



Book Review

Teaching Social Justice: Critical Tools for the International Communication Classroom

Lawless, B., & Chen, Y.-W. (2021). Rowman & Littlefield. 978-1-5381-2134-4 (cloth) US\$84.00; ISBN 9781538121351 (paper) US\$37.00; 978-1-5381-2136-8 (e-book) US\$35.00. 198 pages.

LYNSEY MORI

Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Japan

...communication with others has the potential to trigger, instigate, and create larger structural change. (p. 4)

As sensitivity towards understanding various forms of identity grows, intercultural communication is an increasingly required skill. With an appendix full of easy-to-implement activities for instructors and curriculum reformers, *Teaching Social Justice: Critical Tools for the Intercultural Communication Classroom* intersects communication, critical communication pedagogy, and social justice education. An articulate introduction clearly defines this convergence of intercultural communication and social justice to the readers. The eight chapters that follow offer a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the dynamic and complex intersection of intercultural communication and social justice. Providing both theoretical insights and practical tools for educators and curriculum reformers the book is both an interactive tool and a compelling read. The authors, Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen, provide a conclusion and reflection section reminding readers of the cultural battle fatigue educators of social justice can feel during the process of traversing identity positionality. The book not only offers pedagogical insights, but also encourages a reimagination of teacher-student relationships. It moves away from top-down hierarchies, empowering educators and students to speak out against harmful ideologies, thus providing an invigorating integration of social justice principles into any classroom. A collaborative village approach to the emotional labour and self-care needed in intercultural communication is advocated in the present and for the future of the field.

Correspondence Address: Lynsey Mori, Department of British & American Studies, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Kyoto, Japan; email: lmori@antioch.edu

ISSN: 1911-4788



The pursuit of social justice is not merely a lofty aspiration, and although the concept emerged in the modern era, the concept of justice can be traced back to early religious and philosophical texts (Levi, 2020). It is complex and can be understood in numerous ways (Gorski & Pothini, 2014). The authors of the reviewed text discuss paradigmatic approaches to social justice that orientate readers towards aspirational research designs that present opportunities to create knowledge and build understanding concerning the possibility of social change. To give one example of how the book encourages alliance building through communication, the authors reference Johnson (2006) and Harris & Moffitt (2019) to encourage students to challenge microaggressions with the use of the acronym CHANGE - Communicate, Hear, Acknowledge, Negotiate, Grow and Engage (p. 59). In this case, intercultural communication seeks to encourage individuals to turn their gaze inward on their personal transformational journey. They maintain that this shift from within can ease genuine connection and being *with* one another, to bridge cultural divides, enhance mutual understanding, and mitigate conflicts arising from cultural disparities. The authors therefore champion communication that is genuinely inclusive and respectful.

This collaboration between Brandi Lawless (Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of San Francisco) and Yea-Wen Chen (Associate Professor in the School of Communication, Director of the Institute for Dialogue and Social Justice, and Director of Faculty International Engagement at San Diego State University) provides a comprehensive framework for integrating social justice principles into the field of intercultural communication. The book is written with several audiences in mind: new instructors and graduate students, instructors who have taught intercultural communication before and find it challenging, and those in charge of programmatic curriculum development and assessment. The book signifies a transition away from a neoliberal approach to diversity, which often prioritizes superficial representation and tokenism while side-lining marginalized voices and experiences; instead, the authors urge for a political commitment to action. By recognising that culture is fluid and ever evolving, the text highlights the importance of nurturing cultural reflexivity, empathy, ethno-relativism, and praxis among students to ultimately contribute to a more socially just and inclusive world.

Lawless and Chen use a consistent and reader-friendly structure in each chapter. They introduce a concept, such as communicating power and privilege, negotiating avowed and ascribed identities for social justice, or deconstructing ideologies, and then identify key challenges associated with it. Next, stories from the field are used to provide real life context and relatable experiences. Following this, pedagogical activities are presented, providing practical guidance for instructors on how to teach and discuss the concepts effectively. Their inclusion of videos as teaching tools further enhances the learning experience, making it engaging and contemporary. Each chapter concludes with a set of discussion questions that invite self-reflection and critical thinking.

This structured approach allows readers to delve into specific sections as needed, making it a quick go-to resource for the classroom.

It is worth noting that the examples and stories provided from the field predominantly originate from universities in the United States. This concentration on a primarily American viewpoint may not fully resonate with educators addressing social justice in different cultural, social, and political contexts. Although the book does contain activities with general applicability, the eight categories of potential conflict addressed within its pages, such as articulating philosophies and assumptions, communicating power and privilege, negotiating avowed and ascribed identities for social justice, building alliances, community engagement for social justice, deconstructing ideologies, thinking and acting globally, and assessing intercultural pedagogies for social justice, do demand a more global context to fully align with its core principles rooted in an ethic of critical hope and love. These principles envision an intercultural communication classroom where students bring all their lived experiences, struggles, cultural wealth, and individual lenses to bear the content, embrace discomfort, feel safe to share, and cultivate a community of trust that reimagines relationships based on vulnerability, honesty, deep reflection, and compassion, while collectively speaking back against harmful ideologies. Including a more extensive array of international case studies and a wider range of perspectives would address the global social justice and intercultural communication field more thoroughly, and thus increase the book's credibility.

Despite this lack of global perspective, the book's content is relevant and timely within the context of dialogue on social justice. It emphasizes the critical importance of nurturing cultural self-awareness, empathy, and an understanding of our contemporary, diverse, and interconnected global society. Intercultural communication, as the book suggests, provides the tools and language for ongoing analysis of communication on various levels – individual, relational, and societal. The authors acknowledge the challenges of using these tools to analyse the ideologies of white supremacy and meritocracy as they relate to the lived realities of black and brown bodies and identities. The commitment to engaging with political topics and social issues, especially from a critical perspective, reminds readers that removing emotional labor is infeasible in discussions on social justice. The inevitability of experiencing cultural battle fatigue when doing this work is emphasized as the authors advocate for communal, institutional, and disciplinary support to address the resulting emotional strain, and ensuring that individuals can continue advocating for social justice.

The absence of direct links in the videos included as teaching tools is a cautious way of striking a balance between the need for current and accessible resources and the challenge associated with direct link provision. While the absence of direct links to videos may require readers to independently search for them, it also might have advantages. Instead of merely providing clear links that could become broken or limit exploration, the authors offer an opportunity

for readers to discover and engage with the material more organically. This approach promotes active learning rather than the passive consumption of materials, adding depth and texture to the learning experience. This may serve as a model for other authors to consider as a potentially more exploratory and self-driven approach to finding supporting materials in the digital age.

The book also equips educators with useful pedagogical activities and real-world stories, making it a valuable resource for the classroom. As part of their call for a transition from a neoliberal approach to diversity to a more politically committed one, Lawless and Chen also offer practical suggestions to policymakers that aim to promote social justice. They address various aspects of intercultural communication, emphasizing the importance of developing cross-cultural engagement and increasing awareness of connections. In this sense, separately and together, the eight chapters that make up this book, are crucial building blocks in a quest for a more inclusive and socially just world. From articulating philosophies and assumptions to assessing intercultural pedagogies for social justice, the book effectively directs our attention to the profound significance of working together with intercultural communication in mind.

Drawing from the principles of Bloom's Taxonomy, educators are presented with an action-oriented framework that guides them through the levels of learning, emphasizing the practical application of knowledge. Importantly, educators are not merely tasked with conveying these principles to students; they are also expected to embrace the same responsibilities, without shame. This includes a commitment to examining power, privilege, hegemony, and identity, a journey that complements their endeavour to develop a robust and engaging intercultural communication pedagogy. As the authors eloquently illustrate throughout, social transformation begins with the collective efforts of educators and students, and it is through the lens of intercultural communication that this transformation can be realised. This work contributes in no small measure to this necessary, ongoing conversation.

References

- Gorski, P., & Pothini, S. G. (2014). *Case studies on diversity and social justice education*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Harris, T. M., & Moffitt, K. (2019). Centering communication in our understanding of microaggressions, race, and otherness in academe and beyond. *Southern Communication Journal*, 84(2), 67-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2018.1515978>
- Johnson, A. G. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Lawless, B., & Chen, Y.-W. (2021). *Teaching social justice: Critical tools for the intercultural communication classroom*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Levi, G. Z. (2020). Teaching social justice. In S. Steinberg & B. Down (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of critical pedagogies* (pp. 899-908). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526486455.n83>