2006

The Basic Course as Social Change

Mark Leeman
Ohio University

Arvind Singhal
Ohio University

230

The Basic Course as Social Change

Mark Leeman
Arvind Singhal

Working as an agent of social change calls for perseverance and determination. In our work as, and with, change agents all over the world we have seen many well-meaning people working to serve populations that are often hopeless about the future, demoralized, and/or seeking quick solutions that may not address the real issues or causes of problems. At our university we often see similar characteristics in students enrolled in the basic course. That population can be similarly hopeless about the future (at least in the course), de-motivated, and dreaming of escape through the attainment of a passing grade via the path of least resistance.

When the first author compares his previous work as a "change agent" in a Balkan country with his present teaching of the basic course, he realizes that the two have much in common. In many important ways, the basic course is social change.

As change agents entrusted with the challenging assignment of having the basic course work for the empowerment of our classroom populace—and in the bigger picture toward the building of a better society—we believe our work can be guided by the lives of several great champions of social change. In this essay, we apply principles from the lives and work of Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad Yunus, Paulo Freire, Saul Alinsky

BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE ANNUAL

and other social change leaders to the teaching of the basic course. We begin with an analysis of how change agents view and are motivated by their message or tools. We then move on to how that motivation effects how agents of social change think about their "target population." Finally, we address how change agents embrace their role as ambassadors between that message and that population.

IN THE BASIC COURSE WE POSSESS AND DISTRIBUTE A "CURE FOR CANCER"

With utmost humility, good change agents offer to others that which they hold very dear. They see themselves as having been made privy to the "cure for cancer"—an ultimate difference maker. They believe that they are messengers of the most precious of all catalysts, needed to bring about an abundant and fruitful reaction that can empower the population they aim to serve. Change agents embrace the mandate of making accessible and understood that which they consider among the most important and powerful constructs known to humankind. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that to be unheard and unrecognized was ultimate death to any human. If to be unheard is death, then the instruction, skills, and experience we offer through the basic course in communication studies are all designed to bring life. In the basic course we are dealing with the "cure" for the lethal cancer of silence, alienation, and voicelessness.

Muhammad Yunus, managing director of the Grameen (Rural) Bank in Bangladesh, is a great example of

a change agent who found himself to be in possession of just such a "cure" for his population. Yunus, a development economist, founded the Grameen Bank (see Rogers & Singhal, 2003) in 1976 after wandering in a village near Chittagong University (where he taught) and encountering local women selling hand-made weavings. Upon inquiry, Yunus discovered that the women took out high-interest loans (as high as 10% a *day*) on a daily basis from local moneylenders in order to buy raw materials. The women were then obligated to sell their finished products back to the moneylender at a fraction of their worth. The result was that the hardworking women earned 2 cents per day and remained locked in a cycle of harsh poverty while the moneylenders made a nice profit when they resold the finished products at market prices. Yunus calculated that a loan of $27 would free the 42 women he met out of the vicious cycle by enabling them to buy their own raw materials and thus sell their own goods at market value. Yunus lent the women the $27 (that no "normal" bank would lend without collateral) and the Grameen Bank took its first steps toward becoming the multi-*billion* dollar lending powerhouse that it is today.

Yunus thus uncovered a bottleneck that was choking the flow of nectar to his thirsty population, and then used his skills, abilities, and experiences as catalysts on their behalf, to open the floodgates of empowerment for those in need (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995;1997; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). The Grameen bank has resulted in a virtual social revolution among its 4.4 million member/customers in Bangladesh. Grameen members now "sign on" to a member-generated creed of "16 decisions" that call for everything from not living in a

dilapidated house, to growing vegetables and boiling water, to using latrines, to not committing injustice. All this was made possible because Yunus dared to step out and administer his "cancer cure" of micro credit to the culture of the poorest of the poor in his country. Yunus now considers *credit to be the most fundamental of all human rights*! For through credit is liberated the potential of the poor to create better lives for themselves as they are free to "put into practice the skills they already know" (Yunus, 1999, p. 140).

In the basic course we offer students a "cure for cancer," or a communicative "atomic bomb" (if you will) that is just as powerful as Yunus' credit for exploding open the clogs that hold back the flow of human potential. We believe that people become, and are who they are only in communicative interaction with others (Buber, 1970; Mead, 1934/1962; Rogers, 1961). Further, human development through communication determines what a person can and will accomplish with others. Much of what it means to be human and build society is wrapped up in the communication theory and praxis that we are privileged to explore with our students. Take, as example, the exploration of critical listening and thinking in the basic course. What a great way to help young people take control of and put into use the "raw materials" of their own judgment, experience, and intelligence rather than just swallowing whole what they hear and read from more dominant voices. Through the small investment we make in offering such training we can help activate free and creative voices to impact the world as they exercise their most basic of human rights—the right to express their thoughts, and not just parrot the thoughts of others.

The basic course textbook we use emphasizes public speaking's inherent *social imperative* (McKerrow, Gronbeck, Ehninger & Monroe, 2003). That is, the learning and ability to speak well in public is *imperative* (absolutely necessary, a requirement, a must) to the building and existence of societal relations and thus society itself. While Yunus positions micro-credit as a tool for social integration (Yunus, 1999), in the basic course we offer instruction in the use of a tool that is at the heart of what we value most in the very meaning of "social." We offer fuller and freer participation in democracy, in self-determination, in relationships, in public deliberation, and in the very building and working of society. In the basic course, people learn about the tool of communication that can potentially bring to society revolutionary ideas, widespread social action, and better and deeper lives for all. We help prepare our students to be the life-changing agents that each one of them is capable of being as skillfully communicating relaters, organization members, teachers, and concerned citizens. We serve as change agents to develop in students the most important and precious of all commodities—their voice.

If good change agents freely give to others the thing that they consider to be the most valuable and needed of entities, then communication scholars involved in the basic course are enmeshed in the ultimate social change and social justice work. When writing about his experiences as a scholar during the trying days of the great depression, Kenneth Burke (1965) wrote, "When things got toughest, I thought hardest about communication" (p. xviii). Is it not when we are faced with the biggest challenges, the biggest problems, and the biggest tasks that we turn our attention to the true meaning of life

and the things around us? And is not communication, as the management of meaning, inseparably entwined in that search for what it means to tackle the challenges of living together with our fellow human beings in ways that offer dignity and opportunity to all? To us, instruction in the basic course in communication studies thus becomes among the most precious of all things that we can pass on to others—the development of their voice. The basic course *is* basic civil rights work.

OUR TARGET POPULATION IS WORTHY (TO WIELD THESE POWERFUL TOOLS)

If change agents are to entrust others with the entities that they themselves hold to be the most powerful "weapons" of social change, then those change agents must have confidence in their target population. As change agents we must have faith that these people are worthy of wielding these tools with responsibility and accountability. We must believe that the "cures for absolute death" we are helping hand out are not only in safe hands, but in the right hands.

Brazilian education pioneer Paulo Freire (1970) wrote that his work to free the oppressed "requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake" (p. 71). Freire's faith in humankind was foundational to what he did in literacy education. He believed that people had inside of them what it took to build a more just society, and so his purpose was to help each person pursue their "ontological vocation to be more fully human" (p. 37).

In a similar vein, Mahatma Gandhi brought to the Indian people a politics that has been deftly summed up as the enoblement of people (Fischer, 1954). By building people into what he believed they were, and could be, Gandhi worked toward the just self-governance of India by Indians as they held "true to themselves" (p. 77). Gandhi wrote, "I believe in human nature. An implicit trust in human nature is the very essence of [a leader's] creed" (p. 75).

We in the basic course need reminders not only of the power of our communication tools, but also of the ontological potential of our clientele. We are in the enviable role of acting as mediators and match-makers between the most powerful of subject matter and an inherently worthy audience. Humans are the symbol using creatures (Burke, 1966), and we are offering some of them training in the skillful use of those symbols. They are worthy of that training, and capable of using it to accomplish far more than we could imagine.

When Muhammad Yunus set out to arm the extremely poor with credit, experts on every side told him that the poor were not worthy, they could not handle it. But Yunus insisted that "all human beings are potential entrepreneurs" (Yunus, 1998, p. 207). An entrepreneur is one who assumes risk in order to pursue bold, difficult, and important undertakings. Would you and I have seen this potential in the poorest of the poor in Bangladeshi slums? In the basic course are we not in danger of overlooking the same untapped potential if we are wooed into focusing on the communicative poverty of our young student populations? Rather than viewing them as stumbling 19-year-olds, visionary change agents should believe in each student's potential to offer

their singularly unique contribution to the variety of voices and the plurality of perspectives that are essential to the dialogue necessary to build a just society.

It may be overwhelming, and even humorous, to think of our humble basic course, and our humble students, in such an optimistic and "society altering" way. Yet, we should be emboldened and motivated by many of the world's greatest change agents who have insisted that the *only* way to bring about fundamental change in any society is to work from the bottom up. The real work is done in the inglorious trenches. In what is perhaps among the most powerful of all ironies of human existence, Paulo Freire (1970) firmly insists that only those at the very bottom (the oppressed) possess the power necessary to free themselves *and* their oppressors. "Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free [everyone]" (p. 26). Gandhi also, when faced with a powerful colonizing force and allied with fractious, disorganized, and demoralized masses, declared, "I am trying to work from the bottom upward. Our salvation can come only through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it" (Fischer, 1954, p. 54). The "bottom" may be the right and most strategic place for change agents to focus their efforts.

Therefore, we offer this thought to those involved in the basic course. You are equipped with the most powerful of tools, and are working to harness them to enable and empower the most strategically well placed of all audiences. Your tool/audience combination possesses the potential for ground-swelling power to bring about the most monumental of social change.

THE ROLE OF THE CHANGE AGENT

If agents of social change are convinced of the power of their weapons, and of the innate worthiness of the population, then the looming task that remains is to convince that population that they are worthy, and that it is worthwhile to take up these weapons and change their world. This is the calling of the change agent. We fully realize that neither confidence in one's own worthiness, nor faith in social action through communication are easy "sells" in the current youth culture of the United States. We are up against huge challenges on both counts—by definition agents working for social change usually are.

Our great champions of social change guide us to face this challenge. First, we find it interesting that many social movers have explained their role as what Saul Alinsky (1971) described as "Inseminating an invitation for yourself, by getting people pregnant with hope and a desire for change" (p. 103). Are we earning a right to be heard—for ourselves and our message—in the basic course? Are we helping to bring about the *desire* for change? It is important to keep in mind that we, as change agents, are the small minority. Just as Gandhi knew that he had little physical power to overthrow the British empire, and Martin Luther King Jr. knew that he could not win a frontal confrontation with the white majority in America, so we must realize that we are far outnumbered and out-gunned. Few in our classes see or believe in their vast human potential, nor the power of human communication, and frontal attacks by us to convince them of these points are often of limited use.

As in most social change situations, we are trying to move mountains with little leverage. Therefore, we suggest that in order to infect people with a will to change, in order to "convert" our students to hope and belief in the efficacy of their communicative potential, we must do what MLK, Freire, Gandhi and Yunus have done— we must behave, teach, and live the kind of dialogic lives that prove to be persuasive to the skeptical.

What does that mean in the context of the basic course? Perhaps most importantly it entails being *learners* alongside our students. Alinsky (1971) wrote that a good movement organizer has to be "full of curiosity" (p. 72). It was written of Gandhi that he "longed for change in himself, and he believed it for others" as he called throughout his life for people to "turn the searchlight inward" onto one's own life. Mohammad Yunus became a powerful force as he learned from the poor and they changed him (Yunus 1998), moving him to declare that "the destitute must be our teachers" (p. 103). If we truly believe in the potential and dignity of those at the "bottom," we must learn from and with them.

Perhaps no one is a better model of this for us than Paulo Freire. Freire (1970) posited that effective pedagogy was about dialogic engagement with students in a way that both they and we become conscious of our real situations. We are not bringing to learners our message of salvation for them, but we are hoping that they will taste and experience with us the power of our potential as humans to move one another. Yunus (1998) wrote that when the poor repay their loans they feel like new people. They begin to believe in themselves, and as a result many become active in local politics. We aim to help students develop their communication knowledge

and ability so that they believe in themselves and thus become active in the "politics" around them by offering their voice. If we are learning to do that with them, if we are learning from them, then we have helped to provide fertile soil in which they can grow their voice.

Gandhi said, "In order to assist the underdog you must understand him" (Fischer, 1954, p. 82). To really learn with our students we must constantly work to understand them better, to be empathetic to their situation (Alinsky, 1971), to "live with them" (at least dialogically) in order to "view them as total human beings" (Yunus, 1998). Nothing communicates worthiness more powerfully than having someone seek to understand you. These Gurus of social change are telling us that in order for our students to seek to learn and use our tools, we must seek to learn about them. We must pursue them out of ontological respect if we are to enable our goal of developing them into the kind of tool-users that shape society. Through such respect we may infect them with the will to learn, to communicate, to change, and to bring about change. One practical way the first author has done this in his public speaking course is by having students give a persuasive speech designed to convince their audience to contribute to a non-profit organization. The students must find an organization they think is helping to change the world for the better and then are charged to put their skills and voice to work to raise money to keep that organization going. The emphasis is on the fact that the speakers' words can change and/or save lives. The exercise is made a bit more real by having the class "vote" on the best speeches by giving paper money to the organizations. The non-profit that receives the most votes is then given a *real-money* contribution

by the instructor. The effect is usually an interesting shared exploration of needs and how they can be met, as well as a sense that we can do something, both with words and other resources, to effect our world for good— even right then and there in class.

It is socially imperative that our worthy student population take up the powerful tools of human communication to build better society. Socially, we must have their voice. Personally, we contend that we, as educators, hold the power and responsibility to set the pace as we lust after learning, discovery, and change in dialogic relationship to everyone in our "target population." Professionally, we set ourselves apart as the ambassadors of this sometimes culturally awkward vision and hope— that all of our students can use communication to unleash their innate potential and join others in building better society. If we believe in our tools (the power of communication), and if we believe in our fellow humans (including our students), then we must combine the two beliefs so that we are constantly involved in dialogic learning in our courses—dialogic learning that changes everyone involved. Alinsky (1971) warns us that the role of change agent often entails loneliness, and we may often be the sacrificial lambs as we stick out our necks in and for communication, but we may also win some "converts" along the way.

We must make it our goal, as change agents of communication through the basic course, to foster communication empowerment among our students in such a way that they can embrace it for themselves and apply it in their own way, in their own contexts. If we do that, they can be free to become the Martin Luther Kind Jr. of their office, the Mahatma Gandhi of their family, or

the Muhammad Yunus of their local civic group in ways we could never have imagined. In our seemingly small way in the basic course we can move them along a bit on the path of becoming fully human—whatever that means for them. For us, as communication scholars and practitioners, we must engage in that process in order to heed Gandhi's call to be true to ourselves. If we do that we will have served the cause of social change, even through the basic course.

REFERENCES

Alinsky, S. (1971). Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals. New York: Vintage.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). The dialogic imagination. (Michael Holquist, Eds., Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Buber, M. (1970). I and thou. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Burke, K. (1965). Permanence and change: an autonomy of purpose. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Burke, K. (1966). Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Fischer, L. (1954). Gandhi: His life and message for the world. New York: Mentor.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Mead, G.H. (1934/1962). Mind, self, and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McKerrow, R., Gronbeck, B.E., Ehninger, D., & Monroe, A.H. (2003). Principles and types of public speaking (Fifteenth Ed.). New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Papa, M.J., Auwal, M.A., & Singhal, A. (1995). Dialectic of emancipation and control in organizing for social change: A multitheoretical study of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Communication Theory, 5, 189-223.

Papa, M.J., Auwal, M.A., & Singhal, A. (1997). Organizing for social change within concertive control systems: Member Identification, empowerment, and the masking of discipline. Communication Monographs, 64, 219-249.

Papa, M.J., Singhal, A., & Papa, W.H. (2006). Organizing for social change: A dialectic journey of theory and praxis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rogers, C.R. (1961). On becoming a person. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rogers, E.M., & Singhal, A. (2003). Empowerment and Communication: Lessons learned from organizing for social change. In P. Kabfleisch (Ed.), Communication yearbook 27 (pp. 67-85). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Yunus, M. (1999). Banker to the Poor: Microlending and the battle against world poverty. New York: Public Affairs.