Chapter 17

The Development of the #BlackPodClass

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When my department chair told me that I could teach my dream course during my first year on the tenure track, so many options of potential courses ran through my mind, but one stood out: the Black podcasts class that had been in my heart for so long. I knew that I wanted to teach the class in an unconventional way, and if I was going to teach my dream course, I was going to dream big. I've always been a fan of incorporating more practice-based activities into my classes, as opposed to solely lecture-based content, and I knew that this class would be no different. The first thing that I did when I began to develop this course was Google "Black Podcasts class" to get an idea of what other courses already existed like this. I found very little, outside of a Virginia Commonwealth University class titled "Podcasting While Black," taught in 2017 by Chioke I'Anson. This was both exciting and terrifying, but I dived in.

I wanted the students to enjoy developing and creating stories, but I also believed it was very important that the class have a critical cultural and Black feminist framework driving the podcast creation process. One of the guiding questions for the class was inspired by Stuart Hall's (1993) prolific essay, "What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?" In the article, he asks, what is the significance of asking this question in this particular cultural moment? For me, the question was, "What is a Black podcast?" Importantly, it is not just a podcast hosted by someone Black.

I teach this class in a communication department where most students desire to be practitioners within the media landscape in some way. The questions that I wanted them to think through and to answer in this course were very specifically connected to a communication studies context. I want students to think critically about the media they consume, and the kinds of media that they want to make. This class is not solely based on learning production skills—we do a bit of that, but it is not the most important part of the class.

However, I also knew that it couldn't just be based solely on theoretical musings as I would run the risk of the students critiquing others' work without actually understanding what goes into creating said media. Lastly, I also knew that I wanted to expose students to various Black podcasters who could provide an even deeper look into the podcast landscape by sharing their experiences, their journey into podcasting, and reveal their production process.

In this chapter, I explore the development of what I affectionately call the #BlackPodClass. This class is taught through a Black feminist pedagogical lens with a critical cultural communication framework. In the following sections, I briefly explore literature on podcast pedagogy and Black feminist pedagogy. Next, I guide readers through the structure of the class, my teaching philosophy, and present a sample unit and assignment. The chapter ends with an explanation of the Black feminist ethic of care that guides my teaching in this class. I also discuss the challenges and opportunities for future growth with this class and Black podcast pedagogy.

BLACK FEMINIST PODCAST PEDAGOGY

I acknowledge my positionality as a Black woman who identifies as a Black feminist, and I bring this important identity into the classroom environment that I construct. Grissom-Broughton (2020) stated the following:

> Feminist pedagogy is liberatory in its aims as it focuses on the principles of transformation and social change. In fact, the primary goal of a feminist pedagogy is to transform students by empowering them to translate their ideas into action. (p. 161)

A feminist classroom is one that encourages the co-creation of knowledge between the instructor and the students. Black feminist pedagogy, Hardy (2023) writes, "criticizes the traditional process of knowledge production and what counts as 'truth'" (p. 238). Within a Black feminist podcast pedagogy, there is a desire to use the technology at hand to not only co-create knowledge but to prioritize lessons that use alternative forms of knowledge. In addition to written texts, I use podcast episodes (many of which are recorded by Black women) as texts for students to analyze and apply course concepts to. These episodes center the experiences of Black women who use the platform to discuss their perspectives from their particular standpoints. The work of Black feminist thought "involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals" (Collins, 2022, p. 13). Podcast episodes are ideal sites of interrogation for this reason. The varied experiences of

Black subgroups are explored within podcasts, and this is reflected in the diversity of the course materials. Black feminist pedagogy is "premised upon the possibility of social and political change as well as liberation for *all* of humankind, regardless of gender, race and class" (Grissom-Broughton, 2020, p. 162).

In interviewing Black podcasters about their production processes and experiences as podcasters for the class podcast, students learned how the creators were intentional with their craft. The podcast platform, within the Black feminist podcast pedagogy lens, is also a liberatory space, and the students and I together were able to create liberatory production practices. Tiffani Marie and Sharim Hannegan-Martinez (2023) discuss the liberatory power of storytelling within podcasts:

> It was sort of the way that we remember, the way that we preserve, the way that we safeguard that which we value, that which is sacred and that which we need for our survival; the podcast is really a way of using a western tool to document that which we know we need. (p. 114)

Through the class podcast, the students and I co-developed a Black feminist podcast pedagogy steeped in care, curiosity, and vulnerability.

Class Structure

I decided that the first place I could look for Black podcasters, specifically those whose shows are not often amplified, was *X* (formerly *Twitter*). I put out a simple tweet requesting Black podcasters (or fans of Black podcasts, or Black people who listen to podcasts) to reach out if they were interested in visiting my class. The response was overwhelming. I used the #BlackPodcastClass hashtag to keep up with the responses. A friend and fellow scholar suggested #BlackPodClass, a play on Black podcasts and class, and the name stuck. I received so many tweets from shows that I had never heard of, on topics that I had not considered. This exercise truly showcased the diversity within the Black podcast landscape. Now, I have an actively growing spreadsheet of the many podcasts that I have discovered to keep the database organized.

The request was simple: I asked guests to Zoom into my class to share their experiences so that my students could be exposed to a variety of podcasters. At some point during these Twitter discussions, the idea for the class podcast was born. We would record and produce these conversations with our guests and publish them to the class podcast. So not only would we be learning about podcasts, but we would be developing and producing our own. The students would then walk away from the class with a finished product they could be

proud of and include in their portfolio as they prepared to search for jobs in media.

Teaching Philosophy

I approach my teaching from a feminist, specifically Black feminist, pedagogical lens. I want to highlight some of the facets of feminist and Black feminist pedagogy that I bring into the classroom. I ask the students to approach this class with a sense of curiosity, to stay with me when it gets uncomfortable, and to bring their whole selves into our space. In turn, I promise them that I will also remain curious and bring my whole self to the class. The assignments that I create encourage active learning and participation, so there is no busy work or pointless assignments. The assignments build upon each other, and we co-create knowledge together. I assign readings and episodes for the students to listen to that are written and hosted by people who hold diverse identities. American Blackness is centered in the class, but we also explore Blackness across the diaspora and other marginalized communities across the globe.

I teach at an extremely diverse and large, research-intensive university. This is also reflected in the demographics of the student population in the department. At the beginning of the class, I reiterate that the class centers on Blackness, but I encourage non-Black students to seek ways to connect to the course themes through their various identities. I also tell my Black students that they are not the ultimate authority in the class, as Blackness is not a monolith, and we all experience Blackness in a variety of ways. By emphasizing this, I encourage a community of curious thinkers who learn when to listen and when to speak up and contribute to the class discussion.

I encourage students to be vulnerable and open, and I try to model doing so. In a project-based class, with so much involvement from the community, there will inevitably be mistakes made, technology will falter, and so on, and when this happens, we discuss it together as a class. We talk about what is working in the class, what can be shifted, and so on. I cultivate a space that prioritizes being brave over perfect. I approach the class as a lab, one where learning and engagement are constantly happening.

Over the course of teaching this class multiple times, I have learned that my "ask" of the students to be curious and creative proves to be difficult for many students. It is not that I am asking something of them that they are incapable of completing. The issue, I have learned, is that I am presenting a class style and course expectations that they are not used to. This goes beyond pedagogical norms such as classroom spaces where "all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Creativity does require a level of vulnerability

and being accepting of mistakes or an imperfect finished product. For many students, the desire to achieve an A stifles their creativity and makes it difficult to risk making a mistake that could lead to a grade lower than an A. They are disappointed, shocked, and then slowly intrigued when they realize that there is no checklist to follow to achieve a perfect grade in the class. Instead, they are given the space to explore concepts that are uncomfortable for many and unfamiliar to several. With this, they have the opportunity to take charge of their learning, especially in the latter part of the class when they begin producing their own podcast episodes. A Black feminist pedagogical lens prioritizes the whole student and cultivates a learning environment that encourages curiosity and care for self and others. The Black feminist classroom serves as a space for innovation, transparency, and growth as the students (and instructor) explore the liberatory potential of Black podcasts.

Sample Unit

Although Blackness is centered in the #BlackPodClass, there are many other identities that are also foregrounded and reflected within the class discussions and materials. The very first time that I taught the class, I noted that often the non-Black students would hesitate to speak up and voice their opinions. For Black students, one of the main challenges was reminding them not to assume that their lived experiences were the only knowledge they needed to succeed in the class. Sometimes their lived experiences actually hindered them from being able to understand experiences and perspectives that differed from their own. Many of the White students had a hard time discussing their whiteness or even considering themselves as having a race. They also struggled with discussing the race of their fellow students. But, as I constantly reminded them, pushing past the uncomfortability led to important community building and conversations, which is also necessary in podcasting.

Podcasting is not just sitting down in front of a microphone and rambling. For a myriad of reasons, it can be very daunting to not only hear your recorded voice but even more so if your voice does not reflect the standard voice typically heard within media and public radio. This standard voice, scholar Chenjerai Kumanyika (2015) asserts, reflects the prevalence of whiteness and patriarchy. It is devoid of an accent or any kind of marker that showcases the identity of who is speaking. In turn, Kumanyika asserts, we lose out on rich storytelling when voices are expected to sound the same. We might hear diversity among the sources being used or interviewed, but not so much among those chosen to narrate the story and be in control of how the story is shared.

In this particular unit to be described, we focused on code switching. Code switching is the practice of shifting the languages you use or the way you

express yourself in conversation (Thompson, 2013). Before class, I had the students record themselves discussing their relationship with their voice. I requested that they reflect on how it has changed over time and what other people have shared with them about how they sound or speak. Over the course of teaching this class, this remains one of my favorite assignments because it encourages vulnerability from all the students (and I model this vulnerability by also sharing my experiences with my voice). Queer students who are not fully out to everyone they know, for example, have discussed being fearful that their voices may reveal their sexuality. They explained that gender has also been an identity marker that has been read through their voices—many of the female students have described not wanting to seem assertive when they speak, so they intentionally speak in softer, more "feminine" tones. Several male students have discussed their desire for their voices to be deeper and more "masculine."

During class, I asked students about their experiences with code switching. Unsurprisingly, most of the students of color were very familiar with the concept of code switching and shared stories about their experiences of changing the way they spoke based on who they were around. During one iteration of the class, one of the Black students grew curious about how quiet the White students were during this particular conversation. There was a minute or so of silence, and instead of immediately speaking up to avoid the awkwardness, I let the uncomfortable silence linger. I knew this would be a moment where the class would have to wrestle and grapple with their identities in ways that I had not necessarily challenged them to do up until that point. Finally, one of the White students responded. They didn't know if this was a moment where they should listen or participate. I challenged them to sit with their initial response of not having to code switch–this was not a moment to lean into whiteness as being void of identity.

The students rose to the challenge and began sharing experiences that connected with the concept. Several of them discussed how they used their "customer service" voice at work, especially those who worked in customer-facing roles. Some of them performed this voice, which elicited laughter, but I also wanted them to really understand this performance and how uncomfortable it can be—particularly when they would forget to turn it "on." The concept finally began to resonate with the students; this performance of identity, done through their voices, can really dictate interactions with one another and with other people.

I wanted them to be aware of these performances as we continued to listen to a myriad of podcast episodes, and to urge them to be aware of not only what kinds of stories were being told, but *how* such stories were being told and by whom. Whose voices didn't we hear? For the voices that we did hear, what did their voices reveal to us about the speaker? This reflection and introspection are crucial to a Black feminist pedagogy.

Sample Assignment

Talking with a fellow Black feminist professor, we bonded over our shared love of *The Read* podcast, which is one of the most successful Black podcasts to date. As we continued our conversation, I discovered that this professor actually had plans to begin their own podcast but had no idea where to start. From there, the podcast development assignment was born. This professor became the client, and the class was tasked with helping the professor develop their podcast.

The professor gave us background information on their vision for their podcast, including the podcast description, their ideal audience and guests, episode type, and frequency. From there, students were divided into groups where they chose categories to apply to the podcast. The categories included competitors, social media marketing, sample episode outlines, potential advertisers, potential podcast distributors, and sample show and episode covers. Students presented their findings to the podcaster, who gave extensive feedback. I instructed the students to treat the presentation as if we were a company presenting our findings to our client. The students delivered, and having the creator there to offer feedback really turned the assignment into a real-life lesson on applying course concepts. In fact, the professor podcaster was so impressed that they hired one of the students to continue working with them on developing the podcast.

Educators looking to replicate this assignment should first identify the prospective podcaster and what specific needs they have in developing their podcast. As a collaborative component to the class, educators could also have the students identify podcasters who are interested in growing their podcast. Students would be in charge of reaching out to the podcasters and determining what their needs are so they can perform the necessary market research and present it to the podcaster. Students gain presentation and research skills and learn about multiple facets of the podcast industry. This assignment connects well to the course's learning objectives of centering real-world experiences for the students and also exposes students to potential careers in podcasting outside of hosting.

BLACK FEMINIST ETHIC OF CARE

In the #BlackPodClass, a spirit of curiosity is prioritized as opposed to rote memorization or lecturing to the students. A feminist ethic of care enacted in the classroom involves "taking a process-oriented approach to teaching, based on guiding students as they make progress toward self-discovery and becoming creative, critical thinkers" (Grissom-Broughton, 2020, p. 174). Holding a Black feminist ethic of care in this class was extremely important

to me, and it guided the development of the course. There were a lot of emotions that arose throughout the class as the students processed their identity formation. Given this, I tried to ensure that students felt comfortable enough to bring the curiosity and vulnerability that I expected. I almost wish that I could do away with giving them grades. So many of them have been trained to focus on their grades and GPA, which I completely understand the importance of, but I've also seen the way that it stunts their creativity, encourages limited engagement, and makes them more anxious in the classroom.

Once I've gained the trust of the students, it's amazing to see how they really tap into their creativity and take pride in what they produce in the class. Don't get me wrong, they were still heavily invested in getting an A in the class, but they also realized that the work they produced goes beyond that A. They produced work that they added to their portfolios, but many of them also used their episodes and assignments to explore very personal issues that they hadn't considered. Several students interviewed family members for their episodes, which was such a beautiful tribute to their family and also allowed their family members an up-close look at what they were doing in school. For first-generation students, this is so important because they don't always get the opportunity to involve their families in their studies for a myriad of reasons. So cultivating a Black feminist pedagogy in this class looked like caring for the whole student, addressing that grade anxiety, including in-class work time because many of them are commuters and/or work jobs, and checking in after they complete major assignments to see what worked and didn't work and giving them time to reflect.

REFLECTIONS

One of the challenges faced in the #BlackPodClass included working on the live podcast episode. The physical space of the classroom matters, especially with the live element of the podcast. Requirements of active thinking and collaboration are very much influenced by the physical classroom design. During the first semester, I was assigned a classroom that had traditional seating. The desks were all in rows, facing me, and it was very difficult to move around the classroom. When teaching this course again, I requested a class with round tables and interactive technology, and that change made such a difference. The classroom I requested came equipped with cameras and microphones, which provided better audio for the episodes. In this shift of classroom, I continued to be open and honest with the students about when I made mistakes. I made it clear that I was (and am) still learning the best ways to capture audio, which is a great model for students in their ability to acknowledge weaknesses, continue learning, and collaborate with others

to solve problems. Through creating live podcast episodes, students were able to actively learn interviewing and research skills, as well as very basic audio production skills. One student researched the wrong person (they had the same name as our guest) and realized it a few minutes into the episode. The student froze. I encouraged her to just keep going, and she was able to pivot and come up with a new introduction on the fly. These experiences help students gain necessary skills while encouraging bravery and curiosity. It also provides a space where students can co-create knowledge together and therefore have shared ownership in the creation of this podcast. Creating their own episodes also helps them in analyzing other podcast episodes because they got to see firsthand what the process was like.

Establishing a social media presence helped raise the digital profile of the #BlackPodClass. I've also used the hashtag as a way to archive these Black podcasts and the hosts who engaged with them. The hashtag expands the reach of the classroom beyond the traditional setting. Bringing it back to Black feminist pedagogy, it was always important to me from the beginning that my classroom expanded past the walls of my university. This is where the significance of the hashtag, social media accounts, and the class podcast becomes important, because it makes the knowledge that we co-create together accessible to so many more people. The interviews that students produced were so powerful, and I'm glad that we're sharing this content and expanding what our classroom community looks like.

I would love to see educators replicate this course and center on other identities and the unique ways that podcasts can be used to amplify them. Given my successes and challenges, educators looking to teach a course like this should first determine if their course will primarily center on the critical and theoretical aspects of podcasting, or also include production lessons like the #BlackPodClass did. This will guide the topics that will make sense for the course. It is also imperative to consider the location of the course, specifically if podcast production will be a component of the course. As this is not a traditional course, a traditional classroom outfitted for lectures as opposed to collaborative work may impact the culture of the class. Educators teaching a course like this should prioritize diverse readings and podcast episodes, including podcasts from different regions, countries, classes, ans so on., to highlight different formats, styles, and more.

My hope for this class is that it continues to be a space where students feel comfortable enough to explore their creativity in imperfect ways. I hope that listeners of the podcast will feel as if they are part of the community and learning right alongside the students. I hope that the podcasters we feature, especially those who don't have a large of a social media following, are encouraged to continue making episodes, knowing that their reach is ever-expansive. Lastly, I hope that educators continue using podcasts as teaching

tools and are intentional about amplifying the vast diversity that exists within the podcast landscape.

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