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Kenneth Burke, the Basic Communication Course, and Applied Scholarship

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 "Applied communication scholarship is practicing theory and theorizing practice"

(Wood, 1995, p. 157)

The *Journal of Applied Communication Research* published a forum of position papers in 2000 (Volume 28, Issue 2) that sought to define "applied communication research." Collectively, the authors called for scholarship that embodies a reflexive relationship between theory and practice (O'Hair, 2000; Keyton, 2000, Cissna, 2000; Eadie, 2000; Frey, 2000; Seibold, 2000; Wood, 2000). In this essay, we call for applied scholarship that focuses on how we talk, perform, and theorize the basic communication course. Drawing from the works of Kenneth Burke (e.g., 1931/1968; 1935; 1937/1984; 1941/1967; 1945/1969; 1954/1984), we focus specifically on the salience of discourses of and about the basic communication course and communication enriched courses across general education and liberal studies curricula.

First, we provide a brief overview of failed general education curriculum revisions at Ohio University. Second, we explore the various contours of Burke's poetic perspective in light of its usefulness for understanding

discourses of and about "oral expression" within these curricular discussions. Burke provides a robust theoretical framework for exploring how institutions of all sorts, including higher education and the communication discipline, take shape in and through symbolic interactions. Burke was interested in the symbolic processes through which *orientations* (i.e., worldviews, accumulation of plotlines, and interworking of characters) develop, how orientations necessarily give rise to partial perspectives that result in *"trained incapacities"* (i.e., one's training results in one's incapacities), and how trained incapacities can lead to fossilized institutions. In sum, Burke was interested in "How society's ways of life affect its modes of thinking, by giving rise to partial perspectives or "occupational psychoses" that are, by the same token, "trained incapacities" (1935, p. 4).

Using a case study of the process of failed curriculum revisions, we bear witness to how interlacing personal, institutional, and public narratives can frame and define, enhance and diminish the potentials of educators and students working to articulate and accomplish the goals of the basic communication course and communication enriched courses across the academy. Finally, we call for counter-discourses as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings embedded in hegemonic discourses of and about the discipline generally and basic communication course specifically. The practice of rewriting can lead to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Even as some discourses dominate and marginalize, Burke reminds us that performances emerge as contested spaces characterized by competing and colliding discourses.

As the Communication discipline responds to calls from inside and outside the academy to practice "applied" or "engaged" scholarship (e.g., Boyer, 1990), we ought to (1) theorize the practices of the basic course, and (2) reclaim and practice our discipline's rhetorical roots. In this essay, we focus on the ways in which Ohio University's proposed general education revisions reduced the broad and multidimensional field of communication studies to training in speaking skills and oral expression. Burke (1969a) argues that "any generalization is necessarily a reduction in that it selects a *group* of things and gives them a property which makes it possible to consider them as a *single entity*" (p. 96). In this case, the categorizing term "Oral Expression," as a generalization, requires that some items be classified as proper to oral expression and others as not proper to oral expression. Through the classification of some elements of human behavior or learning as constituting the substance that will be named "Oral Expression," the manifold possibilities of oral expressivity are reduced to a particular subset. Moreover, as Oral Expression becomes a guiding term, the motives that underlie oral expression are also reduced because "all the disparate details included under one head are infused with a common spirit… They are ultimately organized with relation to one another by their joint participation in a unitary purpose or 'idea'" (Burke, 1954b, p. 154).

Applied Scholarship

FAILED CURRICULAR REVISIONS AT OHIO UNIVERSITY

Ohio University uses an ongoing process of assessment-based program improvement to meet accreditation requirements. That process, called the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), has four elements at Ohio: improving the first year experience, promoting the use of engaged learning techniques by faculty, providing an integrated residential learning opportunity for students, and implementing a revised general education program meeting the needs of contemporary students (Ohio University AQIP, 2005). In November of 2002, a project team consisting of the Provost, several deans, faculty, and students, began discussion on a new general education program. In August of 2004 a final report was drafted by the committee recommending that a revised general education curriculum be divided into three foundational skills (i.e., written expression, oral expression, and logical/mathematical thinking), a breadth of knowledge component, exposure to diverse perspectives on epistemology and ontology, and at least one course targeting research and creative activity. The revised program differed from the current program in several ways (e.g., the addition of oral expression as a foundational skill); however, the size of the new program was equivalent to the current one.

Proposed revisions to the general education program were debated by the Faculty Senate in a series of meetings held between October of 2004 and January of 2005. During those debates, the inclusion of oral expression was contested, as were most other changes. During the

January, 2005 meeting of the faculty senate, the resolution was rejected and the General Education Committee was essentially asked to identify minor revisions to the current system; no mandate was given to undertake further revisions of the general education program. Although failure of the revised program was not due to any particular aspect of the revised program, the effect was that students will not be required to demonstrate competency in communication to obtain a degree from Ohio University.[1] Although failure of the general education revision caused outrage from several segments of the campus community, there is currently no movement toward revisiting general education revision generally, or the inclusion of communication as a foundational skill specifically.

KENNETH BURKE AS A CRITICAL LENS

Burke (1945/1969) is concerned with tropes, figures of speech, as they function to describe and discover the "truth." An understanding of tropes (metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, and irony) and how they function to frame reality is crucial for scholars interested in institutional discourses. As Oswick, Putnam, & Keenoy (2004) suggest:

> Tropes are an inevitable and unavoidable aspect of organizational life. They pervade the everyday inter-

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[1] Although oral expression is not in the general education program currently, many majors across all colleges at Ohio University require Public Speaking. Additionally, a 100-level Introduction to Communication Course and several other communication courses are listed as options under the current Breadth of Knowledge requirement.

> action of organizational stakeholders and they inform and underpin the study of organizations…More generally, they are sensemaking imagery used to describe, prescribe and circumscribe social reality…and in the process, they also project, constitute, and theorize particular constructions of those realities. (p. 106)

As Burke reminds us, the four master tropes "shade into one another" (p. 503). One must consider any particular trope as situated within an ongoing stream of interaction in order to understand its function (e.g., to compare, to reduce, or to represent). A figure of speech can function either metonymically or synecdochically depending on the exigencies of particular discourse.

We use two particular tropes to analyze the nature of discourse about oral expression in the proposed (and rejected) general education program at Ohio University: metonymy and synecdoche. Burke explains that Metonymy is a conceptual reduction— "to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible" (p. 506). Such reductions could lead one to describe sadness in terms of (or reduced to) crying and human communication in terms of (or reduced to) public speaking. As Burke reminds us, the metaphorical nature of language itself is the borrowing of terms from the realm of the corporeal or visible and applying them to the intangible:

> Language develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible; then in the course of time, the original corporeal reference is forgotten, and only the incorporeal, metaphorical extension survives (often because the very conditions of

living that reminded one of the corporeal reference have so altered that the cross reference no longer exists with near the same degree of apparentness in the "objective situation itself). (p. 506)

Synecdoche is related to metonymy in that a representation is advanced. However, the synecdochic representation relies on an interactive relationship between part and whole. Burke used examples of political representation of the society at large as well as microcosm and macrocosm to illustrate instances of synecdoche:

> Where the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa, we have the ideal synecdoche, since microcosm is related to macrocosm as part to whole, and either the whole can represent the part or the part can represent the whole (For "represent" here we could substitute "be identified with."). (p. 508)

Burke also distinguishes metonymy and synecdoche in the following way:

> We might say that representation (synecdoche) stresses a relationship or connectedness between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road extends in either direction, from quantity to quality or from quality to quantity; but reduction follows along this road in only one direction, from quality to quantity. (p. 509).

Using master tropes to discern and critique elements of discourses is nothing new. Hayden White (1978), for example, advocated using tropes as markers to both narrative emplotment and ideological commitments for instances of discourse. Our objective in using Burke's discussion of Tropes is twofold. First, we seek to characterize discourse surrounding the proposed oral expres-

sion requirement based on the tropes; second, we discuss implications of such discursive forms for students, faculty, and the discipline.

ANALYZING THE TROPES AT PLAY
IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION DEBATE

As communication professionals we are constantly faced with external and internal *metonymic tendencies* that reduce the complex milieu of human communication to particular "skills." Thus, communication is reduced to public speaking (notice the move from intangible to corporeal). A case in point: On our campus this discourse has infiltrated discussions about the role of public speaking within the broader general education curriculum. If, as some mistakenly believe, communication can be reduced to particular skills associated with public speaking (being organized, establishing eye contact, etc.), then some justification could be advanced for communication instruction to be diffused throughout the general education curriculum such that science teachers would teach students to use certain skills when communicating about science; theatre professors would teach certain skills such as nonverbal movement and pronunciation; and psychology teachers could teach certain skills about the psychological reaction to particular symbols (or stimuli).

We highlight several cases to illustrate the prevailing discourses about communication during the general education deliberation. At one stage in the process, faculty from other departments proposed "communication enriched" courses that would satisfy part of the oral ex-

pression requirement. A social work professor, for instance, described her class as having an "emphasis placed on ability to present critical points in an articulate, systematic, and interesting manner, ability to prepare relevant handouts" (Course Proposal). In another course proposal from the Modern Language department, faculty argued that their course would meet the oral expression requirement because students were expected to "express ideas orally in various contexts; for example, business calls, oral presentations, and small group discussions." Although both examples come from proposed enriched courses, such discourse was also apparent in proposed dedicated oral expression courses. A colleague from Theatre Arts, for instance, suggested that the Voice and Diction courses offered by her department be considered as a dedicated course because "the ability to speak fluently is a prerequisite to oral expression at any level."

We do not challenge the dedication of our colleagues who emphasized the more performative nature of communication in their proposed courses. In fact, we are thankful that communication skills are at the forefront of dialogue ranging from the arts to the hard sciences. Unfortunately, such discourses also metonymically reduce communication to such skills and fail to recognize the theoretical process of learning which undergirds such skills. Moreover, if communication is reduced to particular skill sets, most anyone could be equipped to help students develop those skills. Indeed, this is the very argument advanced by those proposing enriched courses. In fact, the argument was so persuasive at times that the need for dedicated courses for oral expression was questioned.

As advocates for communication we often find ourselves challenging these naïve discourses by reframing communication and public speaking through *synecdochic relationship*. That is, we argue that skills associated with human communication (and public speaking specifically) are related to and representative of a mode of thinking about human relationships more generally. We stress that particular epistemological and ontological assumptions are embedded in philosophies of communication. Moreover, "skills" cannot be divorced from these assumptions and retain meaning. Gaining the attention of the audience and establishing rapport and credibility are certainly skills – but these skills *represent* cherished theories, ideas, and values of our discipline including the rhetoric of consubstantiality and identification, uncertainty reduction theory, cognitive dissonance theory, etc. The metonymic reduction of communication to "skill sets" disempowers the discipline (and by extension its apostles and prophets) by divorcing practice from theory.

A fundamental difference between this naïve view of communication and the more robust disciplinary view is the one-way vs. bi-directional relationship between "communication" and "skills" within the two frames. The naïve view establishes a uni-directional, reductive relationship between "communication" and "skills": Communication is being organized, communication is vocal and nonvocal presentation, communication is eliciting a psychological reaction. The disciplinary view establishes a bi-directional relationship because skills are manifestations of a body of thought; the part and the whole are connected and dependent (e.g., skills that we know work influence theorizing; likewise, our theorizing

influences how we seek to develop skills). As we seek to redefine the nature of communication studies, as perceived on our campus, we find ourselves turning increasingly to synecdochic relationships between argumentation and critical thinking, argument development and information literacy, audience analysis and delivery, and other fundamentally theoretical connections between theory and practice. We have also attempted to emphasize the holistic experience of courses in public speaking in efforts to justify universal requirements to have the class. Our initial efforts have been well received by colleagues who recognize the broad appeal of Public Speaking early in a student's program.

In summary, we envisioned this essay as a companion piece to the excellent essay by Preston and Holloway also appearing in this volume. As they clearly explain, collecting strong assessment data is essential to arguing in favor of the basic course. We have learned from their experience and are currently enacting similar procedures to advance assessment-driven arguments in subsequent deliberations. What we wish to stress in this essay is that how we talk about communication is just as important as what we say. Colleagues from other disciplines (and sometimes colleagues from within) may mistakenly assume that communication can be reduced to specific behavioral skills; such an assumption is unjustified given the rich theoretical tradition in our field. Rather, as advocates of the basic course we should provide a counter discourse emphasizing the relationship between theory and practice that is emphasized in our course—such connections are grounded in our pedagogy and disciplinary history.

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