Caught Between Silence & Safe Spaces

Examining Learning and Communication Practices in the Midst of Sociocultural Tensions in the University Classroom

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Introduction

College classroom communication in the United States is linked to critical issues that are constructed in the larger sociopolitical and political background. Higher education classrooms do not operate in a vacuum. Cultural diversity and immigration crises that countries experience globally create new challenges to all social institutions.

During the last decade, universities have witnessed increased tensions associated with the understanding and acceptance of diversity as part of the sociocultural reality of the nation. Racial tensions along with sexism and differences in social class continue to permeate the academic, sociocultural, and emotional dimensions of college and university life in the United States.

The divisive nature of our political landscape has created rifts in the fabric of social discourse and the unspoken rules of engagement (Granello, 2013; Myers & Sweeney, 2005; Weil, 1995; World Health Organization, 1968). As social conflicts and the unstable political environment in the U.S. continue to escalate, universities are caught in the midst of agitated public debates where identity politics continue to be at the center.

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Within this context, both faculty and students seem to be trapped in classroom dynamics where silence, taboo topics, stereotyping, and self-censorship are hijacking authentic opportunities for learning, critical debate, and human development. It is against this backdrop that this study takes place, with sensitivities heightened and divided interpretations of issues such as "free speech," the "#MeToo movement," and "safe spaces" (Hudson, 2018; Lee, 2018; Zimmerman, 2019). We aim to analyze students' and faculty's construction of communicative relationships within culturally diverse classrooms and a climate where sociocultural tensions continue to grow.

In states like California, with a heavy immigration influx, it becomes critical to understand the experience of students with whom instructors communicate in their classrooms. The 2010 Census Bureau report revealed that 12.9% of the overall U.S. population was made up of foreign-born residents, for a total of 39.9 million persons (Rowland & Davis, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

For Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, Mexico has been the largest country of accepted applicants (>600,000), followed by El Salvador (31,963), Guatemala (22,821), and Honduras (21,053) (National Education Association, 2017). Almost half of the potential DACA beneficiaries live in California and Texas; however, significant numbers are living in every state across the U.S.

In addition to the steady flow of immigrants that the U.S. receives from South and Central America, as of 2013, war and persecution have created the highest number of global refugees since World War II (51.2 million people; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). Most refugees are from Syria, Central Africa, and southern Sudan. Fearing persecution, they flee to escape intolerable conditions; therefore, displacement and premigration trauma, witnessing or being subjected to torture, killings, atrocities, incarceration, starvation/deprivation, rape, sexual assault, and physical beatings, are critical experiences that immigrants have lived (Bemak & Chung, 2017).

The psychological effects of immigration include not only culture shock but also a permanent condition of acculturative stress (Chung & Epstein, 2014; Sirin et al., 2013). Immigrants, especially children, begin to feel the pain of separation and loss of their homeland as the newness of their journeys and surroundings begins to sink in (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981).

Additionally, immigrants struggle to find healthy and nonthreatening ways to integrate their culture and that of the receiving country (Sirin et al., 2013). Children of unauthorized immigrants live in constant fear that their parents might be arrested, detained, or deported; this continual distress affects their daily lives, education, health, futures, and sense of normalcy and stability (Chaudry et al., 2017).

These psychological implications are important to acknowledge because a significant number of students, instructors, and staff in colleges and universities carry emotional scars that have shaped their life journeys and how they decide to engage in communication with other people. Through this study, we emphasize that understanding higher education's communicative issues depends on scholars' ability to realize the affective

dimensions and personal trajectories that shape the participation of students and instructors in the construction of classroom discourse.

Scholarly Efforts to Understand College Classroom Discourse

The notion of classroom discourse is at the core of this investigation. Faculty's and students' discursive patterns determine whether learning and positive social interactions are occurring. Studies in classroom discourse have explored the micropolitics of language and dialogue construction between teachers and learners (Cazden, 2001; Hardy et al., 2005; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Luke, 1995). Critical to these studies is the examination of the ways in which student subgroups either accomplish or fail to learn standards of academic communicative interaction in the classroom (Sutton, 2011).

Underrepresented minority students often struggle to negotiate their identity as cultural subjects in the classroom due to their lack of understanding of the academic culture (e.g., Hull et al., 1991; Levinson, 1996). Some studies in the field of intercultural and pedagogical communication have explored the ways in which nonnative and English speakers achieve classroom interactional competence by using language to repair linguistic errors and ambiguous utterances (Dippold, 2014).

Finally, with growing technological advancements, studies on classroom discourse in higher education now explore issues in online and other technology-mediated environments (Dahlberg, 2017; Ginns & Ellis, 2009; Pilkington & Walker, 2003; Saltmarsha et al., 2008; Tollman & Benson, 2000; Trow, 2001).

The majority of existing studies on higher education's classroom discourse analyze the role that communicative processes play in academic learning. However, scholarship that seeks to understand the ways in which intercultural communication occurs as part of the socioemotional construction of classroom dynamics and the development of students as civic agents is scarce.

Recent attempts to address this gap include studies that explore the ways in which students, faculty, and other university officers can work together either to promote or to hinder the construction of safe spaces in higher education institutions (Brigley, 2018; Ong et al., 2018). Scholarship has outlined key characteristics of safe spaces and their role in the construction of college and university life (Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019; Harless, 2018; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Roestone Collective, 2014; Stengel, 2010).

The College Classroom Discourse as a Situated Social Construction

Central to this study is the understanding of the college classroom as a sociological space where individuals (i.e., instructor and students) come together to socially construct a microsystem where larger social phenomena are reproduced, resisted, and transformed (Atkinson et al., 2009; Levinson & Holland, 1996). This section discusses the conceptual and theoretical constructs that guide this study.

We assume that to understand the forms of communication in higher education teaching spaces, it is necessary to realize the cultural, social, and political construction of the classroom. The college classroom is an extension of the larger social system. The cultural diversity and cultural erasure, the systems of oppression, and the social inequality that define the larger system are both reproduced and challenged through the interaction among faculty, students, and staff (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

The types of communication that take place in the classroom are the result of the variety of practices and identities of individuals who come from culturally diverse groups. Therefore, in understanding the classroom discourse, the focus is not just on the individual but on the individual within a group, an individual who is situated in a local context and influenced by larger structural forces (Klein et al., 1994).

The students, who engage in the construction of the classroom discourse, belong to different cultural backgrounds and intimate cultures where unique forms of perception, expressions, and meaning making are accessible (Levinson & Holland, 1996). Therefore students' participation in the classroom conversation is always a mediated action.

According to Gudmundsdóttir (2001), mediated activities refer to "what people do, say, and think in cultural contexts" (p. 227). The study of mediated action involves the examination of the kind of individual who performs the action and the cultural resources the individual uses to organize his or her activities and interactions with others. The understanding of classroom discourse as mediated action makes it necessary to explore issues of authority, voice, culture, and relationships among the participants (i.e., instructor and students).

Classroom Authority

The concept of authority is a critical concept to understand the communication between the instructor and students in the college classroom. Based on Weber's (1947) categorization of authority structures, scholars have identified three pathways for the construction of power dynamics in the classroom (Pellegrino, 2010): traditional, legal/rational, and charismatic authority.

Traditional authority relies on a top-down structure where the teacher is the highest authority and students operate based on compliance and obedience.

Legal/rational authority relies on expertise, which means that the group allocates authority to the one who demonstrates ability to dictate rules and direction based on his or her experience and knowledge. Rational behavior and its adherence to rational values and established rules make the leader a person who is approved to use power because of his or her specialized knowledge.

Finally, *charismatic authority* occurs when the group decides to allocate authority to a certain person based on the personal attributes and sense of affiliation that the group establishes for that person. Despite the different authority structures that classrooms can adopt, studies show that college classrooms tend to reproduce traditional structures of authority where students expect to obey the instructor and the instructor is in charge of dictating how interactions and conversations will take place as part of the instructional agenda (Pellegrino, 2010).

Evidence also shows that the common practice of traditional authority models in the classroom promote students' passivity and lack of critical engagement (Cazden, 2001; Collins, 2009; Hull et al., 1991; Pellegrino, 2010).

Dialogue as Resistance and Bridging

Because college classrooms can become spaces for social reproduction and passivity, educational theorists identify the necessity to create classroom discourse as a space for contestation and political deliberation. Teachers and students can develop civic skills, critical thinking, and agency through their engagement in an open classroom climate where dialogue and mutual acknowledgment are welcomed (Persson, 2015).

Despite the valuable role that classrooms may occupy in the construction of active citizenship, instructors and students often overlook the classroom as a space for civic formation. Therefore instructors do not model or guide political discussion and deliberation consistently as part of the classroom discourse. Instead, the typical IRE model (teacher's initiation, student's response, and teacher's evaluation) continues to occupy center stage (Cazden, 2001).

In contemporary classrooms, participants lack the ability to sustain interest and effective dialogue techniques to engage in taxing conversations in which participants manifest different or even opposing views (Kosnoski, 2005). Part of students' inability to engage in complex conversations derives from the lack of moral imagination, which involves the possibility to expand one's possibility for empathy and interpretation (i.e., enlarged mentality) of the other person's position, story, and belief system (Benhabib, 1992).

In classrooms where political deliberation can take place, the role of the deliberative instructor is crucial to stimulating the conversation by positing questions and guiding students to preserve their autonomy at the same time that they present and react to each other's views in respectful and productive ways (Kosnoski, 2005; Rocca, 2009).

Engagement in political deliberation as part of the classroom dynamics contributes to the civic and moral development of the future citizens and their opportunities for self-interpretation (Benhabib, 1992; Persson, 2015). However, the enactment of political deliberation as part of the classroom dynamics is not a simple practice because individuals expose their personal narratives and ideologies as they engage in dialogue with others (Kosnoski, 2005).

Part of the difficulty for individuals to engage in complex conversations derives from the specific cultural practices and understandings that guide the ways in which members of each social group decide to engage in communication (Dippold, 2014). Each cultural group holds specific cultural traditions or intimate cultures that guide their forms of communication and interaction (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

The lack of understanding of the cultural diversity that defines the higher educational landscape in the United States can make it challenging to identify a common ground through which intimate and deep conversations are possible without causing defensive reactions among parties involved.

In a context of heightened cultural diversity, it becomes crucial that both instructors and students develop strategies to overcome interactional trouble spots, which refers to conflictive expressions, language use errors, and interpretation problems (Dippold, 2014). The ways in which teachers and students conduct the repair of interactional trouble spots can open opportunities for deeper and more meaningful conversations.

When conflict or difficulties are not addressed adequately as part of the classroom discourse, the situation can lead faculty and students to see dialogue as a face-threatening experience (Goffman, 1999), which can inhibit the opportunities for active participation. However, diversity of perspectives and tensions in the conversation can lead to active engagement because students and the instructor are exploring boundaries beyond their current state of knowledge.

Therefore, productive tensions can be a source of learning and socialization among different social groups (Dong, 2008). Despite the relevant place that political deliberation and productive tensions have in the higher education classroom, studies show that instructors are underprepared to lead discussions and address sociocognitive conflicts as part of the classroom discourse (Dong, 2008).

Safe Classrooms

In the contemporary social context, there seems to be difficulty in understanding and welcoming conflict as part of the higher education classroom climate. Given the political and cultural changes in the U.S., it has become problematic to maintain classrooms as safe spaces where political deliberation, sociocognitive conflict, and a sense of psychological safety can coexist. Recent studies have analyzed whether the construction of classrooms as safe spaces hinders or encourages authentic learning and interaction (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

The notion of the classroom as a safe space refers to an environment in which students feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50)

In this current debate, scholars have warned of the difference between being safe and being comfortable (Boostrom, 1998; Holman & Freed, 1987; Van Soest, 1996). A certain level of discomfort and struggle is necessary to learn and grow as individuals (Baxter-Magolda, 2010; Coryell, 2013; Hodge, 2014; Pizzolato, 2005).

Creating a safe classroom climate is associated with participants' abilities to communicate in ways that are productive and respectful. However, it is uncertain whether teachers and students truly possess effective preparation to engage in dialogue with one another in this culturally diverse context (Brown & Levinson, 1999; Caldwell, 2005; Cazden, 2001; Dong, 2008; Hull et al., 1991; Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Study Methods

Our interpretive, constructivist research approach used focus groups as the primary source of data. Interpretative research was appropriate for this study because it allowed us to understand the ways in which individuals make meaning of the co-constructed social realities they occupy (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Crabtree et al., 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

We were interested in understanding instructors' and students' perspectives about their participation in the construction of the classroom discourse and the meaning they attached to specific experiences in their roles as communicators and listeners. The subjective experiences of students and instructors in the construction of the classroom discourse was our main source of data (Gunzenhauser, 2013).

We explored the following subjective dimensions: self-perceptions as communicators, awareness of their participation in dialogue, perception of the other as communicator, level of interest and detachment toward certain messages or topics, reaction toward conflict as part of the process of communication, access and use of power as part of the classroom discourse, and emotional reactions linked to the process of communication.

Three research questions guided this study: (a) How do university faculty and students engage in the construction of communicative relationships in the classroom? (b) What challenges do university faculty and students experience when they engage in communicative relationships in the classroom? and (c) What type of communicative strategies do university faculty and

students identify as necessary to engage in respectful classroom conversations?

Research Site and Sample

The study was conducted at Inspired University (IU), located in a suburban town in the Central Valley of California. At the time of the study (2019), IU had an undergraduate population of 8,888 and a graduate population of 1,115. Demographically, 51.4% of students identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 23.5% as White, 9.5% as Asian, 2.3% as African American, 0.4% as Native Indian, and 5.2% as two or more races; 3% identified as nonresident, Alien and 8% as other. IU is a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI).

During the last 3 years, issues related to racial tensions have persistently emerged as part of the campus and classroom climate. Students from minority groups have repeatedly protested about the presence of White supremacy acts on campus. These types of incidents were particularly sensitive for students who identify as DACA/DREAMers, illegal immigrants, and/or refugees.

Institutional responses that emerged in response to such tensions included the creation of a commission of diversity and inclusion, among other initiatives. This commission designed and secured approval of a plan for diversity inclusion with the academic senate in spring 2019. It was in this sociopolitical and cultural context that the study was conducted.

Data Collection and Analysis

We recruited faculty participants in the teaching credential programs, the liberal studies program, the doctoral program in educational leadership, in kinesiology, and in the master's program in education and counseling in the College of Education, Kinesiology, and Social Work exclusively. We were interested in exploring the experiences of students and professionals who are in charge of educating future generations within a culturally diverse and impoverished region in California.

It was crucial for this study to ascertain the pulse of the ways in which educational leaders, practitioners, and future instructors were participating in the process of communication with others in the classroom. We initially contacted faculty who responded to our invitation. Faculty who participated in the study referred students from the classes they taught.

We conducted five focus groups (Creswell, 2014). We choose focus groups as our data collection technique because they allowed us to observe the ways in which participants engaged in conversations as members of a group (Colucci, 2007). Participation in focus groups allows participants to build meaning of their experiences subjectively and intersubjectively as they hear the experiences of other people in the group (Freeman, 2013). Additionally, we wanted participants to compare and contrast their experiences with others' as participants in classroom discourse.

We conducted one focus group with faculty, two with graduate students, and two with undergraduate students. The focus group protocol included topics such as classroom conflicts, authority and conflict, difficult topics of discussion, emotional reactions, and communication strategies. Focus group sessions lasted 90–120 minutes.

Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti. The research team created and discussed a coding book, which contained 66 codes grouped into six family codes. Through contrasts and comparisons, different categories of analysis emerged, which were later integrated to identify themes. In the process of integration, we built a concept map that helped us identify themes and determine conceptual relationships and hierarchies.

Findings

Two broad themes emerged from our data analysis: (a) the avoidance of conflict by creating silence and (b) the engagement of productive discomfort by creating trust. We identified specific conditions that were characterized by each of these two communicative dispositions.

Our findings suggest that avoidance of conflict included a tendency to simplify learning experiences and dehumanize classroom interactions. Engagement of productive discomfort required the development of intimacy and trust to engage in complex conversations.

Instances of Avoiding Discomfort

Faculty members described instances in which it was easier to avoid controversial conversations in class than to engage them. In particular, political polarization of discourse was seen as contributing to faculty efforts to avoid discomfort. One veteran professor acknowledged, "It's become harder to deal with controversial issues in our society, [the common reaction is] let's not have a discussion about this or this. It's like, you're wrong and I'm right."

Professors viewed this obstacle as a significant block for critical intellectual discussions. Students interpreted such avoidance by professors as attempts not to lose their jobs. One undergraduate noted, "[If I were the professor] I would probably avoid [controversial topics] too just because I don't want to say something or let something happen that could cost me my job at the end of the day."

Students acknowledged that they avoided discomfort in instances in which their peers could judge them. One undergraduate student noted that when it came to discussing "taboo" subjects, "it's bad to share what you think, because then you're going to be judged." This sentiment seemed to have similar support by some faculty.

One newer faculty participant noted that when it came to certain topics, "I would see the lights just turn off where—and then you have that blank face." The faculty explained that students were engaged before and after class, but when it came to certain controversial topics, students "would just turn it off." The perception of this faculty member seemed to have been supported by an undergraduate student who noted, "I feel like a lot of the youth is turned off by politics because it might create controversy."

Participants also avoided discomfort by disengaging from the class when they perceived course content as too hard or too different from their personal knowledge base. One student admitted in one such class, "they probably think I'm shy, because I come in with my practice stuff, and don't say anything. But other classes, everyone knows me, and I talk all the time." Another student explained how this avoidance could be taken to an extreme. After describing a professor who utilized humiliation routinely in the class, she considered avoiding this discomfort by "dropping out of the program."

Conditions Leading to the Avoidance of Discomfort

Participants in this study mentioned their reluctance to engage in forms of communication that caused them to feel uncomfortable in the classroom. The conditions that created silent responses among participants were linked to the ways in which relationships were socially, culturally, and politically constructed within the classroom. These conditions included the following: (a) reductionist interpretations, (b) the lack of ownership of the space, and (c) the lack of trust and a collective consciousness.

Mutual reductionist interpretations. One of the factors that made it difficult for faculty and students to communicate effectively in the classroom was the reductionist perspectives they held about one another. Both students and teachers felt that they perceived each other in limiting ways and that they were not viewed as fully human.

Participants explained that they wanted each other to understand that they were not perfect and yet they had important virtues to offer to the world. In certain circumstances, participants chose to be silent because they felt they were misinterpreted as individuals or because they did not want their audience to create and perpetuate reductionist perspectives about them. Some participants explained the ways in which people's reductionist understandings about race or religion would cause them to feel uncomfortable and silenced during the class dynamic:

> I had one class, they were asking about certain faith, like, religious faith, and I wanted to just say stuff, but then I could hear other people's—you know, imposing into their faith. I wanted to defend my faith, but at the same time, I just didn't want to be put in that position . . . to be attacked, at school especially, having to defend myself. Especially because my faith is probably—it was more—like, I was probably the only one there that had that faith . . . I was worried I was going to get pointed out and highlighted.

In this narrative, this undergraduate female student emphasized the ways in which her peers did not care to find out more about who she was as a member of her religious faith; she explained that peers would judge her by the label that her religious faith meant to the collective. She chose to be silent to avoid being misinterpreted based merely on her religious title.

Among students, the construction of reductionist perspectives about them was not restricted to the perception of their social attributes but also included their abilities as learners. They emphasized that some teachers tended to assume that they were lazy students, that they did not care to learn, or that they did not have the ability to learn. One of the male undergraduate students emphasized that the abrasive communication of his instructor reflected the poor perception this instructor had about him as a student:

> Some professors, the way they communicate it [is hard]. Some just say straight up, "No." Like, "That's not the right answer." But professors that tend to say, "No"—and this is why—where they kind of break it down to you where—and it helps you gain an understanding of why you were wrong, then it's—you're more inclined because you feel like, "Okay. This is a learning environment." But if they just communicate, "Okay. No." And they don't tell you why, you just feel let down like, "Oh. I'm stupid."

Participants emphasized that their communicative engagement was linked to the perceptions other people constructed about them. This student reasoned that an instructor who has a rich understanding of him as a learner would care to engage in a more substantial and meaningful form of communication. If the student feels that he is being perceived as a smart learner and valuable person, the student will also be willing to engage in communication with the instructor.

A graduate female student, who works as a teacher, summarized what she viewed as part of a tendency in the ways that students and teachers interact and communicate in higher education. She emphasized that people tend to judge others based on their limited perception and understanding of who the other person is without taking time to learn about them:

> We're all coming from our different experiences and we assume a lot of things about other people without really hearing them and trying to understand what they're saying. Many times, when someone is talking, you are already thinking about what you want to say or arguing your point. So, I think it is important teaching students how to listen, how to be good listeners, how to ask questions. I always tell my students, just because you have a thought in your head does not mean that that is the truth. We have these thoughts and sometimes they come from nowhere and that is not necessarily what the truth is. So, you need to ask for clarification, you need to figure out what the truth is instead of just assuming. Or you might perceive this person as being a certain way, but do you really know that person? Have you really listened to them? Did you ask for clarification on what they were saying? So, it's a lot of, I think, listening skills that are lacking.

In addition to this participant, most of the other participants agreed that nowadays, people at school tend to develop more superficial or shallow understandings of the people with whom they interact. They operate based on labels and stereotypes more than an accurate understanding of the person. Participants attributed this situation to the individualistic culture they experience as part of their lives or the lack of time to invest in truly knowing and understanding the particulars of other people's life journeys.

Students were not the only ones suffering the oversimplification of their selves or attributes. Faculty also talked about how they felt that students simplify and judge their lives and beings based on ongoing stereotypes in society. A female faculty in a teacher education program emphasized her discomfort about being perceived exclusively as a White privileged woman:

> I was a K12 teacher, we would go through Ruby Payne workshops and everything. And I think being a White woman I felt like there's a target on me. I mean, at least I've got the woman aspect going for me so I'm at least a little bit oppressed. You can say, I don't know what it's like to be a little Black boy. However, little Black boys do not know what it's like to be a 53-year-old White woman either. None of us can be in anybody else's shoes. So those are the kind of things that make me feel uncomfortable, when I feel like they are being unfair thinking that I'm this big racist because I'm a White chick when I haven't said anything or done anything to make me that way.

A male faculty member in a program in kinesiology supported a similar perspective:

> You look at me and you see a White male. But I didn't grow up with privilege. I'm first generation. Grew up very poor, Alabama person. And when we do things like privilege walks or different things to kind of see where we all start, I'm usually in the back, as well. So, we can't prejudge. You know, and those sorts of things kind of help people understand even the way we communicate or how we interpret where somebody's coming from.

This faculty member emphasized that it was crucial to help students avoid making reductionist perspectives about other people; he talked about his efforts to help students develop a critical self-reflection about how they see others:

> What I get my students to stop doing is to stop seeing the person for their point of view but to understand the reasoning behind their point of view. And so if we get past these layers, I don't see you as a White male who teaches here. I see you for, why do you think that? Why do you believe this? You know, get to that root. What we a lot of times find out is people don't really understand why they think and feel the way they do anyway . . . I love getting through the layers of who the true person is and where they're coming from and why they are that way.

Both instructors and students experienced a sense of discomfort in their communication and interaction every time they discerned an audience that perceived and assessed them inaccurately or in simplistic ways. Participants wanted to be seen as individuals with deeper layers and more complex life stories. They did not want to be reduced to labels or stereotypes in their process of interaction with others.

Lack of ownership over the space. Both faculty and students noted that the lack of clear authority in the room made them hesitant about being part of serious conversations. If there was not clarity about the rules of interaction and who was in charge of the situation, it became very challenging for participants to engage in difficult conversations actively. Without clear sources of authority, the purpose and style of communication became areas of contestation where the strongest argument could win. Students emphasized that for them, it was important to perceive that instructors were in charge of the situation and that they could moderate difficult conversations:

> I've had professors that are like, oh, I don't know what to do and that's when I'm like—that's when I look to the professor, like this is your room, manage your room.

Another female graduate student emphasized her lack of comfort when the instructor blurred lines of authority and was not able to moderate the discussion:

> So, when we were taking a class, maybe like a political science class, depending on how the teacher handled discussions, discussions would get—just be all over the place. One person screaming at another person who's screaming back at the other person and it's just uncomfortable.

A male undergraduate student from kinesiology emphasized the ineffective ways in which faculty distribute the authority space between them and students. He noted that faculty occupied the floor in the conversation and students had very limited time to express their ideas or concerns. Without the proper space to express their voices, students felt that their authority as members of the learning and negotiation process was restricted:

> I went to a meeting coordinated by faculty and it had to do with athletes . . . but the way that I saw the faculty run the meeting, like, I've seen my own fraternity run better meetings than they have. It was so disorganized and they're like, "Okay. The students are going to get a time to talk." And let's say it's a 2-hour meeting. They're talking about the same damn thing the whole time. So, when it gets down to like 1:50, you barely have any time that you want to talk. So, you're not even able to get out what you want . . . And then they're like, "Oh, we'll table it for the next meeting." And it's like, "Dude. Come on. I took my time out of the day to come here and to come sit and listen to you guys for an hour plus and I'm not even getting in what I've got to say."

Since faculty held a positional authority, they did not care to share the authority with students in a respectful way, valuing their time and participation. One professor from a social work program emphasized the difficulties they experience as faculty in questioning and redefining their authority role:

> The struggle for me, always is, especially in the classroom, which I consider to be one of the most oppressive environments in the world, to be able to decenter myself and to undo the privilege I walk around with—I'm a White guy in this culture and I walk around with huge amounts of weapons of privilege, right? I struggle very hard to not have those played in the classroom and to develop relationships so students can call me out on it when it happens. So, for me, it's that struggle to undo the colonizing that I've gone through to be a man in this culture.

Both faculty and students struggled to find the "right ways" to both express their voice and be respected by the other participants in the classroom. How to enact their ownership of the classroom was not always clear among faculty and students. The more confusing the lines and structures of authority were, the more challenging it was for people to engage in communication actively.

Lack of collective consciousness. Participants described situations in which the lack of understanding of group cohesion or a common goal hindered the possibilities to engage in effective conversations. One student described how they were forced to take chemistry as part of their general education but never felt connected to the content or that they belonged in the class. In describing this situation, the student said, "I sit by myself, never raise my hand, I don't think anyone's ever heard my voice before."

Students expressed frustration about being in contexts where they did not seem to have similar goals as the professors. One student discussed how faculty often assumed he was taking a class because he had an interest or passion for the subject matter. He noted that faculty "expect you to almost be on their level of certainty [in] what the subject's about."

In such instances, the student wanted to tell the professor, "I'm in here because I kind of have to be." In this, the student was identifying a mismatch in the purpose and goals for being in the class. Participants shared how this lack of a communal goal or collective consciousness influenced most aspects of how they approached, behaved in, and learned in a particular classroom context.

Instances of Productive Discomfort

Participants from the study recounted numerous instances within which they and others sought productive discomfort. Faculty described utilizing uncomfortable topics to practice skills necessary to learn complex areas of study. In such instances, discomfort was viewed as an expected aspect of the classroom experience on the path toward learning.

One faculty described building communication skills through the use of preliminarily "weird topics" under the assumption that if they could "learn to communicate in this manner, talking about this weird subject matter, we can do it with anything else."

Similarly, faculty explained to students that discomfort is expected when they are learning snd making mistakes, "that's why they are here." One graduate student highlighted how conflict in the classroom was discomforting, but "it's through conflict that progress is made." Such instances highlight that discomfort was utilized as a tool toward building initial skills and proficiency.

Students and faculty preferred to engage in productive discomfort vis-à-vis smaller group sizes. Students discussed small-group work as a great scaffold for testing ideas before sharing possibly embarrassing information or perspectives "out loud to everyone." Faculty and students praised one-on-one communication because "there's less pressure" and one-on-one communication often indicates a high level of trust.

In these instances, we saw that smaller group sizes proved meaningful in preparing students and teachers to interact with discomfort. Instances in which participants sought discomfort were also repeatedly connected with building relationships. Students discussed how the more they knew their peers and professor, the more likely they were to share their thoughts. Students described how they actively sought out professors who were "authentic" or "the ones that actually are themselves."

Faculty reinforced this sentiment, describing well-calculated humor and even profanity as tools to build trust and humanize themselves in front of students. In these instances, we saw active engagement on the parts of participants, who were taking a risk in building relationships or behaviors with the hope that such efforts would benefit them in the end.

Conditions Leading to Seeking Productive Discomfort

Although students and faculty acknowledged the challenges and complexities to engage in meaningful, complex conversations as part of their learning experiences, they also agreed on conditions that could help them engage in dialogue. Participants realized that engaging in meaningful conversations would not always be comfortable; they noted the importance of accepting and embracing certain levels of discomfort that would help them engage in deeper conversations.

Participants identified three critical conditions that inspired them to engage in complex conversations despite the discomfort this involved: (a) building trust and intimacy, (b) sharing ownership of the classroom authority, and (c) developing a collective consciousness.

Building Trust and Intimacy. Trust and intimacy were deemed important conditions for participants to be willing to engage in productive discomfort. Participants identified three practices that helped them trust others and connect with them at a more intimate level: displays of authenticity; disclosure of personal ideology; and work in small, intimate groups.

Several students acknowledged that instructors who were willing to disclose personal attributes and trajectories were easier to identify with. Professors who exhibited a "genuine," "authentic," "raw and real" side of themselves as individuals were highly appreciated; students felt they were able to connect with their instructors more effectively when those instructors cared to explain who they were beyond their professional role. One graduate student said:

> I've had professors say, "Some things I might say might offend you, but this is who I am." And, not said in a rude way, but more so just like to make jokes or super—I don't want to use the word intimate, but—personable with the class. So, it feels like—because they're acting that way towards the class, you feel comfortable enough to be the same towards the professor.

Students valued when their instructors took the time to demystify their professorship role and present a more mundane version of themselves. This lack of intimidation felt by students, with regard to this type of professor, was an important condition that prepared them to grapple with discomforting material. Another graduate student built on this idea, saying:

> I think it's always good, like the hot topics that we were kind of discussing. I think it's really nice when professors are able to share their own experiences or their ideas about what's going on.

Faculty participants supported the students' perspective; they noted that showing a personal side of themselves (i.e., vulnerability) was an important condition to develop a sense of trust in the classroom:

> [In our conversations, it's important] being vulnerable. Being relatable. And there's a trust build too. I think they know that I'm not going to do something to break that trust. And I've heard often that this is the first time I've actually come and talked to a professor or asked questions or—and so as—that's sad to me, but at the same time, that's—I think that answers the question is that there's a—they feel a trust . . . I am able to relate to students who are shy in class who aren't talking because when they come in and say, "Listen, I've heard you encouraging on my papers or in conversations and I want to do this too. I just don't know how to do it yet." I'm able to tell them, "You and I are a team, when I'm in Academic Senate, I'm going through the same things that you're going through. And so why don't we work together on this? You try to do once a class, I'll try to do once a senate." And there's also that—there's that "we" involved also. I think that's helpful.

Although students and the majority of faculty emphasized the value of interacting with one another at a more personal level, some faculty took a nuanced approach to this sense of authenticity. One faculty member cautioned, "It's really important for the teacher to stay unbiased, because I feel like as soon as the teacher goes one side or the other then you kind of—if you're the opposite, you might not want to participate." So, while students' interpretations of authenticity were rooted in professors appearing real, some faculty recognized the negative influence the sharing of their opinions may have on students. For some faculty, it was not always easy to discern the level of authenticity or personal disclosure that was necessary to share.

In addition to displays of authenticity, participants noted that it was important to disclose their personal ideologies even if that meant exposing different ideological positions in the classroom. Participants emphasized that the diversity of opinions was welcomed and could be nurtured as part of the classroom dynamics. An undergraduate student noted the importance of being aware of the diversity of opinions as part of classroom life:

> You can't expect everyone to agree with you and it's never—there's never—not even in race. Even like on a lesser subject, not everyone's going to agree with you and that's fine but it's just like, you have to be able to be comfortable with the way you feel and express your opinions out.

Students valued knowing that their instructors welcomed diverse viewpoints. A professor from kinesiology emphasized the importance of helping students not only to value the diversity of opinions or ideologies but also to search for deeper layers of understanding in the attributes of their peers: "I need the students to learn that it's not that your point or their point is right. It is that you have a point. Understand why you have that

point of view, and let's communicate that together." Another faculty member from the liberal studies program noted his contentment with the possibility to have opinions that differed from those of his students without causing trouble for any of them:

> I'm with a student right now who we both told each other we disagree with viewpoints. But, he's so happy because—and I am just happy again in class because he said, "This is the first time I was able to come into a class and know that my grade is not going to be affected and be able to share my opinion knowing that we're just having a dialogue."

Faculty were very vocal about the importance of helping students own an ideological stance. They wanted students to be able to own their ideas and to express them and contribute to the construction of classroom dynamics:

> I don't believe the classroom is a neutral space . . . Open discussion of different points of view have to be what we do in my classroom . . . Your view in the world is just as important as my view. We have an obligation to each other to share our views around very difficult issues. The traditional difficult issues around race and sex and all the way through political issues almost never are talked about because there is an assumption of neutrality and the classroom is not a neutral space . . . We have to talk about this, and my opinion isn't the truth.

For faculty members, it was crucial to create awareness among students about the complexity of diverse ideological positions within the classroom. Faculty wanted students to be able not only to articulate their viewpoints and ideological roots but also to entertain the value of other people's perspectives and ideological constructions.

Finally, the construction of trust and intimacy was connected with working within smaller group sizes. When prompted about how to increase positive communication in the college, an undergraduate stated, "I would tell the dean that in smaller classes we as students feel more comfortable to talk more." This sentiment was related similarly by a graduate student, who said, "In our program, we talk a lot about confidentiality and confidence. So especially with the field group, because it is a smaller group and we have that rapport with each other." Smaller group sizes were seen as low-stakes practice spaces in which ideas could be tested and vetted before sharing in front of the whole class. Large groups were described as daunting and dangerous spaces where the feeling was "I don't want to be judged." However, one-on-one conversations with professors or smaller groups were spoken of fondly as safe areas, where more ideas could be more openly shared.

Building Collective Consciousness. Participants noted that to engage in productive discomfort, it was important to know that the group cared about the existence and well-being of all the members. Participants noted that caring for each other leads to increased comfort levels among students and promotes a sense of "we-ness" among its members. This in turn creates a powerful bond that nurtures a belief that "risk-taking is part of academic life and intellectual growth, and participatory inquiry is at the center of challenging pedagogy" (Gayle et al., 2013, p. 1).

One of the faculty members in social work emphasized the importance of creating a learning community that helped students see the value of the diverse composition of the group and the interconnectedness of each other:

> So, for me, the difficulty is making sure that I—the classroom, the collective that becomes the learning collective in the classroom, sees me as a participant in it. I have to deconstruct that all the time and do the disclaimers. Open discussion of different points of view have to be what we do in my classroom.

One of the undergraduate students in kinesiology provided a very representative example of the importance of developing a collective consciousness as part of the construction of the social dynamics of the group:

> I think the communication amongst your peers in the classroom is like, "We're all in this together. You know, let's all succeed as a unit—as more of a common"—I mean, I play team sports. So, it's more of like a team. Like, everybody brings something different to the table. Like, not everybody's going to be Michael Jordan, obviously. But if we all contribute and we can all achieve high grades together—because I don't like individualistic—just grab a book and read it. No. I'm not that type of learner. I need to be with other people because—like, kind of to reiterate, people—other people might bring up different topics or somebody may be able to teach it differently. That way, I learn better.

Students acknowledged that it was important to develop a collective orientation not only to engage in effective learning but also to sustain an adequate emotional balance among the members of the group. For students, the creation of a balanced emotional state within the collectivity could be strengthened when the instructor helped the group to be aware of how the classroom dynamics could unfold and with what consequences:

> I think, in a classroom setting, the professor can really determine how people feel about it, [the instructor can note], "Look, we're going to be talking about racial issues and it's fine. Don't freak out. Be honest." And then, I think that would go a long way because a lot of people do freak out. And if you're going to say like, "Racist things might be said or racial issues will be brought up," I think it kind of helps take away that stigma because people were kind of prepared. You know, they are like, "Okay. We're just in a classroom setting. Not everybody really believes these but we're going to bring them to attention because they exist."

Students valued the instructor's efforts to keep the group prepared to experience the emotional distress associated with the occurrence of difficult conversations. Participants understood that sharing a caring, collective orientation made it possible to endure challenging situations, which ultimately could lead to collective growth.

Shared Ownership of the Classroom Space. Participants in this study emphasized that having a clear understanding of the authority structure in the classroom was crucial for engaging in meaningful conversations. Students did not appreciate traditional structures of authority in which faculty had absolute power and students were expected to be compliant.

For students, it was important to feel included and valued as participants of the learning community. They enjoyed having instructors who had a clear understanding of their authority as a leader and at the same time could value their students' voices. A male undergraduate student emphasized this point in the following way:

> [If I were the professor in charge], I wouldn't talk about a very sensitive topic on the first day of class. You develop a rapport with your students, right? So, I mean, if you do a good job of having that open forum as a classroom, I think that talk's a lot easier, you know? And when you establish, "I'm the professor. I'm the leader. And I respect you. You respect me, and we all respect each other." In that scenario's much less likely that tension or conflicts happen. So, I think it's based on how you start and carry yourself through your classroom can help reduce that. I mean, it still might happen, but I think the odds are way less likely.

Another male student emphasized the importance of having faculty who can explicitly communicate that they care and that they value the voices of their students. For undergraduate students in this study, respect was not based on positional authority but in the instructor's ability to validate them as humans with emotions, as learners, and as individuals with valuable experiences. As described by participants, effective communication could be more likely to emerge in a space where participants shared power:

> I feel like a lot of professors feel like they got to act a certain way to command the room, but they don't realize the importance of being friendly and being open . . . Somebody who acts sort of strict or sort of disciplinarian or—I don't know—just throws you out, doesn't really put in the extra effort—I wouldn't even say extra effort. Just act human. Like, don't act like a robot. Don't act like we're lesser than you because you have a doctorate. We respect that, but notice that we're also putting the work to do.

Another student supported the idea that instructors can facilitate healthier forms of communication when they are willing to share their power and show respect for students as well:

> One of the things I think professors can do as another good form of communication is just talking to you about things that aren't class related. Like, how he was saying, "What's a good place to eat?" You know, I've seen professors outside class and they'll just walk by me instead of just like a, "Hey. How's your day?" Or just a, "Hey." You know? That way, I'm a—like, back to—not to that I'm a person thing, but he acknowledges me as almost an equal—even though, obviously, we're not on a certain level. But it's still respect, you know?

For students, it was important to build an authority structure based on the mutual acknowledgment of participants as humans who share vulnerability and personal lives beyond the classroom.

A male faculty member in a teacher education program emphasized his desire to help students gain ownership of the classroom space and the teaching and learning process. He described the ways in which he encouraged students to use their voices and authority in the classroom:

> I consider myself by nature to be an introvert . . . I try to model what I think would be good instructional methodologies. And so, for me, a good instructional methodology is not for me to be the center of the communication, but I have a lot of group communication and them working in groups. In fact, one of the things that I try to do with my class from day one is "When you're talking, don't address me. Address your colleagues. Don't face me. Make sure your voice is projecting so everybody in the class can hear you." And one of the things that I try to do, as the semester progresses, is I actually like to get to the point where I can sit down, and they can carry on a conversation. The whole class. And it's like if I'm not even there, because now they're sharing ideas back and forth.

In a similar way, a male professor from kinesiology emphasized the importance of acknowledging students' voices through different ways. He acknowledged that some students struggle to engage in large-group conversations openly; however, they still want access to open spaces for expression and power for those individuals who are shy:

> Doing surveys or allowing them to still have a voice at the end of class has always helped. So then even if they're not vocal or they were offended or they had found something a little sensitive, they've learned to share that with me. And then I get that so that when the next class I have, I know now to maybe address it head on or to talk about it . . . That's helped take a little of the sting out of some topics. That everybody still gets to share and communicate in their own way, because they may be better writers and they may be able to express themselves that way and feel more confident and increase sort of efficacy and their ability to do that, rather than vocally.

Both faculty and students mentioned that the possibility to engage in deeper or sensitive conversations required a sense of shared power in the classroom. Participants wanted to feel that they owned the space and that they could use their voices to express their perspectives and their humanity openly.

Discussion

This study explored the ways in which students and instructors at an HSI with a teaching orientation collaborated in the construction of communicative interactions in the classroom. Our focus on issues of communication in the higher education context was particularly relevant to explore given the contemporary racial tensions and exacerbated sensibility to address social issues like politics, American ideology, gender inequality, and immigration.

We analyzed the voices of instructors and students to understand how they perceived themselves as communicators and what the perceptions of the others in the classroom communication are. This study expands existing scholarship about the construction of classroom discourse in higher education by explaining the ways in which individual and collective subjectivities intersect to offer both opportunities and constraints in the delivery and reception of messages.

Central to our process of analysis was to explore how participants' voices could help us understand what safe spaces mean in the higher education system and whether the creation of safe spaces is conducive to learning, individual and collective growth, and civic engagement.

Our findings suggest that participants move between two communicative modalities or dispositions: (a) the avoidance of conflict by creating silence and (b) the engagement of productive discomfort by creating trust. Silence was constructed as a form of self-preservation and self-censoring that participants used when the sociocultural context of the classroom was perceived or experienced as threatening or dehumanizing. Engagement in productive discomfort involved participants' willingness to take risks in difficult conversations that they deemed as valuable to advance as individuals and a collectivity.

Three sociocultural conditions were conducive to silence: reductionist interpretation of the other person, the lack of a collective consciousness, and

a lack of ownership over the classroom space. Participants' engagement in difficult conversations stemmed from sociocultural conditions that reinforced a humanistic construction of classroom dynamics: the development of trust and intimacy, the construction of a collective consciousness, and the ownership of the classroom as an authority space.

This study confirms that higher education classrooms are sites for not only academic learning but also the re-creation of sociocultural dynamics where instructors and students bring their experiences and personal stories to interact with others (Atkinson et al., 2009; Levinson & Holland, 1996). Our findings show that the construction of safe spaces does not mean avoiding difficult conversations.

Among participants, engagement in difficult conversations was important to achieve, and the construction of safety was connected with their ability to share power and to develop a rich awareness about who the other person is and who they are together as a collectivity. Participants saw the value of engaging in productive tensions (Dong, 2008). The construction of the classroom as a safe place was described as something to accomplish collectively, when students and instructors engage in moral imagination, which involves empathy and an interpretative capacity to view the other person as fully human, with a positionality, story, and belief system (Benhabib, 1992). Moral imagination includes the individual's disposition to stop seeing the other person superficially, from a reductionist perspective.

Participants agreed that the construction of the classroom as a safe place was a collective project toward the humanization of social interactions; however, they emphasized that the instructor played a critical role in moderating difficult conversations and helping students achieve moral imagination.

Similar to what other studies have suggested (Kosnoski, 2005; Rocca, 2009), our participants wanted their teachers to become deliberative instructors who could guarantee opportunities for fair access and participation in the authority structure of the classroom among all participants. The classroom became an unsafe space when the group, as a collectivity, moved toward experiences of dehumanization, which involved participants holding reductionist perspectives about one another and abusing their power in their interactions.

This study suggests that authentic opportunities for substantial and challenging conversations rely on the construction of more humanistic forms of interaction with one another. Participants emphasized that creating intimacy and trust, signs of a movement toward humanization, in the classroom is a process that takes time and work, in small groups. We must ask whether the current format of the higher education classroom, which encourages massive classes, is authentically conducive to humanization and the construction of safety.

In alignment with our participants, we support the idea of moving beyond the construction of safe spaces to develop brave spaces (Palfrey, 2017; Rudnitsky et al., 2017); this resignification of communicative practices in higher education classrooms aims to emphasize the value and benefit of engaging in productive discomfort as a way to expand sociocultural awareness, cognitive development, and group productivity.

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