

*Using critical media literacy to create
a decolonial, anti-racist teaching philosophy*

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ABSTRACT

Media educators must address their personal teaching philosophies to adequately participate in anti-racist pedagogy. Using critical media literacy principles, educators can be aware of student's bodies and performance in relation to reinforced systems of whiteness in the media classroom. This article proposes ways for higher education media educators to adjust their classroom content, and classroom environment, to adopt an anti-racist, decolonial pedagogy.

Keywords: *decolonial pedagogy, critical media literacy, media education.*



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INTRODUCTION

As a white-passing Latina student and educator, I've witnessed the disregard for diverse identities when white¹ bodies are "alone" in classrooms. I've witnessed how those constructions permeate higher education – those built on norms of whiteness (for example, expected dialect, desired reverence, etc.) that are uninviting to POC and often lead to drop-out rates of POC students (hooks, 2003). A specific example of norms of whiteness is in the journalism classroom with lessons of objectivity. These lessons often communicate to POC students that when reporting on stories about racial justice they must also include the perspectives of opposing parties, such as white supremacists (Alemán, 2013). When doing this, we tell students that one cannot practice objectivity if they do not create an "equal playing ground" by giving voice to those that are racist. Additionally, it tells POC students that they must put their bodies in danger by also talking with those opposing parties. I advocate for dismantling the systems in media higher education that allow privileged mindsets to dominate ideals of media practices and products, inflicting pain on bodies of students not fitting the norm. The "expected norm" is connected to how students' bodies and minds are regulated to perform in the classroom and are taught to enact professionally.

In the film media field, I often found myself on film sets with no POC. Additionally, those sets rarely mentioned perspectives outside of the perspective of whiteness. I grew frustrated with ideologies and processes that informed such omissions. Despite scholarship on racial disparities and negative representation of POC in media (Crenshaw, 1991; Semali, 2000), higher ed media classrooms remain conducted per colonized institutions of whiteness. When classrooms and pedagogy are defined by whiteness, it's difficult to teach anti-racist practices. To foster an anti-racist and decolonial environment, educators must reevaluate their personal teaching philosophies by being reflexive per their chosen classroom materials and the formed classroom rules and expectations.

MEDIA EDUCATION & WHITENESS

Minorities are expected to navigate inhospitable spaces defined by normative perspectives (Fasset &

Warren, 2007). The classroom is a prime location where social norms are evidenced (Alemán, 2014; Valle et al., 2011), especially through expected student performances. "Performance," per the sociological perspective, is examined as a part of our everyday lives (Carlson, 2004, p. 32). Social life shapes how bodies perform – in everyday life we learn accepted behaviors, rehearse behaviors, and act out those behaviors as "normal" (Komittee, 2013). In addressing how POC bodies are expected to perform in white-defined spaces, we dismantle inequitable bodily expectations.

Many of these expected performances are confirmed as a norm through repetition. Repetition cements learned performances, and in this case, this goes for both students and educators. Bruner (2000) explains that there are expectations of what assumptions and beliefs teachers must adopt and incorporate in their professional careers – these assumptions then become evident in the classroom. For example, a common classroom norm is attendance. Attendance and tardiness policies are often present in higher education without recognition of how attendance policies contribute to course learning objectives. Rather it is thought of as "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971) that attendance and timeliness are important. Minority students tend to be more affected by attendance policies due to outside influences (Ford & Triplett, 2019) meaning that POC students end up being graded lower, not because they don't achieve learning outcomes, but because they don't meet the classroom norm of attendance and timeliness.

Media classrooms communicate expectations for successful performance through documents like syllabi and grading rubrics, as well as through instruction that reinforces normalized principles and expectations (Fassett & Warren, 2007). For example, again, the notion of objectivity suspects that bodies remain dispassionate as they move through spaces as media "professionals." More generally, students' bodies perform in the classroom to meet expectations: sitting attentive for hours, raising one's hand to ask a question, and taking notes. These practices are learned and repeatedly performed by students throughout their education with the promise of success – although that success is premised on mundane and habitual classroom expectations (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Amour (2020) explains that this type of characterization of the classroom acts as a cultural enclosure, where Black

and don't have the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color" (Bauder, 2020, par. 2).

¹ AP states the word "Black" (when referring to race and culture) should be capitalized, but not "white" because, "White people in general have much less shared history and culture,

students must consistently perform education with standardized multiple-choice tests and quizzes and write with dialect (code-switch) deemed acceptable to white audiences, rather than participate in a learning process that invites Black cultural expression.

These classroom expectations come from dominant white perspectives. Alemán (2013) explains that within university journalism classrooms, there are tendencies to normalize white culture, advocate colorblind ideology, and promote individualistic values. This kind of ideological expectation relies on outdated and inherently biased media-created principles and content (Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Mulvey, 1975). These teachings mold future practitioners who can, in turn, re-create inequitable media representations and messages. These practices often do not acknowledge the differences of Black and Brown bodies. Alemán (2013) further states, “Current journalism pedagogy may be understood as perpetuating whiteness and promulgating a worldview that excludes the perspective of racially disenfranchised communities – even when students of color are enrolled” (p. 86). Minority students are taught to perform according to standards of whiteness and to use Western media-making practices, even if the learned practices conflict with their interests in positively representing their communities (Alemán, 2010; Fasset & Warren, 2007).

For example, when being taught three-point lighting practices for filming interviews and conversations in film, students are not taught how to properly light darker skin tones. Three-point lighting is known to use three different lights to illuminate the subject of the shot: the primary key light, the secondary softer light, and the backlight to separate the subject from the background (Dyer, 1997). This is the lighting setup that most film, communication, documentary and journalism students will learn in their skills courses, and this description will similarly be found in most beginning production textbooks. This is the method generally thought to be the most efficient way to set up lighting for interviews and is easiest for beginners. Yet, this method is historically biased in its preference for subjects with light skin (Dyer, 1997). Those with darker skin do not benefit visually from this lighting set-up. And in film education, often only a three-point lighting set-up is taught and educators do not provide an adjusted or alternative lighting set-up for darker skin tones (Dyer, 1997; Romero Walker, 2020). This is an inequitable practice that has been canonized in media education and has real effects of lighting POC incorrectly and making

them look like they are in the shadows and scary – an image historically used to criminalize POC.

With that, entering higher education comes with normalized assumptions that are decades old. Institutions haven’t become inviting to the diverse demographics and bodies of students today. Higher education is built on assumptions of white, upper/middle class, heterosexual, male bodies. When an institution is built on these norms, it forces assimilation on POC students.

To accomplish a decolonial and anti-racist classroom and curricula is to enact an equitable pedagogy that reflects a multicultural approach to education that champions diversity (Kellner & Share, 2007). “Critical solidarity” teaches students to engage with humanistic perspectives, developing empathy and solidarity with those marginalized or oppressed (Ferguson, 2011). For example, educators can create space in the journalism classroom to talk about how one should not perform the journalistic norm of asking POC if they are American citizens when covering a story (Alemán, 2010). This can put the POC subject in danger in many ways, and having a discussion to not reproduce that norm that comes from a perspective of whiteness, could create critical solidarity in the classroom. Additionally, democratic classrooms allow students to contribute to the educational process (Freire, 2018). This requires a pedagogy that “raises critical consciousness about oppressive social conditions” (Anderson, 2006, p. 327) and can empower students and educators. Educators can assure all students receive the closest possible thing to an equal, decolonized education by creating this type of classroom.

DECOLONIZED, ANTI-RACIST MEDIA EDUCATION

Decolonizing higher education evaluates, dismantles, and rebuilds institutions, curricula, and classrooms. Higher education curriculum must be reevaluated because “curriculum is one of the great apparatuses designed to produce and reproduce a hegemonic modern(ity) way of existing and thinking” (Paraskeva & Steinberg, 2016, p. 3). There is still a long way to go. As Abdi (2011) explains, “[in] so-called postcolonial spaces of education and schooling, the native elite has failed in deconstructing colonial philosophies and epistemologies of education” (p. 5). We must decolonize curriculum to escape hegemonic education norms. Media educators have an opportunity for our work of decolonization to affect the classroom

and the media field. Scholars have discussed decolonial practices in education (Alemán 2014; Tordova, 2016), but more work must be done as it relates to the bodies of students (and educators). The body is, after all, the site of violence upon which colonialism continues to operate.

Decolonizing the curriculum

To decolonize curricula and escape normalized whiteness is to interrogate how Western power structures dominate materials – how thought is controlled, undergirding the loss and inequities of those marginalized (Sleeter, 2010). “Traditional school curricula teach the values, beliefs, and knowledge systems that support colonization” and to decolonize that curricula “is to critically examine that knowledge and its relationship to power, recentering knowledge” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 194). To then decolonize curricula, means to include all knowledge systems and cultures in curricula (Keele University, 2019) because currently whiteness is molded in the curriculum and the classroom – as evident in the expected and constructed norms in media education particularly.

Sleeter (2010) states, “The curriculum and forms of pedagogy are central instruments in the transmission of cultural and social reproduction” (p. 194) and in media education, Indigenous and non-Western perspectives are often excluded or marginalized (Tordova, 2016). Media education is not different from other fields in normalizing colonial content, and using pedagogies that reinforce Western expectations. This is especially evident when media fields indicate “official” knowledge systems. Those rules (consider teaching print journalism students’ expectations of objectivity, or photo-journalism students how color reflects emotion) are influenced by Eurocentric knowledge systems, while other cultures’ knowledges and experiences (that often have different values) are silenced, or “considered marginal cultural and political practices outside the professional cannon of journalism” (Tordova, 2016, p. 676). In this way, “whiteness is embedded in journalism pedagogy” and is inhibited according to the knowledge systems deemed accurate by white folks (Alemán, 2013, p. 85). For example, when teaching about representations of color to media students, this is often done from a Eurocentric perspective that does not acknowledge that globally and culturally, color can affect mood and tone differently (Sahlins, 1976). This could then lead to offensive or insensitive media

products by students that do attempt to create content featuring different cultural backgrounds.

Whiteness is perpetuated in journalism education through factors of: relying on white elites as sources, inaccurate coverage of racial and ethnic groups, and dismissing stories that provide coverage on racism (Alemán, 2010). Teaching these norms in journalism education perpetuates whiteness, in students, and in reinscribing worldviews. This then “excludes the perspectives of racially disenfranchised communities – even when students of color are in the classroom” (Alemán, 2014, p. 86). In maintaining only Western colonial norms in the classroom and in curricula, we expect our POC students to assimilate rather than create a space that values their voice, culture, and experiences.

Efforts have been made to diversify curriculum, but those efforts are often additive, perpetuating “otherness” in diverse identities. This mistake is often made on behalf of organization and time. For example, many educators work to make their conceptual courses more inclusive, and include readings and materials created by POC. However, these materials are often lumped into one topically divided week as “diverse voices” or “POC in [insert class subject].” Why must these materials be presented in one week within a semester? Presenting clumped information continues “othering” POC and presents whiteness as the norm (Gosine, 2002). Rather, educators need to include these voices throughout the semester within the lessons of the course, such as, for example, standpoint theory, ethical reasoning, and framing.

Importantly, additive approaches tend not to work the way we hope (Romero Walker, 2020). Alemán (2014) explains, “Unfortunately, accentuating an additive approach leaves existing training practices intact” (p. 76). Additive approaches reference diversity as something important to think about, but not important enough to be a journalistic norm. Students outside privileged groups aren’t recognized or empowered, and all students are taught distorted views of culture, and don’t receive a full mode of education. Additive conversations continue colorblind narratives, skirt around the topic of white privilege, invalidate systemic racism, and uphold white supremacy (Alemán, 2014). With required courses teaching general skills as Western, white, norms, one often must take additional courses to learn anything different (if those courses exist).

For a more equitable pedagogy, media educators must work beyond additive approaches/created norms of education. To do this we must “embed [I]ndigenous

knowledge related to media, communication, and journalism across the curricula and treat these epistemologies as equal to the Western paradigms that currently dominate the field” (Tordova, 2016, p. 676). This means breaking down colonized structures of both education itself and the norms of the journalism and media field. It is instead asking how to construct curriculum that embodies an all-encompassing nature, rather than one that has canonized a singular perspective. Educators must acknowledge the environment and structure of their classrooms to further decolonize education.

Decolonizing the classroom

Creating a decolonized classroom means fostering engaged learning outside the banking system—that is, the process of depositing knowledge into passive students (Freire, 2018). This means disrupting reverence and hierarchal power structures of classroom rules (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Saunders and Kardia (1997) describe inclusive classrooms as classrooms where instructors and students work together to create an environment where everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged to express their perspectives and concerns. This is easier said than done. Hooks (2003) explains, “To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination” (hooks, 2003, p. 36). In this sense, “domination” is of privileged perspectives. Doing so presumes that normalcy is harmless, even though it perpetuates environments of injustice (Funk, et al., 2016). Adjusting classrooms in this manner means having more discussion-based lessons, normalizing the use of popular culture, changing seating arrangements/not requiring seating, advancing personal storytelling, creating a casual setting, and/or allowing students to help create what the classroom and assignments will look like (Alemán, 2014; Giroux, 1988). These changes can help students feel comfortable, creating new “norms” of the classroom space.

For example, rather than establishing a classroom norm where students sit facing the front of the classroom to listen to the educator lecture, arranging the classroom to be discussion based, and having students lead discussions where they relay lessons with their personal experiences, can make the classroom space more casual and comfortable (Alemán, 2014). One could also come with main learning objectives and terms of a course, but

then work with students to create a syllabus together that reflects both what students must learn for the discipline and what is accessible and reasonable per students cultural and educational backgrounds. Then, we can talk with students about how and why the classroom has been adjusted, and how it challenges dominant norms of education. In doing this, we can constitute a transformative pedagogy that empowers students to challenge dominant myths in society and be a part of a new system that acts in opposition to those presumed norms (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016).

These perspectives help achieve Freire’s (2018) “pedagogy of the oppressed,” which sees education as a “practice of freedom – as opposed to a practice of domination” (p. 81). To achieve this, and to achieve the community that hooks (2003) defines, conversation and discussion is central to pedagogy for democratic educators. This means not to act as a teacher with power, but to act as a facilitator who helps students to drive the conversation.

Additionally, student-centered inquiry consists of conversations that include students’ identity, reality, and interests (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Allowing students to be vocal about their experiences connected to their identities is valuable in creating a classroom environment where other students can build understanding and empathy. This creates a space in which oppressed students may dismantle harmful narratives and generate counter-narratives. In this environment, inquiry starts with problematizing societal beliefs media and society instill, and setting up counter narratives – moreover, counter-knowledge systems. Educators could, for example, implement a universal learning design where students are not required to all produce assignments and content based of the same topic (Burgstahler, 2020), but can showcase learning objectives through mediums and expression that are connected to their lives and interests (Knaus, 2009). Students must feel comfortable lifting their voices, and this can be done by allowing them to learn in ways that include interests and understandings of their lives outside of the classroom. Then, through their voices new knowledge systems may be created so all students might be empowered through the learning process.

WHERE DOES CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY FIT?

Critical media literacy (CML) involves, “ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality”

(Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8). In applying CML perspectives related to race and ideology, educators can recognize how the media industry, and higher education as its training ground, reflect whiteness (Alemán, 2014). Doing so creates possibilities for difference to be illuminated and, ultimately, meaningful solutions to be found to the lack of equitable education in media classrooms and content (Schmidt, 2012).

CML includes important core concepts related to constructed media messages and languages, and recognition that media are organized as a means to maintain/gain profit and/or power (Kellner & Share, 2007). We can implement these critical perspectives when engaging with a text to further eliminate and dismantle social norms, but we must be reflexive in the process and actively include principles that work to further decolonize the classroom and be anti-racist. These principles don't currently exist within CML literature, and decolonial principles must be added to CML frameworks. Educators might ask, for example:

1. Is the language I use from a perspective of whiteness? If so, what are the consequences of using that language?
2. Am I teaching skills as if they are rules?
3. Do I over-emphasize content considered "canonical" and treat other content as additional or "alternative"?
4. Am I observing how individual students react to content?
5. Am I constraining students to perform in a way per my perception of "normal" classroom rules?

CML perspectives help media educators confront these questions. By shifting media education away from the superficial examining of content for aesthetic pleasure to a critical pedagogy that "raises critical consciousness about oppressive social conditions" (Anderson, 2006, p. 327), we prevent our classrooms from becoming sites of oppression (Pineau, 1994).

CML education creates an opportunity to provide a set of tools to educators to decolonize their classrooms, and escape perspectives of whiteness. This can be done with principles that focus on the body and performance with the goal of decolonizing media education. These new principles could look like: moving away from using phrases such as "true white" when describing white-balance; showing students that the media they produce do not have to follow the rules of the discipline but students could instead create a counter-story that challenges those rules; including perspectives from POC, LGBTQ+ individuals, Indigenous communities, and activists throughout the semester; responding when

it appears that students are uncomfortable or have a reaction to teaching methods to instead be a reflexive educator; and examining classroom rules and expectations to see if they align with the courses learning objectives rather than simply policing the bodies of students in the classroom.

An example of an assignment which reflects on the proposed questions could be an exercise of teaching students how to do lighting for an interview. Interview lighting practices are based on perspectives of whiteness that created the norm of three-point lighting, so teaching this lesson in an alternative way, which addresses the questions of: Am I teaching skills as if they are rules, and do I over-emphasize content considered canonical? Skin colors reflect light differently, a phenomenon that, left unaddressed, undermines all media productions. The fact that skin colors reflect light differently has ramifications beyond equipment adjustments and "movie lighting hierarchizes," Dyer writes (1977, p. 201). It indicates who is important and who is not. A unit on figure lighting in a media-skills course often is limited to three-point lighting, which does not function well for all people or all skin tones. Thus, inequity is assured in the final product.

My method for imparting this critical information about lighting is to first teach students the basics of three-point lighting with a white subject and, after doing so, replace the white subject with a subject with darker skin (getting permission from the POC student first, or requesting a POC colleague to assist me in this lesson). I then incorporate an assigned reading by Richard Dyer (1997) about lighting darker skin. As a class, we go over how lighter and darker skinned subjects look under the same lighting set-up – POC are more difficult to see and when the lights are brought closer they are overexposed. We go on to experiment using reflections, light filters, and even different backgrounds until we find the best way to light darker skin.

In this lesson, students and the instructor must work together in the process because, admittedly, we are still working on finding the best way to light subjects with darker skin. Many of us were taught three-point lighting when we were in our media education programs, with no alternative set-ups for non-white subjects. But this provides a valuable opportunity for instructors and their students to collaborate in a transformative process. This example above further integrates discussions of diversity and inclusion in the skills classroom, and decenters whiteness as the norm of the medium.

CONCLUSION

To decolonize education, educators must be willing to audit their classrooms, content, and themselves, and re-adjust. A decolonized and anti-racist media education uses all of the concepts described above to create an environment in which all students have equal opportunities to learn, despite what their social world has primed them to believe is “normal.” This pedagogy empowers students, subverts teacher-student hierarchies, invites critical thinking, provides a safe space, encourages voice, includes diverse perspectives, and opposes concepts of normalcy. This comes with the goal of helping students become empathetic media creators, and helping POC students feel safe, comfortable, and accepted in the classroom. I have worked on doing this in my classroom, and students have shared their feelings of comfort and support because of it. Creating this type of curriculum and environment is a step forward in dismantling current knowledge systems of whiteness – to engage with decolonized and anti-racist thought. There is opportunity in CML frameworks to move forward with this if educators are willing to be reflexive and include anti-racist, non-normative CML principles in their teaching philosophies.

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