

*Reflection Article*

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## **Decolonizing the Public Speaking Course: A Starting Point**

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*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*  
- Audre Lorde

“I’m shy so my advisor recommended I take this course,” is what we hear when we ask our students why they are in our Public Speaking classes, along with, “I’m only here because it’s a requirement.” Based on our conversations with students about their public speaking experiences, very few say they are comfortable getting in front of a group to deliver a well-organized, well-researched presentation. While this has long been the case, in our experiences, it is far more common in a post-COVID world (Mowreader, 2024). Students report high levels of anxiety and mental health issues that keep them outside the classroom, and the loss of interpersonal skills due to persistent isolation makes taking a public speaking course a dreaded proposition (Cerutti et al., 2024). At our two-year college in Queens, NY, we welcome an incredibly diverse group of students each semester: Students fresh out of high school, adults returning to college after a period of work, and high school students earning early college credits; students of all races, genders, cultures, and abilities from over 150 countries and speaking over 100 languages. They each have strengths, rich cultural identities, and yet, are insecure about speaking openly in their second or third language. As instructors of this long-standing traditional

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course steeped in European rhetoric, we are tasked with convincing our students it is worth it to study public speaking, a required course that has never considered their ethnic, gender, and cultural identities, or acknowledged their personal struggles.

## **T**he Problem

Traditionally trained, our classroom practices uphold standards that promote a Western hegemonic ideal of constructing and delivering oral presentations (Gerhke, 2016).

### *Our Classrooms*

**Jaime.** I began acknowledging the limitations of our classroom practices in my first year of teaching: A student entered class in the Spring semester; an incredibly bright, energetic, and charismatic young woman named Emily. She had dreams of becoming an attorney and had no fear of speaking publicly yet was nervous about her abilities to succeed in class. Being paralyzed from the neck down, Emily's vocal qualities were unique. Her ability to use gestures and space was limited in unexpected ways. After reviewing rubrics, assignment guidelines, textbook, and other materials, I realized that this course was not designed for students like Emily. If graded according to current standards, she would be unfairly penalized. As someone who did not share Emily's experiences, I was first shocked, and then dismayed that the public speaking framework provided to and by instructors was grossly skewed. Going forward, I began to assess students on a more individualized basis, but I never challenged the structure I was part of.

**Patricia.** A new instructor, with a background in ESL, not in Communication Studies, I was given a syllabus and textbook to teach students to prepare and present informative, persuasive, and special occasion speeches delivered extemporaneously. The grading rubrics focused on the ability to follow the traditional essay organization, and deliver, without reading, using appropriate volume, pitch, rate, pronunciation, eye contact, gestures, and posture. I recognized this tool would not work to assess a student who wore a burqa. Criteria such as facial expressions and eye contact were not applicable and would undermine my student's performance. Although the student dropped the course, I continued to use the same rubrics for a long time until I had Deaf students. Guided by the interpreters, I learned to appreciate and assess these students' performances without the voice criteria. Like Jaime, I did not question the system I was part of though I knew, coming from another culture, that eye contact and gestures are not universal or natural, but cultural and assume an "able" body. In addition, for many English learners, "standard English" remains a hurdle that hinders their progress, increases anxiety, and decreases confidence.

Language and linguistic discrimination is a well-known display of power imbalance in the public speaking classroom. In 1970, the linguist Walt Wolfram implored Speech instructors to move away from a "deficit" view of dialects to a "difference" view, which accepts different varieties of a language as equally valid. Over 50 years later—despite many scholars asserting that race, ethnicity, and culture play a role in variations of oral and nonverbal communication (Greene & Stewart, 2011; Anzaldúa, 1987)—Public Speaking textbooks continue to reinforce linguistic discrimination. de Cuba and Slocum (2020) noted the following statements describing variants of "nonstandard" varieties of English:

- "Bad grammar is much like having a bit of spinach in your front teeth." (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 185)

- “Some business and professional people find ‘improper’ English as offensive as body odor or food stains on the front of a shirt.” (Gregory, 2018, p. 241)
- “If you tend toward lazy speech, put more effort into your articulation.” (O’Hair et al., 2019, p. 135)

These examples highlight misunderstandings of language variation that influence students and teachers in ways that impede performance in the classroom, especially for non-white and/or non-native speakers, who suffer from anxiety and a lack of confidence in their ability to speak English (Reaser et al., 2017).

### ***Post-Pandemic Classrooms***

To focus solely on linguistic injustice would be a vast oversimplification of the ways Western hegemonic ideals influence how students are taught and therefore learn. In fact, this is just one of the many injustices our students face in the classroom and beyond. Daily, our students contend with the complex entanglement of social inequities including housing insecurity, financial instability, and lack of digital access rendered more acute and more visible with the COVID pandemic. Returning to the classroom after at least a year online, their higher levels of anxiety, mental health difficulties, and changed interpersonal skills, compounded the difficulties of an already nerve-wracking course. Our challenge was, then, to manage anxieties and make the

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classroom a more open, equitable space for students recovering from such collective trauma, especially since our goal is for students to gain confidence to speak up in front of others at work, during interviews, or in social settings. To “support young people in sustaining the cultural competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95), we see decolonization work as a pathway toward implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies that build equity.

## **D**ecolonization Defined

“Decolonization” can be defined in multiple ways. In fact, this is the source of some debate in the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) field (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Our work centers on the decolonization of knowledge within educational institutions instilling such knowledge to students from all walks of life, ages, ethnicities, and experiences. At a two-year community college in the most diverse borough in one of the most diverse cities in the world (Keefe et al., 2021), we encounter many ways of knowing and learning. There is no better place, therefore, to extend the work of decolonization.

At the heart of decolonization is the concept of power. While discussions on the role of hegemony in colonialism date back to Thucydides (Lebow & Kelly, 2001), scholars refer to the writings of Frantz Fanon (1961, 1959, 1952) as the beginning of explorations and deconstructions of coloniality and its effects (Rabaka, 2010). In his work on the psychology of coloniality, Fanon (1964) argued for the liberation of colonized peoples and spaces—both intellectually and physically. In the 1970s, Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano began to draw lines between colonial power and knowledge production, noting alongside Michael Ennis (2000):

Europe’s hegemony over the new model of global power concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its hegemony...repressing as much as possible the colonized forms of

knowledge production, the models of the production of meaning, their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity (pp. 540-541).

Decolonization, then, is the liberation from these hegemonic structures of power and meaning. It is within the framework of the “coloniality of power” in knowledge production (Quijano, 1992) that we center our work. Acknowledging the college or university as a space of colonization, we see the hegemony of Western thought at the heart of our higher education classrooms.

### ***A Seminar, a Grant, a Possible Solution***

Serendipity or Zeitgeist? In Fall 2023, the City University New York (CUNY) offered several BRESI (Black, Race and Ethnic Studies Initiative) grants to foster change and encourage initiatives “advancing social and racial justice.” With colleagues from other CUNY campuses, two of whom were already engaged in decolonizing work (Slocum et al., 2022), we received a grant in the category of *decolonizing curriculum*. First, we started with a deep dive into existing literature on decolonization work in higher education, then focused on Communication Studies and public speaking specifically. We finally shared knowledge in a series of public events led by guest scholars on decolonization in the Humanities and Social Sciences who are representative of formerly colonized or neocolonized communities (Gaines, 2023; Monét Martin, 2023; Foley & Gerhke, 2023). Although we invited students to attend the events, we failed to engage them at the onset of the process. We now know that to truly decolonize means to involve those impacted from the start.

### ***Decolonization Redefined for Public Speaking***

With a preliminary understanding of decolonization, we contacted representatives of the CUNY Humanities Alliance and Standing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), and collected resources from a workshop at the 2022 National Communication Association convention. In the end, we identified six tenets of decolonization applicable to the Public Speaking context and other basic courses throughout the Humanities.

**Unlearning “Traditional” Public Speaking Pedagogy.** Traditional public speaking pedagogy has a history rooted in ethnocentrism and ableism, still present in current curriculum (Foley & Gerhke, 2023). Our goal is to critically examine how we learned the “correct way” of doing public speaking and to what extent we teach the way we were taught. With our students, we will critique traditional course materials through dialogues and in-class activities exploring multiple methods of speaking publicly across cultures and abilities.

**Storytelling as a Means of Identity.** At the center of our lived experiences, storytelling is a means of representing ourselves (McAdams, 2001; Polletta et al., 2011). As we (re)construct our worlds, speech acts can serve “a position-assigning” force (Herman, 2010, p. 202.) Reframing “public speaking” as “storytelling” empowers students to control the narratives they craft and share about their lives, and to become visible agents in the dominant story.

**Including Diverse Representation in Course Materials.** Media and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall (1973), postulated the importance of analyzing representations in the media and other cultural works. Whether audiovisual or text-based, we must ask who produces such messages and for what purpose. Matsuda (2012) noted that educational materials may also influence students’ perceptions of reality and the world at-large—or at least the world of higher education (Bori, 2022). As in the media, when students are not positively reflected in course materials, they are “symbolically annihilated” (Tuchman, 1978); they do not exist or matter in the educational world. It is our charge, then, to incorporate texts and examples that celebrate our diverse student body.

**Embracing Translanguaging and Nonwestern Rhetoric.** Well-known in linguistic circles, but largely ignored in pedagogical practices, translanguaging refers to the ability of students to think and speak in multiple languages fluently, oftentimes moving among them (Najarro, 2023). Having this ability, without penalty, grants agency and confidence to students (Mora et al., 2022). To facilitate translanguaging, we can provide space for incorporating native languages, recognize various colloquialisms and dialects in speeches, and encourage alternative means for crafting arguments beyond the Aristotelian techniques.

**Co-constructing and Reciprocating Knowledge.** Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) acknowledged that learning takes place in part due to social interactions between partners as they co-construct knowledge. Moving toward student-centered learning, students can contribute to in-class activities and assessment design through defining assignment guidelines and rubrics, or engaging in peer review. By giving up control, we believe we can learn from our students as much as they can learn from us.

**Resisting Through Public Speaking.** In a social justice model of teaching public speaking, the classroom is a space for engaging students in critical analysis of societal issues through the lens of those most marginalized and to communicate resistance to dominant structures by giving everyone a voice (Putman, 2019). To foster resistance, we empower students by having them select their topics, share elements of their identities in speeches, and by making public speaking a tool for change. We can engage students' social consciousness with the hope of creating fully engaged citizens.

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**Gaining Deep Understanding of Culture(s) in Which One Works/Teaches/Learns.** “Deep understanding” goes beyond knowing students’ names and majors, and how they have arrived in our classrooms. Our responsibility is to gain meaningful knowledge of our cities, institutions, and programs to understand our positionality and make space for the expression of multiple identities in the classroom.

With these tenets in mind, we sought to reduce the power imbalance in our public speaking classrooms.

#### ***An Attempt at Decolonization***

Since our grant year, we chose to focus on *Unlearning “traditional” Public Speaking pedagogy* and *Co-constructing and reciprocating knowledge* through redefining assessment practices in our classrooms:

**Jaime.** As a preliminary step, students in my class reviewed public speaking resources from the perspectives of (neo)colonized populations. Discussions centered on what effective speeches look, sound, and feel like to students, with each providing insight on how this varies based on culture. Student comments reflected an appreciation for a more contextual approach to understanding public speaking and the inclusion of multiple cultural standpoints, but expressed hesitation about shifting the ways they had been taught to conceptualize public speaking for years. There was also confusion when students worked with me to determine assignment criteria, for instance. This was reflected in a revised persuasive speech assignment in which students designed a rubric that included items they deemed most important to effective persuasive speaking, such as knowledgeable, emotionality, convincing evidence, and presence of story(ies). However, students were uncomfortable with removing more traditional methods of

assessing, and the inclusion of new perspectives in this rubric did not completely preclude the long-held Eurocentric criteria for assessing public speaking.

This activity represents the early stages of a decolonized and asset-based approach to assignment design and assessment, and demonstrates the capacity for co-creation of knowledge. The inclusion of culturally relevant resources and a community-built rubric impacted outcomes, with grades for the persuasive speech improving moderately. It is worth noting that certain elements of decolonization practices remain hard to measure, and as students remarked, grading criteria may be more “generous,” leading to inherently improved scores. Given the positive feedback overall, this course adjustment will be expanded upon in the future.

**Patricia.** Similarly, 27 of my students participated in creating a rubric for a short speech explaining an injustice they would work with during the semester. Starting with traditional expectations about effective speaking, such as eye contact, voice, and body language, students moved to more inclusive criteria giving examples of the question of grading students with different abilities. Given the important level of anxiety in our students due to fear of public speaking, and/or being English learners, it is not surprising they proposed a more inclusive, generous, and less punitive rubric.

Twenty students had done this type of exercise before, seven had not, and one did not answer. Asked the value of creating a rubric, all 27 said the exercise was an effective way to understand the presentations' grading system, to engage their responsibility, and to create a more democratic and empowering classroom. Yet only 11 wanted to do it again. For the other five, the reasons ranged from the anxiety about creating a rubric, not having the expertise, or ending up with a lenient rubric grading everyone for effort. In addition to repeating the process to gain more acceptance and assessing the results, students could also choose to be evaluated with the students or the instructor's rubric. In making these slight changes to our pedagogy, we opened the door to more intentional decolonization work. In examining grading criteria, students acknowledged the limitations of traditional course materials, while addressing their assumptions and biases, thus beginning the process of unlearning so central to decolonization. Anecdotal feedback has been positive as these activities continue to evolve.

### ***Encouragements and Challenges***

Unlearning is a lengthy process; even when given the opportunity to decide on grading criteria, students stay close to what they know, which is similar for us. We still teach informative, persuasive, and special occasion speeches with an introduction, body, and conclusion. Even authors of recent textbooks who strive to open our minds to different forms of delivery and audience engagement remain traditional about the structure and organization of oral presentations (Gerhke & Foley, 2023). But positive student feedback confirms the decision to continue our decolonization work. Listening is one area of further research. Speech rubrics tend to focus on the speaker's performance, not on the listeners. To further decolonize, we must also question how we listen. Going beyond teaching the importance of and ways to improve listening, we need to interrogate the meaning of terms such as “clarity” and “intelligibility” with our students to undo the ethnocentric ideas that have shaped our listening practices with the hope of welcoming differences without judgment.

Within the rigid confines of higher education institutions, decolonization will happen little by little. At the least, we can all start making incremental changes before addressing entrenched disciplinary concepts and ideas.

## **O**ur Positionality & What This Work Has Meant

As two white, able-bodied women, the grant offered a space to reckon with past experiences of our participation in colonizing students to the Western conventions of organizing and presenting information in public. While we continue our work in decolonization, we are left with this question: Is it even possible to decolonize in the ways we imagine? For those who say to decolonize is to make things unrealistic or “too easy” and thus not prepare students for a rough and often unfair world, we can respond by engaging students early in the process, maybe with a questioning of the traditional speech format and delivery to give them the tools to challenge societal expectations beyond the classroom.

The proposed tenets may offer an entry into decolonizing the Public Speaking course to build greater equity. However, no matter how sincere our intentions, our current social and cultural positions remain those of privilege and power. We have the time and energy that many do not, to reflect on decolonization. Increasingly, scholars critique the practice of decolonization itself, calling to “decolonize decolonization” with the belief that decolonization should be “defined by, led by, and the benefits reaped by...the indigenous, formerly colonized, and (neo)colonized” (Opara, 2021, sec. 3). To that point, the vast majority of faculty in higher education continue to be white, and even more are white and male (NCES, 2023). Yet, aware of this quagmire as two white women in a largely non-white environment, we can start by decentering ourselves in the classroom and, as facilitators, strive to empower students to become actors of social change. And if there is no place for us in a fully decolonized system, it will be okay.

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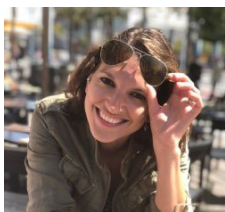
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### Author Note

The authors would like to acknowledge their funding from the City University of New York's BRESI (Black, Race and Ethnic Studies Initiative) grant #7W201-1201, and their grant team members.



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To Cite this article:

Riccio, J. & Sokolski, P. (2025). Decolonizing the Public Speaking Course: A Starting Point. *Dialogues in Social Justice*. 10(1). Article 1790.