The *Praxis* of Narrative Assessment: Communication Competence in an Information Age

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Educational Change–

> Higher education in America is being downsized, merged, and reorganized just as business and industry has been in recent years. Taxpayers are more concerned about taxes, crime, and K-12 than they are about higher education. They see professors as a pampered class with lifetime security [and] an aversion for teaching. They see research as unconnected to society's concerns and largely an activity that scholars do to please each other. Our inclination to spread higher education to the largest possible number has diminished its value until now college graduation is seen as high school graduation was in the past. (Nelson, 1995, p. 134)

Documenting Quality–

> Education is engaged in stiff fiscal competition with transportation, the environment, and the rebuilding of urban infrastructures. Unless improvements in the quality of education can be documented and demonstrated, policy makers and the public will lose interest in education. (Carpenter, 1987, p. 50)

HIGHER education in the United States is in the midst of enormous change. Educators are being drawn into the political arena as the public demands accountability from educational institutions. In the closing years of the 20th century, the emergence of key educational reform policies and their influence on higher education has been overwhelming. Educators are currently in the process of trying to change a system designed in the 1920s to make it work for the 21st century.

CURRENT PRACTICES IN ASSESSING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Communication competence may be defined as being able and willing to reproduce behaviors which enable one to accomplish identified goals. Spitzberg (1994b) viewed communication skills as "reproducible, goal-directed, functional actions and action sequences. As behaviors, they must by definition be observable, relatively discrete, and operational" (p. 329). Evaluators seek to identify "the components that are likely to produce the impression of competence in self and other" (Spitzberg, 1994b, p. 329). Assessment research in our discipline emphasizes a behavioral approach to examining communication competence.

Numerous instruments are available for use in assessing various elements of communication competence. Morreale and Backlund (1996) and Morreale, Brooks, Berko, and Cooke (1994) examined assessment instruments designed for measuring communication competencies. The literature includes information related to communication affect as well as competencies in the areas of public speaking, interpersonal communication, listening, intercultural communication, group communication, organizational communication, and general communication competence.

McCroskey (1994) noted people who have positive affect toward communication "are more likely to take communication seriously, try to learn more about it, and try to be effective communicators" (p. 58). Two aspects of affect toward communication (i.e., motivation to communicate) have been examined: communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970, 1977, 1984) and willingness to communicate (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). McCroskey (1994) asserted, "One of the things that a communication course should promote is a positive value (or affect) for communication" (p. 58).

Moore (1994) recognized public speaking has historically received more attention than the other forms of communicative performance. Public speaking assessment typically focuses on several dimensions: content, organization, language, and delivery. Instruments designed to evaluate student public speaking competencies are widely available (Backlund, 1983; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, & Jandt, 1982; Bock & Bock, 1981; Brown, Backlund, Gurry, & Jandt, 1979; Morreale, Moore, Taylor, Surges-Tatum, & Hulbert-Johnson, 1993; Rubin, 1982).

In contrast with the attention given to public speaking evaluation, interest in interpersonal communication assessment has occurred more recently. Several instruments assessing interpersonal communication competence have emerged (Spitzberg, 1994b, 1995; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989; Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987). While the level of consensus enjoyed in public speaking assessment is not yet available, instruments which assess interpersonal communication competence are undergoing careful theoretical and methodological examination.

The increased focus on communication competence has sparked a renewed interest in listening theory and competence. Listening assessments (Bostrom, 1990; Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980; Brown & Carlsen, 1955; Watson & Barker, 1983; Willmington & Steinbrecher, 1994; Wolvin & Coakley, 1993) can examine skills at various levels. Molar skills are based on the purpose or function of listening: discriminative listening, comprehensive listening, therapeutic listening, critical listening, appreciative listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1992). Each of these molar skills is composed of specific lower-order skills (Moore, 1994).

Gomez, Ricillo, Flores, Cooper, and Starosta (1994) noted developing "an interculturally sensitive assessment instrument for the context of intercultural communication poses a monumental challenge" (p. 391). Several instruments to assess intercultural communication competence are available (Dinges, 1983; Gomez, Ricillo, Flores, Cooper, & Starosta, 1994; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Olebe & Koester, 1989; Spitzberg,

1984). Scholars continue to work in this area to establish curricula equitable for all students.

In the area of group communication competence, "there have been few systemic efforts to identify and assess the key competencies of working in groups" (Beebe, Barge, & McCormick, 1994, p. 355). A variety of instruments assessing group competence have been developed (Beebe, Barge, & McCormick, 1994; Greenbaum, Kaplan, & Damiano, 1991; Kaplan & Greenbaum, 1989; McCroskey & Wright, 1971). The interactive nature of groups presents challenges for assessing an individual's communication competence in group settings.

Jablin, Cude, Wayson, House, Lee, and Roth (1989) recognized that while organizational communication competence is an important issue, little research has focused on this area. Schockley-Zalabak and Hulbert-Johnson's (1994) "review of the organizational communication competency literature suggests no comprehensive framework exists for either describing communication competency or determining how, whether, or at what level it should be assessed" (p. 374). They summarized information about 72 instruments currently available that assess individuals or factors of organizational life, including: organization-wide assessment, organizational climate/culture, organizational conflict, organizational stress and coping, teamwork/group processes, and managerial and supervisor assessment instruments. Their discussion addresses the status and limitations of information currently available in this area.

In addition to examining communication competence within specific domains, scholars have written about procedures for examining one's general communication competence (Duran, 1983; Ellis, Duran, & Kelly, 1994; Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg, 1988; Wiemann, 1977). These instruments examine aspects of communication competence including issues such as perceived effectiveness and social adaptability. Their general contribution offers a holistic approach to examining communication competence.

Our review of instruments currently used to assess communication competence reveals the prevalence of social scientific approaches to assessing communication competence. These discussions frame assessment of communication competence from a social science approach.

Spitzberg (1994a) cited 24 studies dating from the 1970s which present "a foreboding list of methodological and measurement dilemmas and criticisms of existing assessment schemes" (p. 327). In addition, Daly (1994) clearly outlined five problems with behavioral approaches to assessment: measurement of the individual, rehearsed exhibition of skill development, lack of contextual sensitivity, failure to recognize individual differences, and not acknowledging consequences of communication. Assessment challenges addressed in the literature frequently emerge from limitations within the behavioral approach itself. We suggest addressing communication competence from a perspective outside the behavioral orientation to communication. In shifting our perspective to a narrative approach to interaction management, we can augment our understanding of communication assessment issues.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARADIGM ALTERNATIVES

From a purely pragmatic perspective, we must engage the public in dialogue about assessment, for assessment is not going to disappear as a point of contention in the near future. Cautious dialogue between the public and those of us in academe is necessary (Arnett & Arneson, 1997). Dialogue among members of the academy is also necessary. Such dialogue is essential if we are to meet the public demand for accountability without forfeiting our ability to shape the nature of higher education in the 21st century.

Dialogue presupposes both the general public and the academy meeting one another in serious conversation about educational assessment. Ignoring assessment will not make per-

sistent calls for accountability disappear. We can choose how to play this game—as players or spectators—but we are being forced to play. If we choose the "high road" of critic and spectator we will place ourselves at a significant disadvantage, inviting "others" not in the academy to dictate standards for the assessment of learning. Simultaneously, members of the academy need to discuss issues with one another to discover new paradigms of thought and knowledge. If we are not careful, assessment structures may reify information within given paradigms. Assessment efforts would then reward implementation of communication competence within a given paradigm. In presenting an alternative to social scientific forms of assessment, we must examine how the narrative paradigm is rooted in dialogue with the public and between members of the academy. In a later section, we address how narrative assessment for students examines their ability to accomplish what the public indicates they expect from graduates of higher education. This section addresses the foundation for educators to engage in dialogue with members who are within and outside of the academy.

Arnett (1986) defined dialogue as the ability to know and stand one's own ground while being open to the other's perspective. Two components are necessary while we stand our ground in a dialogue that takes seriously the concerns of the general public in this historical moment of limited public funds and calls for accountability. First, we must lessen our role as a spectator in the ongoing conversations that interest a concerned public. Second, we need to move from practice to *praxis* in both doing and discussing the work of the academy. This foundation begins to point us toward a view of assessment that will meet the needs of paradigmatic shifts inevitable in the 21st century, not merely the implementation needs of the 1950s. Students will need not only to apply communication techniques, but they must be able to consider the needs of the historical moment which will call for different types of communication choices to be made.

From Spectator to Participant

In a postmodern academic consciousness where the notion of *agency* is called into question, the role of *spectator* can become normative. In an academic consciousness where the notion of *authority* is called into question, the role of the *spectator critic* can become normative. In times of prosperity on the campus, such roles would not be dangerous to the academy. However, in a time of public examination of the life and action of the university campus, the role of spectator not only does not engage the other in dialogue but offers an impression that educators in the academy are above the common questions of accountability.

The work of Sennett (1974/1976) and Lasch (1995) expand our understanding of the spectator role. Sennett outlined our societal loss of the public domain. The public domain is important for perpetuating public participation in a dialogue that impacts communities. His concern is that movement into the self and into a "tyranny of intimacy" (p. 337) placed a higher premium on private discourse than on public discourse. To engage the other in important issues for the community requires a willingness to participate in public discourse.

The metaphor that surrounds Sennett's (1974/1976) analysis of the decline of the public domain, from active participation in community life, is "spectator" (p. 205). According to Sennett, the spectator learns

> [p]assive silence in public is a means of withdrawal; to the extent that silence can be enforced, to the extent every person is free of the social bond itself. . . . [The spectator] is learning a fundamental truth of modern culture, that the pursuit of personal awareness and feeling is a defense against the experience of social relations. (pp. 212-213)

The spectator withdraws from social relations and public discourse. On our campuses, we see the difficulty of getting faculty to speak with one another, let alone the community at large. Spectators think and critique without engaging—theirs is a watching, not a contributing, lifestyle.

Sennett (1980) connected this "spectator" style with a seemingly ceaseless appetite to engage in critique of authorities offering ideas and strategies that attempt to shape our public world. A "culture of negation" (p. 196) makes life for "authority" (p. 196) nearly impossible, as the critic confuses constant criticism with actual participation in the public domain. Sennett claims that much of intellectual life in the academy has been propelled by negation of authority since the reign of the Nazi atrocities of World War II. His contention, in this historical moment, however, is that to be propelled by such a narrow view of authority limits the complexity of life, which as Buber (1966) would suggest is indeed a "unity of contraries" (p. 111).

> Authority . . . is itself inherent an act of imagination. It is not a thing; it is a search for solidity and security in the strength of others which will seem to be like a thing. To believe the search can be consummated is truly an illusion, and a dangerous one. Only tyrants fill the bill. But to believe the search should not be conducted at all is also dangerous. Then whatever is, is absolute. (Sennett, 1980, p. 197)

The routine use of negation of authority leads the way for a powerful enemy to take the public stage from the spectators who by that time have confused the critical life of a spectator with active participation in the culture for too long.

This position is outlined in Lasch's (1995) book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. In this text, Lasch's last book before he died, he stated what blue collar workers have long thought about academe:

> The 'routine acceptance of professionals as a class apart' strikes Kaus as an ominous development. So does their own 'smug contempt for the demographically inferior.' Part of the trouble, I would add, is that we have lost our respect for honest manual labor. We think of 'creative' work as a series of abstract mental operations performed in an office, preferably with the aid of computers, not as the production of food, shelter, and other necessities. The thinking classes are fatally removed from the physical side of life. . . . (pp. 19-20)

The spectator who lives by criticism alone begins to ignore the value of honest manual labor that connects the work to visible accomplishment. Such sentiment motivates a public to ask *why*, *what*, and *how* about our accomplishments in the academy. Some of our public is informed by common sense concerns similar to those of Sennett (1974/1976, 1980) and Lasch (1995).

Our first move to dialogue is to *move from the role of spectator to that of active participant in the ongoing conversation about assessment.* We can not remain within the role of spectator critic—ever critical of the public's concerns. Our communicative partners in the public are no longer willing for us to claim the safety of the academy for our spectator action any more than many of us were satisfied with Richard Nixon using "national security" as his defense for breaking into the Watergate building.

From Practice to Praxis

The call for assessment can be an opportunity for us to break out of our spectator formulae. We are so practiced at the act of spectator critic that we do not actually know when it is being done. This mode of routine critical discourse is part of the taken-for-granted communicative practice on the university campus. The call to assessment is a battle cry from the public for spectatorship to cease in the waning days of the 20th century. Assessment can be viewed as a social good for the academy, moving us from practice (unreflective action) to *praxis* (reflective action).

Praxis was central to Marx's (1932) counter of *unreflective* discussion of theory that ceased to connect to genuine human problems. Any practice that is unreflective can become problematic. What happens with an unreflective practice is that the objective, task, teleology, or direction is no longer clear; this sense of direction drives appropriate application in a given historical moment. Marx clearly wanted *praxis* to be theory informed action. He wanted theory to get the person somewhere in concrete application.

The danger of the role of spectator critic is that one unthinkingly gives up the task of trying to get somewhere, to do something with the information. Simply listing the flaws in a proposal offered by the other and confusing that with work is problematic. *Praxis* demands that theory drive the concrete action that attempts to make a difference in a given historical moment.

Schrag (1986) pointed to a participatory understanding of *praxis* as he connected it with communication—*communicative praxis.* Communicative *praxis* connects discourse and action. Such a view of *praxis* is content-filled, directed toward someone, and offered by someone in a given historical moment. In short, there is a historically grounded reason for the communicative action that goes well beyond unreflective routine.

> [Communicative *praxis* is] *about* something, *by* someone, and *for* someone. Communicative *praxis* thus displays a referential moment (about a world of human concerns and social practices), a moment of self-implicature (by a speaker, author, or actor), and a rhetorical moment (directedness to the other). (Schrag, 1986, p. viii)

Assessment is calling the academy out of the spectator role and into a life of communicative *praxis* in which we know what we are saying and to whom we are speaking, while we take responsibility for being the person charged with not only the content, but the rhetorical obligation to address the other meaningfully.

In this historical moment, it is not enough to be a spectator critic of assessment. If we in the academy have theories that call into question the way in which assessment is done then we must engage in communicative *praxis* that is clear to our audience. *Communicative praxis is a way of suggesting that we engage in thoughtful, intellectual participation in the action of trying to figure out how to address the needs of a public, while preserving the necessity of academic freedom on the campus.*

ASSESSMENT IN AN INFORMATION AGE

Our participation in communicative *praxis* about assessment is crucial in an information age, which must be held together by story and ideas. Otherwise, we will be driven by a view of education framed only by accessing information, rather than the more fundamental question of what we will do with the information when we have acquired it.

One of our graduate students was told the following by an employer: "We do not need people with knowledge, just people who can access the information. We are considering eliminating the tuition benefit for any additional education." There are two implications

here. First, the employee who is in a service job is being treated like a secretary. Second, there is the assumption that information itself is sufficient for making decisions. From that perspective, the employee becomes only a gatherer of information. The employer has forgotten just how much information can be gathered in an information age. The employer has forgotten that once the information is gathered it must be evaluated in terms of its worth, organized, and then synthesized into some usable form. Finally, the information must be put into action. The realm that Aristotle called *phronesis* is still the key to communicative *praxis*. The question is not simply "Can you access information in a computer age," but "What will you do with the information after you have acquired it?"

The information age can open the door to a view of education limited to information access and implementation. Our student's employer stated this position, as has Ellul (1982). Ellul wants us to ask *why*—not just how to get things done with technology. Asking if one should do something is just as important as asking how to get something done. Ellul (1982) explained:

> All of the work I conceived during that period was intended to be, with few exceptions, part of the detailed analysis of this technical society. For example, *The Technological Society* studies this society in its entirety; *Propaganda* examines the technical methods that are used to change opinion and transform the individual; *The Political Illusion* is the study of what politics become in a technical society; *The Metamorphosis of the Middle-Class Man* looks at the social classes in a technical society. . . . *The Technological System* raises another problem. Technique as a system within technical society, or in other words, what new insights can we gain from the application of systems analysis to the technical phenomenon? And finally, *The Mindless Tyranny.* . . . These are some examples . . . I posed each question in a technical society. (pp. 176-177)

Ellul has functioned as a prophet in an Information Age. He has warned us that the skill of accessing information is not knowledge; accessing information is the art of a secretary and a technician. The key questions for narrative assessment of communication competence in the 21st century are *"What information should be accessed?" "To what end will the information be put to use?"* and *"With what sensitivity will the information be applied to the historical moment?"*

THE *PRAXIS* OF NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT

Both narrative and social science research acknowledge communication competence as consisting of three domains: "psychomotor or behavioral (i.e., skill), cognitive (i.e., knowledge), and affective (i.e., motivation, attitude)" (Rubin, 1994, p. 75). "Communication competence requires knowledge of appropriate and effective communication behaviors, a repertoire of skills which correspond to that knowledge, and the motivation to perform those skills in a socially appropriate and effective manner" (Moore, 1994, p. 89). Historically, communication scholars and educators have been most concerned with the skill domain. Performance measures are the most appropriate methods of skill assessment. A variety of methods may be used to assess the target skill development, including: presenting a speech, listening to material read aloud, engaging in a dyadic interchange, leading a group discussion, or conducting an interview (Moore, 1994).

Rubin (1994) noted "there is consensus that competence *requires* performance" (p. 76). Spitzberg (1983) asserted the only way an evaluator can tell if a student has knowledge

is if there is performance on a test or in a behavior. "Knowledge and skill are intricately entwined in communication competence through performance" (Rubin, 1994, p. 76).

> Skill, then, is a matter of judgment (choosing correctly from a repertoire), and knowledge is a matter of inference (making connections among bits of information learned about situations and communication). One without the other does not lead to competence, both require some type of behavior to be assessed. (Rubin, 1994, p. 76)

Communication competence is comprised of both behavioral and cognitive components, revealed through performance. Moore (1994) explained:

> To judge another person's communication competence, we must have evidence that the individual not only can perform the behavior in question, but also possesses the requisite knowledge of the behavior. We have all seen the student who effectively exhibits an appropriate behavior in a speech, for example, but who, upon further questioning, can not explain why he or she used that behavior as opposed to others. (p. 89)

He continued, "Only when the measure is designed to assess all three domains will we have an assessment of communication competence—and, even then, only with respect to that skill or set of skills" (Moore, 1994, p. 89).

Educators, the public, and students are all entering the story of assessment in higher education as it is being constructed. We must enter the story, moving as a participant and with communicative *praxis*. This story will be written in dialogue between the public and the academy or—if we refuse to enter the conversation—by the raw power of a disgruntled public. The reason for entering the story on assessment is tied to practical political reality and to MacIntyre's (1984) understanding of postmodernity—we can not agree on what virtues will guide us. If we can not agree on the virtues that will guide us in the 21st century as we construct value-added education, then how can we assume that an assessment plan might be called the "virtue implementation project" for higher education? We need to see the story of assessment for what it is—socially constructed reality.

Whoever writes this story in the *praxis* of higher education will be framing a story with both "manifest" and "latent" (Schrag, 1986, p. 39) structural significance for the *why, how* and *what* of learning on the university campus. Manifest structures will represent the form assessment will take, but latent structures will be the vehicle through which higher education is shaped into the 21st century. In narrative assessment, educators set the stage for story development by themselves entering and generating the story of assessment. Educators provide the *framework* for writing the story, while students (the future public) *determine* the story situated in the historical moment of the rising 21st century.

Examining Communication Competence

From a narrative perspective, educators must articulate ideas within the context of a human story. The act of "teaching" means paying attention to the student's historical moment and applying course material to the text of student's life through the use of stories. Witherell and Noddings (1991) pointed in this direction in their conclusion to *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education.*

> Stories are tools of enchantment. . . . We use stories to explain. In brief or sustained metaphor, we explain to our students by beginning, 'It is like this. . . . ' Our stories serve an interpretive function, acquainting our students

with difficult new concepts by relating them to familiar ideas and personal interests. Stories can help us to understand by making the abstract concrete and accessible. What is only dimly perceived at the level of principle may become vivid and affectively powerful in the concrete. Further, stories motivate us. Even that which we understand at the abstract level may not move us to action, whereas a story often does. (pp. 279-280)

Shaping stories as a participant willing to enter communicative *praxis* with both a disgruntled public and our students is done not only to have the academy represented in the assessment, but in full awareness that the story of higher education will be determined by students in their use of communication information.

Approaching assessment from a dramaturgical orientation, *the story provides the historical context for motivating the application of communication knowledge and skill.* For example, achieving a particular score on the MCAT test does not tell us if a person will be a good physician. The test is a way to make sure the person knows about science. We should not get rid of the test, but go beyond the test to application *in the historical moment.* In parallel example, the study of interpersonal communication from a narrative perspective views the process of dyadic communication as a way humans make sense of discourse between people. Students would then learn to address interpersonal communication issues: why we are communicating, how communication is problematic, where the study of interpersonal communication needs to go to address problems evident in dyadic interaction.

We suggest that the current emphasis on skill development is indicative of a larger social issue of what we call a "narrativeless" or "rootless" society. Students have no confidence in a metanarrative structure to guide them, so they ask for/we provide skills. In a society which values image over content, our experience often resembles that which Moore (1994) expressed earlier—students are unable to articulate why they selected one skill over another. Rather than assessing unreflective practice, we must assess *communication praxis.*

Implementing Narrative Assessment

Assessment is an inescapable part of the evaluation process. How do we know when communication *praxis* is occurring? We can examine *praxis* from both an atomistic perspective (e.g., oral and/or written tests) and a holistic perspective (e.g., authentic assessment of behavior accessed through portfolio assignments, internship experience). The form of assessment is not the central feature of narrative assessment—what is central is that *information must not be removed from the historical context which frames the interrelated nature of communication domains.* In the character of dialogue, when the student exhibits trust and open-mindedness to possible outcomes, genuinely new understanding emerges as a result of the interaction. Their task from a narrative perspective will be to use information about communication studies to create a narrative structure that will guide them in the 21st century.

If we enter as participants willing to engage in communicative *praxis* about the story of assessment, we have a chance to shape the meaning of education in an information age. We need to not only ask our students to access information, but to ask value laden questions about the use and implementation of that information, and to justify in story form the *why* for using that information, the *what* of historically relevant content, and the *how* of implementation. We need to get our students to think in terms of the story laden use and context of information. If they can tell us the story of *why, what,* and *how* about what they learn, we will shape higher education in a postmodern culture.

The first step in narrative assessment is to ask students to identify *practices* from the workplace. In a descriptive examination, the student conveys what she/he observed. For example, she/he may view a great deal of conversation in the workplace occurring about

things that are not work related. The identified scenario may be part of a larger narrative or a smaller unit of discourse. Patterns of behavior practices offer useful examination because of the probability that the student may find himself/herself in that situation.

The second step is to discuss *communication theory* that can be applied to the observed practices. In this phase, the student connects theory to the practice in order to generate a theory-laden understanding. The student will discuss information from coursework to address the relevance and significance of the observed communicative behavior. The student should discuss communication practices observed in light of the theory he/she has selected for analysis of the event. The student should justify *why* the selected theory was chosen as a means for offering insight about the value of the observed communication practices.

In the third step, practice is translated into *praxis* (theory informed action). There are two parts to this step—discussing the historical context in which the communication practices occurred and addressing his/her preferred communication in this situation. In the first part, the student responds to the question, "What is the historically relevant context which justifies appropriate behavior?" In discussing the *what* of historical context, the student asks value laden questions about the workplace communication in light of the theoretical information discussed in step two. Here, the student identifies his/her communicative ethics for this situation. Communicative ethics addresses the fit between the historical moment and communicative praxis. The student should ask if the observed behavior in step one is appropriate workplace discourse in this historical moment. He/She should justify the response in terms of the present historical moment and justify his/her response in terms of the historical moment of culture and society and also the organizational culture in which they are working. At a "minimalist" communicative ethic, one needs to be able to articulate the connection between the communicative praxis and the historical moment (Bok, 1995, p. 9). The second part involves responding to the question, "How will you act in this situation?" This involves the student identifying his/her preferred communication, given one's evaluation of the situation. In this discussion, the student justifies why he/she will use the selected theoretical information within that historically relevant context and also *how* he/she will implement that knowledge. This includes defending a position and demonstrating appropriate application of ideas.

The student's narrative offers a story of appropriate communication for that historical moment. Story-informed assessment utilizes an assessment model wherein we ask students to understand material as a story (who are the characters, who came before whom, who said what) and suggest how communication scholarship could be used in today's drama. The key to this approach is not to assume *praxis*, but to ask students to exhibit *praxis* by applying material to the present historical moment. A story-informed assessment model provides genuine gender, ethnic, philosophical, and dialogic alternatives to the social science view of assessment. *The skills of oral and written communication, defending a position, and demonstrating the appropriate application of ideas in a given historical context then becomes the alternative agenda of assessment.*

Narrative Assessment and Accreditation Considerations

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education oversees the six regional accrediting agencies: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Each regional association has individual autonomy and although they share a common goal, small interpretational differences in their approach to accreditation exist (Allison, 1994).

Regional accrediting agencies provide general guidelines to examine overall institutional effectiveness, which include assessment of student academic achievement. The North

Central Association of Colleges and Schools' (NCA) *Handbook of Accreditation, 1994-96* identified as one of their criteria for examining institutional effectiveness, that "the institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes" (p. 34). In clarifying their interpretation of "educational purpose," the commission noted higher education requires students to use their intellect, stimulates students to examine their values, teaches students the importance of considering divergent views as expressed in research, and challenges students to engage each other and their teachers in a free exchange of ideas and attitudes. (NCA, 1994, p. 44)

Institutions must exhibit an appropriate pattern of evidence documenting the academic achievement of its students. In the section, "Hallmarks of Successful Programs to Assess Student Academic Achievement" the NCA acknowledges "successful assessment is marked by faculty ownership and responsibility. . . . Faculty must assume primary responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of any program to assess student academic achievement" (p. 153).

We believe faculty and accrediting agencies would be interested in a narrative assessment approach for two reasons, both dealing with the social good. First, accrediting agencies want departments which comprise institutions to be able to verify their claims. One of our goals in departments of communication is to assist students in attaining "proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults" (NCA, 1994, p. 34). To exhibit competent communication skills, students must understand behavioral practices, select appropriate theory to analyze the event, and engage in *praxis* (apply theory in manner sensitive to the historical context and personal communicative ethics). We believe the *praxis* model of assessing student achievement outcomes offers a clear understanding of students' knowledge, skill, and motivation to be communicatively competent. This form of assessment is best accomplished in smaller classes, such as a capstone course or a core course in an emphasis area, where faculty and students have the opportunity for discussion and analysis of interpretive schemata. Second, this assessment approach would fit within any college deeply committed to liberal arts and committed to writing across the curriculum. Implicit in this commitment is that the writing process helps us synthesize and generate a "community of memory" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 154) about important communication discourse within our discipline.

Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1991) call for the return to a rhetorically sensitive view of education.

> The Greeks invented not only political philosophy as an aid to practical reason *(phronesis)* in reflecting about these matters, but also rhetoric, the use of persuasive speech in public deliberation. While there was an argument about the legitimacy of rhetoric from the beginning, it had an honored place in the educational curriculum for millennia and was closely associated with the search for the common good in republican and democratic societies. (p. 145)

The oral and written tradition (that starts with evidence, is developed for a specific problem, audience, and historical moment, and then is tested in the *praxis* of life) once again needs to guide us. Our assessment needs to lead us to such a rhetorical story or higher education will not address the deep structural needs of an information age without a clear story held in common to guide us. In a post-modern culture we need to teach the skills of creating good stories, and in the conversation among us discover which stories should guide us into the world of work, family, friendship, and the joy and tragedy that awaits us in this changing era as we examine communication competence in an information age.

SUMMARY

Members of the academy have responded to the public's call for accountability with a variety of student assessment procedures. Scholarship discussing current methods for assessing student communication competence were identified. A narrative approach to assessment was offered as an alternative to the social scientific approach to assessing communication competence. In the *praxis* of narrative assessment, we ask students to tell us the story of *what*, *why*, and *how* their learning appropriately situates them for living in the 21st century. By asking students to connect their discourse with action appropriate for the historical moment, students develop communication competence necessary for living in an information age.

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