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Embracing and Rejecting Student Agency: Documenting Critical Reflection Practices in the Basic Communication Course Classroom

Blair C. Thompson
Western Kentucky University

Renee Robinson
Saint Xavier University

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In the past two decades, student-centered learning is an idea that has moved to the forefront as educators have begun to place more value in students becoming more actively involved in their education, leading to increased interest in both student agency and reflective learning (Brookfield, 1995; Ericson & Ellett, 1990; Palmer, 1998; Weimer, 2002). This represents a shift from the more traditional model of teacher-centered learning. To date, a majority of extant educational and instructional research has primarily focused on the importance of the teacher in instructional environments. Although the teacher is an important aspect of the teaching learning process, the emphasis on instructor ability and responsibility in empirical research has diminished the perceived role that students have in educational contexts whereby creating an imbalanced learning equation that ignores student responsibility for their personal, affective and cognitive development. This imbalance has created a need for research focusing more directly on the experience of the learner in a more student-centered environment.
At the heart of student-centered learning is the idea that the balance of power in the classroom needs adjustment; in traditional classrooms power lies almost solely with the teacher (Brookfield, 1995; Palmer, 1998; Weimer, 2002). The teaching and learning process consists of two interactants, the teacher and the student, which co-exist in the context of a classroom exploring specific content, in this case the basic communication course. While the ways in which teachers use power to control classroom learning and student behavior has been heavily explored (e.g., Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1985; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987) the linear focus of this research, on the role of the teacher, has ignored the role of the student in the construction of power in the classroom (Sprague, 1994). More specifically, instructional scholars have operationalized power, as techniques that teachers use to change student behavior (e.g., Richmond et al, 1987). As a result, the exploration of power in educational settings has been primarily concerned with classroom management techniques implemented by the instructor (e.g. McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comcadena, 2006). Power has not been examined as thoroughly in terms of learner characteristics or behaviors of choice in educational settings like the basic course. The lack of information on student power has created a gap in the literature and knowledge that we possess about this student behavior also known as student agency. This is a noteworthy oversight as power in the educational context is far more complex than a set of teacher behaviors (Sprague, 1994).
One educational movement that has placed a great deal of focus on student-centered learning is critical reflection. Reflection has become a buzz word in educational circles, and as Ford and Russo (2006) poignantly noted, it has been defined in a variety of ways conflating the term, making it important for scholars to specifically delineate what they mean by “reflection”. In this study, critical reflection consists of two key elements, student reflection and agency, drawing specifically from how Brookfield (1995) and Weimer (2002) conceptualized the idea. Student reflection consists primarily of employing reflective exercises in the classroom throughout the semester which foster student thinking about their learning experiences (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). Student agency is the ability for students to determine courses of behavior that positively impact student learning and performance, which may include altering course assignments, content, or policies (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). The push for critical reflection stems from the notion that students learn most effectively when given a level of agency to make adaptations in a course and reflect on their learning as this grants students an increased level of control in their educational experience (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). Unfortunately, most classroom practices do not exercise this type of student learning experience despite the wealth of literature advocating reflective practices in the classroom (Ford & Russo, 2006). It is critically important, as Ford and Russo argued, that researchers “examine ways in which reflection is enacted in the classroom” (p. 1) in order to document the effects of the process, specifically as related to learning outcomes.
One context where critically reflective practices can be examined on a larger scale is the basic course. Because the basic course director typically oversees a number of sections, reflexive practices could be implemented across these classes. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the number of teaching assistants and instructors that basic course directors oversee represents an important pedagogical training ground to help critically reflective teaching practices become more mainstream as teacher assistants progress to faculty members. Furthermore, as these faculty members practice reflexive teaching and learning behaviors in the basic course they are more likely to implement it in other courses they teach resulting in reflexive practices across courses that stemmed from its introduction in the basic course. Although it is important for faculty to be exposed to and practice reflexive pedagogy, it is also vital for students to be introduced to critically reflective teaching practices early in their university experience to both normalize and create expectations of agency and reflection in their coursework. In sum, the basic course director role serves both as a means to expose students to critical reflection as well as teachers. The present study makes a unique contribution to research in the basic course context, focusing on the role of students in the critically reflective learning process while examining teaching practices in the basic course that create opportunities for agency to occur in the instructional setting.

This study explored classroom power through the implementation of critical reflection exercises aimed at promoting student agency and learning in the basic course classroom as phenomena that significantly im-
pact the instructional environment. Minimal research exists on reflection. One study that has focused on reflection was conducted by Ford and Russo (2006) which explored teachers’ perceptions of the critical reflection process, examining how teachers enact reflection in their classrooms and what results they report. Ford and Russo found teachers use a variety of writing activities (e.g., reflection exercises, one–minute papers, synthesis papers) to foster student reflection in their classrooms. Teachers reported the outcomes of reflection in their classrooms included performance (student higher level thinking and understanding) and agency. Of particular interest Ford and Russo noted that while “Most respondents [teachers] identified practices or strategies they used to promote student reflection, and many referred specifically to a ‘reflection paper’...there were very few specific connections with formal reflection practices or the literature of reflection” (p. 5). Ford and Russo did not define “reflection” for their participants, thus, few teachers used the reflection practices as conceptualized by educational scholars (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). Our study builds on Ford and Russo’s (2006) study by specifically analyzing students’ reflections on their learning in the basic course classrooms where teachers employed more formal reflection practices as outlined by the educational literature (see specific details in methods section), thus, making a unique contribution to the study of critical reflection and simultaneously bringing a new area of scholarship to basic course research. Further, Ford and Russo (2006) called for research that focuses on students’ perceptions of reflection practices in the classroom.
Accordingly, three research questions guided the study: (1) how do students react to the critical reflection process? (2) how do students embrace and reject power in critically reflexive classrooms? and (3) how does the critical reflection experience affect the student learning process? These questions helped to discover how students react to the content, activities and assignments, changes students make within the basic course when granted agency, and how the critical reflection process enhanced or detracted from learning in the basic course. These questions also prompted our thinking about the role of the basic course director as curriculum developer and pedagogical expert in relation to instructional strategies that incorporate critical reflection and ways in which he/she can advocate for student agency via reflection in the basic course.

**METHOD**

The study used an interpretive approach to gain a more comprehensive, in-depth understanding of students’ perceptions of the critical reflection process (Strauss & Corbin, 1988) as well as students’ views on increased levels of agency in the classroom. This paper stems from a larger study, but our analysis here focuses on four basic course sections: *Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication* (three sections) and *Perspectives on Human Communication* (one section) taught during the fall 2008 and spring 2009 semesters. The *Honors Fundamental of Speech and Communication* is a hybrid course combining the study of public speaking and introductory elements of communication in a variety of contexts (e.g., Interpersonal, Organiza-
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Perspectives of Human Communication is a course focusing on communication theories in multiple contexts ranging from interpersonal communication to mass media. An investigation of critical reflective practices in the basic course allowed for a more diverse student population, increasing the likelihood that students of all majors and demographics enrolled in the critically reflexive basic course would be exposed to the process and share information with other professors and students about critical reflection and student agency that may result in a pedagogical paradigm shift that focuses on engaged learning through reflection and agency. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only four basic course sections were included, as we first wanted to start with basic course sections taught by teachers experienced with critically reflective teaching practices prior to examining these practices on a wider scale basis with teachers less familiar with these practices. This initial study with basic course sections should spur a follow-up study as well as provide valuable feedback for teacher training with respect to critically reflective teaching practices necessary for a larger study in the future. The 81 student participants in this study consisted of 48 females and 33 males. The participants were predominantly Caucasian (73). The demographic make-up also consisted of four African American, one Hispanic, and three other students.

**Data Collection Procedures**

A series of five critical reflection assignments (five questions per reflection on average; final reflection consisted of 13 questions) were administered over the course of each semester which asked students to reflect
on their learning in the basic course, ways to improve the classroom experience throughout the semester, and their perceptions of student agency during their experience in a critically reflective classroom. Some reflection assignments were conducted in class while others were completed electronically via Blackboard. Students were also given the option to alter the basic course syllabus, granting them agency to make changes to enhance their educational experience. Adhering to Weimer’s (2002) “syllabus draft” procedures, students had the opportunity to revise the syllabus (e.g., change assignments) pending teacher approval. With respect to the first research question, how do students react to the critical reflection process, we asked questions such as, What have you liked/disliked about the critical reflection exercises? In terms of the second research question, how do students embrace and reject power in critically reflective classrooms, students provided feedback through questions such as what forms of student agency do you wish you had more (or less) of in this (and other) courses? Finally, with respect to the third research question, how does the critical reflection experience affect the student learning process, questions in the reflection exercises included what would you like the instructor to do differently to improve student learning.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was used to analyze over 400 critical reflection responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We first conducted open coding on the data collected from the basic course. Open coding consisted of the initial categorization of student data, which lead to the identification of preliminary themes. Axial
coding consisted of multiple stages, including reading the transcripts again in order to re-conceptualize the categories as well as interpret emergent themes. We clustered related codes and systematically reduced the data. Our themes were consistent across the data collected from each classroom. In the final report, we weaved in exemplar quotations from the reflection responses, serving as rich data to support our emergent themes.

As mentioned earlier, both researchers have naturally employed critical reflection exercises into the basic course sections they teach, a practice which led to the idea for this research project. Therefore, it was necessary for us to address our researcher bias as related to this research. Bias is inevitable in interpretive research as the researcher(s) themselves are the primary instrument (Creswell, 2002; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), and in our case, we both acknowledge our “buy-in” to the importance of the critical reflection process. In order to address our biases, we constantly compared the data, analyzing student participants’ responses to insure that our analysis stayed true to the data. We also shared rich quotations in the findings section to directly illustrate participants’ experience of the reflection process from their perspectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Findings**

The questions from each of the reflection exercises produced rich data regarding students’ perceptions of the critical reflection process. Data analysis revealed emergent patterns in response to the three research questions, including *students’ positive reaction* to the
critical reflection process, students’ tendency to both embrace and reject power/agency in the classroom, and influence on student learning. The emergent patterns indicated that students believe the critical reflection process enhanced their educational experience in the basic course. We incorporated excerpts from students’ responses to illuminate their perceptions of the critical reflection process.

**Positive Student Reaction**

In response to the first research question, students primarily reacted positively to the critical reflection process. With respect to the critical reflection exercises, a majority of students across all sections found value in the reflection process, many viewing courses which offer them the chance to reflect and adapt the syllabus as ideal (the ability to adapt the syllabus will be addressed in response to the second research question). Students typically offered comments such as the reflection exercises are “a good process for giving feedback” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*) while others elaborated with statements such as, “I liked the critical reflection process because students get to speak their mind about the course and are asked their opinion about changing the course. I would not change anything about the critical reflection process” (*Perspectives on Human Communication*). Students explained that the reflection exercises gave them the power to provide feedback to help improve the basic course while they were still taking it, making the feedback more effective and meaningful as the teacher received better information that could be implemented almost immediately. The reflection exercises enabled the teacher to know
what was going well (and not so well). In the critical re-

flection exercises, a majority of students indicated that

the course concepts were explained very well. In fact,

one student even commented, “The course was already
going well; we didn't need to do so many reflection exer-
cises” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). This theme consisted of three relevant sub-
themes: successful classroom practices/need for clarifi-
cation, student-teacher communication, and ways to fur-
ther improve the critical reflection process.

**Identifying successful classroom practices and need for clarification.** One reason that students re-
acted positively to the reflection exercises, stemmed from the opportunity for them to identify classroom
practices that worked successfully. Students indicated
they liked courses in which the teacher employed a mix-
ture of student discussion, question/answer sessions in
class, student activities/group work, case studies, visual
models, and lecture with minimal PowerPoint slides.

Students also enjoyed the use of videos, especially via

*YouTube*. While students identified the aspects they
liked in the course, they also pointed out things they
would like to change within the class so the teacher
could try to address it. For example, in one course a stu-
dent requested that the teacher offer “more explanation
about the paper due at the end of the semester” (*Honors
Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). During
the overview of the reflection patterns during the course
itself, the teacher went over the paper more thoroughly
to help clarify what students needed to do to be success-
ful on the assignment.

Additionally, the reflection exercises encouraged

students to reflect on what they did and did not under-
stand and informed the teacher what to specifically review prior to the test. For example, in the Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication sections 13 students indicated before the first test that they struggled with the debate over communication and intentionality. Accordingly, the instructor focused a good deal of time on this issue during the test review session. Another example concerns the Perspectives on Human Communication course in which a student commented “It would be helpful if we could periodically meet to discuss the progression of assignments and make sure that I am doing them correctly.” This student’s concern was addressed via the extension of office hours and the inclusion of instant messaging and video chats. The addition of alternative communication channels allowed for an improved student-teacher communication interaction as well as assisted the student in better understanding the course content. However, the instructor also learned ways to redesign her classroom space so as to further advance opportunities for student-teacher communication and improved student learning.

**Student-teacher communication.** Interestingly, students identified positive change in student-teacher communication and relationships. Students attributed this positive change to the fact that the reflection process opened up and increased communication between the teacher and students, both of which made students feel more comfortable in the basic course classroom. One student commented “[I] don’t feel as if the teacher is on a completely different level than students” which “makes me more comfortable speaking up in class” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication). Further, another student added that the process created
a more “caring” relationship between teacher and student:

I feel comfortable talking to my professor in this class and asking questions as opposed to other classes where I am almost afraid to talk to my professor. I definitely like that you do the reflections because it shows you care. (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*)

Students even suggested that the reflection exercises made the teacher seem more knowledgeable because they had so much information about what was working well and what needed to be further addressed in the course. One student commented, “I feel more open and like we are on a deeper level, which helps him have credibility and effectiveness” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). Several students echoed that the critical reflection exercises assisted in the creation of a more open classroom environment.

**Improving the critical reflection process.** While students liked most aspects associated with the reflection process, students also identified elements they did not like about the reflection process. Primarily, students did not like the repetitive nature of the reflection exercises, offering specific suggestions like the teacher “only ask each question once throughout the semester” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). Additionally, students mentioned that the reflection process differed from what occurred in other classes, which took some students time to adjust to; most students grew accustomed to the process and did not mind it as they became more familiar with it. Although students typically adjusted to the reflection process, a majority of students indicated they probably would not use the reflection
process in the future, primarily because they believed other teachers do not offer reflection exercises as part of their courses. One student specifically commented, “I probably will not use this process again because most of my teachers do not listen to me” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication). Another student noted, “This is the first time that a professor has asked the students about the course and its activities” (Perspectives on Human Communication). However, students also expressed the desire for reflection exercises to be offered in other courses. For example, one student noted:

I will suggest this to my future teachers so that as a class you get feedback...because it's one thing for me to say something, but sometimes when you have lots of people suggesting the same thing change happens. (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication)

A second student commented on the desire for more opportunity in other courses to participate in critical reflection practices:

I wish other classes allowed this type of student agency and feedback. There seems to be a very impersonal relationship between students and professors in other classes, thus causing minimally effective learning environments. Courses are offered for students and should therefore be structured around what proves most beneficial to their learning. (Perspectives on Human Communication)

Fortunately, a few students developed plans to use the reflection process in the future as in the following case: “Every once and a while I like to sit down and think
about my coursework...now I have a structure to do that” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*).

**Student Agency: Rejecting and Embracing Power**

In addition to students’ favorable response to the critical reflection exercises, students also reacted positively to the opportunity to adapt the basic course to assist in their learning experience. While students certainly embraced the power to make improvements to the course within the semester itself via the reflection exercises, the opportunity to alter course assignments represented the primary way students embraced and rejected student agency in these critically reflective classrooms. Interestingly, most students indicated they placed more value on the syllabus changes than the reflection exercises, though students noted both were very beneficial to their learning. Students who embraced the opportunity to alter course assignments were glad they took advantage of the increased levels of agency. Conversely, students who rejected the agency offered to them in the critically reflective basic course typically wished they had taken advantage of the opportunity to alter the course.

Most students appreciated the level of agency offered to them in the courses included in the data set. In fact, students commented that the level of agency in critically reflective classrooms was ideal. A prime example of this comes from a student who stated “I wish I had this much power to change and improve the syllabus in all of my classes. It makes learning more interesting because it is more catered to me personally” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). Another student shared, “I believe student
agency is effective and creates a positive atmosphere in the classroom. It definitely enhances motivation and learning” (*Perspectives on Human Communication*). Students embraced the opportunity to change assignments as it allowed them to work to their strengths. Students who made changes to the syllabus typically altered course assignments in the following ways: replacing individual projects with group assignments, developing teaching units in place of a paper or test (primarily those planning to teach), and replacing tests with synthesis papers. In addition, students changed due dates, added more extra credit opportunities, and dropped their lowest grade. Students who embraced the opportunity to make changes to the basic course found a connection between that and increased learning (more details on student learning are discussed in the final emergent pattern). Most students believed strongly that students should be the one who is primarily responsible for their own learning, as illustrated in the following exemplar:

I think it is important for the student to have some power in decision making in the courses that they take. College is about individual performance and you are the one paying for your education. I think you should be able to shape things to the way you perform best so you can get the most out of your class. (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*)

Students tended to think that they should bear the responsibility for their own learning, which the increased levels of agency enabled them to do. Although students viewed the responsibility for learning as primarily their own, most students believed that teachers still needed a good deal of power in the classroom. Students suggested
they should be able to make a few changes to the course, but the teacher still needed to have some things required in the course. While some students embraced the opportunity to adapt the basic course to better suit them, surprisingly a majority of students rejected the agency offered them, choosing not to make changes to the course syllabi though all students participated in the reflection exercises. The primary reason students chose not to alter the syllabus was that they were uncomfortable with the freedom to make such choices since they had never had that opportunity in other courses. It is important to note, nearly all the students explained that even if they did not make changes to the course, they truly appreciated that they had the chance to make changes if they chose. This student sentiment is expressed by the following individual: “After reviewing the syllabus, I do not see anything I would like to change at the moment. Thank you for the opportunity though. It is good to know there are other options available” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication). Students grew more accustomed to learning in a critically reflective classroom as the semester continued, and students who rejected agency at the beginning of the course indicated that if they were given the opportunity to make changes to a course in the future, they would be much more likely to do so. However, many students doubted whether they would be granted the opportunity to adapt a course to better fit their needs in other courses, even though they desired these opportunities. Students made striking comments that suggested in other courses they had little to no agency to affect change. For example, one student commented that they [students] “were
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slaves to our teachers’ wills” in most other courses and another student noted that “I usually change me to fit the course” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). Additionally, a *Perspectives on Human Communication* student shared, “Well, only your class lets the students get involved in how the class is going. It’s great in your class. As for other classes, just another assignment in the wind.” These statements offer critical insight into the results of not offering students a level of agency that enables them to adapt the course in order to improve their educational experience as well as describes what student life is like for them in other courses.

Interestingly, students who made changes to the course were so pleased with their experience that they often encouraged students who did not change the syllabus to do so, one student stating that they should “not be afraid to make changes to the syllabus” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*). Some students’ experience in a critically reflective classroom changed their view of student agency as they had never had the choices to alter assignments as they did in these basic course sections, leading to a more positive view of students taking a more proactive approach to their own learning rather than have the teacher decide everything students would do in the classroom. Put simply, a student reported, “I used to think I had no freedom of choice (related to course assignments), but this class has changed my perspective for the better” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*).
Reflective Practices and Learning: An Adaptive Intersection

Based on the findings, students believed that the critical reflection experience enhanced the student learning process in the basic course. The critical reflection process enhanced student learning both via the process of reflecting on their experience in the course throughout the semester and the opportunity to alter assignments as alluded to in the first two emergent patterns. However, the connection between the critical reflection process and learning merits further attention. The following two sub-themes help to capture students’ perceived connection between reflective practices and learning: freedom to learn through syllabus adaptation and learning through reflection.

Learning via syllabus adaptation. Students indicated the critical reflection process enhanced the learning process because they had the ability to alter the course assignments in the syllabus which helped to both create a more positive attitude towards the course as well as increase student motivation, in turn, producing higher achievement and better understanding of the course content. One student commented, “I believe student agency is effective and creates a positive atmosphere in the classroom. It definitely enhances motivation and learning” (Perspectives on Human Communication).

Across the data set, students indicated that they learned more because the opportunity to adapt the syllabus enabled them to study course content and develop assignments they cared about studying/completing. These elements increased student excitement/enthusiasm about and interest in the course. These
factors worked together to foster a learning environment in which students increased their effort and motivation to learn in the course. For instance, a student declared, “I think it definitely enhanced my learning, and I know that it has really helped others. I stuck to the syllabus, but having the alternate options made me feel more at ease about the material” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*).

Students explained that the ability to adapt the syllabus also enhanced their learning by increasing their freedom and the flexibility of the course due to the option to alter course assignments. Moreover, the option to change the course encouraged students to become more proactive as they were more involved in shaping their own learning process, which helped students think outside the box of what normally is done in a course. These options also enabled students to draw upon their strengths and interests. Combined, students indicated that these elements increased their motivation to learn because as one student put it, they could “negotiate and contribute to how the class works...which makes (students) more comfortable with the learning environment” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*).

One student who altered course assignments suggested that the reflection process, “Definitely, improved my understanding (of course content) and grade” (*Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication*).

Enhancing student learning through reflection exercises. The reflection exercises themselves enhanced the student learning process. For example, a student stated that the reflection process enhanced the learning process because it, “Let me look back at what we’ve done” throughout the course itself (*Honors Fundamen-
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Thus, the process of reflecting on the course enabled students to learn the material more effectively (e.g., students learned by reflecting on their learning). Students further explained they valued the voice they were given within critically reflective classrooms, as represented in the following excerpt:

It influenced my learning because it opened up the possibility of having a voice in the class. That allowed me to have the freedom in my learning to be more open and try new things. I wanted to learn more and be more involved with the class” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication).

Thus, the reflection process increased students’ motivation to learn in the basic course. The reflection exercises enabled students to identify what they were learning in the course throughout the course itself, but also enabled students to identify and inform the teacher what they struggled to understand so that they could work together to help improve their comprehension of the most challenging course content. One student explained this process:

Critical reflections keep my mind thinking about this class. I believe that they are vital to help you and me because I know that if I am confused on something, I can put it in here [the reflection exercises] and you will be able to answer it. (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication)

To put it simply, the process of constantly reflecting on their learning created greater student involvement. A student commented that the process facilitated students being “more involved in shaping (their) own learning.
process” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication). One student even commented that the process of completing the reflection exercises and reviewing the patterns that emerged from other students’ responses in the class “Made me feel like we were receiving the best education based on our responses” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication).

Further, the reflection exercises also encouraged students to inform the teacher what was not working in the basic course so that changes could be made which might enhance the students’ learning experience in the course. The power to make changes to the class during the course itself coupled with the process of reflecting on what they have learned (or not learned) made the reflection exercises a valuable part of the learning process. Additionally, the reflection process created a more positive learning environment. The following excerpt provides a telling example of how the reflection process helped to create such a place:

The level of student agency was effective because it allowed the students to suggest ideas that catered to their needs. Most of their needs were similar to mine, so the ability to influence the course ultimately enhanced my learning and performance. (Perspectives on Human Communication)

The participants pinpointed student input as an integral part of the reflection process. One student stated, “The critical reflections helped in terms of allowing us to give feedback and let the instructor know our thoughts on a lot of matters” (Honors Fundamentals of Speech and Communication).

In summation, the critical reflection process granted students’ agency to alter course assignments and en-
couraged them to reflect on the class and their own learning, creating a more positive view of the class leading to a class environment that was more conducive to student learning.

**DISCUSSION**

This study explored classroom power through the implementation of critical reflection exercises aimed at promoting student agency and learning in the basic communication course classroom as phenomena that significantly impact instructional environments. It specifically did so by investigating how students react to the critical reflection process, how students embrace and reject power in the critically reflexive classroom, and how the critical reflexive process affects the student learning process. These results tap into a new area of inquiry in the *Basic Communication Course Annual*, providing key data to help basic course directors make important decisions about whether or not to introduce critical reflection practices into the basic course context.

The use of critical reflection exercises as they related to student learning and classroom choices about content, course assignments, and learning activities, in general, had a number of positive outcomes in the basic course classroom. The results offer support to Weimer’s (2002) suggestion that giving students increased agency offers several benefits including improved communication between teachers and students, increased student effort, less resistance, and positively changes the classroom environment. For example, students reported their appreciation of and desire to have more opportunities to engage in student agency activities. Furthermore, stu-
Students articulated they not only enjoyed the process but they felt that they controlled their learning resulting in them feeling good about the course. Scholars advocating critical reflection have noted the importance of students having increased levels of control in their learning experience (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). This feeling encouraged students to learn more and assisted them in developing their academic identities further as students. These findings support the work of Thomas (as cited in King, 1983) regarding the effect of student agency on self-confidence building and identity formation. It also solidifies the connection between the affective and cognitive learning relationship (Plax et al, 1986).

These research findings further underscored the importance of teacher-student communication. Interestingly, according to students, elevated levels of agency and reflection improved student-teacher communication. Students want an opportunity to provide input on course design, assignments, and content. Essentially, students want to convey to instructors their interests in specific content and their personal learning strengths. This requires a teacher communicator style (Norton, 1983) that is encouraging, open, and warm consisting of teacher generated messages that seek student feedback and solicit student input into how classes are conducted and structured. These results are relevant to teachers across disciplines and across various levels of courses.

However, this type of basic course classroom environment can only exist if teachers undergo a radical paradigm shift regarding their beliefs and perceptions about students and the role that communication plays in learning. Basic course directors can play a significant role in this shift due to the large student population...
they have access to and because they work directly with faculty, adjuncts, and future teachers in the discipline. Basic course directors have multiple opportunities to emphasize critical reflection as a way to alter courses, engage students, and provide more information related to teacher evaluation. A communicative organization (in this instance classroom) can only exist if there is a valuing of the interactants. In other words, teachers cannot position themselves in a class as the “sage” of subject matter and expect students to engage. Instead, students must be viewed as individuals who enter the basic course with experiences, ideas, and valuable contributions. Students must be seen as active participants in the world and part of their world consists of the classroom.

In addition to providing information to teachers on course content and design, students also want to share feedback about pedagogical strategies that enhance the classroom experience. The findings of this study reveal that students enjoy sharing with instructors teaching techniques that assist them in the advancement of their learning. This can be a very valuable tool for teachers across course levels. However, in order for teachers to benefit from student input about teaching, students must learn the language of teaching. Consequently, students must identify and understand pedagogical strategies such as assessment techniques, case studies, group work, instructional discussion, and presentations among other kinds of teaching activities so they are able to provide more meaningful feedback to instructors about their pedagogical performance. Therefore, in addition to teachers providing instruction on course content, we advocate dedicating time to discussing the learning activi-
ties associated with the course assignments and content so that students are better able to analyze their own learning processes and exercise classroom power while assisting in the instructor’s development of pedagogical content knowledge.

Some students experienced frustration in doing the critical reflection exercises and other students chose not to make course changes. Students experienced frustration with the critical reflection process as they felt they would not be able to use it to modify future courses. It was discouraging to discover that a majority of students indicated they probably would not use the reflection process in the future and that so few students took advantage of the opportunity to alter the syllabus to fit their learning style. To alleviate this frustration, basic course directors can implement faculty development seminars and workshops to assist educators in engaging in the critical reflection process to improve their own teaching. Furthermore, instructors should be trained on how to develop and implement the critical reflection process into their courses in order to promote student agency and to increase teacher-student communication while positively influencing student learning. Although basic course directors face a challenge in recommending that those teaching the basic course offer students agency to make syllabus changes due to the need for more standardization, there are certainly elements of the basic course which can be modified while not interfering with larger general education assessment purposes. Further, teachers in all courses can take important steps to increase students’ exposure to critical reflection practices.
As for the students who chose not to make course modifications, many of them reported that they were uncomfortable doing so. This discomfort may stem from the lack of experience the student had with the critical reflection process as well as course modification options leading to student agency opportunities.

In order for student agency to exist and for students to recognize their role in the teaching learning process, educational institutions must create a culture that is conducive to this type of student participation and interaction in classroom settings (Brookfield, 1995; Weimer, 2002). This also means that student experiences, skills, and voices must be valued in the process of learning. Consequently, teachers must recognize that they along with their texts are not the only possessors of knowledge in a classroom. Beyond teacher’s relinquishing instructional control to their students, they must also come to terms with their own personal vulnerabilities. Critical reflection practices and student agency often reveal information to the teacher that can challenge their professorial identities, create cognitive dissonance regarding theory and practice, and invert their pedagogical ideals. Encouraging critical reflection and student agency is a risky business for the educator; however, it is a calculated gamble with enormous benefit to both the teacher and the student. Basic course directors can play a fundamental role in further advancing these pedagogical opportunities. There is significant need for departments of communication to emphasize pedagogy as well as content. An emphasis on pedagogy creates changes that could alter other communication courses (e.g., once an instructor teaching the basic course uses critical reflection then they are more likely to use it in
another course they teach). Department-wide critical reflection permits the inclusion of student voices in curricular modifications departmentally. Critical reflection could balance the teaching-learning equation and further solidify the teacher, content, and learner relationship while simultaneously impacting the department's decision making.

**STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are a variety of strengths associated with this research project. For example, the study permitted us to further explore the critically reflective classroom, student perceptions of critical reflection activities, and to reflect on our individual pedagogical practices in our respective learning spaces. This study also underscored the role that communication plays in learning spaces, the student-teacher relationship, and the fundamental importance of obtaining feedback about what we do as instructors and what students feel and think as learners. Although this research project represents an important step in documenting student perceptions of the critical reflection process as related to increased levels of student agency and the relationship between reflection and student learning in the basic course, limitations exist. First, as acknowledged in the methods section, researcher bias was present. As teacher’s who actively practice critical reflection, this data and analysis may provide an overly positive view of the reflection process. However, because few teachers actively practice the formal reflection process as conceptualized by educational scholars (Ford & Russo, 2006), it was an important step to collect and analyze data from students in
the basic course classroom where critical reflection is enacted. We did take several analytical steps to reduce bias and were careful to include data in the final report that reflected both students’ preference for and struggles with critically reflective classrooms. Another limitation relates to the findings regarding student learning. While most students strongly believed that critical reflection practices enhance their learning, this data was self-reported. More specific measures of student learning needed to be developed for future research. Finally, it is important to recognize that three sections here represented honors sections. Students in other sections may react to reflecting on their own learning and student agency differently.

This study represents the first in a long overdue area of study and represents only an initial step into research with critically reflective practices in the communication classroom. The next important step is for researchers to conduct studies across a much larger number of basic course sections in order to directly compare differences in student learning in classes where critical reflection is and is not employed. Consequently, an examination of control and treatment groups may provide insight as to the specific teacher, student, and classroom variables that lead to student agency and power in instructional settings such as the basic course. Such research has the potential to play a significant role in increasing the acceptance and use of critically reflective methods within the discipline and beyond.

In sum, this study answers the call by educational scholars to empirically examine critically reflective teaching practices in order to document the process and outcomes (Brookfield, 1995; Ford & Russo, 2006;
Weimer, 2002). We believe these results provide evidence for those employing critical reflection in the classroom and may encourage others to try these practices. When students are granted agency and reflect on their learning throughout the semester they benefit greatly, whether that be in direct learning or improved communication in the classroom. We hope that basic course directors will take note that students are reluctant to fully embrace the critical reflection process as a central part of their academic experience until more teachers embrace this process; basic course directors have agency to both train and inform faculty at various stages in their career, creating a more accepting atmosphere for critically reflective teaching practices that may lead to classes beyond the basic course being affected by this inclusive pedagogical strategy.

REFERENCES


Embracing and Rejecting Student Agency


