“Critical Academic Studies as An Opportunity for Justice: Crisis Communications in Higher Education”

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*Institutional description:* Current justice initiatives at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) occur in the context of recent shifts in administration/faculty relations and race relations. Less than a decade ago, the American Association of University Professors joined with UNI’s faculty union to challenge an administrative decision that had eliminated several academic programs and terminated faculty. (The value conflict fueling that event was echoed during the State of Iowa legislature’s 2020 attempt to eliminate tenure at state universities.) In 2019, tensions between the student government and student members of the UNI Racial and Ethnic Coalition prompted the latter to begin a campaign called #UNIisnotanAlly, focusing on students’ experience with racism at the university. As one response, administration launched an initiative titled *Cultivating Justice: A Quest Toward Racial Equity,* a program “that moves people through a collection of projects and resources…. [in order to] cultivate habits of consciously and consistently practicing anti-racism” (J. Herrera, email, December 9, 2021).

*Key theorists/frames:*

By examining how certain approaches had been used to understand crisis and conflict communication in educational contexts, prominent benefits and drawbacks of these approaches can be revealed. In comparison, the emphasis on restorative justice, as enabled by a critical academic studies approach, suggests this framework as more productive for analyzing such communications.

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) as a frame: Use of SCCT can reveal the degree to which an organization is regarded as the source of a crisis, and accordingly, the extent to which the crisis damages the organization. In particular, SCCT guides this revelation by classifying a crisis according to type and by pointing to factors that exacerbate the crisis (Coombs, 2015).

Critical academic studies as a frame: Baker et al. (2018)’s study of the impact of El Sistema (officially, the Venezuelan National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras) is a powerful embodiment of this framework. The authors perform a discourse analysis of evaluation reports on this educational initiative, to reveal how its communications perpetuate “the official narrative of El Sistema as a programme aimed primarily at, and with transformative effects on, the poor” (p. 6). Using a critical academic studies lens, the authors reveal how the evaluations’ methodology was shaped to ignore certain datasets reflecting the program’s larger context: A social climate troubled by “school dropout, crime, or unplanned pregnancies” (p. 7).

*Glossary:*

Critical academic studies: A framework that regards educational activity as uniquely shaping academic organizational contexts.

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT): A framework that reveals the degree to which an organization is regarded as the source of a crisis, and as a result of this connection, the extent to which the crisis damages the organization.

*Draft text:*

A call to scrutinize crisis communications in higher education was increasing in volume even before the globe was ravaged by COVID-19; see, for instance, the strong response to Wexler’s controversial book *The Knowledge Gap* (2020). As a centralizing space populated by varying demographics, the physical academic campus is vulnerable to conflicts and crises such as impoverished contingent labor and food insecurities resulting from tuition-fueled debt. Meanwhile, the academic cultural space similarly is vulnerable to particular, troubling events: decline of the humanities, threats to tenure, legal prohibition of certain topics in the classroom. Conversations surrounding volatile issues are powerfully shaping the lives of all who work and learn in 21st-century education.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the need to look hard at institutional discourse about all crises and conflicts impacting education (“Survey Finds,” 2021). A communication-focused analysis can reveal these problems’ complex and heterogeneous effects. The critical response to even a single-issue crisis can be diverse, and appropriately so, when we consider tragedies including COVID-19. Conflict and crisis communications particularly in higher education, however, can exhibit traits unique to their academic contexts. Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2020), studying the relationship between university employees’ emotional exhaustion and the amount of social support available to them during a crisis, first make a point of distinguishing between factors affected by crises (such as “normal work activities, planning, financial conditions”) as they manifest in noneducational versus educational institutions. One phenomenon of institutional contexts that embody educational culture is that discursive responses to crisis may elide the real source of problems.

Of interest here is the diversity of lenses taken during studies of crisis and conflict communication in educational situations. As Sagner Buurma and Heffernan (2020) reveal in their exploration of *The Teaching Archive,* often the effort to address educational troubles is pre-emptively scoped by a study’s framework. Rather than looking at conventional academic texts, such as journal publications and those discourses associated with institutional crisis tabletop exercises, the authors argue for recognizing other communications and contexts (e.g., syllabi as they evolve within the classroom) as data to guide problem-solving. That the entire *Teaching* book must work to pull focus from more expected communication formats speaks to the prescriptive influence of analytical frameworks typically used.

The project “Critical Academic Studies as An Opportunity for Justice” therefore acts as an argument for critical academic studies as the preferred approach to analyzing conflict and crisis communication. In its “focus primarily on ideological questions such as class, neoliberalism, and (neo)colonialism” (Baker, 2018), this lens distinguishes itself from other approaches (e.g., situational crisis communication theory) by pointedly avoiding reinscription of the very factors that can ignite conflict and crisis. For instance, Brandtstädter and Steinmüller’s (2017) analysis of relationships among education and gender, economics, technology, and other systems takes a critical academic studies approach by explicitly heeding Nader’s (1990) cautions about social analysis. As Nader explains, social analysis of an effort to solve a systemic problem may laud the parties invested in such effort, but without recognizing that the effort may merely be a confirmation of their authority: “The conditions under which [parties’] preferences in dispute management are historically ‘shifting commitments’ usually [merely] involve power in motion” (p. 714).

Put another way, “Higher education should in its ideal form lead to more economic security for more people, a more equitable and innovative society, and a well-functioning democracy,” but those in academe must engage in “some fundamental and uncomfortable questions” to realize such social goals, e.g., challenging traditional structures such as academic versus non-academic divisions, academic year calendars, and either-or binaries between in-person and online instruction in order. In the absence of such self-awareness, the only social result will be perpetuation of the status quo (Rosenberg, 2021).

A critical academic studies analysis can reveal not only problems with communications in academic contexts, but solutions in the spirit of restorative justice. Fairbanks’ (2019) assessment of pedagogical practice, for instance, distinguishes between the democratizing potential of music education, as promoted by a particular set of communications, and actual restorative justice, whereby “social justice is only achieved by rescinding the social structures that initially caused certain populations to become marginalized” (p. 38, citing Cremin, Sellman & McCluskey, 2012). Advocacy messaging, an example of the former, can operate as a savior complex only cloaked as justice; in demonstration of this claim, Fairbanks quotes from conductor Jose Antonio Abreu’s 2009 TED Talk: “From the minute a child’s taught how to play an instrument, he’s no longer poor. He becomes a child in progress heading for a professional level, who’ll later become a full citizen” (p. 86). Meanwhile, applying a critical academic studies lens, Fairbanks traces how a teaching philosophy that places at its center Western classical music—particularly among student populations with a colonized history—sidelines, devalues, and otherwise silences indigenous (musical) cultures (p. 39).

Scholars can use the affordances of a critical academic studies’ lens to note how justice as a discursive act is defined in their fields, and the extent to which they wish to nudge their definition along a spectrum of acts of justice. Fairbanks’ study, for instance, concludes that an effectively restorative justice approach to pedagogical practices may lead to uncomfortable realizations that even well-intended efforts at “inclusivity” may simply be increased access to music education that renormalizes Western values, and in certain cases the elimination of some practices altogether may be necessary.

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