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Teaching Ethics in the Basic Survey Speech Communication Course

William A. Haskins

The teaching of ethics in the speech communication curriculum is not a new phenomenon. However, emphasis upon the teaching of ethics in our profession appears to be growing (Arnett, in press). A new commission on ethics for the Speech Communication Association on research output (Johannesen 1975; Arnett, in press; Jenson 1985) points to its growing importance. This increased attention on ethics and communication is also true in our basic speech communication classes. This essay focuses on a general overview in the teaching of ethics, as related to major contexts of communication taught in most basic survey courses of speech communication.

We face a unique opportunity in our profession. We can teach our students to integrate not only knowledge of communication theories and perspectives but ethical choices that we, as well as our students, must consider and make within the different communication contexts (McCaleb and Dean 1987). Teaching students to think about such choices and demonstrating to them the processes in making our own ethical choices in speech communication can be a learning experience instructive to all class participants. This process needs to start early in the course, allowing the class a yardstick by which to judge ethical issues as they evolve. To begin this process, a general definition of ethics is required.

Definition of Ethics

No one universally accepted definition of ethics exists. Each of us has a "specialized meaning" of ethics which influences our personal behavior. This is not less true in a communication transaction. We act in part according to our "personalized" view of ethics. Yet, our "personalized" view is tempered by societal norms (rules of behavior) which influence our moral judgements. For example, we may have learned that it is wrong to tell a lie. So, a friend tells it "like it is" to someone who may be insulted or angered or both. The friend risks damaging the relationship because of the ethical choice made not to lie. He or she believes it more important to tell the truth — perhaps thinking that a relationship built upon trust and honesty is stronger than one built upon opposite factors. Our communication reveals the ethical choices that we make and act upon.

For the purposes of this essay, ethics is defined as *principles used for determining what is good and right*. These principles can originate from such areas as character, values and conduct.

An individual's character may contain constructs that connect ethics with our credibility (McCroskey and Young 1981). One's personal traits such as fairness, humanness, truthfulness or kindness can generate principles for making moral judgements concerning what actions (or means) are right and just to achieve a good (or end) within a context or across contexts. One may, for instance, perceive him or herself to be fairminded. Another may believe, as a general principle, it right to listen carefully to a proposal before making an enlightened (good) judgment. One's character, then, is intimately tied to our personal *ethos*.

Quintilian understood this important connection when he wrote, "Ethos, in all its forms, requires the speaker to be a man of good character and courtesy" (p. 427). Aristotle, likewise, discusses this topic in his teachings of rhetoric.

Values are the worth placed on something. For example, it may be important to place high value on telling the truth in relationships with others. The principle to draw from this

value is "that it's always right to tell the truth in a relationship." At times, however, values may be in conflict with each other. On one hand, an individual may place great importance on telling the truth, but may also place much worth and importance on maintaining polite and courteous relationships. Conceivably, these two values can clash with each other in an interpersonal context when faced with the choice of either telling the truth or attempting to maintain a courteous relationship that omits or shades the truth. Yet, an either/or dilemma may not be the only avenues for ethical choices. Other possibilities from other values or combination of values (e.g., telling the truth but doing so in a tactful manner) may exist pointing the way to ethical choices and action.

One's conduct can be used to deceive or tell lies (Ekman 1985). It can also provide areas for discovering principles used in determining what is good and right. For example, how we behave in an argumentative situation reveals basic principles for determining good and right. Does a person behave as a rapist (Brockriede 1972) allowing only for one goal to be achieved or only one version of the argument to be completely aired? Or, does a person behave as a lover who is willing to be open and honest and who encourages the other person to present his or her position as completely and persuasively as possible? One's behavior can help uncover truth through action about good and right in a communication context. Using this definition of ethics, a researcher can explore the way for integrating this topic with major contexts of communication that often appear in a basic communication course.

Ethics and Concepts of Communication

For a better understanding of the relationship between ethics and communication, it's helpful to examine such a relationship in the broader contexts of communication. This section explores four of the most basic contexts of communication. They involve intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, small group com-

munication and public communication. To help introduce these contexts in the basic course, this essay recommends using narration.

Intrapersonal Communication and Ethics

Marion sat by herself in the library. She thought about the three term papers due at the end of the semester. In high school, she like to put off projects until the very end. "But, this wasn't high school," she told herself. She knew that her old behavior habits for doing school work had to change. "No excuses can be made for delaying work on these papers," she thought. "I need to start now." Marion realized her challenge. She confronted herself by assessing her school habits. Her honest appraisal of them helped her realize what needed to be done if she was to accomplish her goal of completing the term papers on time. She thought to herself, "I'll start researching my first paper *this week*."

As with Marion, we, too, have conversations with ourselves. Intrapersonal communication such as, "Why did I put that answer on the test?" or "I shouldn't have said that to her" or "This time I'm going to tell him what I think" are but some of the types of statements that we may raise in private conversations with ourselves. But even in these conversations, everyone faces ethical issues.

In Marion's conversation, she had to confront certain ethical issues. Is she honestly assessing her behavior towards school work? Is she purposely omitting any relevant facts necessary for evaluating her situation? Or, is her commitment to start the research process a genuine commitment? Essentially, Marion is the only one in this situation who can answer these questions. For she is the *only* one communicating.

In exploring ethics in intrapersonal communication, we can ask students to explore the following questions.

- 1) Are we objectively examining the facts?
- 2) Are we rationalizing about our behavior?
- 3) Are we purposely omitting information, taking it out of context or attributing it to the wrong source?

For class discussion, students can provide examples, anecdotes or brief stories which illustrate their answers to the questions above. Together, instructor and students can explore some of the principles which affect private inner conversations. Are such principles increasing our ability to be more open and honest with ourselves? Are such principles helping us achieve what is good and right? Or, is the opposite occurring? Clearly, these are sensitive questions which must be treated delicately and skillfully. No student should be forced to contribute if they elect not to. But, when dialogues about the self occur in the classroom, the instructor needs to encourage self-assessment if self-improvement and ethical development are to occur.

Interpersonal Communication and Ethics

John and Pam have been married for nine years. They enjoy sharing all kinds of information with each other. They trust each other to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings. They are sensitive to each other's feelings and right to privacy. Each can be counted on to not divulge confidential or sensitive matters, especially if asked not to do so.

John and Pam are engaged in an interpersonal communication setting. This is the type of communication which frequently occurs between two people. Their conversation is not unique. Everyone has probably found themselves in similar situations. Their conversation reveals a variety of ethical choices made to attain what they perceive as good and right. Choices concerning trust, openness and honesty are but some of the actions that they consider right and just for establishing a *good* interpersonal relationship.

Possible questions to raise concerning choices are:

- 1) Do we feel comfortable revealing details, perhaps some intimate, about ourself?
- 2) Do we trust the other person not to reveal confidential information?

- 3) Do we or the other person present information in a manner that does not distort its accuracy or the accuracy of the message?
- 4) Do we listen to each other for purposes of understanding?
- 5) Does each person allow the other person the possibility of reaching his or her respective goal?
- 6) Does a monologue or dialogue conversation mode dominate?

Case studies, examples from students, and personal examples can be used as topics for examining the ethical principles which can derive within this context. An additional source for uncovering ethical principles comes from work done by Makay and Brown (1972). They offer some helpful characteristics believed important in ethical communication. Their work can be used to assess the discussion of ethical choices made in an interpersonal communication context. These characteristics include:

1. human involvement from a felt need to communicate,
2. an atmosphere of openness, freedom, and responsibility,
3. dealing with the real issues and ideas relevant to the communication,
4. appreciation of individual differences and uniqueness,
5. acceptance of disagreement and conflict with the desire to resolve them,
6. effective feedback and use of feedback,
7. mutual respect and, hopefully, trust,
8. sincerity and honesty in attitudes toward communication,
9. a positive attitude for understanding and learning and,
10. a willingness to admit error and allow persuasion.

Their list is important because it recognizes the possibility and importance of conflict and persuasion in interpersonal dialogues (Arnett 1986). Such characteristics

can both build relationships and uncover what's good and right between people. Instructors can use these characteristics to reveal basic principles important for establishing ethical communication in the interpersonal communication context.

Group Communication and Ethics

The dreaded, annual departmental meeting was occurring. Members expected the worst and often found the worst to occur in these meetings. This meeting was no exception. Many of the members were ill-prepared to discuss the key issues. The group's leader was known for his lengthy monologues and his policy of favoritism — recognizing, supporting and rewarding those who agreed with him. Those who disagreed with him found themselves censored from the discussion or relegated to the worst assignments in the department. To circumvent the leader's authority, some members brought hidden agendas in order to accomplish their goals. The meeting turned into its usual shouting match with members accusing each other of deception and lack of commitment to the department's goals.

This group has some severe communication problems. Members distrust each other. Some fear voicing their opinions. Others feel that they must use hidden agendas to accomplish their goals. The leader seeks to encourage only those who agree or support him. The leader tends to use a monologic mode of communication with group members. Certain members lack the necessary motivation for adequately preparing themselves for the meetings. As a result, members accuse each other of lying, deception and laziness.

Using the above case study, the class can explore areas for ethical choices during group communication. Divided into groups, the class can consider the following questions.

- 1) Are hidden agendas inherently unethical? Why? Is it true in this case?

- 2) Is the leader's policy of favoritism necessarily harmful to the group's discovering truth in analyzing problems and discovering solutions? Why?
- 3) Is conflict in small group communication unethical? If so, when and why? Was it unethical in this case? Why?
- 4) How prepared should members be to participate effectively in small groups? Was the lack of preparation of members in this group harmful to their ethical conversation with each other? Why?

From this discussion, instructors can follow it up with a class exercise involving a problem to be resolved in groups. Once the problem is resolved, members ask themselves similar questions to those in the case study. What general assessment can they offer of their ethics and possible effects upon their small group communication. Much can be gained from a self-appraisal of the ethical choices made (or need to be made) in group communication.

Public Communication and Ethics

Paul presented his first speech in his public speaking class. He was nervous. But, he prepared long and hard for it. His message contained current facts, credible sources, and reasonable arguments. His language clearly expressed his ideas. He did not cloak them in terminology that few listeners would understand. He further tried to create a dialogue with his audience by adapting his message to their feedback. Paul's efforts paid off. His classmates rated his speech highly. Both he and his class learned from the experience. They realized that sound preparation, practice and audience-adaptation can enhance the effectiveness of a public message.

Paul's experience in presenting a public message is not atypical. His class seemed to respect and appreciate the effort he gave to it. They felt as though he spoke to them and not at them. They tended to view his speech as containing credible sources and evidence and sound arguments. They

rated Paul as a trustworthy speaker, who displayed good-will towards his audience.

Generally, public communication occurs before large audiences who may or may not be in the same proximity with each other. Audiences listening to a radio broadcast, viewing a television broadcast or reading a newspaper or magazine are some of the types of public audience who can be spread literally around the world.

As in the other modes of communication, senders of messages to public audiences face ethical concerns. The Federal Communication Commission, for instance, places restrictions on particular content (e.g., lying or making unsubstantiated claims in advertisement) contained in mass media communication. If sources violate these laws, they may suffer not only judicial penalties but loss of confidence and trust by the public.

From the case study or from other examples, we can explore important topics related to ethical choices that public communicators face. In determining some of the ethical principles that can emerge in this context, students should consider the following questions:

- 1) Does the communicator's competence affect his or her ethics? Why?
- 2) Is it important that a communicator appear trustworthy to an audience? Why?
- 3) Is it important that a communicator display goodwill towards an audience? Why?
- 4) Need a communicator be able to identify with an audience? Why?
- 5) Is a communicator's use and citation of sources important in determining if he or she acts ethically? Why?

Students' answers to these questions may reveal much about what they perceive as being ethical in a public communication context. If they are, for example, to present speeches later in the term, they can be reminded of what they considered good and right when acting ethically in a public communication context. Their knowledge, then, of this

context and the possible ethical choices existing in it can greatly shape the speech that they give.

Summary

As stated at the beginning of this essay, it is useful to introduce the section of ethics early during the course. It provides a yardstick by which students can judge ethical issues as they develop in each of the communication contexts studied. The end result of this, of course, is to have students question their own ethical choices made in these contexts.

The paper provides a general definition of ethics. Ethics is defined as the *principles used for determining what is good and right*. These principles originate from areas such as character, values or conduct. How these principles are used in communication classes help students assess ethics, behavior, and other people's behavior in various communication contexts.

As speech communication teachers, we can help students explore important ethical issues in each of the communication contexts by examining case studies or students' personal examples. There is always the danger that instructors may be perceived as imposing their own ethical system on the class. But, the risk is necessary when discussing the important relationship between ethics and communication.

The topic of ethics has a long tradition in the teaching of rhetoric. Speech teachers need not shy away from this important topic in the basic communication course. Instead, instructors should welcome the challenge to show students the connection of the speech communication field to daily communication behaviors.

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