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Communication Ethics: Is there an Alternative to Teaching It Prescriptively?

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COMMUNICATION ETHICS:

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO TEACHING IT PRESCRIPTIVELY?

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INTRODUCTION

A goodly number of us are "only" teaching-practitioners in the field
of communication ethics. To use the word "only" in this context is not
meant to depreciate the worth of the classroom teacher, nor to suggest a
separation between the theorist and the practitioner, but rather to
identify where many of us, for one reason or another, focus the bulk of
our time and energy. Because few of us in the profession take the time
to concentrate on this particular scholarly activity, and because few of
us are assigned to teach only a Communication Ethics course, we who
teach the subject must rely heavily on the scattered scholars who do
make major contributions to our discipline as published theorists in
communication ethics.[1] However, as we choose texts and gather materials
for teaching such a course, we are somewhat limited in what we find,
especially compared with other subjects in speech communication.[2] Most
of what we do find, and probably justifiably so, is course content.[3]
Very little is said about the approach to teaching a course (or unit) on
communication ethics. It is to this end that I write this paper, and
not as an expert in pedogogy, but rather as one speech communication
generalist who has long been interested in the subject of ethics in
communicative behavior and who has had some positive feedback from both
students and colleagues on his approach to the teaching of it. Though my
primary concern is for the separately designed and taught course in
Communication Ethics, what is written here is also applicable to units
on ethics taught in other speech communication courses.

THE PROBLEM AND THE TASK

In recent years we have experienced Watergate, the Wall Street scandals, tainted televangelism, Irangate, scores of political appointees losing their jobs because of questionable behavior, numerous disturbing surveys on national attitudes, and now we are into another presidential political campaign full of rhetorical examples that make many of us very uncomfortable. We have concluded, or it has been concluded for us, that there exists in our nation a serious problem of ethics, a concern which touches many institutions and disciplines, ours included.

Because of this concern, be it from internal irritation and/or external agitation, your department has decided to offer a new course in communication ethics (or to revise and update an already existing one, or to make such a course a requirement in your program so none of your majors will graduate without wrestling with the subject). You have either indicated an interest in communication ethics or shown the least resistance to teaching it, and the course has been assigned to you next term. Where do you go from here?

First of all, you accurately recognize that you have some very definite ideas on what is ethical and what is not in communication behavior. After all, you have been trained in graduate school to identify appropriate and inappropriate expression, and over the years you have both formally and informally evaluated the communication of thousands of students, community spokespeople, and national leaders according to your own well-developed standards of good and bad, right and wrong, effective and ineffective. You know what is ethical and what

is not. <u>You</u> know what kind of communication is needed to reverse the alleged demise of ethical behavior in our nation. ,

PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEMS IN PRESCRIPTIVE TEACHING

Herein ·lies a major problem in teaching a course in communication ethics. <u>What is the purpose of such a class today?</u> Is it to teach a <u>"better" way of communicating</u>--more humane, fairer and more ethical? If that is the major purpose, such teaching cannot be other than <u>prescriptive</u>: as a learned critic and professional, the teacher prescribes the medicine for an ailing society. (And I, for one, do not doubt that we, as a profession, have such medicine.) However, medicine must not only be given, it must also be taken; and this poses some real pedagogical concerns for me. .

We who teach are frequently reminded that <u>we should fit our teaching to the needs and receptivity of our students</u>; in other words, we should "practice what we preach" when it comes to audience analysis. <u>Just who are our students</u>? For most of us, the large majority are still <u>traditional students</u>, people in their late teens and early twenties. Even in a time of returning conservatism, these are still the years of value-testing, of some degree of rebelliousness, and intense defensiveness. Many of these people, having grown up in a culture of many "shoulds" and "should nots," <u>tend to resist prescriptive teaching</u>. As Gibb clearly contends, perceived evaluation, suspected certainty, and a concluded superiority only serve to <u>increase defensiveness</u> on the part

of a communicator.[4] Since defensiveness is a major barrier to effective
communication, it is wise to avoid it where possible.

Another aspect of prescriptive teaching which concerns me,
particularly when values are involved, is the problem of long versus
short-term results. Prescriptive teaching may result in an instructor's
satisfaction, via testing procedures, that the student "understands"
what the instructor believes to be the best or preferred ethical
behavior, but there is little guarantee that the student has personally
"wrestled" with the subject sufficiently to assimmilate those values
into her/his own behavioral system. Regurgitation of an instructor's
value system and ethical framework is not necessarily applied learning.

Thirdly, there is the problem highlighted by Kohlberg's theory on
moral development. If only part of Kohlberg's theory is acceptable and
true, our students are a mixture of each of the three levels of moral
development, and their ability to understand, on a practical level, a
prescribed theory on communication ethics will vary greatly. It would
be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to target students at all
three levels with one prescribed ethical framework. Two of the three
would not be able to understand and/or apply the prescribed
communication ethics, and the third level would probably be very
confused.

The fourth problem I have with the prescriptive teaching of
communication ethics is the question of its ethicality. (Saying this
indicates at least one facet of my own ethical framework.) With the
many different and sometimes conflicting theoretical and behavioral
perspectives available to study and apply, more than a few of the people

holding them being at least as moral, as societally concerned, as ethically aware as I, can I "ethically" prescribe for my students one or two frameworks as "best" for them to apply in their own lives? While some instructors may answer "yes" to this question, I cannot.

DESCRIPTIVE TEACHING: AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONSIDER

Is there an alternative to such prescriptive teaching? Yes, I think there is. For want of a better or more original name, I call it "descriptive teaching." Will it achieve our stated goal of increasing awareness of communication ethics among our students, and leading them to be more "ethical" in their dealings with people? I would answer "yes" to the first part of the question, and "at least as well as prescriptive teaching" to the second part of the question.

As we begin planning for our new or reconstructed course (or unit), it is necessary to start with some basic and objective background (information which should be given in a prescriptive approach to teaching, as well). First, we live in a democracy. In this democracy, choicemaking is a definite part of a citizen's privileges and responsibilities. When our choicemaking affects and/or influences other people, and it includes an application of value judgments, we are involved in the subject of communication ethics.[5] One of the most fundamental choices of this kind we as citizens make is the choice of whom we will allow to lead and influence us, particularly in the free election process, whether it be on the local, regional, national, or organizational level.

The second basic point we make is that "behaviors beget consequences." Whatever we say or do, whenever it has an effect on

another person, produces a response or reaction. Though this sounds obvious, even simplistic, it is necessary for us to be reminded of it. Applying this observation to communication ethics, students need to be reminded that all ethical behavior, from whatever philosophical basis it springs, provokes a response in other people. In order to become more intelligent and/or effective communicators, it is helpful to hear how others respond to our communication ethic, and to identify our own response to theirs. The quantity and quality of ensuing communication will be influenced by those responses.

Having stated that we live in a choicemaking democracy and that whatever we say or do provokes a response from others, points to be made as background for either teaching approach, how might we design a comunication ethics course (or unit) using this descriptive approach?

To begin, an instructor might set and seek to meet six general goals: 1) to present as understandably as possible how published theoreticians have developed and described their philosophical and behavioral frameworks of ethical communication; 2) to challenge students to identify their own behavioral frameworks; 3) to provide an atmosphere in the classroom for interactive feedback in which the students will react and respond to each other's ethical standards and behavior; 4) to provide an opportunity for students to identify, describe, and evaluate the ethical framework out of which the instructor communicates; 5) to guide students through the process of identifying and evaluating the communication ethics of contemporary influencers of public opinion and behavior; and 6) to suggest possible societal consequences if and when

each of the various frameworks might become a dominant communication ethic in our culture.

It might be helpful to the reader for me to describe briefly how I, as one instructor, attempt to meet each of these goals in my teaching of a class in Communication Ethics. After presenting working-definitions and describing the parameters of communication ethics study, and following an explanation of the two points (democratic choicemaking and behavioral consequence) mentioned above, through lecture and small discussion groups I present the various frameworks used to describe the communication ethics of published and analyzed communicators, using Johannesen's Ethics in Human Communication as a text and guide.[6] As we discuss each framework, I indicate both positive and negative possible consequences, and we attempt to identify public communicators who might accept that framework as her/his own. During the term, I provide multiple opportunities for students to discuss with me and amongst themselves. I challenge them to identify their own ethical framework, and to seek feedback from others in the way of nonevaluative reaction (concentrating on their own feelings and thoughts when confronted by someone behaving in such a way). I frequently become a "devil's advocate," identifying positive attributes and/or "respected" personalities who probably hold to a minority-held or "despised" communication ethic. I attempt to communicate a willingness to be evaluated by the students as to the ethicality of my own classroom communication (an attempt that is generally successful and an activity which many students seem to relish). A major assignment is the writing of a substantial research paper in which the student analyzes two or

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more speeches of a contemporary public influencer, identifying the
ethical framework out of which that person operates and evaluating the
speeches on the basis of their faithfulness to that ethical standard;
then the student is to compare and contrast the public figure's ethical
standard with her/his (the student's) own, using the studied speeches as
examples.

Throughout the course, when applying the communication ethic
frameworks to public figures, my emphasis is on describing behavior and
observing consequences, rather than on attributing motives or suggesting
intentions. The former are more readily identifiable. This approach
reinforces part of my working-definition that a person's real ethics are
behaved (therefore observable), not just verbalized. How one behaves,
not what a person says s/he will do or not do, is the benchmark of one's
real ethic, if that person has a choice of behavior.

A descriptive approach to teaching communication ethics is not
without its problems, too. Sometimes not prescribing a particular ethic
is interpreted by students as advocating that one framework is as "good"
as another, and that its all just a matter of opinion, anyway. I
attempt to meet this interpretation by discussing with them both the
positive and negative consequences for communicating from each
framework, discussions out of which the students can judge for
themselves in what kind of "a world" they want to live, and what kind of
behaviors they want to allow to have influence on them and their loved
ones. Of course, this assumes the students are capable of making such
judgments for themselves.

A second problem with the descriptive teaching of communication ethics is the human factor: it is very difficult not to be prescriptive, not to advocate "the better ethic," especially through the instructor's paralanguage and nonverbal behavior. Many is the time I have "bitten my tongue" when a student identifies as her/his own ethic: "I can say or do anything as long as it saves your soul," or "Since its not illegal, its not unethical." However, when such statements are made, other students are quick to express how they react to such an ethic, and this becomes important feedback to the student, and far more important than anything I might say in response. (Sometimes I have even ended up "protecting" the person who made the original assertion!) I think being aware of this human factor is an important step in neutralizing it. I also believe that allowing the students "to figure out" the instructor's own ethical frame of reference for communication behavior, and to evaluate her/him by it throughout the course, will help keep the focus on description rather than prescription.

Yes, I believe there is an alternative to prescriptively teaching communication ethics, and whether or not one employs that alternative is a choice an instructor has. Until someone can convince me that I have the only acceptable or desirable communication ethic for our nation and world, and until the pedagogical problems of prescriptive teaching can be overcome, I will continue to approach the teaching of communication ethics in a descriptive manner, as difficult an approach as that may be.

A CONCLUDING CONFESSION, QUESTION, AND SUGGESTION

Finally, I have the responsibility of admitting <u>a major problem in</u> <u>the writing of this paper: unsubstantiated need.</u> Doesn't every instructor teach communication ethics descriptively? I originally assumed so. I discovered not.[7] However, how widespread prescriptive teaching is, as opposed to the descriptive approach, has yet to be studied systematically. Are my limited conversations with other instructors of communication ethics representative of a larger group? Jaksa and Pritchard, in reviewing moral development as a method of reasoning[8], remind us that "egocentric" thinking is not limited to children, but is often present in adults, as well. I imagine they would include teachers in the category of adults. How many instructors of communication ethics are "egocentric thinkers" who, when teaching their classes, do not take into account the validity of differing perspectives? Or, to use Brockriede's framework for analysis: how many instructors commit rhetorical rape or seduction in the name of "truth" and "building a better society" through prescriptively advocating the "better ethic?" I should like to suggest an alternative approach for consideration: the descriptive teaching of communication ethics as an attempt to "rhetorically love" our students.

ENDNOTES

[1] e.g., Johannesen, Nilsen, Weaver, Buber, Fletcher, etc.

[2] e.g., Public Speaking, Rhetoric, Small Group Discussion, Interpersonal Communication, Listening, etc.

[3] Arnett, Ronald. "The Status of Communication Ethics Scholarship in Speech Communication Journals from 1915 to 1985." Central States Speech Journal, Spring 1987, 38/1, Pgs. 44-61.

[4] Gibb, Jack. "Defensive Communication." Journal of Communication, 1961, 11, Pgs. 141-148.

[5] Johannesen, Richard. Ethics in Human Communication, 2nd Ed. Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, Ill., 1983. Pg.1.

[6] Johannesen, Richard. Ethics in Human Communication, 2nd Ed. Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, Ill., 1983.

[7] At the 1987 Speech Association of Minnesota Convention, during a question and answer period following a panel on the teaching of ethics, I stated that I tried to teach communication ethics primarily in a descriptive manner. Some members of both panel and audience expressed amazement and indicated that they didn't (or couldn't) teach that way. Since that experience, through informal conversations, I have discovered other communication ethics instructors, in both private and state universities, who teach the subject primarily with a prescriptive approach.

[8] Jaksa, James, and Prichard, Michael. Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA. 1988. Pg. 62.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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