

1-1-1991

# Communication Ethics Pedagogy

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, [steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu](mailto:steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. "Communication Ethics Pedagogy" by Steven Goldzwig, from *Ethics Across the Curriculum: The Marquette Experience*. Eds. Robert B. Ashmore and William C. Starr. ISBN 0874629985. © 1991 Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press. Reprinted with permission. [www.marquette.edu/mupress](http://www.marquette.edu/mupress)

# COMMUNICATION ETHICS PEDAGOGY

Steven R. Goldzwig

Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Christopher Lyle Johnstone argues that in considering the "mission" of contemporary rhetoric one necessarily must focus on the proper "ends" of rhetorical communication.<sup>1</sup> This effort leads inextricably into discussions of virtue, the good, and the nature and function of values in and through human discourse. From a pedagogical perspective, one is forced to examine foundational theories of rhetoric and relate them to both individual and social ethics. Such a task, while daunting, is essential to a grounding and framework for ethics instruction in the communication arts and sciences. In this essay, I must trust that my commitments in this area will be apparent as I work through a more modest but no less essential task.

The purpose of this essay is to ground and describe my course in Ethics in Human Communication, which is taught under the auspices of the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Marquette University. In what follows I will (1) identify three standard pedagogical approaches to communication ethics, (2) delineate significant value perspectives on human communication and indicate some pedagogical methods for demonstrating their utility, and (3) detail some specific assignments and activities associated with the course and offer reflections on this classroom experience.

## THREE STANDARD PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Scholars in the ethics of human communication have a variety of value perspectives for determining ethical conduct. Stanley A. Deetz suggests that most ethical issues are approached from three distinct vantage points: ethics for communication, ethics from communication, and an ethics of communication.<sup>2</sup> An ethic *for* communication is intended to determine whether a particular speech act is ethical or not. Here the theorist presents an external ethical code or norm that is said to influence the speakers' choices about a message. Pedagogically, the student is given a standard for judging a particular communicative act. He or she is taught basic normative standards to apply to a

communication transaction, e.g., never lie in a public speech, carefully examine both means and ends of a particular message, and use the best and most recent evidence fairly and accurately.

An ethic derived *from* communication focuses on the *process* of communication itself. Here the ethic is derived from the "reservoir of accepted good reasons" for human communicative actions. Thus from this vantage point, the student learns that ethics is possible because we can communicate "good reasons" for our communicative actions. The student gains ethical knowledge in the process of communicating with another person or listening as social or communal standards are transmitted. As the student tests his or her ideas against those of others through public discursive practice, a communal reservoir of good reasons is enacted and this reservoir helps set up a consensus wherein a dialogue is created for adjudicating norms for critical ethical reflection and analysis.

The idea here is to focus student attention on the "self" in a "community of selves." As Wayne Booth argues, "[I]f all men [and women] make each other in symbolic interchange, then by implication, they *should* make each other, and it is an inescapable value in their lives that it is good to do it well--whatever that will mean--and bad to do it badly." Thus in Booth's view the "supreme purpose of persuasion" is to value and promote the dialectic of "mutual inquiry and exploration."<sup>3</sup> Scholars who treat communication ethics while speaking of "good reasons" are interested in turning merely "factual" questions into significant "value" questions regarding self and society.<sup>4</sup>

An ethic *of* communication uses a specific definition of communication as a basis for developing normative standards for public and private discourse. Rather than imposing an external ethical code or proposing norms for the communication process itself, an ethic *of* communication presumes from the outset that rhetoric or persuasion is a "good" in itself. This ethic enjoins participants to engage in a distinctively human capacity: to persuade and be persuaded. Normative standards for persuasive activity are said to be inherent in the definition of the rhetorical enterprise. The existence of persuasion in the human community suggests that certain norms be employed so that persuasion,



viewed as an active "good" for self and society, may perpetuate itself. Thus, as Henry W. Johnstone would describe it, we are enjoined to observe a categorical imperative here: in each and every case, so act as to keep open the capacity to persuade and be persuaded. To fully observe this codicil, a number of duties and obligations between speaker/rhetor and audience/auditors are presumed. Chief among these presumptions are openness, resoluteness, gentleness and compassion. By following these norms, it is argued, we create and sustain a healthy, self-generating rhetoric for self and society. In Johnstone's view, then, rhetoric is not only a means, but a laudable end in itself.<sup>5</sup> Similar self-perpetuating standards, which are derived from the nature of rhetorical discourse, can be appreciated and communicated to students. For example, Robert L. Scott calls for tolerance, will and responsibility when engaging in the rhetorical transaction.<sup>6</sup>

From my perspective, no single pedagogical approach is adequate. All three approaches guide and inform the various value perspectives that can be applied in interpersonal, small group, organizational, intercultural and public address communication contexts. Specialized courses in communication theory, rhetorical theory and criticism, argumentation, persuasion, gender, family, political communication and the rhetoric of social movements, among others, can also be served usefully with an eye toward structuring student attention and focusing upon the approaches outlined here.

## **SIGNIFICANT VALUE PERSPECTIVES**

The attempt to marshal a variety of research and relate it to a significant summarizing term or category is fraught with danger, not the least of which is the risk of misrepresentation and oversimplification. Nonetheless, communication ethics pedagogy has been advanced, in the main, by just this type of development by abstraction. One of the things that justifies this endeavor is the powerful comparisons one may draw as one ruminates over various value perspectives. I hope to give some idea of this power by drawing from both communication theorists and my course syllabus in the ethics of human communication.

According to the latest texts, the ethics of human communication is vitally concerned with free, critical choice in the construction of a particular message.<sup>7</sup> Thus the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom is paramount in ethical deliberations over communicative means and ends. Choice-making, in this context, not only includes criteria-based ethical analysis of the speaker's choices but also the amount of informed choice an *audience* can be expected to exercise given the speaker's presentation of facts and events.

A number of useful summaries in the ethics of speech communication have been developed over the years.<sup>8</sup> The category system I adopt here is informed by Richard L. Johannesen's now classic text in ethics and by my own course syllabus and experience.<sup>9</sup> The value perspectives that help inform my course in the ethics of human communication include: (1) basic issues, (2) human nature perspectives, (3) political ethics, (4) situational ethics, and (5) dialogical ethics.

### Basic Issues

In discussing basic issues, a number of pertinent areas are covered including the nature and function of values, codes and standards, the importance of criteria-based ethical reflection and judgments, absolute versus relative standards, maximum versus minimum standards, ends and means, utilitarian standards, religious standards, differentiating legal from moral standards, lying, demagoguery, racist-sexist language, ethical responsibilities of receivers and non-participants, and gender-differentiated ethical stances. Lectures in these areas are supplemented with additional reading assignments and case studies. For example, supplemental texts include Sissela Bok's *Lying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Students are also asked to read and reflect upon an article by Kenneth E. Anderson that establishes their responsibility as receivers and/or non-participants in the public dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Students are exposed to the nature and importance of values in an article describing the American value system and in a case study concerning James Watt, Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of the Interior.<sup>11</sup> In covering basic issues, I also find it a good idea to utilize



actual codes drawn from the various professions. Thus codes from the American Medical Association, the Wisconsin Bar Association, the American Advertising Federation and the Public Relations Society of America, for example, provide a context for investigating the strengths and weaknesses of various professional codes. A case study that helps students apply textbook norms for demagoguery is realized in a televised-in-class speech by Louis Farrakhan entitled "Power at Last, Forever." Students are asked to determine whether or not Farrakhan seems to meet or fail to meet the given ethical criteria. This usually provides the basis for lively discussion and leads to a richer critique of both the norms and the speaker.

### **Human Nature**

Human nature perspectives are premised upon the defining characteristics of the human being. Thus the definitive "nature" of our humanness is said to reside in a specific trait which differentiates humans from animals. Theorists in communication have posited a number of attributes as unique to human nature including our rationality, our symbol-using-misusing capacities, and the act of persuasion itself. The focus is on those attributes that make persons uniquely human. Further, according to the human nature perspective, that speech or discursive act which promotes human potential and well-being is argued as ethical. Other ethical perspectives often found in this category include theories advanced by Immanuel Kant, Habermas' concept of communicative competence and the "ideal speech situation," as well as existentialist, epistemic, and humanist approaches. Two interesting and successful modes of demonstrating human nature perspectives to students include (1) a discussion of Kenneth Burke's classic treatise "The Definition of Man" and (2) reading and critical analysis of a case study involving gay rights controversies in Dade County, Florida and St. Paul, Minnesota. Burke's definition creates controversy over what it means to be human and the case study isolates the fundamental differences people seem to have over what it means to be human and the fundamental nature and meaning of homosexuality. Moreover, students are able to analyze closely and evaluate ethically the various arguments attending the controversy.<sup>12</sup>

## Political

Political perspectives are based on American political values. Preserving freedom and democracy in a democratic system of government is presumed to be an ethical enterprise. From this perspective, then, the normative values of a political democracy are delineated. Karl Wallace, in particular, offers four basic values that are essential to our democracy and he uses those values as a basis for normative guidelines. The values include respect for the dignity and worth of the individual, fair and equal opportunity, freedom and responsibility, and belief in the individual's ability to comprehend and act responsibly in the political system. These values become normative in Wallace's enjoinder to (1) develop the habit of search; (2) develop the habit of justice; (3) prefer public to private motivation; and (4) develop the habit of dissent.<sup>13</sup> Other standards include: degree of rationality, significant choice, ground rules for political controversy, democratic debate as a procedural ethic, and ethical standards for governmental communication.

One of the most interesting exercises in this section of the course is student exposure to an application of the political standards through a focus on articles describing Ronald Reagan's public discourse. Case studies involving Reagan's public address on civil rights and the invasion of Grenada provide excellent material demonstration on how to apply and evaluate the given norms.<sup>14</sup> The question of honesty in government becomes central through this exposure. I find that articles that attack cherished figures get read; and they are often better criticized or defended by students than those articles that merely attack "common" enemies.

## Situational

Situational perspectives focus judgment of communication ethics on the *contexts* and *settings* for encoded messages. The "special circumstances" attending the message may either increase or decrease one's ethical culpability and any subsequent ethical judgment in a particular instance. Edward Rogge, for example, argues against applying absolute,



timeless or universal norms in evaluating a communication transaction because of myriad factors both within the speech situation and surrounding the implementation of any specific proposal. These contextual factors have a bearing on both the process and outcome of any speech transaction and often, it is argued, will negate or reduce an individual's ethical responsibility.<sup>15</sup> B.J. Diggs offers a modified version of this perspective by suggesting that one's role or profession might dictate what is ethical or unethical in a message transaction. Thus even universal or widely accepted norms are subject to scrutiny and are dependent upon one's specific persuasive role with a particular audience.<sup>16</sup> The situational perspective is further explored by encouraging students to read Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

My best classroom discussions on this subject have come from reflections on Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971). This book represents a situational perspective and is something of a curiosity piece for students. The book reads fast, is highly anecdotal, entertaining and provides controversial moral prescriptions which are subject to and receive heated debate in the classroom. Alinsky's discussion of ends and means and the use of tactics are particularly lively and thought-provoking.

## Dialogical

Dialogical perspectives are premised upon developing normative values that respect the nature and function of a communicative transaction. While dialogical perspectives are best associated with and employed in interpersonal and small group communication transactions, some scholars advocate using these norms to evaluate public discourse. Dialogical perspectives focus attention upon the attitudes or orientations we take toward the communicative transaction. Ethical conduct, under the aegis of developing dialogue, values discursive practices displaying openness, compassion, authenticity, honesty, empathy, directness and, as one author terms it, "response-ability."<sup>17</sup> Built upon the rich roots of religion, psychiatry, psychology and philosophy, the dialogical perspective is best associated with Martin Buber and his description of "I-Thou" and



"I-It" relationships. As an ethic for human communication, dialogue represents the opposite of monologue, which is seen as defensive, manipulative, self-serving and inauthentic.

In teaching this particular value perspective, I have found students rather dubious of the utility of this orientation. The argument usually runs "This would be great *except* in the 'real world' not everyone operates with these principles and, therefore, the dialogical perspective is not only too idealistic, but naive. One could get hurt by being open and sharing with someone at the level required. Our mutual trust is often violated and *others* do not generally employ such norms, especially in the workplace." Given this attitude, I ask students to list their criticisms against this perspective and I usually am able to garner a list of five or six major objections. Then I ask other students to defend the perspective and a lively exchange ensues. Finally, I use an article by Paul W. Keller that summarizes the pro and con arguments and then defends the perspective.<sup>18</sup>

## ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES AND REFLECTIONS

I have summarized the major approaches to communication ethics I have adopted in my classroom. The theoretical material introduced in the course is also reinforced through particular examinations, assignments and activities. The essay exams require students not only to outline their understanding of the various perspectives but also to critique them and suggest additions and revisions deemed helpful. Students are also encouraged to describe their personal stance toward the perspectives and express any reservations individually.

I also require a class presentation and a final essay. The class presentation assignment is usually a group project designed to give students the opportunity to apply communication ethics to particular "real world" events. Past class presentations have been wide-ranging, focusing on the ethical evaluation of communications over the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the speeches of Jesse Jackson and Ronald Reagan, political campaign ads, and even the ethics of MTV music videos. I solicit creativity here and encourage students to pick issues that make a

difference in their lives and I counsel them to include their classmates in the resulting dialogue. Given my particular bent, I am not so much concerned that the communication be *about* a moral issue (although this is certainly welcome); but rather, that the *morality* of a particular communication or set of communications be thoroughly explored and analyzed using criteria drawn from the course. Students are required to argue the relevance and applicability of the various codes they have selected in undertaking their analysis.

There is a degree of latitude in the final paper as well. Students are given a number of options for carrying out this particular assignment. They can (1) further investigate a basic issue or perspective that has been of greatest interest to them throughout the semester; (2) analyze messages and arguments over major public moral issues; (3) ethically evaluate a set or series of communicative transactions or (4) elect to research a particular area of moral philosophy and use this investigation to further critique, develop and/or improve norms and standards for ethical communication.

In addition, I try to set aside some time each week to discuss ethical issues in the news. I ask students to bring in articles that seem to have direct relevance to theories discussed in class. This becomes a key instrument in grading participation. More importantly, it encourages sensitivity to ethical dilemmas in society and makes the classroom environment more exciting as the theories seem to "come alive."

The theories, pedagogical methods, specific exams, assignments and activities are, of course, directed toward a larger goal--the development of the human being. Human action involves choice. Choice involves character.<sup>19</sup> The development of critical skills involving processes of moral reasoning are products of human communication. When value perspectives clash, one must be able to determine how and why. Moreover, one is then invited to engage in self-reflection over how one views the good, the desirable, and the nature of virtue in contemporary society. Reflection over self and society is not without some distress for the serious student.



Over the years, I have encountered a few students who experienced a "values crisis" during some part of the semester. When this happens, they often express themselves in this manner: "Well, I never looked at things that way before" or "My parents always lead the way here and now I feel somewhat adrift." Sometimes there is something in their own present life experience which resonates with a particular perspective or ethical dilemma and they feel compelled to confront it.

I am both humbled and enthralled by this reaction for it signals the struggle of independent thought and action. It signals that the student is taking ethics seriously. It is a persistent reminder that in some way how one thinks about ethics can not only give one pause to wonder but also can potentially alter one's lifeplan. That is a serious pedagogical responsibility; but, more importantly, it is a human responsibility. For if we are to build the humane collectivity, an ethical sensitivity is paramount. From my vantage point, be it for good or evil, how we communicate communicates our ethics and our ethics are an inevitable result of contemporary dialogue within our communities. A course in the ethics of human communication can be an impetus for detecting and improving the various communities and constituents of that ongoing conversation.

## Notes

1. Christopher Lyle Johnstone, "Ethics, Wisdom, and the Mission of Contemporary Rhetoric: The Realization of the Human Being," *Central States Speech Journal*, 32, (1981): 177-196. I define the term "rhetoric" as the act of symbolic inducement (persuasion in both oral and written forms).

2. Stanley A. Deetz is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Rutgers University. This discussion is drawn from my notes outlining a talk Dr. Deetz delivered a number of years ago at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association. His insights have proved invaluable to me in organizing a plan for introducing communication ethics instruction.

3. Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 137.

4. See, e.g., Walter R. Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64, (1978): 376-384; Walter R. Fisher, "Rationality and the Logic of Good Reasons," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 13, (1980): 121-130; Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1987/1989), esp. pp. 105-123.

5. Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., "Toward an Ethics of Rhetoric," *Communication*, 6, (1981): 305-314.

6. See e.g., Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal*, 18, (1967): 9-17; Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," *Central States Speech Journal*, 27, (1976): 258-266.

7. See, e.g., Thomas R. Nilsen, *Ethics of Speech Communication* Second Edition. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974; Richard L. Johannesen, *Ethics in Human Communication* Third Edition. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1990), esp. pp. 25-28. Another recent text



that might be of interest in this context is James A. Jaska and Michael S. Pritchard, *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988).

8. See e.g., Ronald Arnett, "The Status of Communication Ethics Scholarship in Speech Communication Journals From 1915-1985," *Central States Speech Journal*, 38, (1987): 44-61; J. Vernon Jensen, "An Analysis of Recent Literature on Teaching Ethics in Public Address," *Speech Teacher*, 8, (1959): 219-228; Richard C. Johnson, "Teaching Speech Ethics in the Beginning Course," *Speech Teacher*, 19, (1970): 58-61; James Chesebro, "A Construct for Assessing Ethics in Communication," *Central States Speech Journal*, 20, (1969): 104-114, esp. 104-107.

9. See Johannesen (cited in footnote 7). My discussion of the various value perspectives and their components is taken, in the main, from Johannesen. Certain subcategories outlined in this essay diverge from Johannesen's and reflect my particular syllabus. Thus I have modified certain categories and subcomponents for both pedagogical reasons and to lend clarity to this particular essay.

10. Kenneth E. Anderson, "Communication Ethics: The Non-Participant's Role." *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 49, (1984): 219-228.

11. Edward D. Steele and W. Charles Redding, "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion," *Western Speech*, 26, (1962): 83-91; Steve Goldzwig, "James Watt's Subversion of Values: An Analysis of Rhetorical Failure," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 50, (1985): 305-326.

12. Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man" in Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 3-24; Barry Brummett, "A Pentadic Analysis of Ideologies in Two Gay Rights Controversies," *Central States Speech Journal*, 30, (1979): 250-261.

13. Karl R. Wallace, "An Ethical Basis of Communication," *Speech Teacher*, 4, (1955): 1-9.

14. James Nathan Miller, "Ronald Reagan and the Techniques of Deception," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (February, 1984), pp. 62-68; Ralph E. Dowling and Gabrielle E. Marraro, "Grenada and the Great Communicator: A Study in Democratic Ethics," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 50, (1986): 350-367.

15. Edward Rogge, "Evaluating the Ethics of a Speaker in a Democracy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 45, (1959): 419-425.

16. B.J. Diggs, "Persuasion and Ethics," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 50, (1964): 359-373.

17. See, e.g., Ronald C. Arnett, *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber's Dialogue* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); John Stewart, "Foundations of Dialogic Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64, (1978): 183-201; Richard L. Johannesen, "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57, (1971): 373-382.

18. Paul W. Keller, "Interpersonal Dissent and the Ethics of Dialogue," *Communication*, 6, (1981): 287-304.

19. See Kenneth. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), esp. p. 41.