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Context vs. Process: Revising the Structure of the Basic Course

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The theme of the 1994 SCA convention, "Building Community," was quite appropriate for communication. The contemporary field of Communication seems to be a set of specialists studying communication phenomena in specific and unique contexts as if those contexts had no connection with each other (Burgoon, 1989; Burgoon, Hunsaker, & Dawson, 1994; Reardon & Rogers, 1988; Wiemann, Hawkins, & Pingree, 1988). Powers (1995) refers to these contexts as the "level-centered" tier of human communication theory and research. Wartella (1993, 1994) clearly described this situation by saying that the field has "no intellectual unity." We are left, says Wartella, with a "fractured set of subfields who know little about each other." The communication field seems concerned with classifying the study of communication into contextual categories. which define the field of communication (Marlier, 1980), the individual departments (McCroskey, 1982), and curriculum development (Phelps and Morse, 1982).

The divisions within the communication discipline were formally begun in the earlier 1950's when SCA proposed restructuring the organization into twelve autonomous "departments" representing different communication contexts (Gilman, 1952). These contexts became further subdivided as research accumulated and interests of communication

scholars became more and more specialized. Over time, the number of contexts being studied has increased dramatically. As illustration, more than fifty divisions, sections, commissions, committees, and caucuses and more than eighty different program sponsors listed in the 1995 SCA Convention Program. Even a casual glance at the programs sponsored by each of the separate "departments" indicates an immense amount of overlap in the content, theory, and processes of communication discussed. Yet each unit perceives itself to be distinct from the other groups so much that the field has become more occupied with the study of the idiosyncrasies of specialized contexts than with the processes they hold in common. The contextual approach to the study and pedagogy of communication is a barrier to building community and developing a coherent field of communication (Burgoon, 1989).

THE CONTEXT APPROACH
IN THE BASIC COURSE

The problem of specialization and departmentalization of our field is reflected in the definition and construction of the basic course in communication. Participants at the 1994 Midwest Basic Course Directors' Conference in Kansas City attempted to determine the specific nature of *the* basic course in communication. After extended discussion, the consensus was that there is, in fact, no single basic course, but rather several basic courses. The definition and description of the basic course varies among institutions and sometimes even within institutions. Lester (1982), Gibson, et al. (1985; 1990), Trank & Lewis (1991), and Seiler (1993) report several forms of the basic course including those concentrating on specific contexts of public speaking, business and professional speaking, interpersonal communication, interviewing, and group discussion. In some schools, the basic course is the blend or

hybrid course which covers a number of communication contexts, adding mass communication, organizational communication, interviewing, and/or intercultural communication to the traditional contexts.

Even within a specific type of basic course, there are a number of variations of the contexts covered. For example, some public speaking courses teach group communication, some do not. Some interpersonal courses teach interviewing and others do not. Some hybrid courses teach mass communication and organizational communication, some focus only on interpersonal and public speaking.

Even within a specific context, variations occur. Public speaking courses cover different combinations of informative, persuasive, ceremonial, after-dinner, introduction, group presentations, and motivational speeches. Some hybrid and interpersonal courses teach employment interviewing, while others teach journalistic, sales, appraisal, media, or medical interview contexts. Some small group courses teach group discussion, forums, and symposium presentations, others focus on group decision making contexts, while still others focus on family, organizational, and educational group contexts. This seemingly infinite bifurcation and subdivision of the basic course reflects the fragmentation of the field into specialized contextual units.

As scholars in communication continue to specialize and the field becomes more fragmented, the number of specialized communication contexts continues to increase. For example, interpersonal communication now focuses on specific categories such as family, intercultural, friend, marital, gender, gay, health, and aging. Public speaking is subdivided into contexts such as political, presidential, debate, and religious contexts. The list goes on. The problem of subdividing the basic course into contextual units will become further exacerbated as more and more of these contexts become integrated into the basic course. Even now, some basic course textbooks include separate chapters or units on family communication,

conflict, gender, intercultural communication, small group discussion, small group decision making, and speeches for special occasions.

The fragmentation of the communication discipline, which is reflected in the structure of the basic course, seems based on the assumption that each context is in some meaningful way unique. Subsequently, knowledge of one context cannot transfer directly or completely to the idiosyncracies of other contexts. Similarly, communication skills for any specific context typically taught in the basic communication course would be distinct from basic communication skills needed in other contexts. Despite the contextual approach to defining and structuring the basic course, however, basic courses seem to exhibit extensive commonality and overlap among topics. Regardless of contextual focus, all or most of the basic courses include communication concepts such as listening, nonverbal communication, audience analysis and adaptation, organization, persuasion, information sharing, credibility, and the use of language. The problem is that these concepts are taught as if they are a characteristic of only specific communication contexts, rather than generalizable across contexts. Granted, different contexts have different situational constraints. However, the processes or activities of communication remain constant; they do not change across contexts (Yoder, Hugenberg, & Wallace, 1993). For example, each participant in interpersonal, interviewing, or small group contexts must engage in the processes of organization, audience analysis, listening, use of vivid language, delivery, and audience adaptation. These processes are **not** unique to the public speaking context. However, many courses are structured as if these processes only applied to public speaking situations.

The thesis of this article is that the assumptions of the context approach are neither warranted by the theoretical foundations of the course nor do they have pragmatic value for pedagogy. Rather, the transactional perspective that assumes that contexts are more alike than different, that

basic communication processes transcend contexts, seems to be a more theoretically defensible and pedagogically sound approach to structuring the basic communication course. The implications of the context and process approaches are especially evident in evaluating communication skills, creating accurate understanding of the nature of communication, and an appropriate image of the communication discipline.

CONTEXT AND ASSESSMENT
OF COMMUNICATION PERFORMANCE

One assumption underlying the assessment practices in the basic course is that competent communication performance within the classroom setting will be similar to performance in other settings. In other words, the classroom setting is generalizable to other settings and the evaluation of students in the classroom are in some way predictive of their abilities to perform in other contexts. The contexts which define the basic course, however, are arbitrarily defined stereotypes. The class in public speaking arbitrarily defines the parameters of the student speeches and the types of speeches the students perform. The type of speeches taught in the classroom, however, are seldom representative of the non-classroom experience. The occasion for a public speech as performed in the classroom will probably never arise for most, if not all, students after the conclusion of the basic course. How often does anyone outside the classroom give a five minute (plus or minus fifteen seconds) speech about seat belts using one notecard, citing three library sources, and a hand drawn chart on a posterboard? Similarly, an employment interview for a fictitious job conducted by a first year student pretending to be a personnel officer is undoubtedly dissimilar from any experience the student will have when applying for a career position after graduation.

The communication skills discussed in a public speaking class or interviewing class are quite valuable, but they are taught and assessed within a specific classroom context. The students' grades reflect not only their communication abilities but also their abilities to meet the constraints of the classroom performance. For example, students may receive lower grades (i.e., they may be labeled as less competent) because they spoke 10 seconds too long, failed to provide a full sentence outline, used a topic the instructor had not approved, or failed to list enough research sources in a bibliography. The same speech and performance of the same skills, however, may be very effective in a different context. Although students may fulfill (or not fulfill) the contextual requirements of the classroom performance, we cannot assume that they will be competent (or incompetent) in situations with different contextual demands.

The counter argument to the above statement is that the students learn the basic skills (e.g., public speaking or employment interviewing) in the classroom setting and can thus adapt to specific requirements and constraints of other communication conditions. That may well be true, but that is exactly the argument this paper tries to make about contexts. Gestures are as important to an interview and group discussion as a public speech, but seldom are people critiqued on their use of gestures apart from the public speaking context. Credibility is necessary when vying for leadership in a group or trying to convince a relational partner to attend a concert, but is seldom discussed in these contexts. To limit specific communication processes to one context arbitrarily departmentalizes skills and knowledge into segmented units.

CONTEXT AND PERCEPTIONS
OF THE BASIC COURSE

Student perceptions of the basic course and the communication field are, most likely, shaped by the content and perspective of the basic course (Bort & Dickmeyer, 1994). By designing the basic course as if each context was different, students complete the basic course with the impression of multiple and independent contexts and without seeing the relevance of communication processes across contexts. They have trouble understanding the relevance of conversational skills to public speaking or interviewing; they have difficulty relating the relevance of delivery to interviewing or casual conversation. Students who want to study public speaking may think interpersonal communication is irrelevant. Even though students may perceive they are successful in interpersonal relationships, they are apprehensive about a public speech since they perceive it as a totally different context requiring skills they have not developed. Students do not see the relevance of processes taught in one context to communication skills and knowledge needed in another context, perhaps, because those who teach the courses fail to see the relevance themselves.

Because we teach communication processes as being context based, students leave the basic course with the notion that certain processes are appropriate to one context while other processes are appropriate to other contexts. This perception is further heightened by the use of different contextual vocabularies for essentially the same communication behavior and processes. Basic courses talk about compliance gaining in interpersonal contexts, but persuasion in public speaking, and leadership in small groups. Students learn about person perception and behavioral flexibility in interpersonal contexts but study audience analysis and adaptation in public speaking and impression management in interviewing. They learn problem-solution sequences (e.g., Monroe's Motivated Sequence) for public speaking, and then learn different names for essentially the same organizational patterns for group decision-making (e.g., Dewey's Reflective

Thinking Model). Almost all hybrid and public speaking books have separate chapters on nonverbal communication and delivery, even though the chapters discuss the same concepts and processes (e.g., kinesics, eye contact, appearance, etc.). Students learning different models and processes for different contexts cannot help but think that the material learned in one context does not generalize to any other.

The contextual approach has derived from a long-standing tradition of classification and sub-classification of communication phenomena into contextual categories. The over-specialization creates barriers for researchers, teachers, and students in understanding the commonalities among communication contexts, and it gives an unnecessarily fragmented view of communication (Marlier, 1980; Burgoon, 1989). This fragmented view of contextual differences pervades the basic course and promulgates the notion that there is no agreement as to what the basic course is or should be. What would happen if we started over and tried a different approach to structuring the basic course?

THE PROCESS APPROACH

If we abandon the contextual approach that defines both our discipline and our basic courses, what alternative focus can we adopt? How will that focus restructure our thinking, and subsequently, our teaching of the basic course? One possibility is to focus on the *processes* of communication rather than the context in which the communication takes place.

The Transactional Approach

Many communication scholars, and subsequently, many basic course textbooks advocate a transactional, process approach to the study of communication. The transactional

approach makes two important assumptions concerning the nature of communication. First, the transactional approach assumes that people communicate simultaneously, and through their simultaneous enactment of communicative behaviors, mutually create the communication situation. In other words, communication is not a "thing" which people create, but a process which people enact (Smith, 1972; Hawes, 1973; Fisher, 1987). The act defines the communication and the context, rather than the context defining the communication and hence the act (Freshley, 1975). Therefore, the contexts that are typically labeled as public speaking, group discussion, interviews, or conversations are stereotypes of generic definitions rather than isomorphic with the idiosyncrasies inherent in a specific communication transaction. No two situations are the same, yet we teach "public speaking" as if there is a particular model of public speaking that can be applied to all similar situations. The classroom "public speech," however, is unlike any other "public speaking" situation; a person who performs well in a classroom assignment may not perform equally well in other public speaking settings.

A second assumption of the transactional approach is that the definition of the context is part of the negotiated meaning of the communication. Most basic course texts define and characterize communication contexts as if they exist apart from the communication participants. The context is not imposed from external sources, however, but is agreed upon by the communication participants. If the participants define the context as an interview, then for the purposes of their communication, it *is* an interview regardless of whether it meets externally generated *a priori* definitions of an interview. Mutual perception that the situation is a "public speech" or a "conversation" is the *sine qua non* of the context rather than arbitrary criteria assumed to exist in "reality" and imposed on the situation.

If we assume that the context does not define the communication, but rather, that the communication defines the context, we must therefore focus on the *processes* of communication rather than the context. Processes of communication generalize across contexts and must necessarily include all people in the interaction, not just the message sender (speaker) or the message receiver (listener). This differentiates processes from the constituent concepts of "skills" and "knowledge". *Knowledge* is the cognitive schema which individuals have about the processes of communication which shape their perceptions of the communication event. Communication *skills* are specific behavioral patterns performed by individuals. From a transactional perspective, *process* becomes the cooperative, interdependent patterns of behavior and meanings mutually created by the communication participants. Processes are shaped by the interaction of the communicators' knowledge and their performance of communicative skills, but are not synonymous with behaviors and knowledge.

Once we adopt a process approach to communication instruction, we change the focus from identifying specific behaviors appropriate for an arbitrarily defined context, and focus instead on the creation and enactment of a repertoire of behaviors and the discovery of the meanings assigned to them. The appropriateness of behaviors to a specific context must necessarily be determined by the interactants, not by whether they are consistent with normative models or templates created by the instructor. The instructor changes focus from creating artificial contexts to helping students learn a variety of communicative behaviors and increasing knowledge so students can determine and understand the meanings of those behaviors for the other participants in the communication episode.

If we assume that communication processes transcend specific contexts, then we must be able to identify those processes which are basic to all contexts. A partial inventory of

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processes already taught in most basic communication courses includes, but is not limited to:

1. *encoding processes:* creation of verbal and nonverbal messages

2. *decoding processes:* cognitive information processing and listening

3. *persuasion and argument processes:* influencing others

4. *information sharing processes:* explaining, receiving, understanding and remembering information

5. *negotiation processes:* creating agreement about the nature of the communication and the accomplishment of interdependent goals

6. *decision making processes*: choosing among alternative actions

7. *critical thinking:* analyzing information and arguments; reasoning

8. *organizing processes:* the creation of meaningful and integrated patterns of messages and communication interactions

9. *adaptation processes:* changing communication behaviors to fit the continuously changing parameters of communication interactions

10. *affective processes:* managing and expressing emotions; motivating self and others

The advantages of focusing on these (an other) processes accrue from their generalizability across contexts. Marlier (1980) defined speech communication as "a discipline concerned with the study of a dynamic process which occurs in every social context" (p. 326). Persuasion processes, for example, are not limited to the enactment of Monroe's Motivated Sequence in a five minute public speech. Rather they

entail the knowledge to identify the persuasive nature of any context, and to mutually create appropriate persuasive communication with others in that context. Organizing messages is not a communication skill relegated solely to the public speaking context, but an integral part of all communication situations. Similarly, asking and answering questions (information sharing) is as important to relationship development and group discussion as it is to the formal interview. In short, students learn communication skills and knowledge that can be used in all contexts, not just the arbitrarily defined contexts prescribed by the instructor.

Students realize that learning communication processes is not just something they do in the basic course but continue to do in all contexts. By avoiding the pitfalls of contextual limitations, students are discouraged from thinking that public speaking skills are irrelevant since they cannot perceive themselves "giving a speech" or that interpersonal skills are irrelevant since they "already know how to communicate with friends". By decompartmentalizing communication, the basic course relinquishes its focus on isolated contexts and creates a learning environment in which students can immediately understand the generalizability of their instructional experience.

Finally, the change in focus from context to process creates an integrative approach to communication study. Students can learn generalizable symbolic codes for communication processes rather than separate vocabularies for the same processes in different context categories. They can understand the commonalities of communication contexts rather than focus on arbitrary differences. For example, listening is not a "receiver skill" but a *communication* skill all people are performing simultaneously. Persuasion processes are inherently involved with decision making and information sharing processes. Skills and knowledge are not isolated to specific contexts (e.g., the persuasive speech, the information gathering interview, the decision making group, etc.), but

integrated throughout all contexts and mutually created and performed by all participants.

IMPLICATIONS

Changing to a process approach has several implications for the basic course. While it may be possible to "phase in" this approach as some combination of processes and contexts. The contradictory underlying assumptions of the approaches, however, make this problematic. The transactional process approach assumes that contexts are similar and that knowledge and skills applicable to one context are transferable to others. The context approach suggests that each communication situation requires different skills that are, at the most, only marginally transferable. Therefore, adoption of the process approach to structuring the basic course necessitates fairly dramatic and fundamental changes in the way the course is operationalized.

First, many traditional pedagogical practices will need to be changed. Course organization, assignments, and assessment procedures will need to focus on skills and knowledge about processes rather than defining and enacting contextually defined normative patterns of behavior. Assessment would focus on acquisition and demonstration of a repertoire of skills, ability to adapt to a variety of situational exigence, and motivation to engage in competent communication, rather than the performance of contextually defined communication events. All communication situations are perceived as equally viable for demonstrating communication knowledge and skills, not just the traditional public speech, interview, and group discussion formats. This assumption may also lift many of the time constraints in the basic course since the focus is no longer on the stand up 5-minute speech or the 30 minute group discussion as the only method of demonstrating skill and knowledge acquisition. Many classes already teach communication skills through experiential learning, activities, and worksheets. These activities might become the focus of skills assessment rather than used merely

as activities building toward the "real assignment" (e.g., a formal speech or interview). Technological advances may allow the use of computer simulations to create a variety of interactive scenarios in which the student can demonstrate knowledge and skills acquisition in a variety of situations.

The change in focus will also necessitate a restructuring of traditional textbooks to focus on processes rather than contexts. Chapters or units labeled as "public speaking", "interviewing, or "small group discussion" will no longer be necessary. Rather, specific contexts will be used to illustrate all of the processes. In essence, the entire course becomes focused on public speaking, just as the entire course would be simultaneously focused on interpersonal, group, intercultural, and other contexts. Refocusing on processes may actually make the textbooks clearer, reduce redundancy of information, and allow more depth in the development of conceptual and behavioral (skills) material. For example, a student who learns the processes of nonverbal communication does not have to relearn the same processes as separate concepts in each different context.

Curriculum changes will encourage scholars to discover and understand generalizable processes of communication rather than the limitations and idiosyncrasies of specific contexts. Integrating communication skills across contexts requires a renewed focus on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of our discipline. Are processes hierarchical, i.e, are there "supra-processes" and "sub-processes?" What are the specific interdependencies of the processes? Are processes sequential or simultaneous? These questions may provide a fruitful endeavor for pedagogical research.

A final concern of the approach will be our ability to communicate the process approach to others outside of the course and outside the discipline. Some departments require their students to take basic communication courses which trains them in a specific context, e.g., public speaking or group decision making. Will other departments or administrative units

understand the difference between learning persuasion processes and the ability to give a persuasive speech? Will they understand the advantages of learning information sharing processes rather than learning employment interviewing? Making the advantages of the process approach understandable to people in other disciplines may pose a special challenge for basic course administrators.

In summary, the context approach to structuring the study of communication creates problems in determining the nature and function of the basic course. The process approach was suggested as a possible alternative that looks for commonalities among contexts rather than differences. The process approach does not ignore the influence of contextual constraints, but does remove them as the driving force for communication research and pedagogy. A benefit that may result from the process approach is that we may finally avoid the problem of trying to justify the inclusion of one communication context in the basic course to the exclusion of others. The process approach may increase similarity among basic courses across colleges and universities. We may be able to draw closer to the notion that there is ONE basic course that covers the fundamental processes that define our discipline.

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