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Traditional and Applied Graduate Education: Special Challenges

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The academic field of communication has undergone explosive growth in recent decades at both the bachelor's and master's levels of higher education (Craig & Carlone, 1998). In the 1970's and 1980's communication became an extremely popular undergraduate major (Chesebro, 1991) and the total number of communication degrees awarded in the U. S. increased by 534% between 1967 and 1993 (Craig & Carlone, 1998). Additionally, master's degrees in all fields of communication increased by 63% during this time period and experienced a growth rate approximately two and one-half times greater than the increase in master's degrees awarded in other academic fields (Andersen, 1997).

Communication scholars suggest that although both bachelor's and master's degrees have increased significantly in popularity, the reasons for this growth differ for each of the degrees (Craig & Carlone, 1998). Whereas the growth in communication bachelor's degrees reflects the emergence of research and theory in a new liberal arts field, much of the growth in the graduate degree reflects the proliferation of applied communication-related professional fields, such as broadcast journalism, public relations, or advertising. Indeed, an examination of 135 mass communication master's programs revealed that only 12% of the colleges and universities use a purely theory/research approach to graduate education while the other 88% place an emphasis on the practical skills and knowledge necessary to work in a media-related profession (Senat & Grusin, 1994). This produces extreme stress upon the administration of graduate programs of one or the other emphasis (particularly in the speech communication area), and critical internal stress within those programs offering a combined approach. The purpose of this essay is to address the differences in philosophy and instruction methods while offering a means of complementary support.

SPEECH COMMUNICATION AND THE LIBERAL ARTS?

Much of the growth of mass communication graduate programs has reflected a shift towards a practical knowledge perspective in teaching. This has not been the case in speech communication departments (Andersen, 1997). As a rule, speech communication departments have continued to stress general theory and research in their master's degree

programs and have, therefore, not experienced the significant growth characterizing those other academic units that offer a degree that bridges the gap between academe and the non-university workplace (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993). This trend can be traced back almost ten years when, in 1989, more than 83% of all master's degrees awarded were categorized as professional/applied in nature (Conrad & Egan, 1990) yet speech communication (along with history, biology, and English) was considered a field in liberal arts and sciences where applied learning was the exception rather than the rule (Anderson, 1997).

Although some graduate programs in speech communication have developed master's degrees oriented to the work force (Steinfatt, 1997), the dilemma between theory and pragmatic application development remains a complicated, ongoing issue and subject of debate within the discipline (Glazer, 1986; McCroskey, 1979; Soloski, 1994; Steinfatt, 1997). Clearly, in graduate programs where the goal is to produce teacher/scholars, deep theoretical understanding and traditional instructional strategies are most responsive to the needs of the students. However, in graduate programs where the goal is to produce practitioners with enhanced career potential in the work place, the role of theory and research in the classroom and the appropriateness of theoretical content assignments is a bit muddled.

Proponents of applied graduate education argue that they are competing against other professional oriented graduate programs for the "best and brightest of the terminal master's crop" (Steinfatt, 1997, p. 130). They ask why a student should attend a program requiring conceptual courses, such as communication theory, when an M. B. A. or a M. S. in human resource management offers practical knowledge that is directly applicable to the workplace? Let pre-doctoral students take theory and research courses, they suggest, but allow pre-professional graduate students focus on those courses which will allow them to excel in a career.

In contrast, faculty supporting the traditional approach to graduate study claim that, although professional training can have a place in graduate education, it should not dominate the curriculum (Parisi, 1992). What is most important, they argue, is critical thinking. "[We can] train them to be professionally competent. . .but our first goal must always be to develop students' critical-thinking abilities" (Soloski, 1994, p. 6). These proponents claim students must learn how to effectively analyze and evaluate information at the theoretical level. Then, and only then, will they will be equipped to meet the challenges to be later confronted in the work place. Therefore, it is argued, the most practical way to meet the needs of the career-minded student is to require him or her to take conceptual courses that are grounded firmly in theory.

Although student success is clearly the desired outcome for all graduate programs, the role of theory in the graduate experience is central in the dispute between the theoretical vs. applied approaches. Proponents of the general knowledge perspective argue theory must be a core requirement for a graduate program while supporters of the practical inquiry paradigm suggest theory should be dropped from the curriculum. However, there is an alternative to this 'take it or leave it approach.' Theory can be required in all programs. However, theory, as it has been traditionally taught, can also be eliminated from the applied master's degree. The question should not be *if* but rather *how* theory should be taught.

Since theory-based programs are inherently different from applied programs, it stands to reason that there are fundamental differences in content, assignments, and instructional strategy between the two types of programs. The following sections elaborate these differences within two common educational models.

THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION GRADUATE EDUCATION MODEL

The traditional communication graduate education model follows the perennial analytic curriculum paradigm which seeks generalized knowledge for its own sake and focuses upon theory and research (Schubert, 1986). This model approach would typically utilize a minimum of seven elements within the overall instructional strategy. These would consist of: (1) a weekly reading and study assignment typically in the area of 100 pages [perhaps 5-8 scholarly articles related to the theoretical implications and associations of the theory under consideration], (2) a seminar roundtable discussion of these articles and (3) an extrapolation during the seminar discussion of the underlying assumptions and foundation for theoretical predictions emanating from the theory. In addition, students would be (4) encouraged during the seminar's verbal interaction to identify and conceptualize the foundation elements of the theory, (5) follow the trail of logic to develop corollary hypotheses, and (6) discuss the similarities and differences between that theory and other theories previously discussed.

The following week, another theoretical model would be introduced and a similar pattern of instructional strategies followed. At the conclusion of the graduate seminar, (7) students would utilize any of the theories covered during the class in an assignment that involves hypothesis generation from which the student would not only demonstrate learning but also continue to learn at a deeper level than was possible during seminar discussions due to the extended period of concentration. This instructional model with idiosyncratic adjustments would fundamentally be utilized in each and every course within the traditional graduate program.

THE APPLIED COMMUNICATION GRADUATE EDUCATION MODEL

In contrast to the traditional graduate program, the applied communication emphasis employs the practical inquiry paradigm and strives for insight and understanding that can be directly applied to specific situational contexts (Schubert, 1986; Schwab, 1969). The instructional strategy of this approach can be seen as quite comparable to that of the traditional program. It would, of necessity, undergo several alterations from the traditional approach because of the difference in the desired outcomes and sense of measurement of intellectual achievement. However, the differences are not in the directional of decreased intellectualism but rather plainly the opposite in nature. The intellectual achievement in an applied communication program is not measured by the student's logical application of theory to the generation of more extensive research questions, hypotheses, and theoretical knowledge claims. Rather, the intellectual achievement is for the students to draw out of their understanding of the theoretical implications an enhanced ability to understand and/or predict past, current, and future human interaction relative to realistic, applied outcomes associated with contemporary societal problems. Thus, the following pattern of instructional strategies might be utilized: (1) a weekly reading and study assignment typically in the area of 100 pages. This assignment may perhaps include 3-7 scholarly articles associated with the theoretical implications and associations of the theory and 2-5 articles drawn from popular literature sources that demonstrate either support or refutation of the basic underlying theoretical principles. Next, (2) a seminar discussion of these articles led by the instructor follows the readings and (3) an identification and extrapolation of the underlying assumptions and foundation for theoretical predictions emanating from the theory under scrutiny emerges from the discussion. In addition, students would be (4) encouraged during the seminar's verbal interaction to conceptualize the foundation elements of the theory, (5) follow the trail of logic to develop and/or examine applications which are contextually bound within the training and development environment, and if

time allows, (6) to discuss the similarities and differences between those applications of that theory and the applications of other theories previously discussed.

The following week, another theoretical model would be introduced and a similar pattern of instructional strategies followed. At the conclusion of the graduate seminar, (7) students could utilize any of the specific theories discussed during the seminar in an assignment that involves the development of perhaps a training manual in which the student would not only demonstrate learning but also learn at a deeper level than was possible in the seminar setting due to the extended focus of attention. The development of a facilitator's training manual, with a complete rationale based in existing literature for each element of advice within the manual is the type of assignment that requires students to understand at a very deep level the underlying theoretical assumptions in order to address issues of practicality and generalizability. This is essential when giving advice that can influence the careers, relationships and lives of real people. Typically, one does not find this drive for understanding to have the same impact potential when associated with an assignment for a hypothesis generation final project paper because the livelihood of other people is not on the line in the latter case. This model of instruction would be followed in other courses within the applied communication program.

Depending upon the nature of the course orientation, other potential assignments in applied graduate communication might consist of having students analyze their own interpersonal relationships or those of others in fictional accounts, contemporary news accounts, an organization's cultural stories and/or informational interviews to uncover supportive and/or critical experiences relative to the underlying theoretical assumptions and the published research literature. These assignments can be altered to focus upon a wide variety of potential application orientations. Please note that in no assignment within an applied program is theory or related research denigrated or ignored. Both become integrated within the course structure and instructional strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

At no time should the applied communication graduate model orientation be thought to consist of a less intellectually demanding context or nature than that of the traditional communication graduate model. If anything, it is actually more demanding than the traditional model. Not only are these graduate students required to understand the underlying assumptions of theoretical models but they must also use them contextually to understand, predict, and advise on-going human interaction which have significant quality of life outcomes.

The anticipation of all academe is that our work will eventually result in the betterment of the human condition. The most likely scenario is that eventually the knowledge and understanding uncovered by theoretical scholars (produced via the more traditional programs) will be found to be useful by another type of scholar (produced through the applied programs). Both programs are essential to the well-being of our discipline, and academe. These programs are equal in intellectual challenges but with significant differences recognized and accounted for in faculty decision-making associated with course selection, content, and instructional strategy.

Graduate programs that contain elements of both models are the more common in our field and face special challenges. Faculty who have committed their academic life to one approach or the other tend to be very defensive of their adopted approach and very negative and contrasting in reaction to the other. For the students to gain the most in blended programs, faculty who are oriented predominately toward one model will need to be particularly sensitive to the concerns of those faculty oriented toward the other. There is a high potential for the faculty to align themselves into one "camp" or the other, and ulti-

mately for students to do the same. A form of academic war (and suicide) frequently breaks out in such departments and must be avoided at all costs. Perceptions of the quality, value, rigor, and "toughness" of faculty, programs, and courses must be maintained as equitable across all graduate components. While the most obvious guideline involves the creation of strong faculty consensus (regardless of program disposition), the variables involved in responding to the "perception of equality" challenge are so numerous and complex that unique solutions will be required by each individual administrator. Ultimately, the chair will be required to establish fair and reasonable expectations of faculty by example, by rule, and by distribution of available resources. As the faculty respond in a professional manner, so will the graduate students. This will produce the environment with the greatest potential to maximize graduate student learning and outcomes.

Despite the challenges we bring upon ourselves, it may well be time to consider a shift in focus for some or many terminal master's degree programs. Almost two decades ago, applied graduate education was presented as a promising part of this discipline's future. It represented "a shift from a single-minded emphasis on research and theory generation to one which recognizes the importance of both knowledge generation and the application of that knowledge" (McCroskey, 1979, p. 353). Over the years, many scholars and, unfortunately, many administrators have been reluctant to embrace this shift toward applied education. However, it now appears that the realities of higher education in the 21st century will bring about renewed pressures that will hasten administrative movement in this new direction, rather than retrenchment in the traditional approach. Declining enrollments, increased competition, and diminished funding will, no doubt, demand adaptations be made to ensure a bright future for the speech communication discipline. By the end of the 1990's nearly one fourth of *all* academic degrees are expected to be awarded at the master's level (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993). As applied programs in business and professional areas bring in more graduate students and more dollars to those departments and the university, speech communication administrators must be prepared for a new source of competition for the highest quality students and resources. Therefore, it seems only logical that we, as administrators, must prepare our departments, faculty and students for internal collaboration rather than competition. We must establish and focus upon mutual respect for the commonalities held by the two approaches to graduate education and the support they have for each other, rather than the differences.

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