



Let's Get Political: The Challenges of Teaching a Multicultural Course in Communication Sciences and Disorders

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the challenges of creating and teaching a multicultural course in a speech-language pathology program. Students pushed back on content, questioning the connection between politics and practice in the field. The vocabulary of motives theory was used to analyze comments like, "I'm conservative" and "This class is too political." The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's apolitical influence was also examined. Despite student requests to erase political content, the choice was made to continue the antiracist framework and make it more personal.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning; diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice; antiracist framework; white privilege

Positionality Statement

I, Audrey Farrugia, am a speech-language pathologist and associate professor of speech-language pathology at Eastern Michigan University (EMU). My education has highly influenced my perspective. I received my Bachelor's degree in 2006 in elementary education. In this program I learned the fundamentals of pedagogy and the joy of working with children. I received my Master's degree in 2009 in speech-language pathology. It is here that I found my passion for working with individuals with communication disabilities. I received my doctoral degree in 2016 in educational studies with a concentration in urban education. Here, I honed my teaching and learning skills and became introduced to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I received all of my degrees from EMU, where I currently work. It is my home and my community. Prior to joining the faculty at EMU, I worked in the public school system. It was difficult

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for me as I found myself being a special educator that does not believe in special education. I made the decision to pursue my doctoral degree so that I could work with adults and affect change more quickly in the field. I mostly teach courses in child language but I also teach the undergraduate anatomy and physiology course. My research focuses on the scholarship of teaching and learning, social justice in the field of speech-language pathology, early intervention, and autism. I approach my all my work as a learner. I am married and a mother to four children. I identify as a White woman with an invisible disability and ally. I am committed to change.



When I became a faculty member seven years ago, I had my sights set on teaching the program's multicultural course. I was finishing up my dissertation (Farrugia-Bernard, 2016) for my Ph.D., which focused on the cultural competence of White speech-language pathologists (SLPs) practicing in urban schools with students of color. I thought the multicultural course would be a great fit for me to teach as it blended my degrees. As I researched best practice in multicultural teaching and learning in the field, I found there to be a paucity of resources. Two seminal articles had been published to guide multicultural coursework. Stockman et al. (2008) surveyed speech-language pathology programs across the country to gain information about multicultural instructional practices. Horton-Ikard et al. (2009) presented a framework for a foundational course in CSD meant to increase the cultural competency of students. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) also had information for faculty, such as sample syllabi and a cultural competence curriculum guide (ASHA, n.d.). Since then, more research has come out (Bradshaw & Randolph, 2021; Franca & Harten, 2016; Horton & Munoz, 2021; Quach & Tsai, 2017), but at the time, the methods for incorporating multicultural content were left up to individual SLP programs, resulting in a large variety of preparatory practice.

I designed the class using tenants from my doctoral program and fused that with my knowledge of SLP and tried to create an environment in which all students felt safe sharing their identity and experiences. A diversity statement was crafted and read aloud on the first day of the course. The students and I collaboratively produced class and conversation norms which included:

- Assume positive intentions
- Allow everyone a chance to speak
- Listen respectfully and actively
- Criticize ideas and not individuals
- Commit to learning, not debating
- Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language
- Avoid assumptions about others

I was so interested in multicultural teaching that I set up a scholarship of teaching and learning study with the course. I wanted to investigate CSD student perceptions of a foundational multicultural course in its ability to increase cultural competence and prepare students to work with culturally and linguistically diverse clients. In this study, reflective journals were analyzed and the students' blatantly racist statements shocked me. They said things like,

I honestly think that White English-speaking women are the majority of this field because we are the people who know about it and are willing to go the extra few years for a Master's degree.

For society to remain society some things must remain, such as qualified people performing jobs. A lot of people of color just aren't. I also feel, though an unpopular opinion, that in some situations the barriers created by society are needed. (Farrugia, 2020)

It was distressing to me to have the students think these things but also that they felt so comfortable openly sharing these views. I naively thought that racism would be in the shadows.

It is important to note the demographics of the field and my personal classroom. Students of color represent 25% of students enrolled in graduate level SLP programs (CAPCSD & ASHA, 2021). In my classroom, there are very few students of color, typically around 15%. As such, students from underrepresented groups may feel pressure to present in a certain way or feel hesitant to share their experiences (Rosen et al., 2017). hooks (1994) stated:

Even though students enter the “democratic” classroom believing they have the right to “free speech,” most students are not comfortable exercising this right to “free speech.” Most students are not comfortable exercising this right—especially if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas, feelings that go against the grain, that are unpopular. (p. 179)

Perhaps the racist comments I was hearing were because my White students felt comfort being in the majority with me, a White woman, as their instructor. I have questioned if they would have been as openly racist if there were more students of color or if their instructor identified with an underrepresented group.

While researching, I learned I was not the only educator dealing with this. There had been a documented increase in hate speech in

educational settings that scholars attributed in large part to President Trump's public use of hate speech throughout his candidacy and presidency (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). The hateful statements from the students were not just reserved for our classroom discussions; I also saw them in my teaching evaluations. Cotton and Pluskota (2016) found that students evaluate teachers of multicultural courses harshly. Despite the hurtful comments, I took the student feedback into account as I revised the course. With each subsequent teaching of the course (Farrugia, 2021), I tried to improve the structure and content, but I could not seem to reconcile two recurring comments: “I'm conservative” and “This class is too political.”

There are dueling definitions of *politics*. In the narrower sense, politics deals only with the government and two-party system. By this definition, politics is confined to the voting booth. More broadly, politics deals with a power struggle between people and groups (Boswell, 2020). It exists to establish “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1950). What commonly happens is that people meld the two definitions and cultural issues get assigned opposing sides with liberal or conservative ideologies. So, when I talk in class about the cultural issue of healthcare disparity in the transgender community, instead of discussing it as a human rights issue, they argue it in conservative or liberal terms.

As I reflected on student conversations, journal entries, and evaluations, Mills' (1940) theory of vocabulary of motive kept coming to mind. Simply put, a vocabulary of motive is a person's explanation for their actions. Mills asserted that we are limited in the everyday language available to us and this will shape our actions. For example, the term *gaslighting*, meaning “to manipulate someone by psychological means into questioning their

own sanity," (Oxford University Press) is a term that recently gained popularity. Digging deeper into Mills' theory, he stated that individuals will take action based on whether or not they can talk themselves out of trouble if their motives are questioned. This is called *justification* (p.907). People may now choose not to engage in gaslighting behaviors because the understanding and widespread use of the term makes justification of the actions more difficult. Using Mills' theory, throughout the seven times I taught the multicultural course, I realized that most often students' racist comments were justified with "I'm conservative." One time a student shared, "Nine times out of ten I do not believe that what they [Black people] are complaining about is because of their race and is rather because of their actions that they do not want to take responsibility for (Farrugia, 2022). I set up a separate meeting with this student to discuss this overtly racist comment. They opened the meeting with concerns that I was targeting them because they openly identified as being conservative. They proceeded to justify every racist statement with the idea of conservative beliefs. However, it was not just racist comments that were being justified with, "I'm conservative." Women in one class were discussing their fear of being verbally, physically, sexually, or emotionally attacked by men when another woman chimed in to disparage that fear and emphasize her personal protection from God. She quickly quipped, "I'm a Republican and Christian. I don't worry." In another instance, a student was reflecting on where they fell on Cross et al.'s (1989) cultural competence continuum. They stated,

It would probably seem that I am on the cultural destructive side with issues such as LGBTQ. As a conservative Christian I cannot support a lifestyle that I believe is sinful and against God. While I would never be rude or mean to

a person who identifies as LGBTQ, I also cannot support them and get to a level of cultural proficiency where I encourage this culture because I do not support the choices that people in this group make. (Farrugia, 2022)

Today, being conservative is embodied by President Trump and his "not politically correct" rhetoric. When he can make prejudiced comments and say it is because of his conservative beliefs, others can too and use that as their justification. It seems it is far easier and more acceptable to ourselves and others to say "I'm conservative" instead of "I'm racist."

One commonly occurring comment from student evaluations was, "This course is too political," often followed by a questioning of the connection between politics and SLP practice. As one student stated, "I feel like this class talks a lot about cultural issues. How does that pertain to speech pathology and our practice?" (Farrugia, 2020). Each year I tried to find ways to make the connection between current events and our practice clearer but as the same comment continued to appear I found myself asking, was I letting my own political interests take over the class? I tried to envision a class where cultural issues were not covered and the focus was only on assessment and treatment strategies but I honestly could not find the separation the students thought existed. So, I brought back Mills's theory to mull over in this context. Perhaps, "This class is too political" was really code for this class is uncomfortable. It brings up different perspectives and requires students to articulate their views. It may be easier to say a course is too political than to say it is too hard. After all, we have been told there are two things you do not discuss—religion and politics—and I ask students to do just that.

I began to observe it was not just my students pushing away politics in the course;

my professional organization, ASHA, was doing the same thing. On June 1st 2020, ASHA issued a statement entitled *Response to Racially Motivated Violence*. It stated:

We stand with those who stand against violence of any kind, especially recent racially motivated violence. We stand in opposition to any actions that silence change and progress, as well as those actions that impede and interfere with mutual respect and dignity.

ASHA constituents heavily criticized the statement for its apolitical content with comments like, “It’s remarkable how many words they use to say nothing,” (Oppenheimer, 2020) and, “You don’t firmly position yourself against racism. You instead glide over the disease that is racism” (Kifle, 2020). The Instagram group SLPs of Color submitted a petition with over 53,000 signatures to ASHA to make a statement denouncing racism and create systems of accountability. On June 2nd 2020, ASHA posted a message which read,

Our statement fell short; it was not clear or strong enough, and for that we apologize. We missed the mark, and we let you down. We have heard from many members about the pain this message has caused, and we want to do better [...] The Board of Directors will be issuing a new statement in the near future, please stay tuned.

On June 5th 2020, a new statement was released entitled, *Response to Racism*. It stated, “ASHA explicitly condemns systemic racism and oppression, and the violent acts that took the lives most recently of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd—and so many before them.”

More recently, on June 24th 2022, ASHA issued a statement on the Supreme Court Decision in *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which stated:

We understand and respect many ASHA members may have strong feelings about the Supreme Court decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* and want ASHA to take a position on the issue.

Undoubtedly, the Supreme Court’s decision is among a range of important issues under discussion or debate in the public discourse. Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of ASHA’s mission and advocacy efforts to take a stand.

ASHA professionals criticized the statement with comments like,

“Not our scope” is an interesting stance to take considering the gun violence and Pride posts this month. I see ASHA is picking and choosing where to focus performative advocacy efforts, which comes as no surprise. I’d love to see a breakdown of how it’s “within scope” to speak about those issues but it’s not within our scope to speak about medical autonomy in a medical field. (Porter, 2022)

Another criticism voiced to ASHA’s statement read, “Our scope? More than 90% of SLPs are female and reproductive rights are human rights...and that affects us all (Faythe, 2022). While others agreed with ASHA’s stance saying,

Please continue to focus on speech, language, and hearing issues. This is the reason we pay our annual dues. Everyone has an opinion on this matter. Opinions differ. It’s not ASHA’s job to take a stance on this issue publicly. Please do not bow to the pressure to do so. (Skelly-Flores, 2022)

This time, ASHA disabled the comments which they claimed failed to adhere to established ASHA Facebook guidelines for respectful discourse. ASHA constituents continued to express criticism on every subsequent post,

regardless of the subject. For example, ASHA posted about new and improved evidence maps and Kuikka (2022) commented,

The American Physical Therapy Association issued a statement re the overturning of Roe, that included: "Our commitment to person-centered services establishes that APTA opposes efforts by government, institutions, and other entities that may threaten person-centeredness in the provision of physical therapist services." What side of history do you want to be on, ASHA? Because if you won't back women making healthcare decisions, you don't stand for anything at all.

It became clear to me that just as my students feel uncomfortable navigating discussions about issues of diversity and equity, so too does my professional organization. ASHA takes the melded definition of political, where broad cultural conflicts are ascribed narrow political sides, to justify their avoidance of discussion of certain events. By saying it is not within our scope of practice to comment on political issues, they have permission to abstain from cultural discussions that they find controversial and polarizing.

With all of this in mind, I still decided to stay true to my antiracist framework. Instead of erasing the political, I just made it more personal. Rather than turning to the news for stories of diversity and injustice, I drew from personal experiences. Over the years I had students and colleagues share stories and questions like:

- (1) How do I respond to a client that makes a racist comment during a session?
- (2) I had a patient refuse services from me because I wear a hijab. What options do I have?

- (3) On a job interview, I think administrators were trying to 'out' me by asking what plans my boyfriend and I had while I was being walked to the door.
- (4) Parents questioned the use of a picture book which featured a gay family in my school library.

I worked these scenarios into the class to demonstrate that the politics which felt far away and easily dismissible when discussed in news stories affect our clients and those of us practicing in the field. Applying the political to clinical situations removed the ability to disengage in topics. With this change there was a notable shift in student responses towards deeper reflection and discussion. Instead of reading a news story and moving on, they became more invested and curious. For example, I was teaching when the Buffalo supermarket shooting happened. In the past, I would have had the group watch or read the news together and react. There would be varying levels of engagement. Instead, a student in their clinical rotation told me before class that their client was so emotional over the shooting that they did not do anything they had planned for their session. Their client just wanted to talk about it but they felt it was awkward because they were White and the client was Black. We brought this up in class and it led to a rich exchange of how to navigate political discussions with clients, particularly ones with people from different cultures. The students walked away from that class with a clear connection to the field, having talked about the narrow, clinical approach to counseling and the larger political idea of racially motivated violence. I continued to have these hard, uncomfortable political conversations with my students that they were asking me to avoid. I continued to call out racism and all other forms of prejudice when I saw it, refusing to accept "I'm conservative" as

a justification. I believe I pushed my students to become not just SLPs but engaged citizens.

If the field of CSD is to champion diversity, equity, and inclusion, we have to create the space to have these political discussions in our academic programs, so that students can practice the skills needed to engage in this discourse. What they do in school, they are more likely to continue in their practice. To this end, perhaps when events happen what we need from ASHA is not merely a statement but time and space to have

dialogue and share our perspectives with our colleagues—to practice communicating with one another even when we disagree and when it is hard, much like what I am asking my students to do in the multicultural course.

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