

TEACHING DIVERSITY AND COMMUNICATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY

by

Sam Hopkins
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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents Wat and Roselyn, my brothers Lincoln and Jonathan, my sisters Erin and Beth Ann, my nephew Isaac, and my niece Gabrielle. And of course, to Danielle.

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I would like to thank the many people who have made this happen. To my family, they have always given me love and support. To Peter, my director, who always understood what I needed to hear. To Drs. Broeckelman-Post and Gibson, my committee members who always helped me see what I missed. Finally, thanks go out to the George Mason University Forensics Team, without them I wouldn't be here.

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ABSTRACT

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Critical pedagogy and phenomenology as theoretical frameworks encourage the inclusion of experience in the classroom as a source of knowledge and as a means of deconstructing hegemonic systems of power. This study utilized these theoretical frameworks to determine how diverse student backgrounds alter the educational process both individually and collectively. George Mason University's COMM 101 course and Chapter 6 of the university textbook entitled "Adapting to Others: Diversity and Communication" were used as models for exploring these concepts. Interviews with instructors sought to qualitatively uncover themes in the classroom related to goals, course material, and student participation. Research was also conducted with student respondents, revealing that students tend to perceive lessons differently based on their racial/ethnic background.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When *Brown v. Board of Education* integrated schools across the United States, generations of institutional racism did not immediately end. The move to segregate schools was a progressive one, bringing the country closer than ever before to the justice and liberty professed by its founding documents and treating all public school students as equals. However, integration created new and unforeseen obstacles for black and white students alike. Explaining her experience in the homogenous learning environment fostered by segregation, bell hooks (1994) writes, “We learned that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization.” (p. 2). The homogenous environment of all-black classrooms provided a unique location for students and educators to engage in critical pedagogy by allowing the oppressed a place to collectively understand their place in society and tools for undoing this injustice (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). As Freire (1970) argues this unique opportunity for critical pedagogy prepares the student to understand the cultural roles of colonizer and colonized so as to better deconstruct these roles. This environment prepares students to fight white hegemony by using education to empower. Diversity changes this dynamic. hooks (1994) goes on to explain:

School changed utterly with racial integration. [...] Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. [...] Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. (p. 3)

Education for the diverse classroom has not changed to meet the needs of diverse students. Knowledge is seen as objective and transferrable, rather than subjective and exploratory (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). A great deal of pedagogical practice ignores the vastly different lived experiences diverse students bring to the classroom, thereby reinforcing hegemonic principles, teaching students to accept their roles within the social status quo (Rodriguez & Villaverde, 2000; Giroux, 2003). This utilizes lessons to construct a unified classroom identity that frequently shuns diversity in order to “downplay difference and particularity in favor of the rhetoric of a common (white) culture” (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 12).

This does not need to be the case. Harris (2003) argues, “In recent years, the classroom has been emerging as an appropriate and essential context for impacting how citizens critically think about race and race relations” (p. 311). In particular, the interpersonal communication classroom offers a unique space to explore issues of diversity as students learn about their lives and relationships, sharing experiences and making sense of how communication plays a role. The phenomenological tradition explores how experience shapes knowledge and identity, which can be further explored in the critical tradition and in critical pedagogy as scholars seek to uncover “taken-for-

granted systems, power structures [...] that dominate society” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 57). In doing so, the critical communication classroom can provide students with tools to undo these systems. However, just as hooks (1994), Giroux (2003), and Rodriguez and Villaverde (2000) argue, without scrutinizing this practice the risk of reinforcing hegemonic roles is constantly present. Thus, an understanding of phenomenology as related to critical pedagogy is necessary to address these issues. The application of these theoretical backgrounds to modern, diverse classrooms is crucial to understanding and undoing institutional marginalization in the classroom. This application must be conscious of the diverse experiences students bring to the classroom in terms of age, race, ethnicity, sex and/or sexual orientation as these experiences shape how students learn and how they interact with peers and instructors in the classroom. To this end, this thesis will examine how students and faculty teaching introductory interpersonal communication at George Mason University engaged with issues of diversity in the classroom. Chapter 2 will cover research and scholarship related to critical pedagogy and phenomenology. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used to study these concepts in the classroom. Chapter 4 will include a qualitative study of instructors, while Chapter 5 includes a quantitative student survey. Finally, Chapter 6 will provide a discussion of findings and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Diversity as it relates to pedagogy has long posed problems for educators and students alike. Cultural-interpretivist scholars operate under the assumption that experience is the guiding light of education and knowledge, eschewing the concept of objective learning (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This is a particularly important perspective when examining diversity in pedagogical processes. This process is further complicated when teaching lessons of diversity in a world dominated by straight white male hegemony with defined hierarchies based on multifaceted levels of privilege. Carter (2000) asserts, “Race, class, and gender issues disappear even more easily in instructional systems constructed by mostly white males, reflect the American/Western canon and [...] further limit diversity” (p. 29). Similarly, the third-wave standpoint feminist perspective argues that knowledge and logic are “gendered in nature,” (Olson, 2007, p. 509) despite falsely assuming a gender-neutral position in the classroom. Students enter the classroom with a variety of experiences based on diverse backgrounds of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, and class. These experiences color the way students engage with lessons. As Freire (1970) puts it, “The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were

shaped” (p.27). Focusing on the cultural, social, and hierarchical whole is essential to understanding critical pedagogy and its place in communication classrooms.

Hegemony

Rooted in Marxist definitions of dominance and control, hegemony is power. Originally conceived of as legitimate rule for the sake of social peace, the term “hegemony” has since expanded to include manipulative methods of inscribing values favorable only to the ruling class. Gramsci (1988/1920) explores this evolution of hegemonic control as demonstrated by a dominant intellectual class. Gramsci (1988/1920) argues that the ruling intellectual class uses their influence to further entrench their superior status. In doing so, the subjugated class is limited in their ability to invoke change. This “totalitarian system of ideals” (Gramsci, 1988/1920, p. 193) is the manifestation and reflection of intellectual dominance.

On a more nuanced level, the ruling class uses their privilege to influence the perception that their values, beliefs, and norms are preferable to any number of others. Gramsci argues that “many political acts are due to internal necessities of an organizational character, that is they are tied to the need to give coherence to a party, a group, a society.” (p. 191). Institutions tend towards hegemonic practices as they reflect the dominant norms within society: heteronormative, white-centric, patriarchal. The “totalitarian system of ideals” Gramsci speaks of is a cycle of dominance in which a culture collectively promotes expected norms that ostracize and stigmatize those outside of those norms.

Freire (1970) further unpacks the concept of hegemony and hierarchical control, arguing that when identity is defined in a system of oppressor and oppressed, it is dehumanizing for both groups. “The oppressed, as objects, as ‘things,’ have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (p. 42) and yet, “As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized” (p. 38). This process limits and ignores the inherent value in human experience, from which the phenomenological tradition derives knowledge and theory. It also creates an environment in which the oppressed passes on their disenfranchisement generationally and the privileged may ignore the systems of domination at work. “This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate” (Freire, 1970, p. 40). While Freire writes of violence as a means of oppression, these systems of hegemony are inscribed in social and personal life as well.

Peggy McIntosh (1987) explores how both white and male privilege permeate American culture, despite a significant decline in institutionalized racism and sexism (i.e. overt subjugation such as segregation). The foundation of the concept of privilege is couched in culturally normative assumptions as to how personhood is defined. Carter (2000) explains that exploring whiteness is “a critical form recognizing the nature of power and scrutinizing the various affiliations by which human beings define themselves” (p. 27). McIntosh explains that whiteness and maleness are rarely explored as related to personhood, whereas non-whiteness and femaleness are variations of the white male supremacy and thus central to identity. It is important to understand this

undercurrent of attitudes. It exemplifies the way in which hegemony exercises its power in subtle ways instead of simply overt actions of discrimination and subjugation, which is echoed in Giroux's (2011) critique of modern education as a way of "legitimizing a homogenizing cultural discourse that institutionalizes various policing techniques to safeguard the interests and power of dominant groups" (p. 60). This is hauntingly reminiscent of Gramsci's (1988/1920) initial indictment of institutional hegemony and Freire's (1970) concern of cultural reproduction.

Diversity and Pedagogy

Gramsci's hegemonic cycle, Freire's dehumanizing oppressor-oppressed binary, and McIntosh's white male privilege flourish in the educational system. "Design of instruction and curricula send out clear signals about what is to be learned, what behavior to emulate, and for whom instruction is meant" (Carter, 2000, p. 30). In naming what is to be learned, the educator is prescribed a superior role to students within the classroom. When teaching lessons of diversity, the educator risks teaching *from* a specific perspective *to* students of a similar perspective. While it is impossible for educators to eschew their own experiences when teaching, this type of unilateral teaching risks excluding other experiences. hooks (1994) argues that the banking system of education, in which the educator "deposits" knowledge in the students, emphasizes one "correct" interpretation of lessons. In creating the "correct" interpretation of the lesson rather than co-creating these interpretations with diverse perspectives in mind educators define what experiences are or are not valid (Carter, 2000; Freire, 1970). "Racism, sexism, and class

elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider vs. outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins” (hooks, 1994, p. 83). This type of teaching stresses the positivist assumption that knowledge can be objective and seeks to pass that objective knowledge from educator to student without regard to issues of diversity, culture, or context. Without critically examining these issues, Giroux (2011) argues this seeks to “‘save’ underprivileged kids by stripping them of their identities and histories and assimilating them into the dominant culture” (p. 59).

This kind of education occurs on far subtler levels. Just as McIntosh (1987) explored dominance in our culture through norms rather than literal exercises of power, educators are presumably not intentionally using exclusive teaching methods or presenting students with unbalanced narratives. Instead, this kind of unbalanced hegemonic teaching stems from the institutionalization of education in a classroom where students are expected to eschew that which makes them different. Freire (1970) argues, “The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination” (p. 40). “Equality” is too easily substituted by “sameness” with no room to discuss or appreciate diversity. Erving Goffman’s (1963) thoughts on stigma explain how a dominant culture oppresses the “other” culture through definitional means. In this context of social domination and control, “white individuals are socialized to be ignorant of their unearned societal advantages” (Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013, p. 27). These advantages permeate the classroom where lessons are shaped for white students. hooks (1994) argues:

Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this “authority” without their having to name the desire for it. (p. 81)

This is among the many risks that a diverse classroom presents: further entrenching institutional hierarchies. The question then becomes: What strategies can be used to make the classroom a liberating experience for students rather than a reminder of their place within a larger, deeply hegemonic system?

Marking whiteness is a potential classroom strategy to dismantle white privilege and hegemony in the classroom (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). Marking whiteness is the process by which white students engage with the broader cultural impact of their race. Yeung, Spanierman, and Landrum-Brown (2013) found that marking whiteness is most effective when including peer dialogue with non-white students in the classroom. However, this raises greater questions of diversity within the classroom. In addition to her argument that lessons of diversity (in this case, marking race) become lessons that are white-specific, hooks (1994) also argues that this form of minority involvement is a form of tokenism. hooks (1994) writes that “[...] systems of domination already at work in the academy and the classroom silence the voices of individuals from marginalized groups and give space only when on the basis of experience it is demanded.” (p. 81). Including experiences purely

for the sake of white students can itself be a hegemonic act, even though it seeks to disrupt white ignorance in a way that encourages those students to actively deconstruct hegemony. This “often has the effect of turning history upside down and inside out – exoticizing and romanticizing the past in celebration of otherness” (Carter, 2000, p. 27). It is also unclear if this process of marking is effective in other areas of majority identity, i.e. marking straightness or marking maleness.

To accommodate for the diverse and constantly changing educational environment, Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011) explore the pedagogical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). CRP encourages addressing the issue of tokenism in diverse experience by stressing *individual* definitions of culture, ethnicity, and race, and other areas of self-identification (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). By encouraging students to self-identify these concepts, educators encourage critical reflection of experience as it is personally and culturally defined. By blending these two constructs of identity, educators emphasize the importance of diverse perspectives to the learning process without appropriating and exploiting these experiences for the sake of majority students. As hooks (1994) explains, “[for marginalized groups] it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one’s identity as a part of a struggle to challenge domination” (p. 78). Affirming this process as an individual choice prevents it from being a subservient role: the valuable “other” perspective presented for the betterment of majority education. However, if this naming is within the confines of a hegemonic rubric, it is unclear if the marginalized ever exact control over identity or if this process is empowering. Freire (1970) argues that the oppressed identify empowerment by

observing the empowered: the oppressors. This encourages the oppressed to empower themselves through their ability to further oppress others.

Scholars have explored how educators extend hierarchies within the classroom as well as curricula that can aid in deconstructing these hierarchies (Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013; hooks, 1994; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). These concepts, while valuable, focus primarily on how students engage with lessons in the classroom and how these lessons are constructed. It is equally important to examine the role of the educator in this context. Gramsci (1988/1920) argued that the teacher must also embody the role of the student so as to avoid recreating power structures within the classroom. “The concept of the teacher as learner suggests that teachers must help students critically appropriate their own histories, but also look critically at their own role as public intellectuals located within specific cultural formations and relations of power” (Giroux, 2011, p. 58).

The Association for the Study of Higher Education releases an annual report that synthesizes common problems in higher education classrooms and solutions, including issues of diversity in the classroom (ASHE, 2011). Unlike many other issues in the classroom (engaging different learning styles, incorporating a variety of lessons, etc.) problems that arise in diverse classrooms stem from systems of inequality. There are no outright solutions to problems that are deeply entrenched in our culture. Attempting to solve these issues through color blindness trivializes generations of oppression and marginalization.

The rhetoric of color blindness enables Whites to erase from consciousness not only the history of racism and how that history plays itself out economically, politically, socially, and culturally in the present; such an insidious discourse also dissuades both the individual and institutions from engaging in antiracist strategies for dismantling white privilege and for reworking the terrain of whiteness. (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 9)

As such, ASHE proposes methods of managing these issues with the hope of creating an inclusive learning environment. These proposals ask that educators “model tolerance for ambiguity” (p. 87), “facilitate purposeful small groups” (p. 91), and “model the balance between suspending judgment and constructive criticism” (p. 94) among other suggestions.

These recommendations for educators operate under several potentially dangerous assumptions. First, these proposals assume that increased interaction between diverse students is enough to ease tension. It is unlikely that a gay student and a homophobic student will work well together in a “purposeful group,” even if the educator models “tolerance for ambiguity” because modeling tolerance does not actively propagate tolerance. It is impossible to tell to what degree students will adopt the tolerance modeled by the teacher without active steps to remove hegemonic systems of thinking and acting. Second, these proposals assume that diverse interactions will result in open exchange instead of acculturation (or enculturation). Borrowing from the previous example, it assumes that the gay student and the homophobic student will work together

to understand their differences. More often, stigmatized students acculturate, adopting new norms in an attempt to fit in the diverse classroom (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). Again from the prior example, acculturation suggests the gay student may not disclose his or her sexual orientation to reduce tension with the homophobic student. This type of interaction reinforces the dominant culture and reduces tension only in cosmetic ways by silencing marginalized voices.

Another major issue with the ASHE (2011) report is its reluctance to propose active methods of assuaging tension in the diverse classroom. The examples from the report above encourage educators to take passive attitudes towards diversity in the classroom, which Giroux (2011) argues de-emphasizes cultural differences and further subjugates minority students. “Modeling” attitudes may encourage students to accept more open-minded practices but it does nothing to actively include subjugated students and their experiences. ASHE (2011) explains, “need the instructor to act as a constructive role model” (p. 87) though does not further illuminate what action is required. In this way, ASHE (2011) treats critical pedagogy for the diverse class as a general mindset for instructors. Some active proposals are included in the ASHE (2011) report, which also asks educators “disrupt social relations in the classroom” (p. 89) when classroom discussions on subjects of diversity become open reflections of hegemonic domination, like a student denying anti-Semitism still exists and thereby refusing to legitimize those experiences. Here, the report acknowledges oversimplifying the diverse classroom. “The mere presence of diversity in the classroom does not guarantee constructive interaction or skill development—without proper conditions it can, in fact,

lead to the perpetuation of inequality and stereotype” (ASHE, 2011, p. 89). However, ASHE (2011) does not explain how instructors may intercede in discussion without suggesting to students that issues of diversity have no place in the classroom. This is diametrically opposed to critical pedagogy, which seeks to deconstruct hegemony through open discourse (Giroux, 2011; Gramsci, 1988/1920). Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011) also explore the educator’s role in the diverse classroom and exercising critical pedagogy. “In order for teachers to be culturally attuned to the identities of their students, they should be aware of their own identities, as well as how those identities may be divergent from the identities of their students” (p. 73). Again, this kind of self-awareness is not a tool for easing tension in a diverse classroom or bridging divides in experiential knowledge, but rather a prerequisite for teaching in a diverse classroom.

A great deal of research has been done on how students interact with lessons of diversity (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) or how educators should adapt to the diverse classroom (ASHE, 2011). Many of these studies focus on cultivating a classroom environment that is safe for diverse students without respect to their experiences. In doing so, this kind of classroom adjustment is *still* an extension of hegemonic definitions of legitimate and illegitimate experiences. Active praxis is crucial to creating critical, liberating pedagogy. “Every educator and cultural worker must consider the effects and impact of an unexamined whiteness upon themselves and in their work” (Carter, 2000, p. 37). Here, Carter (2000) is using “unexamined whiteness” as a way of explaining the link between passivity and hegemonic entrenchment. hooks (1994) further argues, “The experience of

professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all ‘safe’ in what appears to be a neutral setting” (p. 39). This of course harkens back to Gramsci’s (1988/1920) discussion of overt oppression and McIntosh’s (1987) discussion of white ignorance in assuming “normal” is another way of saying “straight, white, male.”

Diversity, Communication, and Phenomenology

Diversity has a similar history in communication scholarship. Standpoint theory argues that a multitude of variables affect how individuals interpret the social world. “[...] People actively interpret what happens around them and come to understand the world by personal experience with it” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 47). Similarly, communication accommodation theory seeks to explain how people with differing communication styles converge or diverge when communicating with each other. Both of these theories and countless others stress the importance diversity has in the communication landscape. This problematizes the way communication lessons play out in diverse classrooms. “Traditional instructional design and development models do not provide for contextual construction of meaning, the validity of multiple perspectives, or the examination of the inherent biases found in homogenous design teams” (Carter, 2000, p. 30). This suggests that lessons are constructed with specific goals for specific students in mind, regardless of what experiences those students bring to the classroom. Communication educators risk teaching diversity and communication from a specific perspective with a specific student in mind, thereby alienating students.

One of the staples of standpoint theory is the assumption that an individual's standpoint (and subsequent interpretation of the world) is based on that individual's experience and that interpretations of these experiences are as complex and layered as the individual's identity itself (Martinez, 2005). Edmund Husserl's work with the field of phenomenology provides a bridge between positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Husserl affirms that knowledge comes from experience, one can only know by living (Husserl, 1925/2011). Husserl imbeds this argument within the concept of objective experience, suggesting that experience can be objective but interpretation of what that experience means is an entirely subjective process (Giroux, 2011).

Adopting the phenomenological lens, Martinez (2006) argues that while experience is valuable to making sense of the world, when this process occurs in the classroom it often occurs within a Westernized frame that changes how the process may naturally occur for non-Western students. This educational frame values adjusting perspective to understand non-dominant communicative norms. However, this is the type of tokenism that further subjugates non-dominant cultures. Martinez (2008) goes on to argue that imagining the world from a different perspective can be a form of imperialism. Recognizing other cultures as independent of the dominant culture is necessary to avoid ethnocentrism, but the assumption that one can accommodate for diversity by imagining the world from a different perspective can oversimplify the complexity of a different lived experience. "One can shift perspectives all day long yet never step outside of the deeply habituated ways of seeing engendered by virtue of one's location in a specific cultural, historical and social context" (Martinez, 2008, p. 143). Students asked to adopt

other perspectives still cannot change their personal experiences and thereby adapt an over-simplified version of the other perspective.

It is also important to recognize, again, the educator's experience as a powerful influence on the classroom. Anderson and Giovanni (2009) explain that gay and lesbian educators were more likely to value critical pedagogy in regard to communication lessons covering sexual orientation compared to straight educators. However, Anderson and Giovanni (2009) also explore the "paradox of diversity" (p. 23) in which gay and lesbian educators were less likely to directly engage in lessons involving sexual orientation than their straight counterparts despite valuing that type of lesson more highly. This further complicates the process by highlighting the reluctance of an individual to publicly scrutinize their own identity, potentially for fear of tokenism.

The paradox of diversity is potentially dangerous, as the classroom can be one of the most valuable tools in breaking down hegemonic attitudes (Harris, 2003). Harris (2003) found that exchanging narratives within communication courses provided a "cognitive awakening" (p. 313) for students unaware of issues related to diversity. These narratives provide a way of exploring the duality of critical race pedagogy, which requires teaching current issues of race while trying to empower students. Garza (2000) contends:

Naturally, we can only meet the world with whatever knowledge of the world we have accumulated at any given point in time. However, I would hope that our knowledge of the world is a dynamic, active archive of information and stimuli that receives some of its charm from the

relationship we have with it, instead of thinking of knowledge as some kind of fixed stagnant thing. (p. 65).

Communication courses offer a unique place for empowering students by teaching them to reshape the very way they communicate *about* race. However, this issue of diversity is particularly complex in interpersonal communication classrooms. In seeking to educate students as to how communication takes place in relationships there is an underlying assumption that there *are* homogenous communicative norms. These shared norms may be inherently exclusive by defining normal and abnormal ways of communicating.

George Mason University requires all students to take either COMM 101 – Interpersonal and Group Interaction or COMM 100 – Public Speaking. For the Spring 2014 semester, 549 GMU students enrolled in COMM 101 across 21 different sections. The syllabus and textbook for all of these sections are the same. Specifically, Chapter 6 of the university textbook focuses on adapting to others in communication in diverse settings. Entitled, “Adapting to Others: Diversity and Communication,” Chapter 6 covers issues such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, cultural contexts, stereotyping, and tolerance in regard to communication (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2013). The textbook lists objectives at the beginning of the chapter, claiming that after reading the chapter (and working through the subjects in class) students should be able to:

1. Describe how differences of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age influence communication.
2. Define *culture*.

3. Describe, compare, and contrast high-context and low-context cultures.
4. Describe five cultural values.
5. Illustrate five barriers that inhibit communication between individuals.
6. Describe six strategies that will help bridge differences between people and help them to adapt to differences. (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2013, p. 137)

These goals raise considerable questions in relation to pedagogy, diversity, and experience. The sixth goal in particular is problematic, as it assumes *both* parties will adapt their communication to bridge differences. However, McIntosh (1987) argues that this kind of “adaptation” favors white men by a considerable margin. Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008) also found that students in diverse settings adapt to fit hegemonic norms. Standpoint theory and communication accommodation theory both acknowledge diversity and communication, but teaching students how to “adapt to differences” in an environment where the differences are defined by hegemonic hierarchies inherently values one form of communication over others. Again, the act of naming what is to be studied – in this case, diverse or different communication styles – reifies hegemonic definitions of communication. Indeed, the entire process may be a form of othering students with differing communication styles. As hooks (1994) writes:

the privileged act of naming often afford those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a

definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place (p. 62).

This is one of the potential threats of this kind of education: using the classroom as a way of further institutionalizing hegemony by defining what communication is favorable and what communication requires “adapting.” This also risks overgeneralizing the process by naming and categorizing communication habits based on non-communicative demographic information. There are clearly ways of teaching about diversity without reinforcing hegemony. By encouraging students to engage with their experiences and appreciating different experiences, educators can emphasize differences in communication without valuing certain communicative styles over others. Freire (1970) explains the need for this kind of open dialogue, “[...] To substitute monologue, slogans, and communiques for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication” (p. 47). Evaluating the process requires an understanding of the educators’ perspectives *and* the students’ perspectives.

RQ1: How do lessons of diversity and communication play out in interpersonal communication classrooms at George Mason University?

RQ2: Are lessons more or less accessible for students based on differences in age, race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation?

Answering these questions using the theoretical framework of both phenomenology and critical pedagogy requires several considerations. First, phenomenology suggests that we use experience as a means of understanding and interpreting the world. Second, critical pedagogy suggests that using the classroom as a space for understanding and unpacking

hegemonic roles is necessary to provide students in the diverse classroom with equal opportunities for learning. Combining these theoretical frameworks requires the examination of lessons as they affect educators and students with different personal experiences as a result of socially and culturally imbedded power structures.

The student experience (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Martinez, 2008) and the educator experience (ASHE, 2011; Anderson & Giovanni, 2009) have both been studied extensively. This research seeks to explore lessons of diversity from *both* the student and educator experiences within George Mason University's COMM 101 classrooms. Doing so will provide valuable insights into the process of teaching diversity by understanding how these experiences shape learning. Husserl's (1925/2011) phenomenological framework suggests that learning and knowledge comes from one's lived experiences and the subsequent interpretation of these experiences. Incorporating both experiences examines the educators' expectations for the classroom and the students' learning experience in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Two methods of research were employed. First, interviews with instructors sought to qualitatively assess their experiences in the classroom by allowing them to discuss their experiences in-depth. Second, an online survey was used to attain responses from as many students as possible to compare a broad number of responses. Together, these methods seek to uncover how Chapter 6 is taught and received in the classroom in line with RQ1. Critically examining how these two experiences relate provides a way of understanding the successes and failures of the lesson of diversity and communication as outlined in Chapter 6. It also allows an open discussion of which teaching methods excluded students and whether this exclusion was disproportionate for some types of students by comparing how experiences varied based on differences in age, race, ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation of the students in line with RQ2.

Data collection was conducted between January 2013 and April 2014. To begin my research, I contacted 20 COMM 101 instructors at GMU via email. I then met with five instructors interested in participating to conduct loosely guided interviews. The interviews were all between 30 and 45 minutes in length and took place in empty classrooms on GMU's Fairfax campus. These interviews touched on major themes of experience as framed by the phenomenological tradition, as well as diversity and

communication. During interviews, instructors were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences with teaching diversity and communication as well as their pedagogical approaches and values. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) argue that interviewing as a research method opens up new perspective. “Researchers learn gradually about participants and events, and modify the interview strategy as they proceed” (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000, p. 273). This type of immersion and adjustment was invaluable to this research, particularly when stressing the phenomenological concept of experience as knowledge. Questions included:

- What major themes do you want to get across in the classroom?
- How important is the chapter on diversity and communication?
- What obstacles in the classroom do you address when covering diversity and communication?
- Do you think the textbook and syllabus cover diversity and communication well?

These questions – among others – sought to explore the educators’ experiences and their perceptions of student experiences in the classroom. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix 1 on page 99. Exploring the educators’ perceptions of student experiences is crucial to further understanding how educators may or may not adapt pedagogical strategies to diverse classrooms. Five interviews were recorded and transcribed between January 22, 2014 and March 20, 2014. These interviews were then coded with numbers to protect the anonymity of the instructors, (Instructor 1, Instructor 2, etc.). Four of the five instructors were graduate students, either Doctoral or MA candidates in George Mason University’s Department of Communication with only one

or two years of teaching experience. One was a full-time faculty member who had taught COMM 101 for over five years, though did not have a course in the Spring 2014 semester. The faculty members were all between 24 and 32 years old and all of them were heterosexual. Three of the instructors were female and two were male. Three of the instructors were white/Caucasian and two of the instructors were Asian.

To conduct the interviews, I met with each instructor for an interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. After all interviews had been collected, I transcribed the interviews. During the transcription process I noted specific topics or issues that came up in multiple interviews. Finally, I reviewed the transcribed interviews looking for the noted themes, highlighting and coding relevant quotations in each interview.

To measure and explore student experiences a survey was developed. The survey consisted of 17 five-point Likert-scale questions as well as 11 open-ended questions. The Likert-scale questions sought to measure specific aspects of experience uniformly across all participants, i.e. “Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook handled issues of diversity and communication well.” The survey was accessed online at SurveyMonkey.com and disseminated to the students through the Department of Communication. Instructors were emailed the survey link and asked to forward the link to their classes. This was done to maximize the number of responses and ideally provide a diverse sample of student responses that would closely approximate a sample of George Mason University’s student body at large. The student survey covered issues identified by the educators as well as the students’ general opinions of diversity and communication and how it was covered in the course. The full survey can be found in Appendix 2 on

page 101. Demographic information relating to age, race, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation was also requested, though students were permitted to leave those questions unanswered. This was to compare differences in responses based on differing factors in line with RQ2. Survey responses ($N=265$) were collected between January 28, 2014 and April 15, 2014. The Likert-scale questions were examined for general trends based on different student demographics. Though a large number of students ($N=56$) did not answer the short answer section and a similar number ($N=182$) provided either one word or one sentence responses, the longer responses ($N=27$) were analyzed for any similar themes or patterns among respondents.

Methodological Limitations

This methodology is not without its limitations. The methodological limitations primarily fall into two categories in line with the bifurcated nature of data collection, with another category that addresses how these two bodies of data function together.

First, the instructors interviewed will presumably have some degree of participatory bias. The interviews were entirely on a volunteer basis and the recruitment email explicitly stated the goals of this research. It is possible that instructors who are eager to participate will be those who believe to have interesting or noteworthy experiences in teaching COMM 101 and Chapter 6. Additionally, the relationship instructors have to students present the potential for unintentional bias. Instructors who want their students to succeed may report students' experiences as more positive than they were in reality. Similarly, because instructors do not design their own syllabus and

do not choose their own textbooks, there is a chance that any problems in the classroom will be chalked up to the rigid uniformity of the course. Instructors may avoid scrutinizing their own role when lessons fail yet may take credit for lessons that succeed.

Second, the online survey designed for students presents several potential imitations. The survey opened in January, opening up the potential for students to take the survey before covering the chapter in class. Additionally, students were not required to answer every question, allowing them to answer some questions and skip others. This kind of selective disclosure inevitably suggests potential gaps in the survey responses as students choose what answers to disclose and what answers to withhold. Students may also feel pressured to provide positive answers. The survey was disseminated via email through the Department of Communication. Students were sent an email by their instructors with a link to the online survey and in some cases were given the opportunity to receive credit in class for their participation. The relationship between class credit and survey participation may link the two. Given the nature of the questions, students may have felt that the survey was some sort of performance review for their instructors. All students at GMU fill out course evaluation forms that function as a student review of the course material and instructor. Some students may have consciously or subconsciously made the connection between the two. If so, students with positive opinions of instructors may have responded positively and students with negative opinions of instructors may have responded negatively. This undermines the goal of the survey, which is to understand students' opinions of the course material in Chapter 6 isolated from their general opinion of their instructor.

Finally, this research seeks to compare students' and instructors' experiences so as to better understand the process and outcomes of teaching diversity and communication. The inherent problem with this kind of analysis is that there is no way of knowing if students or instructors interviewed have taken the survey. Thus, comparing the two is problematic in that it requires generalizing both instructors' and students' experiences for the sake of making salient analyses without drawing specific links between a student and instructor who were in the same class together.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results – Instructor Interviews

Guided instructor interviews involved extensive open ended questions.

Interviews began asking about demographic experience and then moved on to class goals, the teaching process, and lessons specific to Chapter 6. In the process of interviewing and transcribing all interviews, six general themes emerged in the interviews: 1) class goals, 2) stereotyping, 3) humor as a coping mechanism, 4) class discussion as disclosure, 5) divide between student experiences, and 6) timeliness of Chapter 6. These were noted and then examined across all interviews.

In discussing class goals, most instructors described creating an open and honest classroom environment that would allow students to examine issues of diversity and communication without preconceived notions. In doing so, the discussion of stereotyping frequently came up. Occasionally stereotyping came up in the form of anecdotal examples of intolerance, but more frequently it came up as a teaching method in which instructors ask students to critically examine how they employ stereotypes to generalize other people. Humor came up in one of two forms: either the instructor used humor to keep the class engaged and create teachable moments or students used humor to deflect uncomfortable lessons. In explaining class discussions, most instructors explained it as a form of self-disclosure, allowing students to share and understand each other's

experiences. This, however, sometimes revealed a widening divide between student experiences in which students were unable to make sense of different experiences. Finally, all instructors mentioned the timeliness of Chapter 6 as related to the rest of the course material. Most instructors expressed a desire to cover Chapter 6 earlier and more deeply.

Class Goals

All interviews began with questions on the overarching goals of the COMM 101 course, and specific follow-up questions on Chapter 6 of the textbook, “Adapting to Others: Diversity and Communication.”

For the course at large, most instructors articulated a desire to get students thinking and understanding the theoretical background of interpersonal communication while also providing real-life contexts for this knowledge. As Instructor 5 noted:

[I want them to leave with] better communication skills so that they can better cope with their relational aspects of their life and principles of group communication so as to better format, organize, and cope with any sort of conflict or problems that arise.

This sentiment was directly or indirectly stated by other instructors. Instructor 2 explained, “My goals are really similar to the goals for the course.” Instructor 4 stressed the importance of inclusion in the classroom, “The first goal for me within the classroom, I want [international students] to be comfortable and open to talk with each other. Besides the theories this is my primary goal.” In Instructor 4’s experience, the

classroom's inherent diversity makes "adapting to others" – to borrow the textbook's phrase – a primary consideration in all classroom discourse. This feeling is echoed by Instructor 2, "In my class that I'm teaching right now there are probably students from 10 or more cultures or even countries. I think it's a very diverse group and intercultural environment."

When instructors were asked about goals when teaching Chapter 6, the tone of most interviews shifted from specific theories to general prerequisites for students' attitudes. Instructor 1 remarked:

I would say honesty is actually my number one thing. Initially when I started teaching COMM 101 I felt obligated to just kind of go straight by the book. These are the themes. They totally break down diversity into, you know, sex and gender, and different race ethnicity and all that but honesty is the biggest thing.

In framing the goals of the book ("straight by the book") as separate from honesty, Instructor 1 intentionally or unintentionally suggests that the textbook encourages dishonest class discussion. Instructor 1 clarified, "Yes, in a perfect world you want to say everything that's politically correct. You want to say things that don't make you seem like a bad person. So I say we're just throwing judgment aside. Let's be honest about this." This speaks to a more general discomfort students may feel in the diverse classroom. The issue of "political correctness" and "judgment" implies students enter the classroom with specific expectations as to how these discussions will play out. In Instructor 1's experience, these preconceived notions make students defensive and

unwilling to be honest in discussions, using “honest” to mean a response that is not calculated but rather impulsive. Instructor 1 viewed these kinds of responses as closer to true responses than those that were filtered and thought out.

There was also the general feeling among instructors that Chapter 6 is different from other chapters in the approach they ask students to take. Instructor 2 said, “People need to have consideration for ethics.” Similarly, Instructor 3 said, “Awareness I think is probably the biggest one. Being aware of other people, their backgrounds, how their backgrounds influence their thoughts, ideas, their communication practices.” Many instructors argued that awareness of diversity is the first step to understanding and cultural exchange. Instructor 4 delineated between the diversity chapter and other chapters that cover theoretical groundings of diversity, “I think diversity is not a theory, it’s just an attitude. It’s just like you’re open to minds that are different from you. That’s what I want them to better understand.” Instructor 4 also indicated the need to approach diversity from a value-neutral perspective, “There’s no good or bad or better, there’s no comparison between different groups just differences. Whether they’re open to this topic is the most important part.”

Openness was frequently used by instructors to describe the classroom as a whole and the students’ willingness to discuss diversity and communication within the classroom. This closely reflects critical pedagogy’s demand for loose collective classroom identities that allow a broad range of perspectives to be discussed and validated (Harris, 2003; Rodriguez & Villaverde, 2000; Giroux, 2003). Most instructors asked students to engage in large open-ended discussions without valuing particular

perspectives over others. Sharing individual experiences allows students to figure out how their experiences fit into course material, providing a realistic context for them to apply knowledge and make sense of it.

In general, instructors suggested a difference between Chapter 6 and the rest of the course material. These differences included the prerequisite of open-mindedness and expectations of class discussion that required dishonesty, or at least discussion couched in dishonest “political correctness.” Open and frank discussion on the topic of stereotyping was used by most instructors to avoid these issues.

Stereotyping

Almost all instructors voiced a concern over stereotyping and its place in the classroom. Instructor 1 suggested that students feared being judged by classmates for stereotyping and lacking open-mindedness. Instructor 1 believed this kind of thinking led to dishonest discussions as students hid their true feelings behind masks of political correctness. The main concern was self-censorship on the part of majority students. In some sense, this kind of fear is appropriate for both students and instructors. Using the term “whiteness” as a synonym for “hegemony” in the classroom, Garza (2000) argues, “The problem with these dichotomies, and probably where whiteness tends to nestle, is in the judgment of the ‘different’ entity: the other” (p. 65). This suggests that students are subconsciously or consciously aware of how they are perceived in the eyes of others and

may adjust their communication accordingly. Self-censorship in the classroom then becomes a form of face-management (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

In order to break down these fears and make students more comfortable with discussing diversity, instructors used exercises that highlighted all students' preconceived notions that lead to stereotyping. Instructor 5 openly asked students to stereotype each other:

I break the men up into one group and the women up into one group. This is when we're getting to stereotypes and such. I say, "I want you to write down a list of stereotypes or stereotypical messages that you have about the opposite sex or that you've heard about the opposite sex." I couch it that way because some people have a little bit less sensitive approach to certain things. Sometimes students have language that's not necessarily so nice. When we get to the application part I'm like, "how does that make you feel?" Sometimes it's like, "it makes me feel devalued or degraded and I don't like that and I don't agree with that." As well you shouldn't. [...] I tell them that one thing you have to understand about stereotypes is that we all carry them. We all have assumptions about other people because we don't have a complete picture of anything. We fill in with assumptions.

This kind of class activity is designed to accomplish two goals: 1) help students understand that stereotypes come from assumptions we make about people based on incomplete data, and 2) help students verbalize their own assumptions. However, this

kind of exercise is potentially troublesome for a few reasons. First, it is not an exploration of *potential* stereotypes but actually a platform for students to stereotype each other. It is not men being presented with potential female stereotypes to analyze or scrutinize, but rather men verbalizing these stereotypes, which may reify them. Second, some students enter with different concepts of gender and sex, and these values are at risk. If classes are as diverse as Instructor 2's class, with at least 10 different countries represented, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine how intercultural views on sex and gender may influence these discussions. Ultimately, laying bare these assumptions in the classroom may "define others before offering others the opportunity to define themselves" (Garza, 2000, p. 60). Despite these risks, this kind of exercise is not uncommon.

Instructor 1 also asked students to stereotype, though in a more subversive way.

Instructor 1 said:

There's a part in the book that says "can stereotyping others ever be a good idea?" I have them read that blurb. The scenario that's provided in the book is talking about, you know, it's a dangerous situation, it's late at night, and they're basically saying "would you trust somebody walking by your car?" So I have them read that and I have them write a paragraph, you know, yes or no. Can stereotyping be a good idea? Surprisingly the majority of them say "Yes, based on a dangerous situation." So they make it contextual.

The exercise in the textbook includes a few more contextual clues. In addition to being “late at night,” the textbook also mentions having a flat tire and being in a neighborhood “that’s known to have a high crime rate” (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2013, p. 155). However, the most telling clue when analyzing this exercise is in Instructor 1’s summary of the activity: “So they make it contextual.” In this exercise students are asked to imagine the kind of person who lives in a neighborhood “that’s known to have a high crime rate” and then justify their assumptions about that person through their fear of the high crime rate. This provides a context where stereotyping is acceptable. Instructor 1 used this as a teachable moment:

I kind of want them to strip down that, “In this situation I would – categorically speaking – I am stereotyping. However, was that my natural instinct?” Okay then that’s okay, number one, then number two: how can you break that down and change that thought process?

This kind of self-examination may be helpful to some but it may be harmful for others. Students in the class coming from neighborhoods with high crime rates are not only told their classmates fear them but also that this fear is justified. The textbook also assumes a role for students, one that assumes they are from a neighborhood that does not have a high crime rate. Garza (2000) explains this experience as a Latina in a predominantly white classroom, “These people made certain assumptions about me the moment they saw me. They created images of me based on their knowledge of the world, which knowledge did not expand to allow *me* to influence a perception *of me*” (p. 64-65). This kind of phenomenological sense-making reduces people to roles in the classroom, rather

than fully formed human beings. These interactions must be framed in a way that allows all students to make sense of their own experiences without the dominant group in the classroom defining them through class discussion.

The other instructors also had experiences with stereotyping though they did not provide specific examples of discussions or classroom activities that tackled the subject. Instructor 4 specifically mentioned economic status and how values play into stereotypes, as students tend to value wealth. Instructor 3 mentioned:

We as human beings tend to stereotype against other people who are different. We also have a fear of other people who are different.

Sometimes people just make fun of other things and make jokes and I told them today, “It’s not always important to be funny compared to being sensitive toward others.”

Interestingly enough, the use of humor by both instructors and students in the classroom is pervasive. Instructor 1 argued the use of humor is an easy way for students to access lessons, “Usually there’s a lot of relating but it’s almost in comedic situations.”

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

An unexpected yet unanimous phenomenon in the classroom was the use of humor. Instructors indicated that students used humor as a coping mechanism, as a way of deflecting some of the uncomfortable realities they may face when learning about diversity and communication. Instructor 3 actually used a humorous disclaimer to warn the class of potentially sensitive topics, “I kind of do like a... they think of the warnings

on TV or movies like, ‘This contains graphic content’ or whatever that we may be discussing sensitive material.” Humorously applying the television disclaimer asks students to take the discussion seriously while not draining the room of positive energy.

This method of humor within the classroom is used more extensively by Instructor 1 to accomplish the goals of educating and keeping the attention of the class:

It’s easier to make people feel comfortable when you get them to laugh and it’s like “ha ha ha, okay.” They relax a little bit and I pull them in.

I’m going to be honest, a lot of my lectures it’s like me incorporating standup comedy into the material. Part of that is to make it fresh and funny and I want them to be listening.

The question then quickly becomes, what kind of humor is being used in the classroom and whether or not the comedic frame holds the students’ attention while preventing them from taking the material seriously. This problem is directly addressed by Instructor 1, who referenced the intersection of stereotypes and humor:

Now a student will come out and say “Yeah, I’ve stereotyped this” it’s either two options. The first one is that they’re just being offensive and they don’t necessarily realize it, they just say as if like, “I’m volunteering” they kind of get the glory the attention is on them. The second reason is just for comedic relief. Somebody will say something like a joke.

It is important that students are actively engaged in the lessons but it is difficult to draw the line between humor as engagement and humor as deflection. This is further complicated when students use humor for the sake of entertaining classmates rather than

as a method of understanding diversity. This allows students to ignore portions of the lesson and to reify potentially problematic understandings of diversity. Instructor 5 shared a story that points to this kind of deflection:

Every so often I will have a [cultural] presentation that is not necessarily culturally sensitive. One group had picked Italy. For the majority of the presentation they were doing it as members of the Jersey Shore, [a reality television show that follows Italian-Americans in New Jersey]. I basically had to grade them down and tell them, a) this is not really Italian culture, and b) the material is not sensitive to Italian culture. I basically told them through the feedback form that it was not necessarily appropriate for the classroom.

Ideally the feedback and lower grade will spark consternation on the students' part, though it is difficult to fully understand how critically these students approach diversity, particularly when there is a gaping divide in how students engage in lessons of diversity, and in COMM 101 in general.

Class Discussion as Disclosure

All instructors used some combination of lectures and class activities to teach the course. Instructor 5 suggested there was a 60% to 40% split between lecture time and class discussion/activity time, further arguing that this is to include students of all learning styles. Other instructors also explained the need for this kind of class structure. Instructor 4 explained that this balance is beneficial, "Personally [in my own classes] I

learn more from the lectures, from the professors. [...] I seldom get critiques from [my students] that I should do more classroom activities.” Instructor 1 asserted the classroom-driven discussion allowed students to ease themselves into certain topics, “In terms of activities I open it up for a big discussion and I let the class dictate. I facilitate the discussion but I let the class go as deep as they want to go with this.” Similarly Instructor 2 summarized, “They learn most from discussion, especially when they have a daily question or a controversial question they will have a very good discussion and debate sometimes.” With this kind of self-regulating discussion comes the unique opportunity for self-disclosure in the classroom. Instructor 3 intentionally avoided direct participation, instead encouraging students to teach one another:

I try to do as little lecturing as possible. I try to do a much more Socratic... We sit in a circle and I try to talk as little as possible. I try to get them to say something. When a student asks a question about something and someone else chimes in it's like, “Okay, what does that mean?” I try to get them to explain and unpack their thoughts among themselves as much as possible.

Instructor 1's classroom also followed this pattern of classroom discussion, “That's kind of the beauty of the discussion because it's kind of vulnerable. I know that something could be said that I have no control over it but... I look at that as better than the alternative.” This vulnerability may create a safe space where students are willing to think in ways they had not previously.

This kind of personal involvement with the lesson is perhaps inevitable.

Instructor 1 thought as much:

COMM 101 is really LIFE 101. [...] You can't really have a life that's any richer or better without better communication skills. You really need good communication skills to resolve conflicts at work, in order to understand yourself better, in order to have better relationships with your friends and family.

This highlights the intimate nature of COMM 101 in general, as students are asked not only to scrutinize how they communicate but with whom they communicate and what they choose to communicate. Instructor 1 agreed with the ubiquity of COMM 101's subject matter, "The subject is so relatable. Everybody communicates and everyone has relationships. Communication is inevitable and starting as simple as verbal vs. nonverbal even when you're not talking out loud what are you still communicating?" In many ways, COMM 101 demands that students are willing to be open and honest about their relationships and their lives.

Coincidentally, the very theories students study in the class like Uncertainty Reduction Theory argue that this self-disclosure inevitably leads to feelings of closeness in the classroom. Instructor 3 explained the shift from strict theoretical conversations to more personal disclosure, "We have the basic knowledge of the different systems of communication and the different parts that that entails. And we get more into personality and backgrounds." Instructor 1 also saw the class transform as the semester wore on:

In a lot of activities you stand at your desk and you're talking about x prompt. So at the beginning of the semester they're communication apprehensive and they're rushing through it. By the end of the semester it's like, "Wow" and this has been one of the best experiences for me. I've had students who were so shy who barely said a word the first month of class and they're hilarious. They're just saying these things and the classroom just lights up. Everyone's laughing and smiling.

The process of learning about and understanding classmates also allows students to connect classroom material to their lives. However, these experiences vary wildly from student to student. Instructor 5 put it best in saying, "Every one of us comes into the class with our own personal history. That's for both professors and students." Garza (2000) explores how these differing personal histories are reflected differently between white (hegemonic) classmates and herself, "My self-identification owes much of its definition to how these 'white' others view me [...] The beginning of self-identification comes from the other's position as an 'other'" (p. 66). This suggests that even when students are engaging in open self-disclosure, many students of color bring a very different construction of self to the classroom compared to the white majority. These differing personal histories can be an opportunity to share and exchange cultures, though it just as often becomes a divisive and irreconcilable issue for students. This frames a key issue for non-majority students in the classroom, the question of whether or not they will speak up and whether or not they will be heard and understood on their own terms or in terms that the straight white patriarchy deems acceptable.

Divide Between Student Experiences

Just as the personal nature of interpersonal communication affects the ability of students to understand and grasp concepts as they apply them to their own lives, differences in students' cultural backgrounds change how this process plays out. Instructor 2 openly acknowledged this difference, "Some people are more participative. And culture. Like my culture is the Asian culture. Students don't really participate in discussion. It's very different." This was also mentioned by Instructor 4, "My background is Asian. In Asian countries they [professors] don't do a lot of classroom activities. Most of the time they're lecturing on things." It is unclear to what extent this diversity limits lessons or changes how international students engage in lessons. Instructor 4 further explained, "Some international students are still very open, they are still enjoying American style of everything. They are living like Americans. Those students realize their identity in a different way." Again, delineating international experiences from the "American style of everything calls into question how international students apply and process lessons. In some cases, at least, the newly adapted American experience created problems for international students. Instructor 3 recalled hearing about the difficulty of this process:

I had a number of students who were first generation born Americans that their parents came over that a lot of them talked about the struggles that their parents went through and then the struggles that they would go through in their homes because they wanted more of that teenage young

American lifestyle and their parents wanted them to have the traditional cultural thing.

Some international students must negotiate differences in old and new cultural norms, though it is unclear if this is a problem spurred by covering diversity and communication or if it is just a general problem that international students face.

There is a general feeling among instructors that lessons of diversity are complicated in the diverse classroom. Instructor 5 explained the difficulty of white male students to grasp critical concepts like hegemony and privilege:

Every so often we have students with a more ethnocentric attitude. [...] Sometime we have students that are white males that are saying they are members of a marginalized group. Sometimes it's hard for them to understand the idea that... not really.

This phenomenon can be predicted in any circumstance where an individual's privilege is openly acknowledged. As Freire (1970) explains, "Conditioned by the experience of oppressing others, any situation other than their former seems to them like oppression" (p. 39). This can create a hostile classroom environment. Instructor 4 elaborated:

One of my students mentioned to me that she does not want to be in a group with American students or do group projects together because she thought they were horrible group members. They were talking all the time and she does not feel comfortable with that. [...] American group members were so dominating in conversation that they didn't want to work together with them.

This certainly appears to be a form of privilege, with American students speaking openly and whenever they see fit without regard to their group members. This is precisely what hooks (1994) suggested was the “authority of experience” (p. 81) brought to the classroom by white male students. Carter (2000) similarly warned against this kind of classroom environment that tends to assume American and western concepts at the forefront of any and all classroom interpretations. Instructor 5 also reported that students occasionally feel alienated by classmates, “There’s not a lot of confrontation about it but I can just tell sometimes that they might not necessarily talk to that person as much or sit on the other side of the room or something.” Alienation due to diversity and differing experience is precisely what instructors seek to avoid in creating an “open” classroom. Despite this, openness in class discussion apparently allows privileged students in the class to reify their status.

The divide between international and American students comes up consistently. Sometimes it is due to an inability for American and international students to understand differences in culture. Sometimes it occurs when American students presume they have the privilege to speak out on any and all issues without respect to classmates. This kind of American privilege was present in several classes. Instructor 1 confided, “I think there’s a sense of entitlement with the American student that it’s easier for them to criticize others. I don’t know how to justify it but I just... I feel like it’s there.” This was in the middle of Instructor 1 explaining a general feeling that white American students had an easier time engaging with lessons of diversity. This is a major problem given the intensely diverse nature of most classrooms in question.

Instructor 5 had a contradictory experience in which white American students assumed lessons of diversity were strictly for other classmates. Instructor 5 explained:

Do I feel like students are sometimes alienated by it? Sometimes. A lot of times students approach culture from the idea of race or ethnicity.

Sometimes I don't have the student that's ethnocentric like, "I'm white, I'm right" sometimes it's like, "I'm white, I'm boring. I don't have anything to discuss in the culture chapter."

This affirms the concept of whiteness as an invisible normal in American cultural exchanges. Understanding diversity as something relegated to non-white students allows them to avoid lessons of diversity by equating diverse with different.

There was at least one example of a classroom confronting and debunking privilege. Instructor 3 used Peggy McIntosh's work on white privilege as an introduction to Chapter 6. Instructor 3 explained:

I did a version of Peggy McIntosh's white backpack. I did that last semester to start off the diversity chapter because I had a very very diverse class for my 101 section last semester, very very diverse. Where the white straight male student was the minority for that class, maybe three or four. A lot of the topics for that chapter we had talked about before and I was like, this'll be interesting. This'll be sort of an icebreaker and it didn't work at all. [...] The exercise didn't work the way I wanted it to but it was really interesting that their approach was that this doesn't work, we can't think about things like this. How it worked in the class where the

straight white male was such the minority they were like, “This doesn’t function in this section of society.”

This raises fascinating questions of how privilege actually functions in classrooms if a class collectively rejects it. It is worth noting that it was a Hispanic man that began the discussion of rejecting white privilege, not one of the few straight white men. Despite this exercise, Instructor 3 believed lessons of diversity were designed for straight white men:

You don’t see the privileges you have when you have them. [...] You don’t know what you don’t know, kind of thing. They may be unaware of where other people are coming from based... I mean, we have this sort of like heteronormative approach to society where if you come from something else then that perspective isn’t wrong it’s just “different.”

Students in the some classrooms struggled to understand differing cultures, sometimes to such an extent that intercultural partnerships were impossible to forge. In other classrooms students flipped concepts of majority/minority status and celebrated their own diversity by eschewing notions of white privilege. This also highlights one potential problem in the research process. RQ2 seeks to explore different experiences for students in regard to age, race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation. The interviews as well as the student surveys were designed to explore these specific variables, while the question of nationality was ignored. The guided nature of instructor interviews allowed this gap to be filled, but the student surveys were already in the field at the time of this discovery.

Timeliness of Chapter 6

Instructors shared a ubiquitous concern with Chapter 6 coming late in the semester. It is typically the last chapter covered as dictated by GMU's COMM 101 syllabus. However, the diverse nature of many classrooms forced many classes to "get there before we get there," as Instructor 3 put it. Instructor 3 went on to add:

It comes up a little bit before that [chapter] [...] almost to the point that when we get to the diversity chapter that I wish the diversity chapter was heavier. [...] To a lot of the students who are minorities and come from different cultural backgrounds, they talk about the stuff to the point where we get to the diversity chapter and it's like, "duh."

This sentiment was felt by all instructors, most of which also suggested that the diversity chapter not be altered in content but simply moved up to an earlier point in the semester.

Instructor 4 explained:

Diversity is at the end of the semester but the notion came... It covers at least a third of the chapters. Each time I get this topic I give a short talk about it. Each time I discussed it. At the end I just used this as a framework to summarize what was more organized in other chapters. But I do hope this chapter appears earlier in the semester.

Diversity and communication is something that runs as a continual theme throughout all chapters of the textbook rather than a subject that can be neatly relegated to a single chapter tacked on to the end of the course. When asked about potential changes to Chapter 6, Instructor 5 explained, "I think the group chapters and some of the content is a

little bit repetitive.” In a different vein, Instructor 1 explained, “It’s competent but I don’t think it’s exhaustive enough. Not that it would need to be exhaustive. I think the standard for what students are learning or need to know for the exam is at a minimum.” Similarly, Instructor 2 found the material to be a foundation for understanding and nothing more, “I just feel like right now [Chapter 6] seems superficial. It seems like you can’t really allow them to have a deeper understanding.” This bare minimum is presumably to achieve the highest level of general proficiency in the largest number of students as possible. As Instructor 5 argued, “I try to remind myself that this may be the only communication class that some of these students take.”

The timeliness in terms of where the chapter falls in the semester was not originally a primary goal of the research, but the overwhelming response of instructors suggests that it is worth further investigation. In some cases, discussing diversity at the end of the semester means students are more comfortable with one another and therefore more willing to engage in discussions that are inclusive to myriad perspectives. Instructor 1 emphasized this point while also acknowledging that the high level of diversity in the classroom forced the class to engage in discussions on diversity long before reaching the chapter. Instructor 3 was adamant on this point, explaining repeatedly that the chapter on diversity is in some ways novel, as the class is constantly negotiating diversity within the classroom from the very beginning of the semester. Instructor 1 also emphasized that putting the chapter at the end of the semester condensed diversity to one week in the classroom, and argued that an expanded section on diversity would be better. Instructors 2 and 5 echoed this belief, suggesting that the chapter as it is

cannot possibly cover diversity in enough depth and breadth as is necessary. These instructors also acknowledged that the amount of material automatically means some subjects simply cannot be fully fleshed out for students over a single course.

CHAPTER FIVE

Results – Student Survey

The previous chapter sought to qualitatively understand the classroom experience from the instructor's perspective. The student survey, in order to reach as many students as possible and organize them in identifiable ways, was a quantitative study used to explore issues of experience in the classroom as related to diversity and communication.

Online survey responses ($N=265$) were gathered between January 28, 2014 and April 15, 2014. All survey responses were from students enrolled in COMM 101 for the Spring 2014 semester. In Spring 2014, 549 GMU students were enrolled in COMM 101, meaning our survey was taken by 48.27% of all students enrolled. Of the 265 responses, 148 students elected to answer every question while 117 left some questions unanswered. Despite this, the overall response rate for every question remained high. The 17 Likert-scale questions all received between $N=237$ and $N=240$ responses. The 11 open-ended questions all received between $N=199$ and $N=252$ responses. Given that all GMU undergraduate students are required to take either COMM 101 or COMM 100, ideally our pool of survey respondents will be demographically similar to the university at large.

For the most part, the survey sample ($N=265$) was similar to the general student population of GMU. However there were two major discrepancies between the survey sample and demographic representation in the entire GMU student body. The sample

included a higher percentage of females than present in the population and a lower percentage of males. There were also far fewer Hispanic/Latino/Latina students in the sample than proportional to their representation in the entire student body.

Demographic Information

The student survey asked open-ended demographic questions on their age, race, ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation. Race and ethnicity are collapsed into one category and is tracked by GMU's Office of Student Enrollment and reported on the GMU Visitor's Center website (<http://www.gmu.edu/resources/visitors/>). The website's demographic information is representative of students enrolled in the Fall 2013 semester. Sex is tracked by Forbes.com though their figures are from the Spring 2013 semester. Age and sexual orientation demographic information are not currently tracked by any reputable sources.

Age. 252 survey respondents elected to provide their age. The majority of survey respondents appeared to be traditional college-aged students. 64.68% ($N=163$) were between 17 and 19 years of age while 30.95% ($N=78$) were between 20 and 24 years of age. The remaining 4.37% ($N=11$) survey respondents were between 25 and 47 years of age. This may be due to COMM 101's status as a general education requirement. All students must take COMM 101 or COMM 100, so many first-year undergraduate students take it before declaring majors and moving on to 200 and 300 level courses.

While there is a section of Chapter 6 concerning age diversity and communication, it seems there is very little diversity in age among survey respondents.

Race. 228 survey respondents chose to provide their race. The 13.96% ($N=27$) of missing responses is proportionally greater than the 8.21% of students for which the university has no race or ethnicity information. 45.28% ($N=120$) of survey respondents were white/Caucasian. This is just slightly off the university-wide white/Caucasian student population which makes up 49.35% of all students. 20.00% ($N=53$) of survey respondents were Asian/Pacific Islander compared to 14.29% of GMU students as a whole. 9.81% ($N=26$) of survey respondents were black/African American compared to 9.01% of all students. 4.53% ($N=12$) of survey respondents were Hispanic/Latino/Latina compared to 9.63% of the all students. 3.02% (8) of survey respondents answered with two or more races, which is almost exactly proportionate to the 3.52% of all students who report two or more races. Additionally, 1.89% ($N=5$) of survey respondents answered “Middle Eastern” though the university does not separate this racial or ethnic group, presumably including them in the Asian/Pacific islander demographic.

Of these groups, most are close approximations of their proportional representation in the total number of students. There were slightly more Asian/Pacific Islander survey respondents than proportional in the total student population, which is exacerbated by the university including “Middle Eastern” students among Asian/Pacific Islander students. The major outlier among this group is the Hispanic/Latino/Latina students, which make up only 4.53% of survey respondents despite making up 9.63% of

all students. It is unclear as to what may cause this kind of data skew. It is worth mentioning, that $N=17$ students answered the question about ethnicity with Hispanic/Latino/Latina. This is most likely due to the conflation of race and ethnicity. The United States Census recognizes Hispanic/Latino/Latino Americans as either white or Native American. Thus, students may report their race as white or Native American while also reporting their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino/Latina.

Ethnicity. This proved to be far and away the most complicated demographic question. $N=202$ of $N=265$ survey respondents provided their ethnicity, making this the least-answered demographic question by $N=22$ responses. As mentioned previously, the university collapses race and ethnicity into one category, making an accurate comparison to ethnic makeup impossible. For the sake of ease, Western European ethnicities were all combined with survey respondents that listed white/Caucasian/American as their ethnicity. Of the $N=202$ responses there were only four ethnic groups with ten or more survey respondents. 29.42% ($N=78$) were white/Caucasian/American or Western European. 6.42% ($N=17$) were Hispanic/Latino/Latina. 4.15% ($N=11$) were African American and 4.15% ($N=11$) were Vietnamese. 3.40% ($N=9$) were Asian.

Even after collapsing white/Caucasian/American and Western European into one ethnicity there were $N=40$ unique responses. Of these, $N=19$ were only given by one survey respondent. The sheer plurality of responses to ethnicity serve as an example as to why open-ended questions function best in terms of allowing respondents to provide their ethnicity as a personally conceived identity. Similarly, it makes the variable of ethnicity

extremely difficult to cross apply to other variables and their responses to Likert-scale questions.

Sex. One of the most surprising results from the survey was the disparity in sex representation among respondents. $N=252$ of $N=265$ survey respondents provided their sex. Of these, 62.64% ($N=166$) were female and 32.45% ($N=86$) were male. The university as a whole is 52% female and 48% male. It is unclear what could have created such a disparity. All university undergraduates are required to take either COMM 101 or COMM 100. One possibility is that more women opt to enroll in COMM 101 and more men enroll in COMM 100. COMM 101 focuses on interpersonal communication, relational values, and group interaction, which may be areas of study socially delegated to women by patriarchal values. COMM 100 focuses on public speaking, which may draw more men to the classroom. hooks (1994) argued that white men felt privileged to literally speak out more frequently, “Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing” (p. 81). If this kind of division in sexes is occurring consciously or subconsciously, it calls into question how the two courses fulfill the same requirement for the university. While the survey responses are not enough data to discern some divide in the sexes, it is impossible to overlook this kind of discrepancy in the data when compared to the wider demographics of the university.

Sexual Orientation. Similar to age, there is no credible source or organization that keeps track of the number of straight, bisexual, gay, and lesbian students at GMU. Many LGBT organizations on campus encourage straight students to join as allies. Even a guess using the number of students involved in these groups is hazardous at best and ignorant at worst.

$N=224$ of $N=265$ survey respondents provided their sexual orientation. 78.49% ($N=208$) were straight. 3.77% ($N=10$) were gay or lesbian. 2.26% ($N=6$) were bisexual. Only one gay male took the survey compared to nine lesbians. Similarly, only one of the bisexual respondents was male compared to five bisexual females. This could be an extension of the sex disparity discussed above. If so, it is even more striking here.

Likert-scale Questions

The 17 Likert-scale questions fell into three categories: 1) personal experience in the classroom/in diversity and communication, 2) classroom goals/Chapter 6 of the textbook, and 3) the learning process. The complete set of survey questions can be found in Appendix 2 on page 101. The vast majority of students responded positively to the Likert-scale questions. Respondents tended to believe that their experiences were valuable to the classroom and that diversity in communication is important in and out of the classroom. Respondents also seemed to believe that classroom goals were clearly outlined and met, though with less consistency. However, a large number of students responded “Unsure/Don’t Know” for questions on the learning process. This made it difficult to discern opinions or cross-apply demographic variables to the third group of

questions. Answering RQ2 requires a breakdown of different demographic groups and how they responded to questions in each of the three categories. This will yield a better understanding of how age, race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation change students' perceptions of the classroom.

It is important to note that no significance testing was done involving this data. As such, the observable differences between groups described below are speculative and merely provisional without further testing.

Personal Experience. Of $N=240$ respondents who answered "My experience is valuable to a successful classroom environment" 72.92% responded "Agree" ($N=126$) or "Strongly Agree" ($N=49$). Similarly, of 240 respondents who answered "Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication" 34.17% ($N=82$) responded "Agree" and 58.33% ($N=140$) responded "Strongly agree." Despite respondents agreeing on the important of personal experience, far fewer of them felt their experiences were actually included in lessons. Of the $N=238$ respondents who answered "My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity," a narrow margin of 53.36% responded "Agree" ($N=107$) or "Strongly agree" ($N=20$) For that same prompt, 32.35% ($N=77$) responded "Unsure/Don't know" with an additional 12.61% ($N=30$) responding "Disagree."

The largest difference in responses between demographic groups when responding to questions about personal experience in the classroom occurred when looking at responses from different racial and ethnic groups. All racial and ethnic groups

agreed with the importance of personal experience in the classroom. However, white/Caucasian students agreed that their experience was included in lessons on diversity more often than black/African American or Asian/Pacific Islander students (see figures 10-15 on pages 95-98). Black/African American students agreed that their experience was included in lessons on diversity more often than Asian/Pacific Islander students, though not as often as white/Caucasian students.

Another major difference between demographic groups was found between the sexes. Males agreed that personal experience was important in the classroom less often than females. However, females agreed that their own personal experience was included less often than males.

Age. The $N=11$ survey respondents aged 25 to 47 did not vary greatly in their responses on questions of personal experience compared to the $N=242$ survey respondents aged 17 to 24. When responding to the prompt, “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication” the older students split evenly between “Agree” ($N=5$, 50.00%) and “Strongly agree” ($N=5$, 50.00%). None of the older survey respondents answered “Unsure/Don’t know,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly disagree,” just as the number of responses in the entire sample ($N=18$, 7.50%) that responded with one of these options was negligible. The older students were again similar to the entire sample when presented to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity.” 70.00% of older students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=2$) or “Agree” ($N=5$) while 30.00% responded “Unsure/Don’t know” ($N=2$) or “Disagree” ($N=1$). Again, this distribution was similar to the total sample.

Race and Ethnicity. This section involved creating filters that would show the responses of only one racial group at a time to then compare to other racial groups and to the total sample. Respondents who provided multiple races were included in sample groups of every race they provided when analyzing Likert-scale questions. This was done for the sake of ease and because it is impossible to decipher what race the student primarily identifies with when simply providing a list of identities. In some cases this led to seemingly incorrect data collection. For example, there were $N=26$ students who responded black/African American for race, but when isolating race in the Likert-scale questions there were $N=28$ respondents.

To balance this portion of the analysis when combining race and ethnicity, a composite filter was used to examine Asian/Pacific Islander responses. This filter incorporated every response for ethnicity given as an Asian or Pacific Island country. The composite filter included all respondents who provided Afghan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Iranian, Filipino, Persian, Pakistani, Korean, Indian, Pacific Islander, or Nepali for their ethnicity, and produced a group of $N=44$ respondents, which was roughly similar in size to those who responded “Asian/Pacific Islander” for race ($N=53$). This filter was then compared to other filters to check that there were no responses included multiple times with the exception of students who provided multiple races. This tested the degree to which race and ethnicity could be conflated without skewing data. GMU’s precedence of conflating the two demographic descriptors prompted this kind of analysis.

The $N=120$ survey respondents who were white/Caucasian responded “Agree” or “Strongly agree” more often with prompts discussing personal experience than the total

sample. When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 94.22% of white/Caucasian students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=45$) or “Agree” ($N=65$), which was greater than the 72.92% of the total sample who responded with these options. Similarly, when responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 77.47% of white/Caucasian students responded either “Strongly agree” ($N=25$) or “Agree” ($N=66$). This exceeds the percentage of “Strongly agree” or “Agree” responses in the total sample (53.36%). White/Caucasian students agreed that their personal experiences to be valuable in the classroom more often than the total sample of students. Figures chart this information more clearly starting on page 89.

When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 93.18% of Asian/Pacific Islander students responded either “Strongly agree” ($N=15$) or “Agree” ($N=26$). This is on similar to the responses among white/Caucasian students (94.22%), though greater than the total sample (72.92%). While they are similar to their white/Caucasian counterparts in agreeing with the importance of personal experience in the classroom, Asian/Pacific Islander students agreed that their own experiences were involved in lessons less frequently. When responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” only 55.81% of Asian/Pacific Islander students responded either “Strongly agree” ($N=4$) or “Agree” ($N=20$) while 34.88% ($N=15$) responded “Unsure/Don’t know.” The percentage of “Strongly agree” and “Agree” responses for Asian/Pacific Islander

students (55.81%) is lower than the percentage of white/Caucasian students (77.47%) though on par with the total sample (53.36%).

Black/African American students responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree” to prompts discussing personal experience roughly as much as white/Caucasian students. When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 92.86% of black/African American students responded “Strongly Agree” ($N=8$) or “Agree” ($N=18$). Black/African American students responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree” with prompts describing the importance of personal experience roughly as much as white/Caucasian and Asian/Pacific Islander classmates. However, black/African American students are between white/Caucasian and Asian/Pacific Islander students in agreement in terms of their own experiences being included. When responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 67.83% of black/African American students responded “Strongly Agree” ($N=6$) or “Agree” ($N=13$) while 32.14% ($N=9$) responded “Unsure/Don’t know.” The percentage of “Strongly agree” and “Agree” is lower for black/African American students (67.83%) than for white/Caucasian students (77.47%) though still greater than for Asian/Pacific Islander students (55.81%) and the total sample (53.36%). Figures chart this information more clearly starting on page 95.

Hispanic/Latina/Latino students more closely matched the responses of the total sample than Asian/Pacific Islander students, black/African American students, or white/Caucasian students. When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 70.00% of

Hispanic/Latina/Latino students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=3$) or “Agree” ($N=4$), which is similar to the 72.92% of total sample of students who responded with one of these options. When responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 60.00% of Hispanic/Latina/Latino students responded “Agree” ($N=6$), though none responded “Strongly agree.” Still, this is relatively closer to the percentage of “Strongly agree” or “Agree” responses in Asian/Pacific Islander students (55.81%) and the total sample (53.36%) than either white/Caucasian students (77.47%) or black/African American students (67.83%).

There were simply too few students who identified Middle Eastern ($N=5$) as their race were more divided in their responses than any other racial group studied.

Sex. Men responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree” less often than female students when responding to prompts about the importance of personal experience in the classroom. However, when asked about the incorporation of their own personal experience in lessons on diversity, male students responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree” more often than female students.

When responding to the prompt, “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 84.16% ($N=74$) of male students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=25$) or “Agree” ($N=49$) with 7.23% ($N=6$) responding “Unsure/don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 67.47% of male students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=13$) or “Agree” ($N=43$).

When responding to the prompt, “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 97.23% of female students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=56$) and “Agree” ($N=91$) with only 3.85% ($N=6$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know. When responding to the prompt, “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 47.10% of female students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=17$) or “Agree” ($N=56$) with 36.77% ($N=57$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

Sexual Orientation. Similar to differences in age, there were no discernable differences between straight/heterosexual students and gay/homosexual/bisexual students when responding to questions related to personal experience and the classroom. When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 91.05% of straight/heterosexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=60$) or “Agree” ($N=113$). This percentage dropped when asked about their own experiences being included in the classroom. When responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” only 53.43% of straight/heterosexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=17$) or “Agree” ($N=84$) with 32.80% responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

Gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded in a similar fashion. When responding to the prompt “Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication,” 93.75% of gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=8$) or “Agree” ($N=7$). This is comparable to the percentage of straight/heterosexual students who responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree.” It is perhaps worth noting that gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Strongly

agree” (50.00%, $N=8$) more than “Agree” (43.75%, $N=8$) unlike straight/heterosexual students. When responding to the prompt “My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity,” 56.25% of gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=1$) or “Agree” ($N=8$) with 31.25% ($N=5$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” Again, these percentages are similar to the straight/heterosexual students.

Classroom Goals. Several prompts sought to understand how students perceived classroom goals and goals of Chapter 6. There were also several prompts overtly asking students if they found Chapter 6 offensive. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom,” 64.85% of students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=23$) or “Agree” ($N=132$) and 26.36% ($N=63$) of students responded “Unsure/Don’t know.” Similarly, when responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 65.69% of students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=21$) or “Agree” ($N=136$) with 30.96% ($N=74$) of students responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When asked to respond to the more overt prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 61.67% of students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=28$) or “Disagree” ($N=120$) with 27.50% ($N=66$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

The largest difference between demographic groups was again among different racial and ethnic groups. White/Caucasian students agreed that goals had been outlined and met more often than other students. They were also disagreed that the textbook was offensive more often. Asian/Pacific Islander students agreed that goals had been outlined

and met less often, though disagreed that the textbook was offensive more often than white/Caucasian students. Black/African American students agreed that goals had been outlined roughly as often as white/Caucasian students, though agreed that these goals had been met less often. Black/African American students also agreed that the textbook was offensive less often than any other racial or ethnic group. In terms of differences between the sexes, males agreed more often than females that class goals for diversity in communication were outlined, though the two sexes agreed that goals were met about as often. Additionally, gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Unsure/Don’t know” to these questions more often than any other isolated demographic group.

Age. The $N=11$ survey respondents aged 25 to 47 were more positive when responding to prompts about classroom goals and Chapter 6. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” 80.00% ($N=8$) of older students responded “Agree.” Similarly, when responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 80.00% of older students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=1$) or “Agree” ($N=7$). Again, when responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 80.00% ($N=8$) of older students responded “Disagree.” Older students responded to this set of questions with a surprising degree of homogeneity.

Race and Ethnicity. The same filtering process used in the Personal Experience section above was used to examine differences in racial and ethnic groups in regard to Classroom Goals. There were several differences between racial and ethnic groups.

White/Caucasian students were slightly more positive than the total sample. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” 66.10% of white/Caucasian students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=10$) or “Agree” ($N=68$) with 25.42% responding “Unsure/Don’t know” ($N=30$). When responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 72.43% responded “Strongly agree” ($N=10$) or “Agree” ($N=75$). However, white/Caucasian students were disagreed that Chapter 6 was offensive more often. When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 69.75% of white/Caucasian students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=16$) or “Disagree” ($N=67$) with only 15.13% ($N=18$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” Proportionally, white/Caucasian students were disagreed that Chapter 6 was offensive (69.75%) more often than the total sample (61.67%). This suggests that non-white non-Caucasian students found Chapter 6 of the textbook more offensive than white/Caucasian students.

Asian/Pacific Islander students agreed that goals had been outlined and met less often than white/Caucasian students and the total sample. However, they disagreed that Chapter 6 was offensive just as often as students in the total sample. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” 59.09% of Asian/Pacific Islander students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=7$) or “Agree” (19). This percentage is lower than the percentage for both the total sample (64.85%) and white/Caucasian students (66.10%). When responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” the same 59.09% of

Asian/Pacific Islander students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=4$) or “Agree” ($N=22$) with 38.64% ($N=17$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 61.36% of Asian/Pacific Islander students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=4$) or “Disagree” ($N=23$). This percentage is very close to the 61.67% of students in the total sample that responded this way.

Black/African American students agreed that classroom goals had been outlined as often as students in the total sample, though they agreed that these goals had been met less often. Additionally, black/African American students were agreed that Chapter 6 was offensive more often. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” 64.29% of black/African American students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=4$) or “Agree” ($N=14$). This is similar to the total sample. However, when responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” only 51.85% of black/African American students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=4$) or “Agree” ($N=10$). This is a lower than percentage of the total population (65.69%) and lower than percentages for both white/Caucasian students (72.43%) and Asian/Pacific Islander students (59.09%). Black/African American students were also disagreed that Chapter 6 of the textbook was offensive less often. When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” only 50.00% of black/African American students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=5$) or “Disagree” ($N=9$) with 42.86% ($N=12$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” This is lower than the percentage of

students in the total population (61.67%) that disagreed. It is also lower than the percentage of white/Caucasian students (69.75) that disagreed.

Hispanic/Latino/Latina students responded in similar ways to the total sample. Furthermore, the smaller number of responses from this population made it difficult to draw conclusions based on the data. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” 70.00% of Hispanic/Latino/Latina students responded “Agree” ($N=7$) with the remaining 30.00% ($N=3$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” Similarly, when responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 60.00% ($N=6$) of Hispanic/Latino/Latina students responded “Agree” with the remaining 40.00% ($N=4$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 50.00% (5) of Hispanic/Latino/Latina students responded “Disagree” and 40.00% ($N=4$) responded “Unsure/Don’t know.” Similarly, the small group of Middle Eastern students prevented any meaningful analysis of this race and ethnicity.

Sex. Males agreed that goals were clearly outlined more often than females, though the two sexes were not different in their rate of agreement that goals were met. They also disagreed that the textbook was offensive about as often.

When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom,” 72.29% of male students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=7$) or “Agree” ($N=53$) with 22.89% ($N=19$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication

textbook were met,” 67.47% of male students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=6$) or “Agree” ($N=50$) with 31.33% ($N=26$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 62.35% of male students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=9$) or “Disagree” ($N=43$) with 23.30% ($N=21$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom,” 60.64% of female students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=16$) or “Agree” ($N=78$) with 28.39% ($N=44$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 65.16% of female students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=15$) or “Agree” ($N=86$) with 30.32% ($N=47$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 61.54% of female students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=19$) or “Disagree” ($N=77$) with 28.21% ($N=44$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

Sexual Orientation. The only major difference between responses of straight/heterosexual students and gay/homosexual/bisexual students in regard to questions on goals and Chapter 6 was the high percentage of uncertain responses from gay/homosexual/bisexual students.

Responses from straight/heterosexual students very closely resembled that of the total sample. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before

covering diversity in the classroom” 66.66% of straight/heterosexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=19$) or “Agree” ($N=107$) with 23.81% ($N=45$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” 67.37% of straight/heterosexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=19$) or “Agree” ($N=109$) with 28.42% ($N=54$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 63.68% of straight/heterosexual students responded “Strongly disagree” ($N=27$) or “Disagree” ($N=94$) with 24.21% ($N=46$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.”

Gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Unsure/Don’t know” to questions regarding goals and Chapter 6 of the textbook far more often than straight/heterosexual students. When responding to the prompt, “Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom” only 37.50% of gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Strongly agree” ($N=1$) or “Agree” ($N=5$) with 62.50% ($N=10$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” This is higher than the 28.42% of straight/heterosexual students that responded “Unsure/Don’t know.” Similarly, when responding to the prompt, “Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met,” only 26.67% ($N=4$) of gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Agree” with 73.33% ($N=11$) responding “Unsure/Don’t know.” When responding to the prompt, “I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times,” 37.50% ($N=6$) of gay/homosexual/bisexual students responded “Disagree” with 56.25% ($N=9$) responding

“Unsure/Don’t know.” Uncertainty as a response occurred more often among gay/homosexual/bisexual students than any other isolated demographic group.

The Learning Process. Part of this research seeks to find out how students learn in the classroom. For this portion, students were asked theoretical questions about knowledge and the learning process. These questions were for the most part unsuccessful in uncovering students’ attitudes about knowledge. When responding to the prompt, “There is an objective way to learn without taking experiences into account,” the most common response was “Unsure/Don’t know” with 37.50% ($N=90$) of all students responding with this option. Similarly, there was no clear majority when students were asked to respond to the prompt, “There is an objective way to teach diversity in communication without taking student experiences into account.” 40.16% of all students responded to this prompt with “Strongly agree” ($N=10$) or “Agree” ($N=86$) while 30.54% of students responded “Unsure/Don’t know” ($N=73$) and 29.29% of students responded either “Strongly disagree” ($N=9$) or “Disagree” ($N=61$). This kind of even distribution makes demographic analysis for these questions poor guesswork, at best. Any separation of demographic groups will inevitably compare them to a larger, undecided total sample.

This is presumably due to the phrasing used in these prompts and the terms used. Most of them used inaccessible language pulled from current research on the topic. Without finding a way to operationalize these concepts and apply them to students’ lives in succinct prompts, students found “Unsure/Don’t know” as the best option. However, this makes it unclear if they were unsure about the prompt at hand or if they were simply

unsure what the prompt was asking them. This is a major problem with this portion of the research.

Open-Ended Questions

In addition to the five open-ended demographic questions and the 17 Likert-scale questions, there were six open-ended questions about the classroom experience, encouraging students to speak openly about their opinions. These were reviewed for any responses longer than a single word. Most students did not take the opportunity to expand on their answers, providing one word “yes” or “no” responses. These student responses ($N=182$) were not closely examined. Similarly, a large number of survey respondents ($N=56$) elected not to answer any of the short answer questions. The remaining students ($N=27$) elected to be more forthcoming with their thoughts. These were analyzed for notable responses and these responses were primarily positive.

For the most part, the students who provided more elaborate open-ended responses reported positive experiences with diversity and communication within the classroom. They also tended to stress open-mindedness as both a requirement and a factor for learning. As one straight white female wrote, “I learned that diversity can have a large effect on our communication skills. I have realized that some people aren't always so open minded and aren't always willing to accept the ways that others think.” Another straight white female similarly explained, “I learned that people have different ways of communicating, more than just language, depending on your culture. Something commonly done in America could be seen as something else in another country.” An

Asian female believed that the diverse nature of the COMM 101 classroom was a benefit to learning about diversity in communication. She wrote, "Diversity is very important in learning about how to communicate with each other with respect and you can learn new things just from a diverse community."

Another recurring theme was students admitting to taking the survey before covering Chapter 6 in class. Several students ($N=12$) used the open-ended questions as an opportunity to explain their own lack of experience with the course material. One wrote, "We have not been assigned anything from Chapter 6. We have not discussed Chapter 6 in class." Another student explained, "We haven't covered it due to snow days." Another student offered an apology, writing, "We have not read Chapter 6 in my class yet, so I'm sorry if these answers aren't very helpful. We cover the chapter in mid-April..." If this was the case for more students than reported so, that could have boosted response rates of "Uncertain/Don't know" in the Likert-scale questions. The survey was only distributed to COMM 101 students and most respondents ($N=252$) confirmed that they were enrolled at the time of the survey. It seems this kind of response occurred when students had not yet discussed diversity and communication in COMM 101.

All Black/African American students who provided more than a one sentence response ($N=5$) agreed with the importance of this section. One African American male explained, "Every person out here is different and have their own standards, but that does not mean we should separate ourselves because of that. We are all human and should respect one another." Another, straight black male argued that the lack of focus on diversity prevented the class from impacting his views. He wrote, "I can honestly say I

didn't learn that much. This isn't a class that focuses on such things as diversity and communication. It's group/interpersonal communication.”

Some students had negative perceptions of the classroom. When asked “What personal experiences do you have that affect the way you communicate” one frustrated straight white male student wrote, “More than once, when I have disagreed with someone of a different background I have been accused of being racist just because of my skin color. I now keep to myself out of fear of being labeled.” This same student also argued that Chapter 6 is biased against straight white males. He wrote, “Everybody is covered in a positive light except for straight white males.” He also called COMM 101 “a semester long sensitivity training course where diversity is prioritized over unity.” When asked, “What did you get out of the lessons on diversity and communication?” he wrote, “Straight white males need to be ashamed of who they are and how they were born.”

This kind of overt negative reaction was uncommon though the issue of how classmates are portrayed was discussed by another student. A straight white female wrote:

I understand diversity well, although I believe hypersensitivity makes it a bigger deal than it needs to be. If everyone is created equal and wants equal treatment then we must stop going out of our way to make others feel comfortable because they are different. Accept your differences and don't get offended if someone disagrees.

Similarly, one straight Hispanic male wrote, “I've read Chapter 6 and wouldn't say it handled diversity with respect. I could see the reasons people have to believe the chapter

may be offensive.” He went on to question the value of personal experiences in the classroom, explaining, “I believe connecting life experience can be a valuable commodity to contribute to the classroom, but it isn’t a necessity. I am more of a theoretical person and I don’t need specific situations to learn.”

One white lesbian student did not believe the chapter of diversity added much to her understanding of communication or the world. When asked “Was your life experience valuable to the classroom? If so, what aspect? If not, what would you like to have been included in the classroom?” she responded, “I don’t find that I’ve had any real experiences dealing with diversity because I have grown up in an environment that was not very diverse, so I didn’t have much to contribute.” This is a form of privilege in the classroom that allows white students to assume diversity is an issue for other students to discuss. Oddly enough, the student does not mention her sexual orientation, which makes her experience unique compared to the vast majority of straight students in the sample size. This could be a reflection of the course material, which may not cover sexual orientation as a source of diversity in the classroom. It is also possible that the material was covered in the classroom, but she did not feel like she could contribute to classroom discussions on the topic. Another response showed that she takes for granted the kind of open-mindedness that many instructors stressed in the classroom. She wrote, “I didn’t really learn anything new. I found that a lot of it is review if you’ve been raised in a household that teaches acceptance; I also think a lot of it is common sense.

Ultimately, the small number of in-depth responses greatly limited this portion of the research. The vast majority of students skipped these questions ($N=56$) or only

provided one word or one sentence responses ($N=182$). Those who did respond were either positive, affirming the importance of diversity and communication. Some students were dismissive of diversity and communication, citing their own lack of diversity as a hindrance or the concepts of open-mindedness and acceptance as tired subjects in the classroom.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion

Two interrelated theoretical fields were used as frameworks to explore lessons of diversity and communication in George Mason University's COMM 101 classrooms. First, critical pedagogy argues for the importance of understanding hegemonic structures and how they overtly and subversively influence the classroom. Second, phenomenology argues that we use personal experiences to make sense of concepts and apply them to our lives. Both emphasize the sanctity of individual sense-making as a method of learning. I posed two research questions to more fully examine the complex relationships between social structures, students, educators, and lessons. I utilized a similarly bifurcated methodology to answer these questions: instructor interviews and student surveys. Detailed interviews with instructors allowed me to understand and contextualize how lessons played out in classrooms in line with RQ1. A multi-variable survey of a large portion of students allowed me to study how age, race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation changed perceptions of these lessons in line with RQ2.

Instructor Interviews

Interviews with instructors illuminated six themes that frequently came up: 1) class goals, 2) stereotyping, 3) humor as a coping mechanism, 4) class discussion as disclosure, 5) divide between student experiences, and 6) timeliness of Chapter 6.

1) Class goals. Instructors repeatedly indicated a divide between class goals and the type of mindset that students bring to class. Instructors described the need to explore interpersonal communication theory in the classroom. However, when explaining the primary goal of the unit on diversity and communication, instructors felt the need to first explain that students must approach lessons with open-mindedness and an awareness of diversity. This sort of caveat – explaining prerequisites instead of specific goals – speaks very clearly to the sensitive material involved in Chapter 6 and perhaps the course at large. Many areas of interpersonal communication ask students to examine their own relationships and communication practices. Opening up classroom discussions on these issues inherently demands respect for all experiences. However, it is important to consider these issues when designing and implementing pedagogical tactics. Carter (2000) argues that instructors far too often teach to a conceptually homogenous student body and in doing so often reify systems of inequality and control. hooks (1994) similarly argues that these lessons can be methods of teaching students how to fulfill their prescribed roles in the straight white patriarchy without teaching students how to redefine and move past these roles. The tendency of instructors to separate lessons on theory from

the type of mindset students must bring to class indicates the potential for ignoring diverse backgrounds and experiences.

When discussing issues specific to diversity and communication, instructors tended to stress the need for awareness. Instructors are most likely using this term to explain the need for students to navigate these topics with sensitivity. Instructors further suggested that this is only the first step in creating cultural exchange. It is yet unclear if students ever advance past this first stage. Yeung, Spanierman, and Landrum-Brown (2008) argue that students who belong to the dominant culture are “socialized to be ignorant of their unearned societal advantages” (p. 27). While awareness of diversity is undoubtedly important in the classroom, it is also important to realize that students who belong to the dominant culture may not process this as an awareness of diversity, but rather as an awareness that *other* people in the class are diverse.

2) Stereotyping. All instructors mentioned stereotyping in the classroom. While there is a brief exercise in the textbook that asks students to contextualize stereotypes, instructors mentioned that it came up as a recurring theme and as its own frame for discussing diversity. In some cases students were asked to stereotype. In other cases students offered stereotypes as a sincere means of understanding diversity. Instructors 1 and 5 emphasized in their interviews that they used these situations to create teachable moments where they encouraged students to break down their thought processes.

In many ways, it is important for students to openly acknowledge their concepts of diversity in order to properly scrutinize the social conditions that may have created

these concepts. Garza (2000) explains the importance of understanding how students perceive each other and expand these perceptions in order to eliminate stereotypes. Not doing so would imply that students enter the classroom without any preconceived notions of diversity. However, the open discussion of stereotypes may entrench stereotypes for some students. hooks (1994) explains the tokenizing of certain experiences in the classroom, allowing certain students to fill expected roles and become the voice of certain populations in the classroom. This process would allow students to enter the classroom with stereotypical notions of others and use the classroom to reify these stereotypes. Carter (2000) further argues that attempting to deconstruct stereotypes by first acknowledging them often devolves into romanticizing otherness and the minority experience for the sake of the dominant group.

3) Humor as a Coping Mechanism. All instructors mentioned the use of humor as a coping mechanism in the classroom. Some instructors use humor to engage students and energize them while other instructors mentioned that students occasionally use humor either to entertain their classmates or to avoid discussing topics seriously. It is worth noting that humor tends to come from collectivist understandings of certain concepts. In the classroom environment, comments or jokes are deemed funny by the students if there is laughter as a response. Similarly, Carter (2000) argues that the classroom provides a model for students to understand “what behavior to emulate” (p. 30). If this is the case, it raises serious questions as to how these humorous interactions are perceived by students who do not laugh. The classroom then becomes the dominant

group that defines what is and is not humorous. In some cases, students who do not laugh may be asked to compromise their own perceptions of issues as the dominant group defines the comical frame as the best approach, perhaps undercutting critical examination of those issues.

4) Class Discussion as Disclosure. The intimate nature of interpersonal communication as a field of study necessitates classroom discussion and disclosure as students reflect on their own communication patterns and relationship in regard to course material. Instructors frequently explained the model of classroom discussion as a time for students to self-disclose personal experiences. However, this may be complicated when students engage in discussions of diversity.

McIntosh (1987) explains that the central tenet of white male privilege lies in normative assumptions as to how personhood is defined. Whiteness and maleness function as an invisible normal, generally excluded from race and gender studies and accepted as a normal identity. Similarly, non-whiteness and femaleness are considered crucial to an individual's identity as they deviate from the white male norm. This could explain Instructor 5's assertion that some white students believe diversity to be an issue for other classmates. These students are never asked to critically engage in understanding their identity as it relates to those who are not like them. This has two consequences. First, white male students self-exclude themselves from discussions on diversity. Second, non-white and non-male students are reminded that their identities have been

constructed as “other.” Garza (2000) further argues that this allows dominant culture students to continue to think of and cast other students in preconceived roles of diversity.

5) Divide Between Student Experiences. Self-disclosure through class discussion is valuable for students to understand different experiences and process a diverse range of perspectives. As could be expected in diverse classrooms, instructors stressed the wide range of student experiences in the classroom as well as positive and negative outcomes.

Phenomenology ultimately requires the use of experience to create knowledge. If students are engaging with lessons disproportionately based on experience, it reasons to follow that they will also have disproportionate knowledge on the subjects explored in diversity and communication. However, the inclusion of diverse students to fill the roles that Garza (2000) describes is another way of entrenching hegemonic systems. When white male students see the experience of diverse classmates as a checklist of different perspectives, hooks (1994) argues that this tokenizes their classmates’ experiences. This limits non-white, non-male students to their ability to expand the white male student’s understanding while reminding the non-white, non-male student that their experience is non-dominant, that it exists outside culturally ascribed normative assumptions of personhood.

Instructors 2 and 4 specifically argued that Asian students may have trouble adapting to the classroom. They frequently referenced different learning styles in Eastern and Western cultures while simultaneously emphasizing that most international students

adopt an American style of life. This potentially confirms Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung's (2008) argument that students in diverse settings adapt to fit hegemonic norms. In this case, students are actually encouraged to avoid using their experience as a tool for sense-making and instead assimilate to their classmates.

6) Timeliness of Chapter 6. All instructors voiced concern with diversity and communication coming too late in the courses. Some instructors believed that students were mentally “checked out” by that point, while others argued that the diverse nature of GMU classrooms forced them to address the topic far before students were actually covering that course material. Almost all of these instructors also conceded that reorganizing the course material would always leave a chapter last and would always mean condensing that section should the class fall behind. However, the prevalence of diversity in the classroom, and thereby as a factor to consider in communication, suggests that moving it to earlier in the semester would help students navigate other lessons, almost all of which require some understanding of diversity given the diverse nature of the GMU student body.

Student Survey

The student survey suggested differences between students, specifically across racial/ethnic demographics. Before exploring these differences, it is important to note that without a significance test these results may be due to chance. These potential

differences can be framed in two ways: 1) differences in perceived classroom goals, and 2) differences in perceived inclusiveness of personal experience.

1) Differences in Perceived Classroom Goals. Asian/Pacific Islander students agreed less often than their white/Caucasian and black/African American peers that classroom goals had been clearly outlined. Asian/Pacific Islander students also did not agree that these goals had been met as often as their white/Caucasian peers, though they agreed that course goals had been met just as often as their black/African American peers.

This could be a reflection of the differences in learning styles explained by Instructors 2 and 4. They emphasized that Eastern classrooms typically focus less on classroom discussion and more on lectures led by instructors. The typical Eastern classroom described by Instructors 2 and 4 more closely approximates the banking method of education described by hooks (1994) that encourages instructors to deposit information in the minds of students. If Asian/Pacific Islander students enter the classroom with an expectation of this kind of learning process, it could be a hindrance to fully understanding course material and engaging with classmates. However, this also presumes a certain level of ethnocentrism, specifically that Western classrooms are more inclusive and open-minded than Eastern classrooms and that the Western method of involving class discussions is inherently more appropriate for teaching lessons on diversity. Martinez (2006; 2008) explains that asking students to adapt their perspectives and learning styles to fit the classroom is a form of imperialism, encouraging students

with diverse learning styles to eschew culturally constructed expectations of the classroom environment. The tendency for Asian/Pacific Islander students to agree less often than their peers that classroom goals were outlined may be due to the Western style of using classroom discussion as a common means of teaching

It is also worth noting that black/African American students agreed that course goals had been met less often than white/Caucasian students or Asian/Pacific Islander students. hooks (1994) argues that this may be due to the institutional advantages of white students within universities. hooks (1994) goes on to argue that Black/African American students enter the classroom with an expectation that their experiences will be excluded, or that if they are included it will be in the form of tokenism that asks them to speak for the collective African American experience to classmates previously not exposed to it. Just as Instructor 5 explained that white/Caucasian students assume the topic of diversity is for other students, it is possible that black/African American students assume the topic of diversity is included as a false gesture of cultural exchange. If so, black/African American students may feel that the inclusion of diversity and communication as a chapter is merely an obligation to fulfill the need for dominant culture students to experience non-dominant culture perspectives on issues.

2) Differences in Perceived Inclusiveness of Personal Experience.

White/Caucasian students and black/African American students agree on the importance of personal experience in the classroom. Despite this, white/Caucasian students agreed

more often than black/African American students that their own experiences were included in the classroom.

hooks (1994) argues that white/Caucasian students inherently perceive lessons as extensions of their own experiences, disregarding the lived experience of others as an entrenched part of identity and a different yet equally valid perspective. Extending this to the perception of personal experience in the classroom, it is possible that white/Caucasian students were more likely to believe that their personal experiences were included in the classroom because their experience has never been *excluded*. Carter (2000) illuminates that unexamined whiteness – the tendency to assume classroom homogeneity – creates disproportional expectations in the classroom that leads white students to assume a position of authority in the classroom by defining what is and is not valuable to the pedagogical process. Freire (1970) describes pedagogy with the potential to recreate roles of colonizer and colonized, asserting one group's dominance and superiority over another. The differences between black/African American students and white/Caucasian students could be a reflection of their experience within the classroom or a larger reflection of the hegemonic systems that shape these students before they enter the classroom.

Limitations and Future Research

In addition to the methodological limitations discussed in Chapter 3, the research yielded several other limitations worth mentioning. First, the lack of Chi-Square and/or ANOVA significance testing limits the quantitative results of the student survey.

Without examining the relationships between variables and response for statistical significance, the student survey functions more as a general exercise in observable differences that may or may not be statistically significant. For this reason, the discussion of differences among students based on age, ethnicity, or gender must be viewed as suggestive and speculative, given that the patterns noted in this sample may be due to sampling error or change. As such, future research should seek to statistically test differences across students' experiences in the classroom based on different ages, races, ethnicities, sexes, and/or sexual orientations.

Second, cross applying variables in future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of these differences. hooks (1994) frequently references the straight white male perspective, but this research did not cross-apply these demographic variables. Several differences were noted between white/Caucasian and non-white/non-Caucasian students, as well as differences between male and female students, and differences between straight and gay/homosexual/bisexual students, though at no point were demographic variables cross-applied to study the straight white male and other students in line with hooks' (1994) definition of the dominant perspective. Third, the small number of instructors willing to participate in interviews limits the scope of the qualitative analysis thereof. With only five instructors, interviews were coded and analyzed for similarities across instructors without studying how their experiences differed based on their backgrounds. ASHE (2011) as well as Anderson and Giovanni (2009) assert the importance of examining the instructor's position in relation to the issues being studied. As such, further analysis could more closely examine the

relationship between instructors' experiences and their views on the course, specifically related to diversity in communication. Fourth, the lack of meaningful short answer responses makes any assumptions drawn from that portion of the survey.

Finally, the timing of the survey was potentially problematic. The survey was opened early in the semester on January 28, 2014 with student recruitment emails sent out shortly thereafter. When asked an open-ended question specifically related to Chapter 6 of the textbook, several students ($N=12$) openly remarked that they had not yet covered the chapter, with many more ($N=56$) skipping the question. A few more students ($N=6$) said that they did not know or were not sure. It appears that at least a handful of students ($N=12$) and as many as over a quarter of students ($N=74$) took the survey before covering the chapter in class. If the number of these respondents is closer to the high end of this range, the number of students responding to Likert-scale questions with option 3, "Unsure/Don't know" would presumably be much higher on questions related to Chapter 6 and the chapter's goals. It would also provide unreliable answers to questions on diversity and communication as students would be responding to the topic as it had been discussed outside of the specific chapter.

One potential limitation is the general diversity of George Mason University's student body. GMU's Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Multicultural Education (ODIME) calls GMU "one of the most diverse campuses in the nation" (odime.gmu.edu, 2012). This was referenced by multiple instructors in their interviews and is evidenced in the diverse responses to the student survey. As such, it is difficult to tell whether or not findings from GMU's COMM 101 course will be generalizable to less diverse

universities. The phenomenological assumption that experience is necessary to uncovering and generating knowledge also assumes that this will be extraordinarily difficult in classrooms with a dearth of diverse experiences. Martinez (2008) argues that merely imagining a different perspective can be a form of imperialism. Instead, students need to be exposed to a variety of experiences in order to better understand them. Future research could compare student experiences in diverse classroom compared to homogenous classrooms, particularly if course goals, texts, and syllabi are similar. Doing so would provide insight to the role of a diverse student body in teaching about issues related to diversity.

In addressing how to improve the lesson, future research could take a more active role in analyzing Chapter 6 of the textbook used for COMM 101. The textbook is actually a composite of several different scholars' writings on interpersonal communication. Interview questions and survey questions occasionally referenced Chapter 6 of the textbook, but few questions sought to specifically uncover how the textbook was perceived, rather focusing on how lessons played out in the classroom. Instructors frequently referenced the problem with covering diversity and communication so late in the course while also adding the caveat that moving it to any other time in the course would compromise a different lesson. A content analysis of the textbook in reference to learning outcomes and classroom dialogue could be valuable in assessing one of the most ubiquitous yet unstudied aspects of GMU's COMM 101 course.

Finally, additional research could take place in the classroom. This study sought to explore how experiences and lessons played out in the classroom without ever

engaging in the classroom. Rather than interviewing instructors and surveying students, observing lessons first-hand could provide an interesting lens through which to critically examine the kind of rhetoric that is being used in the classroom. Instructors stressed class discussion as a source of self-disclosure. Examining how students choose to frame personal experiences in the classroom could shed light on survey findings related to different ages, races, ethnicities, sexes, and/or sexual orientations and if/how they are discussed by different classrooms.

“Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in the classroom.”

Answered: 239 Skipped: 26

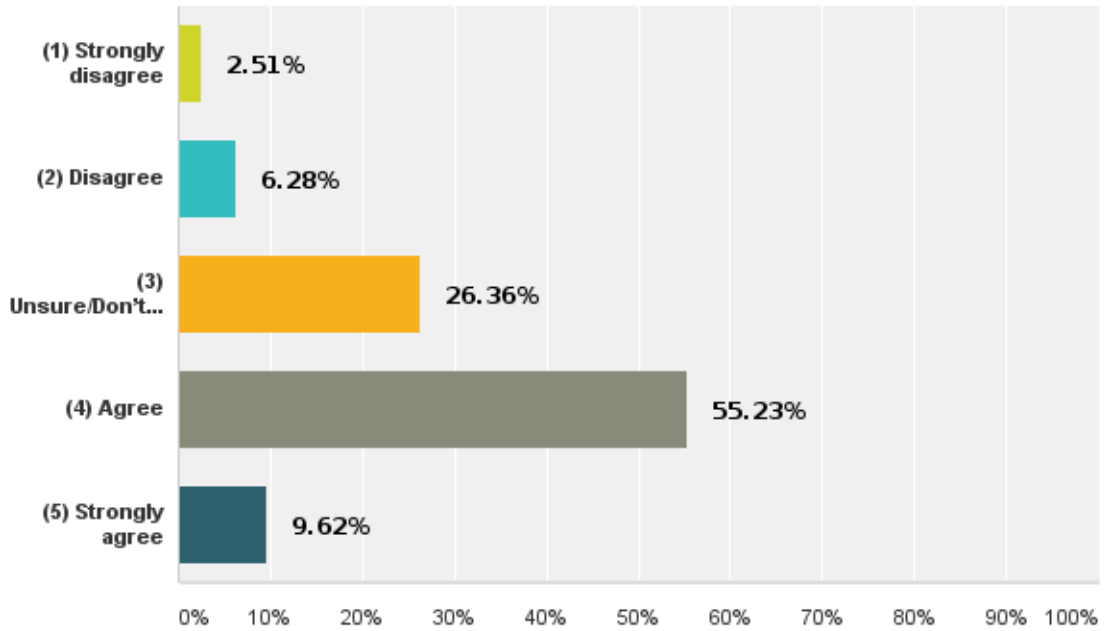


Figure 1. All respondents.

Answered: 44 Skipped: 0

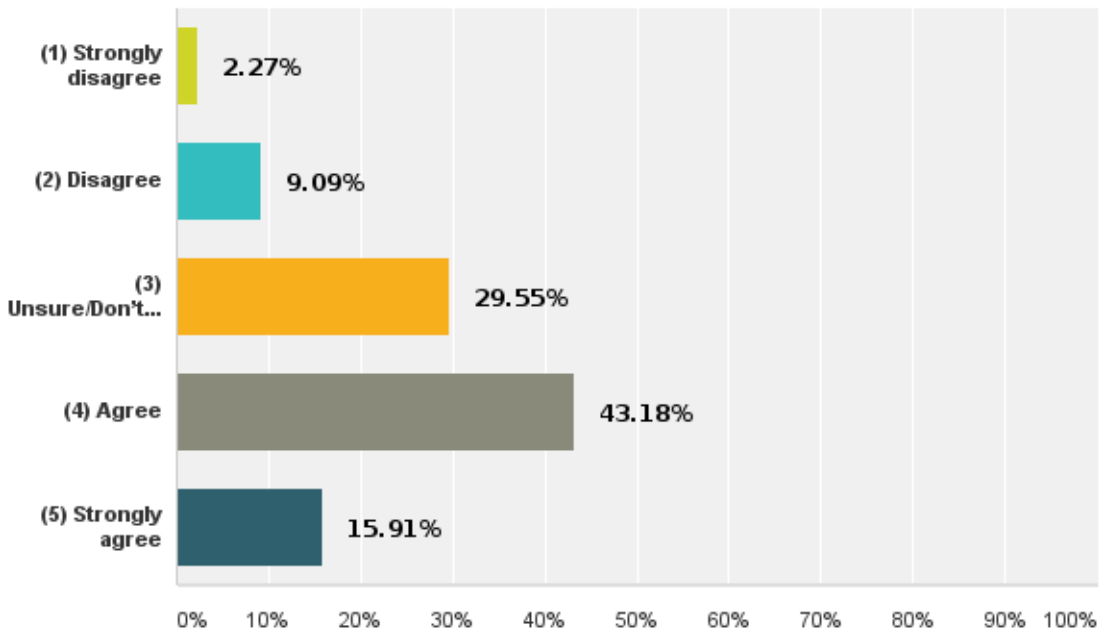


Figure 2. Asian/Pacific Islander Responses

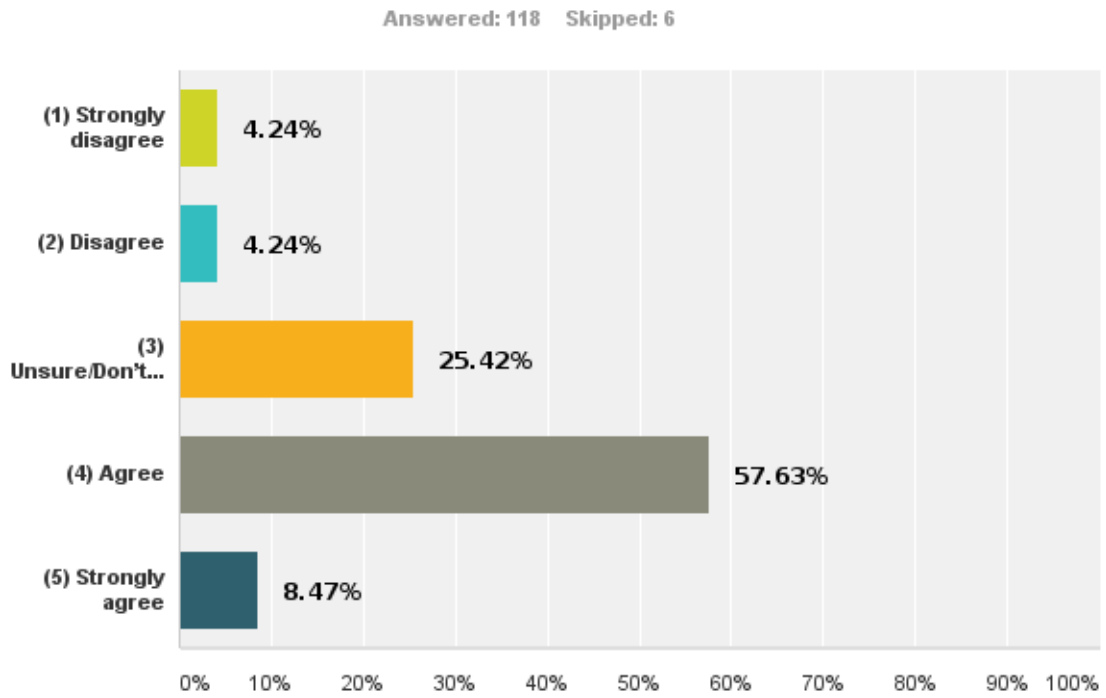


Figure 3. White/Caucasian respondents.

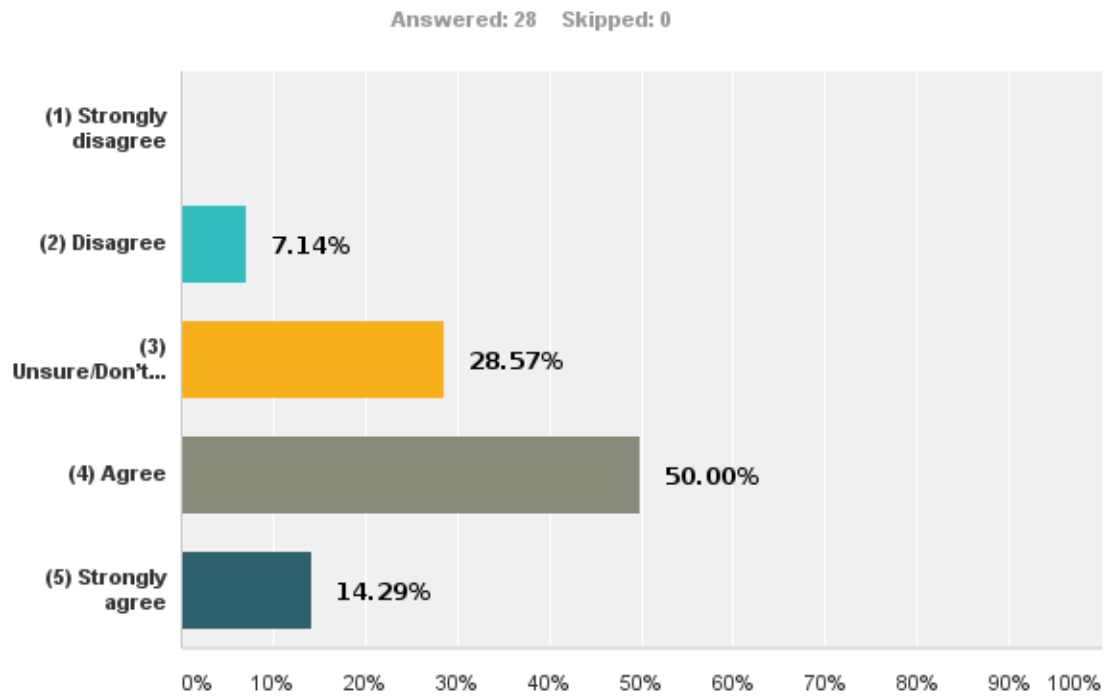


Figure 4. Black/African American respondents.

“Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met.”

Answered: 239 Skipped: 26

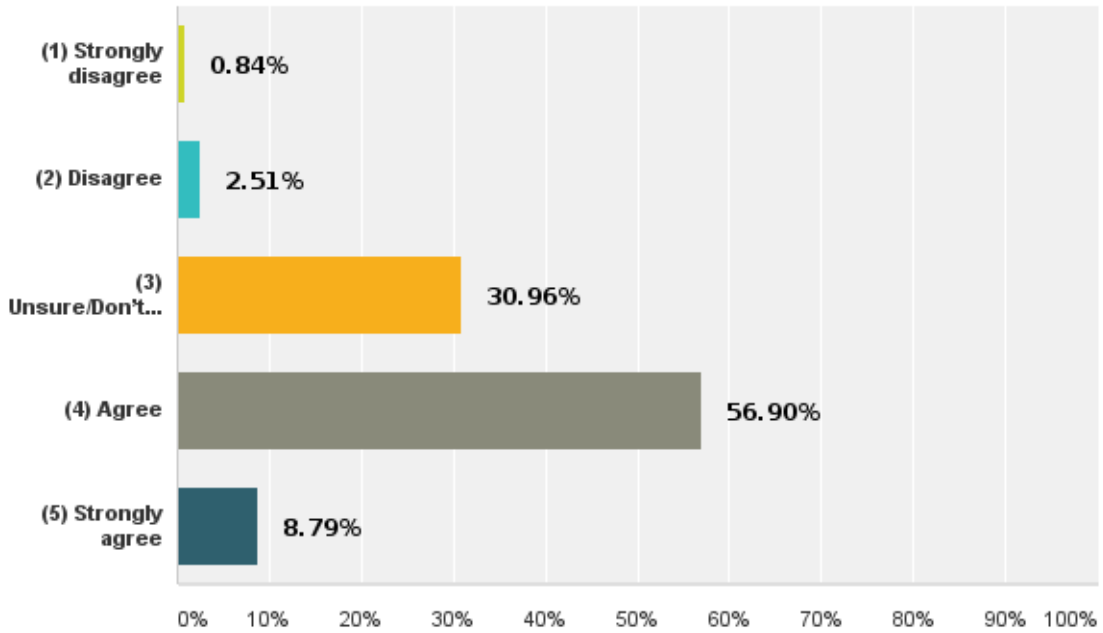


Figure 5. All respondents.

Answered: 44 Skipped: 0

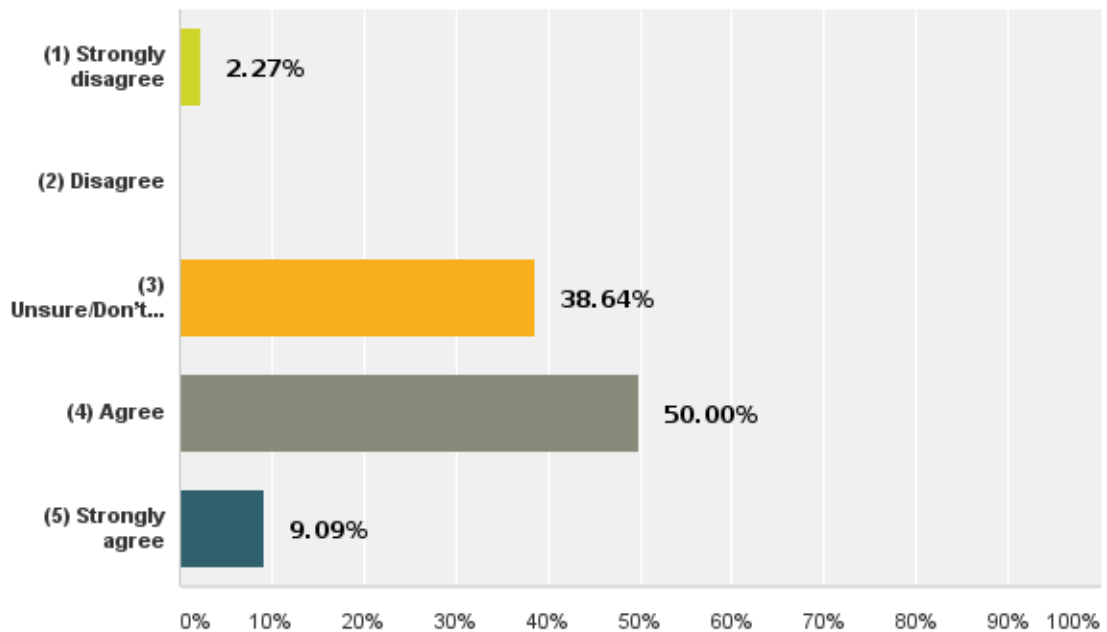


Figure 6. Asian/Pacific Islander respondents.

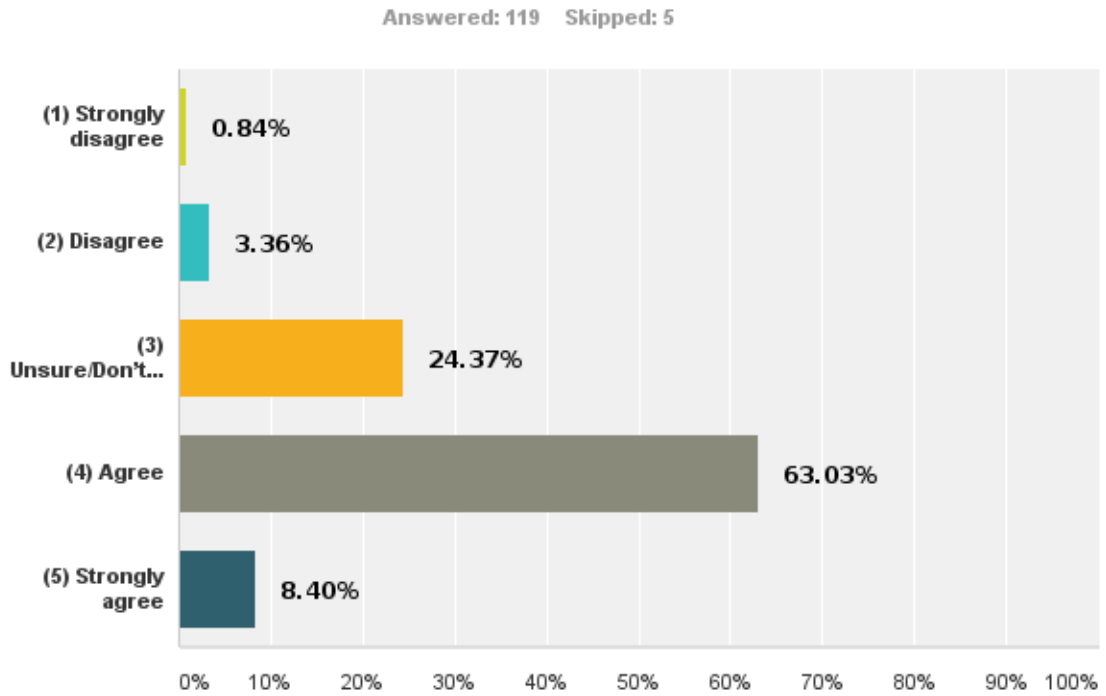


Figure 7. White/Caucasian respondents.

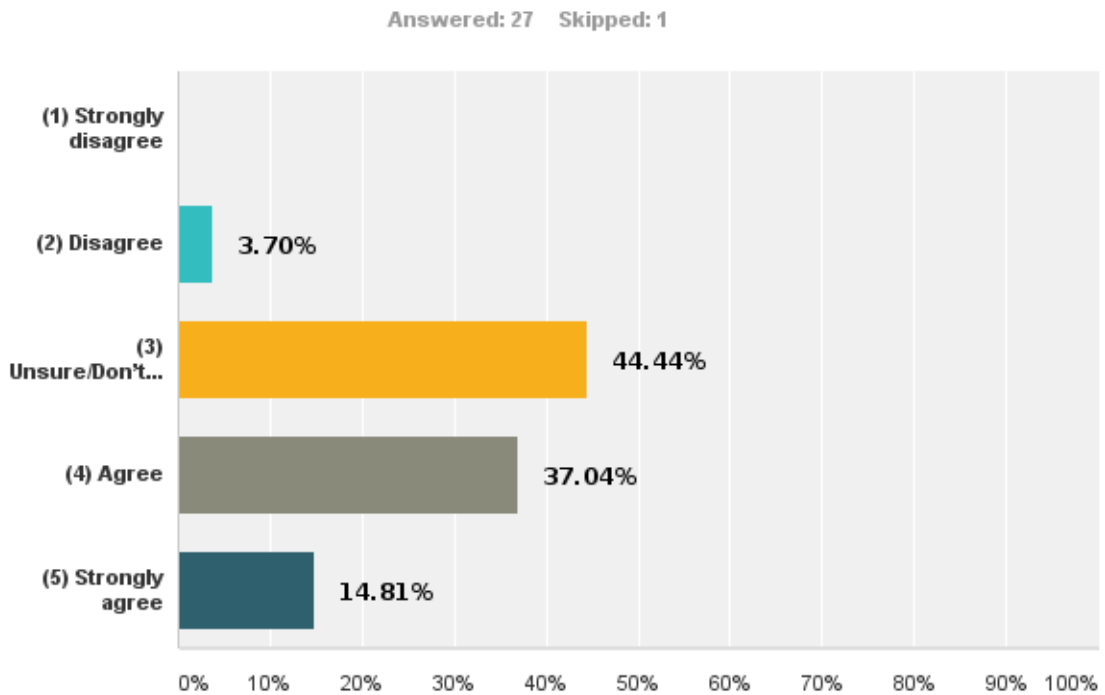


Figure 8. Black/African American respondents.

“I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times.”

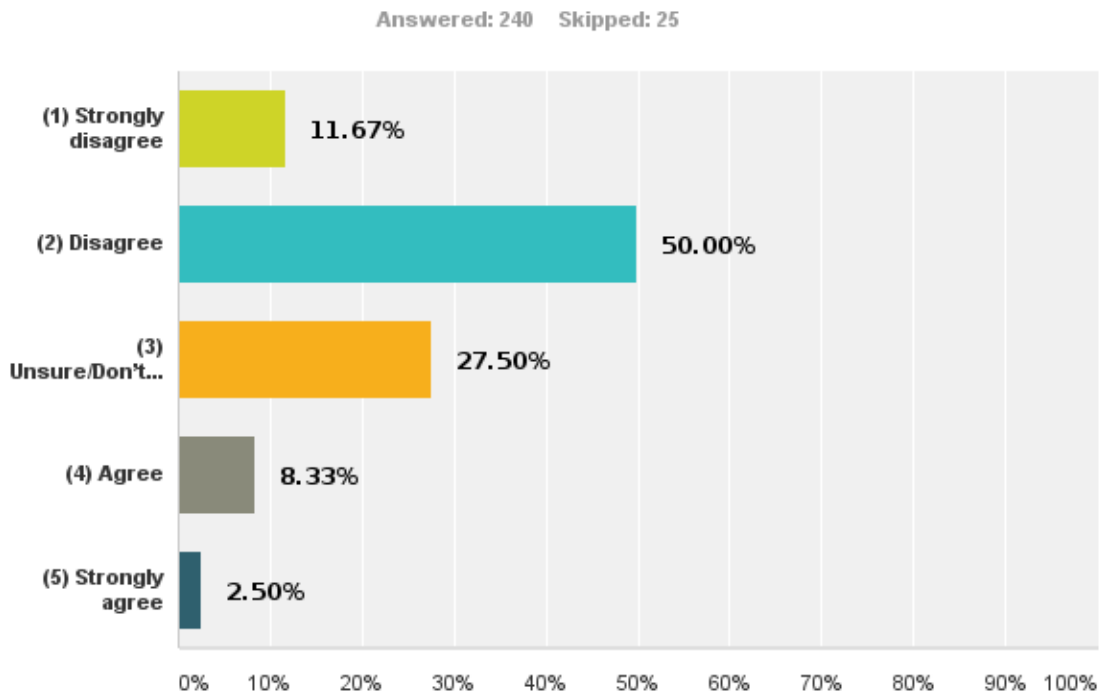


Figure 9. All respondents.

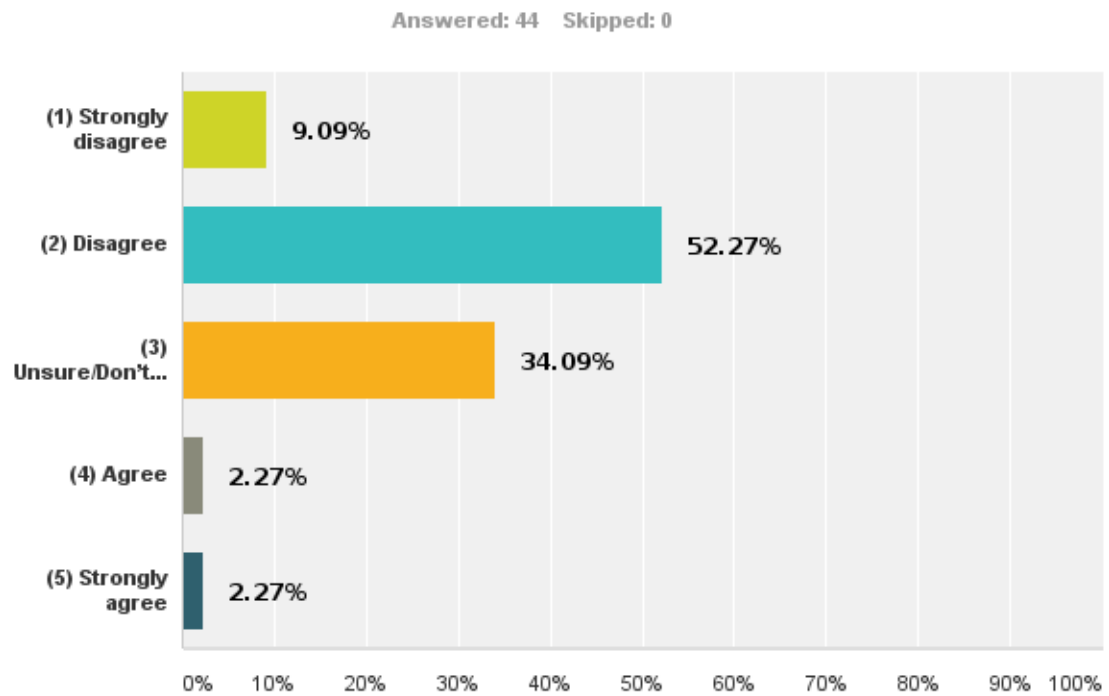


Figure 10. Asian/Pacific Islander respondents

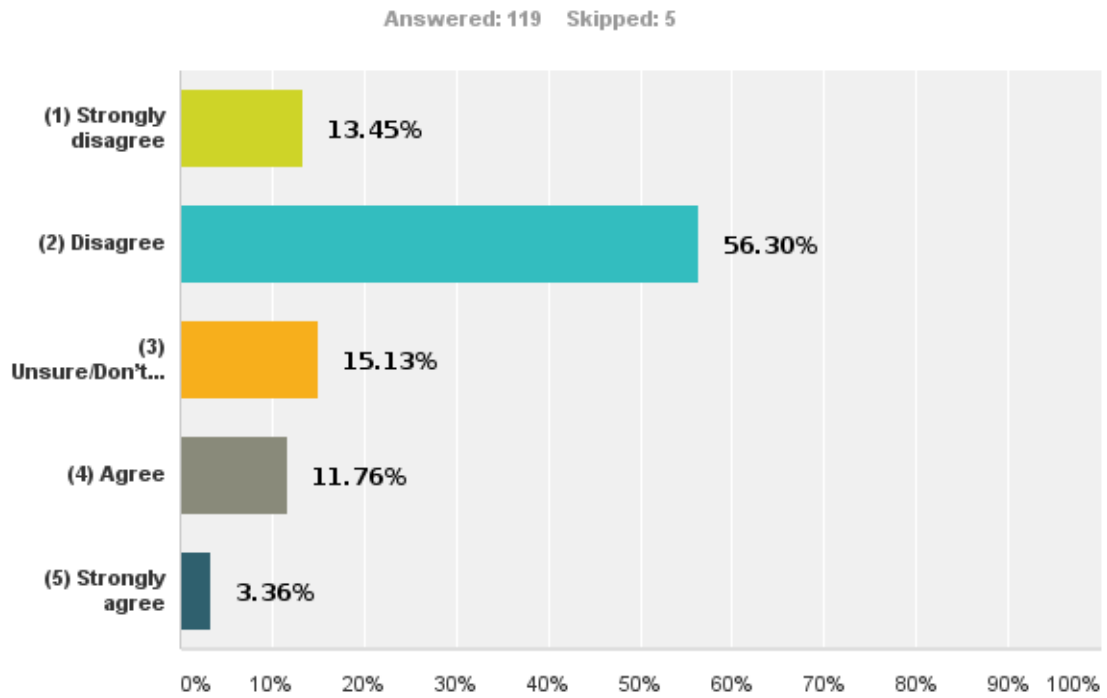


Figure 11. White/Caucasian responses.

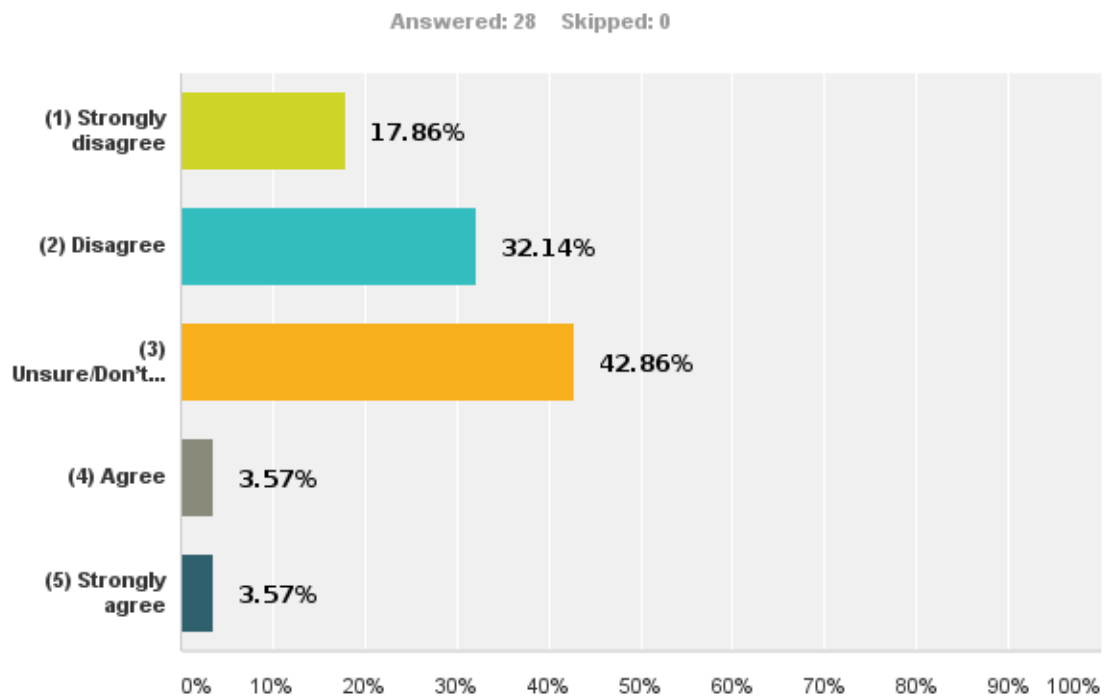


Figure 12. Black/African American respondents:

“Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication.”

Answered: 240 Skipped: 25

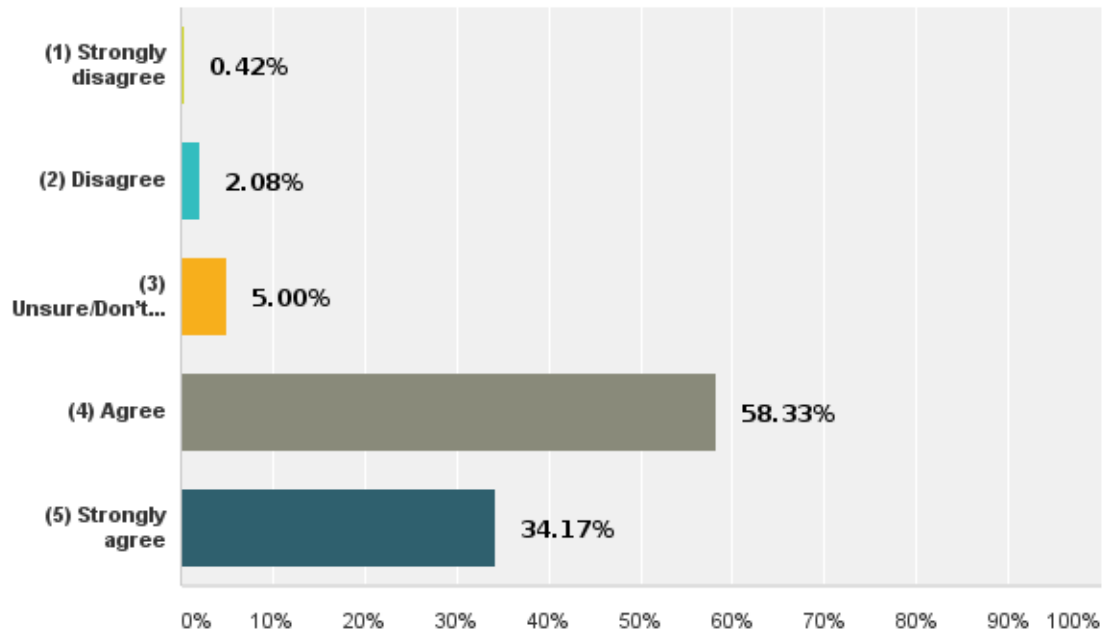


Figure 13. All respondents.

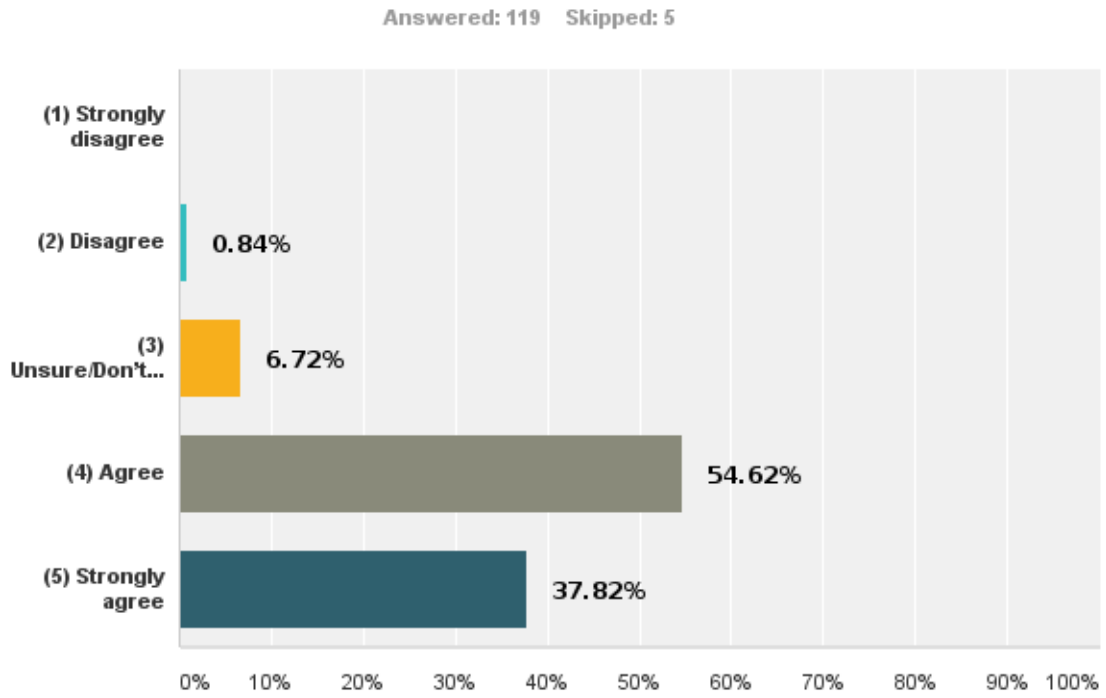


Figure 14. White/Caucasian respondents.

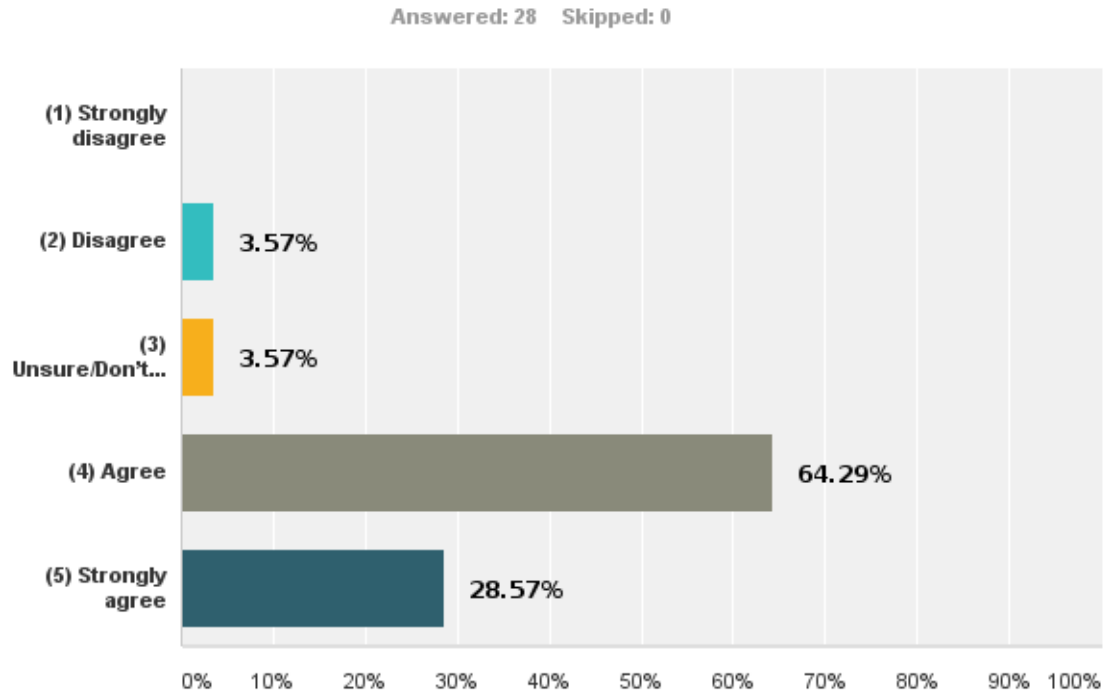


Figure 15. Black/African American respondents

“My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity.”

Answered: 238 Skipped: 27

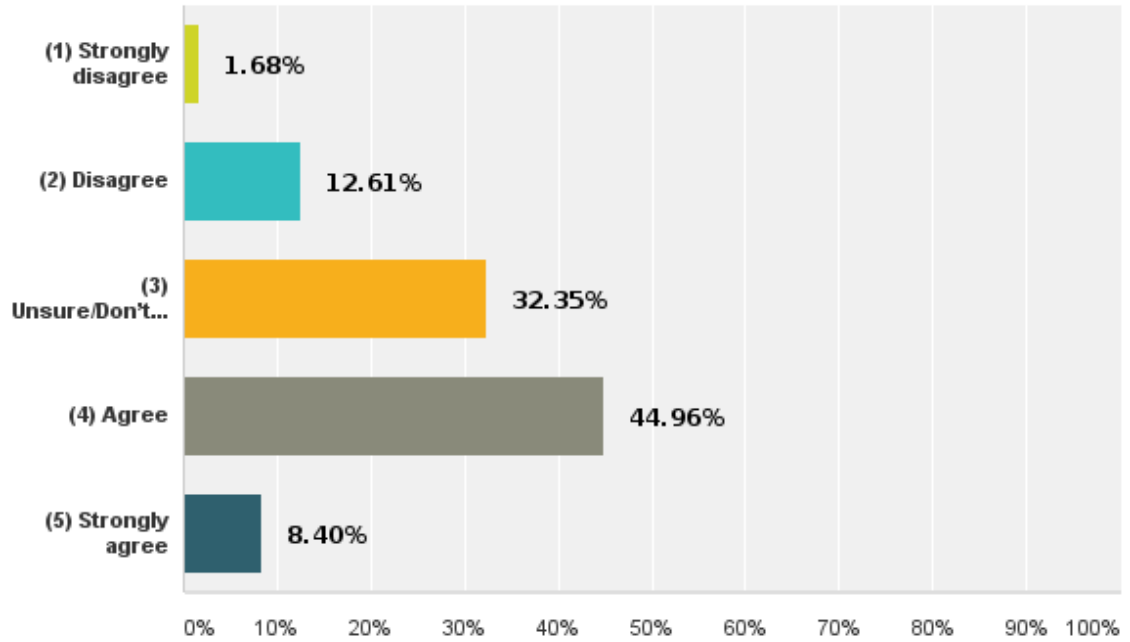


Figure 16. All respondents.

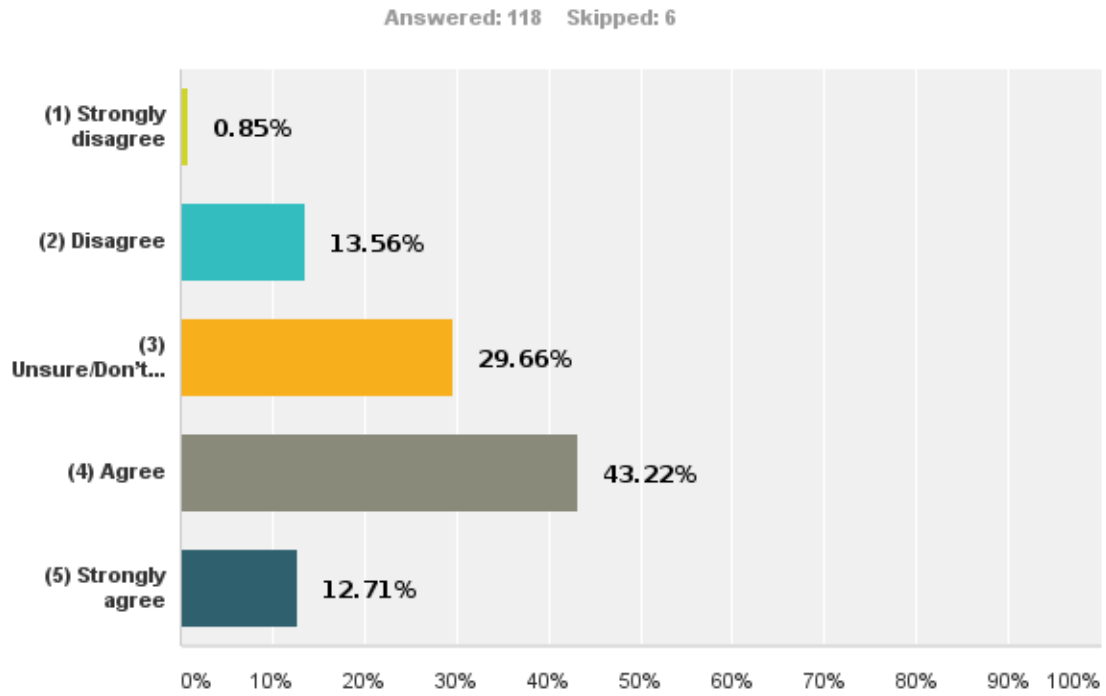


Figure 17. White/Caucasian respondents.

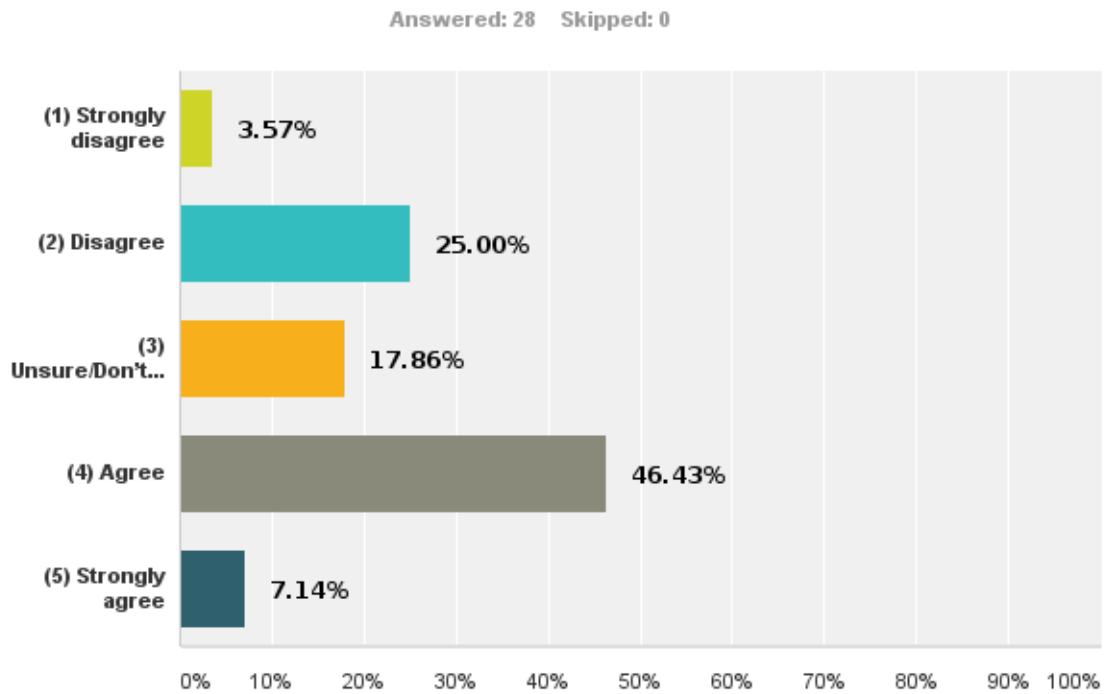


Figure 18. Black/African American respondents.

APPENDIX 1

Instructor Interview Guide

Faculty Background

- What is your age?
- What is your race?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- Are you comfortable with the inclusion of this information in final publication?

Goals

- What major themes do you want to get across in the classroom?
 - How are these covered?
- What goals do you have for students in the classroom?
- What student (hypothetical) has the most to gain from this lesson?

Experience, Knowledge, and Phenomenology

- How is knowledge generated?
 - How is knowledge passed?
- Is lived experience an integral part of learning?
 - [If so] how do students engage with lessons without lived experiences that directly relate to lessons?
 - Are certain lived experiences obstacles in learning?
 - [If so] how do you deal with those experiences as a teacher?
- What theoretical frames do you use when planning or preparing for lessons?

Teaching

- To what degree are students directly involved with the lesson?
 - Are students ever asked to avoid certain topics?
 - Are students asked to share personal experiences?
- How much of the learning experience relies on classroom discussions or group work?
 - Are any topics “off limits” for students in discussions or group work?
- How are topics of discussion defined or framed in class?
 - Can students offer their own definitions or frames?

The Lesson

- How important is the chapter on diversity in communication?
- What obstacles in the classroom do you address when covering diversity in communication?
- Are some students alienated by the lesson?
 - How do you engage students with different experiences relating to diversity in communication?
 - Is the lesson focused on diversity in communication? How often does it become a lesson on experience with diversity?
- Do you think the textbook and syllabus cover diversity in communication well?
- What changes to the coursework would you make?

APPENDIX 2

Student Survey

Pg. 1 – Informed Consent

Pg. 2 – Open Ended Questions (Demographics)

Please provide any and all of the following information you feel comfortable sharing. If you would rather not provide the information, simply leave the field blank. None of this information will be linked to you.

- Age
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Sex
- Sexual Orientation
- Why did you take Comm. 101?

Pg. 3 – Likert Scale Questions

Read each statement and then select the response (1-5) that most closely indicates your agreement/disagreement with the statement.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Unsure/Don't know
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

- My experience is valuable to a successful classroom environment.
- My experience was incorporated in lessons on diversity.
- I was exposed to a variety of experiences from my classmates.
- Personal experience is important in teaching and learning about diversity in communication.
- There is an objective way to learn without taking experiences into account.
- Diversity in the classroom is important when teaching and learning about issues of diversity in communication.

- Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook handled issues of diversity in communication well.
- Diversity in communication is an important aspect of interpersonal communication.
- Issues covered in Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were discussed from a general perspective that did not exclude me as a reader.
- After covering issues of diversity in communication, I learned a great deal about myself as a communicator.
- I found Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook to be offensive at times.
- I can understand why some students may take offense to Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook.
- Goals were clearly outlined before covering diversity in communication.
- Goals for Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook were met.
- There is an objective way to teach diversity in communication.
- I was encouraged to share my thoughts and opinions on sexism, racism, and other topics related to diversity.
- Certain topics of discussion were “off the table.”

Pg. 4 – Open ended questions

Read each question and answer to the best of your ability. The more you can offer the better. Remember, your answer should reflect your opinion and/or reaction.

- Did the Chapter 6 of the Interpersonal Communication textbook handle issues of diversity with respect?
- Was your life experience valuable to the classroom? If so, what aspects? If not, what would like to have been included in the classroom?
- What personal experiences do you have that affect the way you communicate?
- Do you feel like you have to adjust your communication for the classroom? If so, how?
- What did you get out of the lessons on diversity and communication?

Pg. 5 – Verification for Class Credit

Thank you for your participation in this survey! Print this page and present it to your COMM 101 course instructor to receive credit for participation in this survey.

-Sam L. Hopkins

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BIOGRAPHY

Sam Hopkins graduated from Blacksburg High School, Blacksburg, Virginia, in 2008. He received his Bachelor of Arts from George Mason University in 2012. He has coached for the George Mason University Forensics Team for two years and received his Master of Arts in Communication from George Mason University in 2014.