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## Chapter 2 - Imagine the Possibilities: Content Analysis of an Interracial/Interethnic Communication Course

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**IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES:  
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF AN INTERRACIAL/  
INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION COURSE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Communication messages in an Interracial/Interethnic Communication course at a University in the Midwest are the focus of this study. The research interprets and analyzes the use of a weblog as an instrument to study the relationship between communication and race in the classroom. A critical examination of the student's written communication illustrates the positive impact of dialogue within the classroom. The research examines: 1) The transformational process of ineffective communication to effective communication when discussing racial issues in the classroom, 2) Examines students utilizing a weblog to expand dialogue on communication and race, and 3) The impact racial biases/views have on the effective communication process.

Key words: classroom, interracial/interethnic communication, race, racial awareness and weblog

**CONTENT ANALYSIS OF AN INTERRACIAL/INTERETHNIC  
COMMUNICATION COURSE**

Communication scholars have conducted research in the area of culture and communication for decades. However, the area of race and communication is a contemporary course specialization within the communication discipline. Pennington and Johnson indicate there is limited research on the topic of interracial communication both in the areas of pedagogy and communication scholarship (Harris, 2001). Communication scholars have written several textbooks on the topic of communication and race including *Transracial Communication* (1973) by Arthur Smith, *Interracial Communication* (1974) by Andrea Rich, and *Crossing Difference...Interracial Communication* (1976) by Jon Blubaugh and Dorothy Pennington (Orbe & Harris, 2008). In 1988, a professor at a University in the Midwest developed an Interracial/Interethnic Communication course, which is taught as an undergraduate and graduate level course at this University in the Midwest. Mark Orbe and Tina Harris (2000) developed a textbook for the Interracial/Interethnic Communication course (*Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice*). A second edition of *Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice* (2008) is currently being used as the core classroom textbook.

## **BACKGROUND**

For decades researchers have assumed that children will view race only when society addresses the issue. Researchers Bronson and Merryman (2009) found children as young as 6 months old judge others based on skin color. The research suggests children model their parent's racial behaviors. This process is an aspect of socialization. Children view the nonverbal and verbal racial indicators of their parents as a result model the parent's behavior in interactions with individuals of different races.

Research suggests that if one holds a negative view of someone from a different race that attitude can impact ethnic and racial interactions (Harris-Lacewell, 2003). Jackson and Crawley (2003) contend that the remnants of a racially charged national climate render many individuals hopelessly unequipped to cope with racial difference; this is evident in the classroom. Howard (2000) found that most universities throughout the United States are predominantly white, and this has an effect on cultural consciousness, racial tolerance and acceptance (Jackson & Crawley, 2003). Harris (2003) developed a focus group to analyze teaching methods reduce racial prejudice in the classroom and promote racial sensitivity in the classroom. Jackson and Crawley (2003) investigated white students' acceptance of a black professor in the classroom. The research results concluded that white students are indeed uncomfortable with a black professor. Stereotypes, prejudice, and racism factors were critical elements of the research analysis. Lewis (2001) examines the racial messages and lessons students receive from parents and teachers in a suburban school community. The author notes the paradox of discussing racial issues with white middle-class students. The article reviews the challenges of race in society. Rucker and Gendrin (2003) found a historically black university (HBCU) as a communication context while observing black identity and teacher immediacy in the classroom. The study suggests that African Americans are more immediate than European Americans. African American students connect more with African American professors than white professors in the HBCU classroom. The limited contact with individuals outside their race affects communication with others.

## **METHOD**

The goal of this study is to examine and expand the current research on interracial/interethnic communication by utilizing the content analysis as the research design. The area of Interracial/Interethnic Communication is a contemporary specialization within the communication discipline. This study will examine the potential impact of discussing communication and race in a university classroom setting. The research will focus on one interracial/interethnic communication course offered at a University in the Midwest. Approximately 27 students were the subjects in the study. The researcher is also a participant/observer in the study. The examination of communication and race in the classroom may encourage communication departments to offer a course(s) in interracial/interethnic communication and expand academic research in the area of interracial/interethnic communication.

Interracial/Interethnic Communication is the study of the foundation of race/ethnic relations in the United States and its effect on interpersonal relationships in the workplace, community, and school system (University Undergraduate Catalog, 2007-2009). This course is a general education requirement at a University in the Midwest. The course rationale:

Interracial/Interethnic Communication meets the U.S. diversity requirement of general education because it prompts students to consider and evaluate the foundations of race/ethnicity based identities and assumptions in the context of interpersonal interaction. The persistent issue of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States becomes visible in the language and non-verbal expression of people between and within diverse identity groups. When viewed through the lens of communicative interaction, we understand how interpersonal interaction offers socially and persuasively constructed identities, social roles

and status. The increasingly racially and ethnically diverse fabric of American Culture suggests that our interaction with “others” is near constant. The need to understand how race and ethnicity inform our communication choices, shape our understanding of messages, and clarify our individual and group relationship to a changing world is vital. (University Undergraduate Catalog, 2007-2009)

The Interracial/Interethnic Communication course is taught every semester at the University in the Midwest. On average three to four sessions of the course are offered every semester, with an average class size of twenty-eight students. The Interracial/Interethnic Communication course is designed to study the history of racial/ethnic relations in the US. The course objectives include breaking through the barriers of discrimination, prejudice, and racism by using communication strategies to create interracial/interethnic awareness. The rationale for this research is to investigate the probable positive impact of teaching an interracial/interethnic communication course on race relations. The purpose of this study is to discover what impact effective communication skills have on classroom interactions with individuals of various racial/ethnic backgrounds. In addition, the investigation will determine how discrimination, racism, and prejudice potentially impact a student’s academic success in the classroom. Furthermore, this research may develop new teaching methods for teaching in a diverse environment.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

Twenty-seven undergraduate respondents agreed to participate in the weblog study. Participants were 18 years old or older. The anonymity of each student was maintained throughout the study. The participants’ race/ethnic background includes: 14 European Americans (52%), 10 African Americans (37%) and 3 Multiracial Americans (11%). The gender of the participants includes: 18 women (67%) and 9 men (33%). The participants for the weblog were recruited from an Interracial/Interethnic Communication course during the Winter 2010 semester. The study was conducted in one semester. Electronic Interviewing along with face-to-face interaction were used for data collection (Keyton, 2011). This methodology is an interpretative approach. The analysis examines human interaction in the classroom. As a part of this study, students responded to a weekly weblog to assess their reflections on course content and discussion. Students were required to answer a list of eleven open-ended questions over the course of one semester.

**TABLE 1: WEBLOG INFORMATION SHEET**

<u>WEBLOG INFORMATION SHEET</u>
<p><u>What is a weblog?</u> According to the Web Google Blogger (2009), a blog is a personal diary, a collaborative space, a political space, and your own outlet of private thoughts or memos to the world.</p> <p><u>Weekly Weblog Discussions:</u> Each student is required to participate in a weekly weblog discussion. The questions will ask students to describe and reflect on the course textbook, course lectures, discussions, papers and class activities. Students have ONE week to complete the question. The questions will be posted on each Monday of the week. Each weblog discussion is worth 5-10 points each.</p> <p><u>Blog Title:</u> Interracial/Interethnic Communication-Discussion II</p> <p><u>Blog Address:</u> (URL):<a href="http://CTAC275-EMU2.blogspot.com">http://CTAC275-EMU2.blogspot.com</a></p> <p>Only students registered in CTAC275, Monday and Wednesday course will have access to the weblog. Each student’s name and EMU web address is required to access the weblog.</p> <p>Responses to questions can be no longer than 500 characters.</p> <p>Only constructive discussion is allowed in the online weblog. NO profanity or inappropriate language in the weblog comments. <u>Respect your classmates inside and outside of the classroom.</u></p> <p><u>Participation Points: 70 points</u></p>

The weblog questions asked students to describe and reflect on the course textbook, course lectures, discussions, papers, and class activities. The weblog access was open to students in the Interracial/Interethnic Communication course only.

**TABLE 2: WEBLOG QUESTIONS**

WQ 1: What is your gender and race?
WQ 2: Orbe and Harris (2008), authors of <i>Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice</i> , state that individuals are more comfortable discussing culture rather than race - is this statement true? Explain.
WQ 3: Chapter Two of your textbook discusses the history of race. Students reviewed the speech "A More Perfect Union." State whether you agree or disagree with President Obama's view on race or if you disagree with his comments on race.
WQ 4: In class today, I conducted the "challenge day activity." Based on the exercise in class, how will you challenge yourself to stop discrimination, prejudice, and racism?
WQ 5: Do you think that "we" as a country can eliminate discrimination, prejudice, and racism? Explain.
WQ 6: What does it mean to be an "American"?
WQ 7: According to Orbe and Harris (2008), authors of <i>Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice</i> , "If a person believes his or her race is superior to all others, it is very likely that she or he will be defensive when interacting with people from different racial /ethnic groups." Explain how this viewpoint will promote communication with others or decrease communication with others.
WQ 8: Is everything about race or do we make race matter in everything that we do? Explain.
WQ 9: Are we a post-racial society? Why or Why not?
WQ 10: Can you list two organizations/companies that promote racial diversity in their advertising? Does this impact your image of the organization/company? Explain.
WQ 11: What impact will this course, Interracial/Interethnic Communication have on your career and personal relationships with other racial/ethnic groups?

The researcher's role in the study was participant-observer. The researcher wrote a separate journal summarizing the classroom events, situations and discussions of all classroom interactions.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The researcher systematically breaks down the messages, codes 297 weblog posts, then examines explicit communication and inferred communication.

The professor's teaching tactics for the Interracial/Interethnic Communication course focus on research, theoretical and practical approaches. The professor lectures on the current research in the area of race and communication provides theoretical analysis, practical applications, cultivates effective communication, and advances dialogue with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The textbook *Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice*, by Orbe and Harris (2008) is the primary reading material for the course. The basic premise of the course is that communication is the key variable for improving race relations. On the first day of class the professor begins by discussing the six universal emotions (happiness, sadness, surprise, anger, fear, and disgust) to disclose that emotions and race are interconnected. The first assignment is the "respect exercise." The "respect exercise" gives the students the opportunity to define respect, display

positive and negative outcomes of respect, and demonstrate why individuals display lack of respect towards others. The students are then challenged to respect every person they encounter regardless of their race or ethnicity for the entire semester. The follow-up course content includes but is not limited to the history of race relations in the United States, US laws that hinder communication between races (for example: Plessey v. Ferguson (1896), Jim Crow Laws, and Allan Bakke (1978)/Affirmative Action court case), listening techniques, language barriers and bridges, analysis of nonverbal behaviors, organizational communication and race, media and race, the development of interracial/interethnic relationships, racial/ethnic conflict management skills, analysis of the educational arena and racial awareness. The final course assignment is a diversity-training workshop. The diversity training workshop requires students to form groups to develop a 3-hour presentation on one the following topics: Elementary Students and Race, Customer Service and Race Relations, Teachers, Administrators and Race, Getting beyond the Stereotypes, Media and Race, Politics and Race or Policies/Procedures in the Workplace and Race.

## **RESULTS**

Based on this study, an Interracial/Interethnic Communication course can improve race relations in the classroom. The research findings suggest that discussions on communication and race in the classroom can lead to successful communication in the workplace, personal lives, and the global community. Therefore, race relations cannot improve without the development of effective communication skills. This research indicates that race still matters in the United States (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). The students' voices demonstrated their knowledge and growth throughout the semester. Students began to comprehend the importance of communication and race. Communication developed into the central variable to promoting racial awareness. Increasing the students' communication skills with individuals of different races can influence our future relationships with others. The results of study reveal that students can create interracial friendships, change racial perceptions, and eliminate stereotypes in the classroom.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The use of a weblog as an instrument to study the relationship between communication and race changed the dynamics of the classroom. The weblog promoted supplementary dialogue. Students were cohesive during classroom discussions, lectures, and weblog chats. Over the course of the semester the students utilized several communication themes. In the beginning of the course students did not use the word "race" very often. However, by the end of the course students become comfortable with the language choice. The term "race," "racism," and "racist" were used to demonstrate the logical reasoning for racial incidents in the United States. In addition, students critically analyzed ineffective communicative racial situations and developed possible solutions to increase effective communication. Students often described ways to stop/eliminate discrimination in the classroom, workplace, and the community. As students began to understand the systematic process of racism, they devised skills to produce more effective communication messages, thus producing effective communication between individuals of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Students recognized the structural differences between racism and prejudice, then applied the terms accordingly to various situations. By the middle of the semester, students comments began to reflect on the importance of communication in the improvement of race relations. Students' reflections centered on how they had personally transformed (see Tables 4-6) by examining how they communicate with other races. The language selection of "change" highlighted the students' final transformation in the course, Students were no longer uncomfortable when discussing race, discrimination, or prejudice. Finally, each student learned to critically examine racial situations and create effective communication in the classroom.

**TABLE 3: FREQUENT COMMUNICATION MESSAGES**

Frequent Communication Messages	
Frequent words used in the weblog	Number of times the word was used in the weblog
Race, racism, and racist	198
Eliminate (stop) discrimination	14
Prejudice	12
Communication	44
Change	13

The students developed a micro-community inside of the classroom, which resulted in the creation of interracial friendships among the classmates. Students were challenged to think differently, to choose another path besides race, to view their classmates as human beings. The students left the class with an appreciation of different races and a development of effective communication skills.

Examples of weekly weblog discussions:

**TABLE 4: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

According to Orbe and Harris (2008), individuals are more comfortable discussing culture rather than race.
(Student A):
<i>"I think that culture is much easier thing to talk about than race. I have caught myself telling others that I'm Italian before I would tell them I'm white-I guess I just assume that the person looking at me could/would assume I'm European American without me telling them so. I think that it's easier to talk about culture because in America, no one calls themselves "American"-everyone is German, Italian, Irish... So it comes natural to tell a person about your background."</i>
(Student E):
<i>"In my experience this is a true statement. There is much social stigma and fear attached to the topic of race, which makes talking about the topic very difficult as every word must be said exactly as we mean it so as not to be misinterpreted and be accused of racism. Culture tends to be a topic which most people like talking about, culture is source of pride for many people and therefore people are more comfortable discussing it."</i>
Another student shared (Student K):
<i>"I believe that statement is true. Culture is mainly about a belief system. It's something you can control. With race, there's just so much history. There are a lot of problems between the many races that can be referenced."</i>

**TABLE 5: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

Students stated their opinion on whether a particular point of view promoted communication with others or decreased communication with others.
(Student M): <i>“This point of view can do both; a person who holds these beliefs will be seen communicating with other people from their racial group more often; although it’s not beneficial, it’s still communication. On the other hand, they will also decrease in communication-when you only speak to those of your racial group, you limit your education, growth and how many people you can communicate with daily-racial behavior like this can really damage a person and their understanding of the world, others history and their overall understanding of themselves.”</i>
(Student A): <i>“This viewpoint will put a barrier between you and other racial or ethnic groups. If someone thinks his or she is superior, he/she then would think of himself as superior to the individuals of other racial groups. This would decrease communication between racial groups because it would be hard to communicate and accomplish anything with that one person, whether it is the business, school, or community atmosphere.”</i>
Another student stated (Student CC): <i>“I feel that if you believed your race was more superior, you are saying you as a person are more superior which would cause the person to feel dominance over any person of another race. This would cause the person to change how he or she communicates, to not give this person a fair shot or give them respect or empowerment as a person. I feel like the person would always feel like anyone else of a different race is not credible on any subject matter. This will decrease communication because an underlying prejudgment will be formed and perpetuated.”</i>

The research lead the author to create a weblog question to analyze the message and impact of President Obama’s speech on race relations, entitled ‘A More Perfect Union.’”

**TABLE 6: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

Students watched President Barack Obama’s speech on race, entitled ‘A More Perfect Union.’” Students were then asked what impact the televised media event created. Student statements:
(Student W): <i>“On Obama’s speech “A More Perfect Union” and views on race I agreed with what he had to say. I can relate to him greatly being the fact that I am also African American and European American. The issues that people see him in only a racial aspect is an issue with this country and how people see him as either too black or not black enough is something I have dealt with also. Another thing I can relate to is because of the diversity of our families there is no way that we can view the world in a racial way. Our nation needs to take these racial views and subside so we can move on as a country and focus on the real issues. Unite as a nation and get back on top and once again be a thriving nation.”</i>
Another student shared (Student S): <i>“I agree with most of what Obama had to say. It takes a lot of courage for someone to be able to admit that they don’t necessarily agree with everything that was said, especially when they are in the spotlight as much as he is. Racism has been a long standing problem in this country, which Obama acknowledges, but he feels it can be fixed. He knows it won’t be fixed within a year or even two and it will never fully go away and be perfect, it will still be better than what we have a right now. This is something that we as a nation need to realize. These kinds of problems aren’t going to fix themselves.”</i>

To achieve this goal the professor uses the “Challenge Day Exercise,” (adapted from Oprah Winfrey Show) to create a learning shift in the classroom. During the “Challenge Day Exercise,” the professor engages the students with several questions related to race, culture, social class, and gender, which prompt responses from the students. Students openly challenge their racial and gender standpoints. The professor’s observation explains the racial shift that occurred during the “Challenge Day Exercise”:

**TABLE 7: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

(Dr. A, blog entry #4, February, 2010):
<i>“Today was amazing! I conducted the “Challenge Day Exercise” with my class. They were moved by the activity. I challenged the students to think differently: to choose another path besides race, to understand that race does matter to some and does not matter to others. That one can change the way he/she thinks and interacts with others, thus improving communication. Students left the class with an appreciation of different races, classes, and gender.”</i>

**TABLE 8: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

In the web blog the students were asked, “How will they challenge themselves to stop discrimination, prejudice, and racism? Do you think that we as a country can eliminate discrimination, prejudice, and racism? Responses of participants:
Student D:
<i>“Challenge day, truly brings the best out of people. When people have the opportunity to challenge their beliefs, they often try to make excuses. This is one of the only times I can remember just confronting my beliefs head on. Looking at how we view each other and define our beliefs can only make us as individual’s better people.</i>
Student V:
<i>“I thought the Challenge Activity was a wonderful idea and really gave a small insight into some of our classmate’s lives. In doing my part to stop racism, I will speak up when something hurtful is said. Too often derogatory things are said and maybe not even really meant to be vicious. Basically, my plan is to continue to talk to anyone with equal respect (especially if they have given no reason to have respect) and to let people (especially friends and family) know something they say is hurtful. This can be quite difficult telling friends and family they are acting in a very inappropriate manner, but it will be worth it if it can be done.”</i>

**DISCUSSION**

Teaching race is a challenging and difficult task, but has been the most rewarding experience of the professor’s life. Teaching race and communication provides students with a bridge to cross; it is essential for learning about communication and race in the classroom. This course offers students a safe place to dialogue. Students began to analyze their messages (verbal) and behaviors (nonverbal), which impact the degree to which effective communication occurs. One can conclude that half way through the semester students begin to shift their racial perspectives of others. Accepting racial differences became a normal reaction. Respecting various viewpoints became common; students learned how to utilize conflict management skills to enhance communication with individuals from various backgrounds. The majority of students had a positive experience in class. Learning occurred in the classroom and students converted into confident communicators.

The professor's observation of the web blog:

**TABLE 9: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

Dr. A, BLOG ENTRY #10, APRIL 2010
<i>"WOW, what a semester! This class was amazing! It seems as if we were closer than my other courses (I teach three sections of Interracial/Interethnic Communication a semester). The weblog allowed the students to continue to discuss issues of race and communication beyond the classroom. It is my belief that what the students learned in the course will have a long lasting effect on how they will communicate with individuals of different racial/ethnic backgrounds."</i>

Overall, the students' comments reflect a positive experience from the Interracial/Interethnic Communication course during the 2010 winter semester. Students transformed during the course. Several students shared how much they had learned in the class and the importance of diversity. Others students voiced how they will become more open-minded about race and what steps need to be taken when individuals make poor communication judgments. Several classmates discussed how they would speak to individuals of different races with less fear and anxiety. This course developed their critical thinking skills, making the students capable of discussing racial issues and reviewing race with a different lens. A student's comment on the transformation:

**TABLE 10: WEBLOG DISCUSSIONS**

(Student AA): <i>"It will for sure open my mind to new ideas. Diversity is such a great thing. People come from such different backgrounds, environments, just lives in general, which means they have a different ideas and points of views that are great to learn and hear. It will make me more open-minded and an all-around better person."</i>
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## **CONCLUSION**

Students in this course were engaged and talkative during every session. The Interracial/Interethnic Communication classroom became a confirming learning environment. Students stated their viewpoints respectfully and honestly. Racial/ethnic biases did not hinder communication in the classroom. The learning in this class can be evaluated by the final grades in the class, class participation and attendance. The final grades in the class include: 13 As (48%), 11 Bs (40), 2 Cs (.07%), 1 D (.04%) and 0 Es. The course was a safe environment and spurred active/effective communication. Students participated in classroom discussions, class lectures, and course activities on a daily basis. The promotion of effective communication skills prevented discrimination, racism, and prejudice in the classroom, consequently impacting the students' academic success in the classroom. Class attendance over the semester was approximately 90%. One might make the assumption that the topic of race might evoke fears and students would not attend the course on a regular basis, the opposite occurred. Students attended class on a regular basis throughout the semester.

Three major conclusions from this study are relevant to race and communication in a classroom setting. First, communication is the key to improving race relations. Teaching effective communication skills can enhance interactions with people of different races. It is possible to break down the barriers that hinder effective communication and teach students to improve their dialogue with each other. Second, students are willing to analyze their own poor communication judgments to improve diversity in the classroom. Thus, negative interactions can hinder effective communication in the classroom, workplace, and the community. Third, it is hoped that this study will expand race and communication discussions, by advancing research in the communication discipline.

In the future, the professor is currently expanding the research, an additional study was conducted winter 2011 semester. The researcher will compare and contrast the final results to analyze the probable impact of interracial/interethnic communication on race relations in the classroom. Further examination of communication and race in the classroom will encourage communication departments to offer several courses in interracial/interethnic communication and/or expand research in the area of interracial/interethnic communication.

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