

## Basic Communication Course Annual

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Volume 10

Article 12


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1998

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### Recommended Citation

Spano, Shawn (1998) "Delineating the Uses of Practical Theory: A Reply to Hickson," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 10 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol10/iss1/12>

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## Delineating the Uses of Practical Theory: A Reply to Hickson

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*Shawn Spano*

Let me begin by thanking Professor Hickson for his comments on the article I published in the 1996 issue of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* (Hickson, 1996; Spano, 1996). I consider it a compliment that my ideas about practical theory interested him enough to write a rejoinder. More importantly, Hickson's response provides us with an opportunity to "continue the conversation" on the role of theory in the basic course.

It might be useful here to provide some background on how this conversation started. In 1995 I presented a paper on practical theory on a SCA program sponsored by the Basic Course Commission. Soon after, I submitted a revised version of the SCA paper for publication in the *Annual*. The final version of the essay, the one that appeared in the last issue of the *Annual*, thus evolved through a series of conversations between myself and a program respondent, a journal editor, three members of the editorial board, and a few other colleagues who took the time to read the article and talk to me about it.

The conversation might have stopped there if Professor Hickson had not elected to join it by writing a response. The current editor of the *Annual*, Larry Hugenberg, has now agreed to let us take yet another "turn" in this conversation. My hope is that this ongoing exchange will evoke the kind of responses that invigorate our teaching and ultimately assist us in helping our students improve their communication abilities. Specifically, I would like to use

this response—my turn in the conversation—to accomplish three objectives. First, to clarify what practical theory is and resolve some misunderstandings about it. Second, to describe how I arrived at a practical theory approach to communication education. Third, to show through a series of examples how practical theory can enrich the basic course.

### **CLARIFYING ASSUMPTIONS: THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM**

In the original article I critically questioned the usefulness of positivist-based theory and research in the basic course. To put a face on the kind of theory I am talking about, I would nominate uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) as a prototypical example. Uncertainty reduction theory assumes the familiar form of most traditional social scientific theory. It consists of a set of statements or propositions that are logically connected to one another and empirically testable using some method of quantitative research. The thrust of my original criticism is that this theory, *in its propositional form*, is not particularly useful in helping students or teachers improve their communication abilities. As I hope to show later, positivist-based theory can be used to improve communication performance in those circumstances where the propositional form of the theory is changed.

A few points concerning the traditional paradigm need clarification. First, I do not take the position, as Hickson (1996) states, “that empirical research and theory are to be separated from practice” (p. 101). My argument is just the opposite: research and theory need to be much more responsive to communication practice. Second, I am not advocating that we eliminate theory altogether from the basic course. My position is that we rethink our ideas of theory, or more accurately the way we practice theory in

the basic course. Practical theory is sufficiently responsive to communication practice because, as paradoxical as this might sound, *theory itself is treated as a communication practice*.

The third point concerns the theory-practice dichotomy. It is my position that, in the end, this dichotomy is an inevitable feature of the positivist and postpositivist research approach. Hickson (1996) addresses this issue in slightly different way. He argues that historically the division was between research and theory, not theory and practice. Early “variable-testing” research is given as an example of research which operated independently of theory. Whether this or any research can ever be completely free of theoretical influence is a matter of serious contention. Fortunately, it is not an issue that we need to debate here, because as Hickson (1996) reminds us, the vast majority of positivist-based research today is explicitly theoretical (“theoretical” in the sense of the propositional form described above and in the original essay).

The evolution from non-theoretical to theoretical-based research, as Hickson (1996) describes it, seems to me to be indicative of the move from positivism to postpositivism (see Guba, 1990). This interpretation leads me to conclude that my original criticism focused more on postpositivism research and theory than its predecessor. I do not think this changes the essential point of my argument, however, concerning the inherent dualism between theory and practice in the traditional paradigm. There are many ways to bring communication practice into the fold of research and theory. Obviously, I favor practical theory. I am also intrigued by Hickson’s suggestion that we treat communication practice, teaching, observation, research, and theory as part of an interconnected *web* (Stacks, Hickson & Hill, 1991). We might even use the next turn in our conversation to explore the connections between these two approaches.

## HOW I ARRIVED AT PRACTICAL THEORY

The postpositivist paradigm of communication research has shaped my professional life in some important ways. Most of my graduate education was spent learning social psychological theories of human behavior and quantitative social science research methods. While doing course work I also taught lower division performance courses in public speaking and interpersonal communication. Reconciling these two activities—research oriented course work and teaching—was not always an easy task. Indeed, the disparity between the two was established at the beginning of my graduate education. I vividly remember the department chair telling us new M.A. students during orientation that the demands of our course work would naturally conflict with our teaching duties. Our first obligation, he said, was to our course work.

It was clear the department chair believed research and teaching to be separate activities and that teaching is the less important of the two. For the next ten or so years I simply assumed that this was the accepted model among university faculty and administrators. It was actually quite easy to do since very little in my professional experience contradicted it. That does not mean I personally adhered to the model. In fact, for a variety of reasons I chose to define myself as a teacher first and a researcher second, realizing all along that in accordance with the model I would be relegated to second class status behind the research elite.

Soon after taking a faculty position I started working more closely with interpretive, qualitative approaches to communication research, especially in the area of social constructionism. While I continued to teach the beginning public speaking course, I also started assuming professional service responsibilities in curriculum development and student outcomes assessment. At the same time, my

office mate, who studied in the area of communication education, and I would regularly have conversations about some scholarly aspect of teaching. This usually involved one of us sharing a particular teaching experience and then using the experience to launch off into some discussion related to communication theory and research. It was a new way of talking about teaching and I enjoyed it immensely.

Eventually I realized that my research interests intersected with my new found role of “teacher-scholar.” The epiphany was not simply that research and teaching were related, it was that the two could enrich one another in some exciting and useful ways. In this regard, Cronen’s (1995a, 1995b, 1996) treatment of practical theory and recent writings in the coordinated management of meaning theory have been instrumental in providing me with a concrete framework for integrating social constructionist theory and research with my teaching activities. In fact, it was Cronen’s (1995b) work which prompted me to write the original SCA paper in the first place.

### ***Practical Theory Example 1***

It seems to me that there are a number of advantages for using practical theory in communication education. As I stated in the original article, “teachers in the basic course not only employ practical theory, but they are also engaged practical theorists themselves” (Spano, 1996, p. 85). I would like to use the following example to illustrate, initially at least, how teachers can begin to work with practical theory and as practical theorists. It is important to keep in mind that what the teacher as practical theorist brings to the classroom is a set of pedagogical communicative practices that are interventionist in nature because their purpose is to improve (i.e. alter, modify, transform) students’ communication abilities.

- Pamela is preparing materials for the first day of her oral communication class. She calculates that she has taught close to 30 sections of the oral communication course since she began teaching 10 years ago. During that time she has developed dozens of exercises, handouts, and speech assignments. While Pamela has commented on more than one occasion that she could “teach this course in her sleep,” she knows full well the importance of being fully present and fully engaged in all aspects of her teaching.
- As a communication teacher and practical theorist, Pamela knows that how she presents material to the students is as important as the material itself. As she sees it, her job is not simply to transmit information from teacher to student, but to enter into an interaction with students so they are able to situate themselves in the material. Put differently, she wants to adapt the material to the unique needs, interests, passions, and experiences of the students. Her objective on this first day of class is to create a context for students to take ownership of the course and their own communication abilities. She begins by asking students what their expectations are, what their previous experiences were, what they fear, and what they are looking forward to. She leads the class in an exercise where students first take an inventory of themselves as public speakers and then visualize themselves as public speakers at the end of the term.
- The general idea behind these communication practices is to elicit the “grammar” of the students: how they talk about the course, how they see themselves relative to the course and in relationship to other students and the instructor, and how the course fits within their larger cultural frames of reference. Un-

derstanding the grammar of the students is the starting point for a practical theory of communication education. So Pamela listens carefully to the language of her students, to their grammar. She figures that being able to engage in meaningful interaction with her students puts her in a position to help them improve their own ways of talking.

Through Pamela we can begin to see the kind of attitude or orientation the practical theorist brings to teaching. First, there is an explicit recognition that teaching and learning are performative acts and that communication teachers are in a very real sense communication practitioners. Pamela knows that her course materials do not speak for themselves; they must be enacted, practiced, and performed. Second, there is a quality dimension to the teaching and learning process which is dependent on the ways that teachers and students interact together. This is why Pamela is so sensitive to the dynamics of classroom communication and the speaking and listening process. Third, teachers have criteria for assessing the success of their teaching practices. The goals and outcomes Pamela has for her students will be realized when students are able to demonstrate particular communication abilities.

### **CLARIFYING ASSUMPTIONS: PRACTICAL THEORY**

Hickson (1996) noted some confusion in my treatment of practical theory in the basic course. Much of this confusion appears to revolve around the question of whether communication is best learned by applying previously tested theoretical propositions or by responding to the unique contingencies embedded in each moment of social interaction. Hickson (1996) strongly objects to practical



theory on the grounds that it presumes students and teachers must “start from scratch” each time they attempt to learn new communication abilities. I agree that practical theory would indeed be deficient if that was all it had to offer. Instead of “starting from scratch,” however, practical theorists work instead with something more closely resembling “trial and error.”

Let me try to clarify this distinction more carefully by, first, describing trial and error in terms of the American pragmatist tradition and, second, illustrating the importance of social interaction in the teaching and learning process.

In the original article I traced the lineage of practical theory to Aristotle’s notion of praxis, and alluded to the sophistic tradition as another source of insight. The tradition of American Pragmatism, particularly as it was espoused by John Dewey and William James, provides a more recent influence. James (1978) described pragmatism as “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking toward things, fruits, consequences, and facts” (cited in Barber, 1984, p. 177). It is this sense of the meaning of “practical” that informs practical theory.

Given the commitment to American pragmatism, it follows that practical theory would adopt something resembling trial and error method. This method does not mean, as Hickson (1996) states, that we have to “start from scratch” every time we encounter a new communication situation (p. 101). It simply means that *we observe the consequences of our actions and use these in a reflexive-dialectical fashion to guide subsequent actions*. When working within the domain of praxis, it makes sense to say that “[e]very interaction is a unique moment at the same time that each is informed by the historicity of prior interaction events and informs future events” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14). The communication practices a teacher brings

to an educational context may be ones that have been used many times before. But unless those practices have been “successful” as gauged by the consequences of their use, I cannot imagine why the teacher would choose to use them again.

At the same time, there is no guarantee that past practices will be successful in the present situation or in future situations. A practice must always be performed “in the moment.” I do not want to overstate the uniqueness of every interaction event—the present is always shaped within an historical context. Conversely, I do not want to overstate the permanency which can be attributed to a conventionalized practice. After all, that practice has to be put into action over and over again for it to become conventional. What practical theory tries to do is work with the dialectical tension that exists between stability and change, between what is predictable and what is open ended.

In addition to the influence of early American pragmatism, recent writings in pragmatism also help frame the conceptual boundaries of practical theory. What most contemporary pragmatists share is a common focus on communication, discourse, conversation, and the constitutive properties of language (Bernstein, 1983; Rorty, 1982). This focus is clearly at the heart of Cronen’s (1995a) recent work in social constructionism and the coordinated management of meaning theory. According to Cronen (1995a), social reality, and to that I would add the social reality created by teachers and students, “is constituted in and through processes of communication” (p. 19). Given the intellectual lineage of practical theory it should be apparent that it is not grounded in phenomenology, as Hickson (1996) states.

A practical theory of communication education focuses on social interaction as the primary site of teaching and learning. Simply stated, *teaching and learning are thought*

*to be constructed in patterns of pedagogical communication practice. Furthermore, these patterns of communication are jointly coordinated and negotiated by teachers and students.* I would like to emphasize this point perhaps more than any other in clarifying what practical theory is, how it works, and how it differs from postpositivist theory. Foregrounding communication, language, discourse, and conversation as the primary site of teaching and learning has some profound implications for how practical and postpositivist theory are integrated into the basic course.

### ***Practical Theory Example 2***

The following example is designed to show how the propositional form of traditional theory must be transformed if it is to have educational value as a resource in communication education. It is my position that practical theory provides a way to accomplish this theoretical transformation. This is important because it illustrates how postpositivist theory can be used as a pedagogical resource in the basic course.

- Alicia, a new graduate teaching assistant, is teaching her first oral communication course. Like most teaching assistants, Alicia is bright, eager, and committed. In fact, she has conducted some library research in preparation for the upcoming section of the course on source credibility. Alicia has a pretty good idea of what source credibility is, but she figures that she will do a better job teaching the topic if she becomes more familiar with social science research in this area.
- Reading through the numerous credibility studies is actually quite interesting to Alicia, but the more she reads the more frustrated she gets. The problem is that the research findings are presented as general

statements that offer little insight into how she and her students can actually use credibility in the classroom. To be fair, Alicia recognizes that the research was not designed for pedagogical purposes. Nevertheless, she is not sure what to do with what she is reading. For example, one study found that speakers will be perceived as more credible by an audience if the audience perceives the speaker to be trustworthy. Alicia thinks, “what am I supposed to do, go into class and simply state this research claim to my students?”

- Alicia is not satisfied with the credibility research in its present form. She guesses that she might be missing something. Eventually it occurs to her that the goal of the research is to produce logically sound, empirically testable statements about credibility that are as widely applicable as possible. Nothing more, nothing less. It further occurs to her that these statements in and of themselves are not going to be particularly useful to her or her students, although she does sense that they might be helpful as a starting point. She is convinced that some serious work still needs to be done. So Alicia begins to think about ways she can tailor the research findings to the unique demands of her class, her speech assignments, and her students.
- What Alicia ends up developing is a series of concrete examples and exercises on credibility. In one of the exercises, students discuss how other well-known speakers have established their credibility (or not) and how students can go about establishing credibility in their own classroom speeches. Afterwards, Alicia makes what she thinks is a rather curious observation: how she and her students ended up talking about credibility did not sound at all like the re-

search claims she read. In fact, students generated some comments about credibility which Alicia thought were valid even though they contradicted some of the research findings.

The form of practical theory that I am advancing here integrates postpositivist theory into the fold, but does so by changing the grounds on which the theory is based. First, traditional theories are treated as communication practices, as kinds of “language games” to use a Wittgensteinian term. As such, the teaching and learning of these theories transpires through the coordinated and negotiated actions of teachers and students. Once teachers start to work with formal theory in this way they are *doing practical theory*. Second, how the theory is actually taught and learned depends on the myriad of contingencies embedded in any given educational situation. Indeed, a major part of Alicia’s task was to adapt extant credibility theory and research to her students and to her course assignments. In a very real sense, Alicia had to treat the research claims not as truth-oriented statements about credibility but as *actions to be performed*.

My argument for how traditional credibility research and theory is taught and learned appears to be similar to the argument Hickson (1996) makes concerning the concepts sympathy, power and status, and quid pro quo. Hickson (1996) claims that these concepts are universal among humans. While I probably would not begin with the assumption of universality, I certainly endorse Hickson’s (1996) ideas for how to teach these concepts. “Such universals should . . . be discussed and experienced utilizing the dialectic of cultural . . . How are they implemented differently in different cultures? What is the language (Spano’s ‘grammar’) of each of these constructs?” (p. 104). Hickson goes on to suggest that teachers and students discuss “how” sympathy, power and status, and quid pro quo are

performed in context. This sounds very much like the kind of discussion Alicia facilitated on source credibility.

I would add one important point here. When exploring how power, status, sympathy, and the rest operate within cultural contexts, we must also recognize that these concepts are themselves played out communicatively in the classroom. A classroom is a particular cultural context, after all, and as such it is shaped through communication processes of power, status, and the like. This suggests that we can use classroom communication to explore how supposed universal constructs are implemented and practiced within situated contexts (in this case, “educational” contexts). We can also use the classroom to practice with our students ways of negotiating sympathy, power, status, or any other concept that piques the curiosity of the teacher as practical theorist.

### ***Practical Theory Example 3***

Practical theory involves more than the transformation of traditional theory for pedagogical purposes. In fact, practical theorists should draw on any and all available resources which will help them enlarge their communication abilities and the abilities of their students. The following example is designed to show how practical theory can facilitate teaching and learning in more spontaneous interactions. Here teachers and students deal with open-ended and fluid conversational patterns as they jointly coordinate the teaching and learning process.

- Lou’s teaching and research interests are in interpersonal communication. In addition to teaching upper-division interpersonal courses, he regularly teaches the basic communication course. Recently, Lou has been studying some of the interpersonal techniques used by communication practition-

ers in family therapy sessions. One technique, called systemic or circular questioning, is used by therapists to get family members to think in terms of relational patterns instead of individual causes. He is curious how this type of questioning can be adapted to the basic course, so he makes a conscious effort to practice it with his students when the opportunity arises.

- One such opportunity presents itself as the class is preparing for their first major informative speech. When discussing possible topics for the assignment, one student, Martin, expresses the desire to give his speech on computers. Lou asks Martin about his ideas for narrowing the topic and adapting it to his audience. After some initial hesitation, Martin suggests informing the class about the technology involved in the development of new high speed modems. Recognizing the obvious limitations this topic poses for a general audience, Lou decides to use the systemic questioning technique as way of teaching Martin to do audience analysis. Here is a brief excerpt from how this conversation might go:
  - Lou: “Martin, I think its great that you are interested in computers and high speed modems. Who else shares your interest?”
  - Martin: “Well, my friend Bill and I talk about this all the time. Most of the other computer engineering majors I know are also psyched about the new modems.”
  - Lou: “So if you were to give this speech in one of your computer engineering classes, the audience would know something about the topic and they would probably be interested in it?”
  - Martin: “Yes, I think so.”

- Lou: “Are there other groups who would be interested in your topic?”
- Martin: “People who work in the high tech industry would probably be interested. They’re the ones who actually make the modems, you know.”
- Lou: “Yes, that makes sense. Martin, I want you to think about our oral communication class and each of the students sitting here today. What do you think they would say about your speech topic?”
- Martin: “Hum, except for a couple of people they might say its kind of technical, I guess.”
- Lou: “Imagine them actually listening to the speech. How do you think the class would respond to your information?”
- Martin: “Well, they might be confused or bored. I’m not sure.”
- Lou: “It sounds like a plausible interpretation to me. Now, how might you go about changing the purpose of your speech so that its not too technical or confusing for a general audience like our class?”

The line of questioning Lou is pursuing here is based on his working hypothesis that Martin is “stuck” in an ethnocentric way of looking at the world (i.e. “what is relevant to me and the people I associate with will be relevant to everyone”). Lou, of course, can tell Martin to do a better job of analyzing his audience, but Martin might not have the ability to do this without some additional help. What is needed is a pedagogical practice that will teach Martin *how to do audience analysis*. That is, we need a practice which will enable Martin to see his speech from the perspective of the various audiences who might hear it.



While there are many ways to accomplish this objective, Lou finds systemic questioning to be especially useful. Lou also recognizes, however, that the success of this teaching practice is, in part, dependent on his own abilities to use systemic questioning in ongoing interactions with students. Put differently, his abilities will co-evolve in concert with those of his students.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In this response I have tried to clarify some of the conceptual parameters surrounding practical theory and to illustrate through a series of examples some of the ways practical theory can be used in the basic course. A couple of observations might be helpful here in summarizing practical theory. First, practical theory is not a fully formed approach to communication practice and inquiry. Moreover, practical theory will never be “fully formed” if that term is taken to mean theory as codified into a set of hierarchical ordered propositions about the world. The form of practical theory is communicative and emergent. That is, the theory emerges through ongoing communication practice and reflexive assessment.

Second, not everyone will buy into practical theory because it represents a radical departure from conventional understandings of what theory is. After reviewing the original essay, one *Annual* reviewer noted that my argument for practical theory will please those who are sufficiently emancipated from the traditional paradigm, but will probably not do much to persuade those who continue to work within it. I think this reviewer makes a valid point. So who is my audience? Who can benefit most from integrating practical theory into their teaching activities?

The primary audience I am appealing to are those who define their professional identity around the act of teaching, but for whatever reason do not see themselves as theo-

rists, researchers, or scholars. Practical theory provides an opportunity for these teachers to use their pedagogical practices as sites for investigating how the communication process works. Communication teachers are in an excellent position to make theoretical contributions, yet there are few institutional structures which reward or even make such efforts possible (Sprague, 1993). What practical theory does is invite teachers to use their work in pedagogy to help extend our understandings of communication and how it is taught, learned, and practiced. Practical theory is certainly not the only way to accomplish this, but it is a viable option.

Let me briefly comment on how this invitation applies to the practical theory examples mentioned earlier. First, Pamela is particularly sensitive to the dynamics of classroom communication and the language or grammar of her students. She uses her interactions with students as an opportunity for eliciting the kind of talk which will help her understand how her students communicate and how she can best move them forward into new patterns of communication. I think Pamela can tell us something about the constitutive features of human communication and how these features assist in the teaching and learning process. Second, Alicia is looking to acquire pedagogical resources to help students learn about source credibility and how to achieve it. It seems that Alicia is in a position to articulate a case study example of how credibility operates in a particular classroom situation with specific speakers, audiences, and topics. Finally, Lou works out of an interpersonal, therapeutic model of communication and applies it to his classroom teaching. I think Lou can tell us something about systemic questioning as a communication tool for teaching students and others to see how their own communication practices are shaped in complex social relationships with others.

There is also a second audience implicit in my treatment of practical theory and communication education. It consists of communication scholars who define their professional identity around research, but not teaching. This audience tends to see teaching, especially at the level of the basic communication course, as something of a distraction because it gets in the way of research. This sense of distraction is not necessarily rooted in a contempt for teaching as much as it is in the perceived separation of theory and pedagogy. Imagine a communication scholar in the field who works within a specialized area of theory and research (e.g. social constructionism, uncertainty reduction theory, feminist theory, cultural ethnography, or media criticism). It would seem natural for the scholar to use his or her theoretical insights when engaged in pedagogical activities such as teaching the basic course. My experience, however, is that scholars all too often fail to investigate the connection between their theoretical writings and their pedagogical practices. No wonder teaching is thought to be a distraction to these research-oriented scholars!

Practical theory provides a framework for communication researchers to investigate how their theories and methods apply to the classroom context and pedagogical communication. The act of theory building, of course, also has the added benefit of advancing communication pedagogy. By foregrounding communication practice as the site of both theory and pedagogy, practical theory promises to synthesize a number of competing factions. In the original essay I framed practical theory as a way to bridge the theory-practice dichotomy in communication education. Extending that argument a bit allows us to approach teaching and research as interconnected activities. Both have the potential to mutually reinforce and enrich the other.

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