

Building Inclusive Democratic Engagement:
Incorporating Interracial-Communication Pedagogy into Public-Participation Instruction

In a classroom discussion about community engagement, a student's hand hesitantly rises. "I want to talk about race," she says, "but I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing." This moment, familiar to many educators, reflects that race shapes nearly every human interaction, yet often remains unspoken in civic education.

Democracies depend on dialogue; when racial inequality goes unaddressed, inclusive participation falters. Rooted in colonialism, enslavement, and segregation, racial injustice continues to define societal and interpersonal patterns in democracies (Weaver & Prowse, 2020). Accordingly, communicating effectively across racial lines is not just a civic skill, but a democratic imperative (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). However, conversations about race are frequently avoided due to anxiety and norms of silence (Simpson et al., 2007). This silence carries consequences. Learners who lack support in discussing race miss opportunities to listen and grow.

This article explores how interracial-communication pedagogy—teaching practices concerning communication between members of different racial groups—is integrated into public-participation instruction. It examines prior literature and presents a theoretical framework, applied in a comparison of pedagogical strategies and challenges in South Africa, the UK, and the U.S. The article seeks to show the value of such cross-national comparisons, and demonstrate how building interracial-communication pedagogy into public-participation instruction can promote more inclusive democratic engagement.

Literature Review

Interracial-Communication Pedagogy

Research on interracial-communication instruction (e.g., Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Orbe & Harris, 2023) reveals that this pedagogy's goals encompass consciousness raising, promoting racial justice (Zúñiga et al., 2007), improving interracial relationships (Orbe & Harris, 2023), decolonization, and healing from racial trauma (Mendoza, 2018). Instructional methods include dialogue involving personal storytelling (Simpson et al., 2007) and role playing (Cooks & Simpson, 2007). Outcomes of intergroup dialogue—the most rigorously assessed strategy in this pedagogy—include increases in understanding the structural nature of “racial and ethnic inequalities,” preferences for policy changes over interpersonal interventions to address conflict, consciousness raising, and capacities for bridging intercultural divides and advancing social change (Zúñiga et al., 2007, p. 64).

Public-Participation Pedagogy

Public-participation pedagogy prepares undergraduates and adults for democratic citizenship through consciousness raising about social injustices, and building perspective-taking and deliberation skills (Landry & von Lieres, 2022; McGregor, 2004). Instructional strategies range from deliberative dialogue (Shaffer et al., 2017) and experiential learning—meaning applying knowledge in realistic circumstances followed by reflection (Landry & von Lieres, 2022)—to community-engaged learning encompassing involvement in participatory budgeting and similar procedures (Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010). Schugurensky (2010) characterized such participatory procedures as “real utopias” (Fung & Wright, 2003), meaning processes offering experiences of ideals of equality and empowerment. Outcomes of public-participation

instruction include increased knowledge of democratic institutions, political self-efficacy, and concern for community, and improved negotiation skills (Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010).

Interracial-Communication Pedagogy in Public-Participation Instruction

Interracial-communication pedagogy within public-participation instruction has been described in prior research (Eseonu, 2022; Fisher & Checkoway, 2011; Ortals et al., 2021; Romano, 2017; Shea Sanger & Yew, 2021; Welch Borden, 2007). Consciousness raising was a goal of this pedagogy, whose instructional strategies ranged from community-engaged learning to skill development.

Consciousness Raising

Eseonu (2022), describing interracial-communication pedagogy in a UK undergraduate public-administration course with a public-participation unit, emphasized raising learners' awareness of their racial status. Analyzing undergraduate journalism courses employing community-based learning in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the U.S., Romano (2017) identified, as an aim of this pedagogy, elevating students' consciousness of their social positions and worldviews and of social injustices.

Community-engaged Learning

Three studies highlighted community-engaged instruction. Romano (2017, p. 155), describing journalistic community-based learning projects, emphasized students' performance of "reflective assessments." Similarly, Eseonu (2022) argued community-service learning must afford students opportunities to reflect on their experiences. In Welch Borden's (2007) U.S. undergraduate intercultural-communication course incorporating interracial-communication pedagogy, community-service learning was associated with reduced ethnocentrism.

Dialogue

Structured dialogue among learners featured in three studies. Ortvals et al. (2021) and Shea Sanger and Yew (2021) described intergroup dialogues preparing undergraduates for civic engagement. Adapting intergroup-dialogue procedures, Detroit's Summer Youth Dialogue (SYD) program for secondary-school students comprised three stages of interracial dialogue, facilitated by undergraduates (Fisher & Checkoway, 2011); afterwards, students showed increased understanding of race's influence in their lives and "of their own" and others' "racial and ethnic identities" (p. 142).

Brave Spaces

Eseonu (2022) described "brave" classroom spaces in which guidelines enabled learners candidly to discuss race and become accustomed to discomfort during those conversations.

Affinity Groups

SYD's secondary-school learners, before joining interracial dialogues, discussed intragroup issues and identities in affinity groups (Fisher & Checkoway, 2011).

Counter-stories

Eseonu (2022) instructed students in creating fictionalized counter-stories reflecting racially minoritized perspectives on narratives supporting traditional racial hierarchies.

Skill Development

Three studies underscored skill building. Acquiring empathetic listening skills was an outcome of intergroup dialogue (Ortbals et al., 2021) and community-based learning (Welch Boren, 2007), while Romano (2017, p. 155) emphasized training learners in listening "across difference."

Theoretical Framework

From this literature, the co-authors synthesized a theoretical framework for analyzing interracial-communication pedagogy in public-participation instruction, encompassing consciousness raising; storytelling and reflection; empowering, challenging, and protecting learners; skill building; and utopianism.

Consciousness Raising

A goal of this pedagogy is raising learners' consciousness of structural racism (Bell, 1987; Meghji, 2022), race as a social construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), historical and present-day racial and (neo)colonial domination (Fanon, 1965; De Lissoy, 2010), and how racial, gender, sexual, and class identities intersect, creating unique experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Gonzalez & Scerbo, 2024).

Storytelling and Reflection

This pedagogy also foregrounds learners' sharing personal stories of race (Orbe & Harris, 2023) and reflecting on their worldviews and racial injustice in society (Landry & von Lieres, 2022).

Empowering, Challenging, and Protecting Learners

This framework's third principle involves empowering, challenging, and protecting learners. These instructional strategies promote student empowerment (Eseonu, 2022). Further, structured settings are needed that encourage learners to be open to experiencing discomfort about racial injustice (Arao & Clemens, 2023), and that shield racially minoritized learners from retraumatization by accounts of racial oppression and from the burden of taking care of majority-group learners' emotions (Ragland Woods et al., 2021). Thus this framework provides for "brave spaces" which instructors establish using norms and intentional interventions (Eseonu, 2022).

Skill Building

Further, this framework incorporates the development of skills, particularly listening across racial differences (e.g., Romano, 2017) and facilitating and participating in interracial dialogues (Fisher & Checkoway, 2011).

Utopianism

Finally, the framework features utopianism. Interracial-communication pedagogy aims to enable learners—in structured environments—to experience “real utopian” conditions of racial equality (Schugurensky, 2010) and co-create future visions of racial justice (Eseonu, 2024).

Research Questions

Consequently, we ask, in public-participation trainings and courses:

- RQ1. To what extent are consciousness raising; storytelling and reflection; the empowering, challenging, and protecting of learners; skill building; and utopianism evident in interracial-communication instructional practices?
- RQ2. What challenges do trainers and educators face when implementing interracial-communication teaching strategies?

Methodology

To address these questions, a descriptive, qualitative study was conducted, comparing co-authors' interracial-communication instructional methods in public-participation trainings and courses, and identifying challenges in implementing those methods. The contexts were as follows:

UK

In a large research university in the North West of England, the second co-author teaches “The Politics of Race, Racism and Anti-racism” lecture series in a core module for first-year undergraduates studying Politics. Annually, more than 150 students—usually a homogeneous group of mainly white students, mostly aged 18-19 years—attend weekly two-hour lectures and one-hour seminars.

South Africa

At an international social-impact consultancy, the third co-author and colleagues practice this pedagogy in South Africa, where historical and contemporary racial inequity looms large. In informal instruction outside the classroom, they support multi-stakeholder groups of working-age adults in collaborating effectively while navigating high levels of diversity. Further, using more structured learning techniques, especially affinity groups, the third co-author and colleagues have consulted to large organisations addressing structural racism. The third co-author is also a faculty member of the Violence Prevention Forum's annual, nine-day facilitation-skills training, whose participants include police and community activists.

U.S.

At a public graduate school in the southern U.S.—where Black Americans endured enslavement and racial segregation—the fourth co-author teaches interracial communication in a

required course in communication and civic engagement, spanning 14 weekly, three-hour classes, in a master's program in public service from which the first co-author graduated.

Learners are approximately 45 racially and ethnically diverse master's students—one-fifth of them international students—mostly aged 22 to 35 years.

Teaching Strategies

In public-participation trainings and courses, the co-authors have incorporated interracial-communication teaching strategies¹ ranging from historical recontextualization to affinity groups.

Historical Recontextualization

Since discussions on racism may be ineffectual absent historical context (Hughes et al., 2007), recontextualizing contemporary racial injustice within historical narratives—i.e., connecting histories of enslavement, colonization, segregation, and other institutionalized discrimination to current discussions on race—helps students grasp the origins and persistence of racial inequalities (Martell, 2013). This strategy works across all age groups; relevant historical accounts should be adapted to the context. In the UK, the second co-author's lectures on histories of racial regimes in different countries feature a photo of passes Black South Africans had to carry during apartheid and a video of an Australian First Nation elder discussing British rule. Using historical multimedia resources—including documentaries, historical artefacts, and archival texts—deepens students' knowledge of the origins of contemporary racial inequalities, accommodates different learning styles, and allows abstract historical events and places to feel authentic and relevant to students.

Dialogues

In the U.S., the fourth co-author uses interracial-dialogue procedures² in structured classroom dialogues where students share personal stories about race and gain listening and facilitation skills. Guidelines aim to protect racially minoritized learners while encouraging

¹ Resources for implementing these strategies are available at:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1L0ILTeU4a2KbpJyRjQWd-gyrJjEYmzDY?usp=sharing> .

² <https://comingtothetable.org/>

learners to have their assumptions challenged. Learners reflect on dialogues in debriefing discussions and journal entries, and, later, facilitate interracial dialogues in the community and write reflection essays. These strategies are suited to undergraduates and older learners, and can be adapted for secondary-school students by adding affinity groups and undergraduate facilitators. In South Africa, the Violence Prevention Forum's facilitation course offers participants multiple opportunities to dialogue about dynamics, including interracial communication. Trainers provide varied dialogue formats, including more embodied approaches such as the soft shoe shuffle, which invites participants to express their views by walking (Anciano & Piper, 2018).

Afrofuturism and Co-creation

In the UK, the second co-author employs Afrofuturism to enhance co-creation in education (Eseonu, 2024), underscoring how African-diasporic cultural frameworks can challenge Eurocentric norms and facilitate the re-conceptualization of interracial communication via creativity, symbolism, and alternative futures. Educators can utilize Afrofuturist principles to create pedagogical environments affirming students' cultural histories and encouraging liberating discourse.

Vignettes, Small-Group Storytelling, and Counter-storytelling

The second co-author also employs vignettes, storytelling, and counter-storytelling. Student-generated vignettes can shield racially minoritized learners from the emotional labour of sharing racial-injustice stories. In the UK, learners are asked as individuals to write vignettes about interracial experiences of their choosing. Then learners exercise agency by deciding whether to share the vignettes in small-group discussions.

Further, in the UK, small-group storytelling exercises motivate students to share personal narratives about race. Educators can also enable learners to tell counter-stories challenging dominant racial views, and engage with counter-stories by African-diasporic authors. To bring counter-storytelling to life when training practitioners to be anti-racist, the second co-author shows clips from Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses*, dramatised for the BBC, and an episode of the Dr. Who series *The Story and the Engine* written by Inua Ellams and directed by Makalla McPherson. Learners then reflect on their perceptions and feelings, because these shows aesthetically highlight different types of stories of what it might mean to be Black beyond histories of domination. This strategy is particularly effective because storytelling enables people to emotionally connect with the topic beyond increasing their knowledge of racial inequalities.

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups—centered on shared racial identity—enable learners' frank discussions free from cross-racial scrutiny (Tauriac et al., 2013). Affinity groups for students from racially dominant groups facilitate examination of racial identity and biases without imposing emotional labour on racially minoritised students (Justice Unbound, 2020). Affinity groups for racially minoritised students enable exchanging experiences, formulating advocacy strategies, and cultivating solidarity. In South Africa, outside the classroom, affinity groups were established to help organizational members prepare for a structural-racism workshop; in affinity groups, members discussed their experiences, increased awareness, built dialogue skills, and cultivated resilience for upcoming brave conversations.

Challenges

The co-authors also described challenges in employing interracial-communication pedagogy in public-participation courses and trainings.

Resistance to Difficult Conversations

Students may demonstrate reluctance to engaging in discussions about race due to discomfort or fear regarding potential misstatements. White fragility is the tendency of individuals from racially dominant groups to respond to discussions about race with defensiveness or retreat (DiAngelo, 2018). Relatedly, racially marginalized students may decline to be vulnerable if their white counterparts are not sensitised to the issues or are likely to deny complicity. Instructors must manage these responses by establishing expectations and highlighting discomfort's educational value, while ensuring these conversations do not trigger further trauma.

The Burden of Emotional Labour

Students from racially minoritised backgrounds may shoulder a disproportionate share of classroom co-creation work, and bear the burden of educating peers about their experiences with racism, which can be exhausting and retraumatizing (Ragland Woods et al., 2021). Educators must lighten these burdens by intervening to equitably reallocate co-creation responsibilities, and ensuring course materials impart foundational knowledge on racism, thereby reducing dependence on students to provide insight (Shah & Coles, 2020).

Adapting Pedagogy to Different Contexts

Interracial-communication pedagogy must be tailored to diverse contexts. Although U.S. education emphasizes Black-white dynamics, other nations, including South Africa, possess unique racial histories necessitating context-specific strategies (Modood & Sealy, 2022).

Confronting Institutional Racism

Moreover, effective pedagogy requires addressing unjust institutions. Freeth et al. (2023) advocate awareness-based change processes to eliminate structural racism in organizations. Eseonu (2025) urges educators to consider how their institutions sustain injustices, and to challenge epistemologies, power structures, and norms preventing inclusion. Further, Eseonu (2024) advocates empowering students through strategies fostering critical engagement with racial and class-based tensions, and teaching students not only how to engage in discourse but also how to resist systemic oppression and influence public discourse.

Discussion

These strategies accord with the theoretical framework presented above. Consciousness raising is an aim of historical recontextualization in the UK and affinity groups in South Africa, consistent with prior studies (Eseonu, 2022; Romano, 2017). Echoing earlier research, storytelling and reflection are features of vignettes and counter-storytelling in the UK and dialogues in the U.S. (Landry & von Lieres, 2022; Orbe & Harris, 2023). Strategies in all three contexts seek to empower, challenge, and protect learners, in alignment with the literature (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Eseonu, 2022). Developing facilitation, dialogue, and listening skills is central to interracial-communication pedagogy in South Africa and the U.S. (e.g., Ortbals et al., 2021). Regarding utopianism, dialogues in the U.S. offer experiences of racial equality (Shugurensky, 2010) and Afrofuturistic instruction in the UK enables learners to generate visions of racially just horizons (Eseonu, 2024).

In addition, co-authors encountered common challenges to this pedagogy: reluctance to discuss race (Orbe & Harris, 2023), protecting minoritised students from emotional labour (Ragland Woods et al., 2021), customizing strategies to particular contexts (Modood & Sealy, 2022), and contesting institutional racism (Eseonu, 2025; Freeth et al., 2023).

These findings suggest two contributions of this article. First, this theoretical framework is designed to apply to multiple teaching strategies (compare Zúñiga et al., 2007). Second, in contrast with Romano (2017), this comparative study encompasses instruction of learners of diverse ages, in and beyond classrooms.

Our study also features limitations. Space constraints precluded offering a full comparative case study. Further, the co-authors have not formally evaluated their instructional strategies. Future research should address those limitations.

Conclusion

Interracial-communication pedagogy is essential to equipping students for engagement in multicultural democracies. Through instructional techniques like counter-storytelling and affinity groups, educators can prepare learners to be better interracial communicators who contribute to equitable and inclusive democracies.

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