" really means. With this reading, students are encouraged to consider questions such as: (1) Who are your adversaries?, (2) Do you know people who are "enemies," as evidenced in family drama or interpersonal conflict?, (3) What national or international relationships are adversarial?, or (4) How can you (or someone you know) move beyond resentment and move toward reconciliation with an old friend, former partner, or sibling? Students sometimes struggle with Adichie's (2016) "How to Raise a Feminist Daughter" reading as most of them are 20–21 years old and almost none of them have children. Instead, students without children can be asked to reflect upon how they treat their sisters, their female friends, or even their mothers. Both men and women are encouraged to consider the ways in which they were raised, the chores they did (or did not do), or how their siblings were treated in comparison. A word limit for each entry is not imposed, which means that some students may write five succinct sentences which articulate how the reading is meaningful and how it can be applied in their lives, while other students may write several additional paragraphs that incorporate personal stories or anecdotes. One student even wrote a poem in response to the readings.

Best Practice #7: Assign Journal Entries That Can Be Used to Inform Class Discussion

At the conclusion of each journal entry, students are asked to submit one thoughtful question relating to the readings that they would like to see incorporated into class discussion. The creative and meaningful questions posed by students are never disappointing; they sincerely want to know what their classmates think and believe. While this best practice allows students to take ownership of any course, student-led questions are of particular importance in the NVC course as these questions allow for respectful dialogue and debate, which then models the nonviolent approach by incorporating active listening and articulation of needs. This recognition of needs is a hallmark of NVC, and practice in doing so in the classroom can model active listening that occurs outside academia. For example, in response to Ajayi's (2017) TED talk, one student wanted to know of her classmates, "If you could do one thing differently that you did not do because of fear, what would it be?" Similarly, in response to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1957) sermon, a student confessed, "I totally struggle with holding grudges and living in the past. Have you ever forgiven someone who you felt wronged you? How did you feel and do you still have a relationship with them?" Additionally, it is not the same students speaking each week. Because the breadth of readings allows for the possibility for students to identify with or reject the notions presented in each of the assignments, some students will want to participate in discussions about gender, while other students are more enthusiastic about race and ethnicity issues. Regardless, all students are exposed to these issues, and opportunity to take ownership of what is discussed in class is a welcome experience for students. As a result, the discussions that ensue from student-generated questions are both sincere and enjoyable.

Best Practice #8: Invite Students to Complete a Nonviolent Communication Term Project

While readings comprise the content for weekly discussions and thematic progression throughout the course, a semester-long "Nonviolent Communication Project" provides a personal throughline in the course. Over approximately two thirds of the semester, students engage in an activity or "project" of their choice that directly relates to nonviolent communication. The term project invites students to engage in a new or different practice (e.g., beginning and maintaining a mindfulness meditation practice), participate in a new or different activity (such as volunteering at an organization in which they are interested), or changing a particular habit (e.g., observing and adjusting their participation in social media). Although it is most meaningful to leave students freedom in how they interpret and complete this project, criteria in creating and committing to a project is important. Term projects for this course must focus on something unique and atypical to students. For example, the project should not be becoming vegetarian if students already are, or volunteering at a specific organization in a capacity in which they are already involved. Further, students are asked to document their progress throughout the term (e.g., via a blog, social media account, or written piece). Finally, the project must include a rationale grounded in academic literature relative to nonviolent communication and peace.

Although the project is open-ended in terms of how students construct it, samples of projects completed by previous students are of great assistance. For example, one student worked with the Toronto-based charity Fix the 6ix (https://fixthe6ix.ca/about/) and collected ticket stubs at the end of home Toronto Raptors games in order to provide meals for the homeless; this student completed a blog that chronicled his involvement with the charity. Another student sought to get her entire family on board with recycling

(including green composting), which was challenging because her brother and father were resistant to the idea. One student approached me after the first class and said that she had to drop the course because the project seemed like too much work given that her father had cancer. I suggested that she chronicle her family's journey with his treatment; fortunately by the end of term, her father was considered in remission. This student created a photobook with captions addressing her family's struggle throughout the term, with a literature review about how cancer bloggers can create a sense of community. Her family was particularly grateful for this project given that they were so busy and had forgotten much of what their daughter chronicled for her project in the course. One student this term, in the spirit of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory that we all adjust our self-presentation in order to guide others' impressions of us, wanted to see how it felt to wear thrift shop clothes for a month. She and her 10-year-old sister completed the project together, and concluded that the experiment helped them to explore and focus on how they felt on the inside and not the outside (see more here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=te4zQcoKLf8). Overall, the term project invites students to change or do something specific that is nonviolent in nature and allows them the opportunity to actively engage with the premises in this course and how these premises can be implemented in their own lives.

Best Practice #9: Experiment With Nonviolence in Online Forums

Suler (2004) suggested that some people self-disclose or act out more frequently in online contexts than they would in face-to-face situations. This "online disinhibition effect," in which people share personal experiences or are uncharacteristically critical, rude, or intimate, can be caused by factors such as anonymity, invisibility, and communicating in an online forum. Technology—in particular, online forums—can be used to experiment with online disinhibition effects in the NVC course. I have done this by means of online discussion forum applications such as "Answer Garden" (answergarden.ch), which allows for a virtual discussion "room" in which students can type responses to questions presented in a face-to-face class meeting, or it can be left running as a "back channel" of communication throughout each class period. For example, I opened an online forum at the start of class, and in a discussion of the civil rights movement, one student anonymously typed, "I honestly don't understand the conflict around '#BlackLivesMatter' and '#AllLivesMatter.' Can someone please explain this to me?" A student well-versed in issues of race gave a clear and concise response to a student who was too self-conscious to share this important question aloud in class. Similarly, Poll Everywhere (polleverywhere.com) hosts multiple-choice or open-ended questions created by the instructor in which students can either "vote" for a particular response or type in a response that then can be part of either a word cloud or provide a more lengthy set of prose responses. Responses can be projected from the instructor's computer to the screen in class, so that students can see all contributions. For example, in a discussion about ahimsa, or "nonharming," I begin by asking students about whom they care. Rather than having students raise their hands and report that they care about their parents, siblings, or friends, I open a Poll Everywhere forum. Responses are generally more candid in this forum; students report caring about pets, people who have passed away, or themselves.

Further to gathering more sincere responses in class, using online forums can invite a subsequent discussion about the concept of anonymity or willingness to share or say something digitally but not face-to-face. I invite students to consider if they are more likely to share something personal by means of a digital forum in class, and if they are more likely to get involved in a conflict if communication is exclusively digital (spoiler: most students admit that yes, arguments are "easier" to conduct via digital media such as text or social media messaging channels). This debrief opens the opportunity to discuss how conflict can be created or resolved online.

Best Practice #10: Illustrate Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) gave a name—intersectionality—to the notion that issues of power in context of race, class, sexuality, gender, and disability overlap and combine in each individual's personal experience. Thus, individuals do not belong to only one identity category. Rather, all persons exist at the intersections and overlap of their own backgrounds and experiences. For example, a Black woman may identify with being female, Black, heterosexual, and a millennial; she is not limited to only one identity category. The concept of self-identification, and the complexities therein, is particularly important in this course, because violence is both created and resolved in the context of power. Incorporating the notion of intersectionality throughout the course and as different topics are addressed is essential in students' understanding of how power is embodied and how it can be addressed in nonviolent communication. For example, I may ask students to identify ways in which they feel oppressed or marginalized. Some may respond with issues associated with economics, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender; it is nearly impossible for a student to identify with only one area of oppression. A discussion of Adichie's work about raising a feminist daughter invites acknowledgment of intersectionality whereby issues of race, culture, religion, and gender are all addressed, and do not exist independently of one other. We consider how being Black intersects with challenges related to motherhood and/or partnership. By illustrating and focusing on intersectionality, students have a more practical understanding of the complexity inherent in oppression, power, and how nonviolence involves understanding how each party relates to issues of power.

Conclusion

Feedback from students on this course consistently centers on two primary themes: "I learned more in this class than I did in my entire university career" and "Class is always exciting, fun, and different." I believe that this feedback is directly relative to the 10 Best Practices offered in this article. In the NVC course, students learn because they are engaged, and they learn both with and from each other. A combination of robust and engaging readings, together with lively in-class activities focusing on dialogue, debate, and personal interaction, the NVC course provides students with both a depth and a breadth of how they can, if they choose to do so, make nonviolent communication a daily and lifelong practice.

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