JACA
3(1997): 180-189

Providing Focus on Participatory Democracy in Academic Departments of Communication

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A persistent theme in recent social criticism in the United States has been the deterioration of the public sphere, a lack of opportunity and space to engage the citizenry in public discussion. This lack of opportunity has led to a growing incompetence on the part of the public. As Christopher Lasch (1995) has said:

> Since the public no longer participates in debates on national issues, it has no reason to inform itself about civic affairs. It is the decay of public debate, not the school system (bad as it is), that makes the public ill informed, notwithstanding the wonders of the age of information. When debate becomes a lost art, information, even though it may be readily available, makes no impression. (p.162)

Lasch and others (e.g., Purcell, 1973; Yankelovich, 1991) attribute this deterioration of the public sphere to a preference for expert opinion over any form of direct democracy. This preference can be traced back to the Progressive era in American history. During that period, Walter Lippmann argued that the public should not be directly involved in decision making, but public influence should be mediated by experts (Lippmann, 1922; 1925). He reasoned that the public lacked information which could best be supplied by an objective press. John Dewey (1927) disagreed. He urged that information required discussion in order to constitute knowledge and result in effective decision making. The public needed direct democratic participation.

There has been a resurgence of interest in Dewey's work in the last few years and a corresponding attempt to balance modern governmental constraints with the ideal of participative democracy (e.g., Sproule, 1994, 1997). Like Dewey, James Carey (1989) has suggested that the role of the press should include the promotion of public discussion, not just the conveyance of so-called "objective" information. The role of academia has also been considered. The President of the Kettering Foundation has proposed that students

would be more interested in politics if our campuses would substitute community deliberation for the stridency that currently passes for politics (Mathews, 1993). The deterioration of the public sphere has alarmed many, and some have set out to correct the situation.

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate how academic departments of communication can help contribute to a revitalized public sphere. Specifically, we argue that academic departments can develop coordinated curricular and research activities that promote participatory forms of democracy. Using the Communication Studies Department at San Jose State University as an exemplar, we will discuss specific activities for instituting participatory democracy as well as the benefits these activities have for departments which elect to engage in them.

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

One interesting move is the campaign by different groups to enhance the quality of public discourse. Indeed, if we look closely at the concerns about the decline of the public sphere we find that they are more often than not rooted in concerns about the quality of public discourse. Those who work in departments of communication would seem to be well positioned to address issues of public discourse. While it is natural that these issues be addressed within the intellectual traditions of the communication field, departments can also profit by looking "outside" the university context to the practical efforts being undertaken by various groups in society. The following four projects illustrate some of the methods and techniques currently being used to improve the quality of public discourse.

For some, the poor quality of public discourse is attributed to the media. Both the commercial and economic interests of television "news," radio, and newspapers, and the one-way, linear transmission of information characteristic of these media, preclude the kind of deliberation and debate necessary for participatory democracy. One response to the negative impact of the media, particularly in the realm of newspapers, is the "public journalism project" (Meritt & Rosen, 1995). Public journalism is an attempt to use media as sites for the exchange of ideas by broad segments of the public. The *San Jose Mercury News*, for example, periodically sponsors "community forums" in which the public is invited to meet and share their views on particular issues. The results of these forum discussions are then featured in the opinion/editorial section of the newspaper, and readers are encouraged to respond as a way to continue the discussion while broadening the base of participants.

Other groups look to face-to-face interaction in smaller "local" contexts as a way to improve public discourse. Obviously, the form of communication adopted by these groups will be quite different from that proposed in the public journalism project. This is not to suggest, however, that local efforts to reinvigorate the public sphere are somehow at odds with those that work at larger mass media levels. In fact, one assumption underlying local efforts is that the media perpetuate discourse patterns surrounding social issues that are both totalizing and polarizing. The goal is to create communicative contexts that negate the use of the scripted discourse patterns that dominate media coverage. Instead of relying on "stock arguments," participants are encouraged to explore "new" ways of talking about contentious social issues.

We will look at three projects that work to improve the quality of public discourse by attending to face-to-face interaction. The first project is the National Issues Forums (NIF) (see Osborn & Osborn, 1991). The NIF, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation, is composed of over 3,000 local partner organizations that hold thousands of public forums and study circles every year. A typical NIF session is a moderated group discussion. Participants gather to "deliberate" a single issue (e.g. health care, affirmative action, welfare reform, etc.), which is outlined in an Issues Booklet distributed before the forums or study circles. Importantly, the booklets include a list of possible "choices" associated with each issue

along with evidence and reasons used to support and oppose the particular option. The key to an NIF session is the careful deliberation of each of the options, a method known as "choice work."

Both public forums and study circles are designed to achieve essentially the same goals and work off the same set of assumptions. They differ only in respect to their size, with the forums being larger than the study circles. The first goal is for citizens to see themselves as actors who directly influence the political process. The second goal is for people to act together so as to make choices. Doing "choice work" leads to the third goal, deliberation, which is a form of communication that carefully considers the costs and consequences of particular actions. The effective use of deliberation leads to public judgment about the actions that should be taken. Public judgment, the fourth goal, creates a public voice, the fifth goal. Finally, the public voice created by deliberation and judgment helps to establish common ground for action, which ultimately forms the basis for implementation of a policy or solution.

The Public Conversations Project comes at public discourse from a family therapy orientation (Becker, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig, & Roth, in press). The project started when members of the group noticed that the clinical skills they used to facilitate dialogue in families could be used to help citizens who were similarly trapped in polarized patterns of communication surrounding social issues. The approach taken by the Public Conversations Project obviously differs from the approach used in the NIF. Where the NIF sponsors thousands of old-fashioned town meetings across the country to deliberate the choices associated with a given political issue, the Public Conversations Project convenes small groups of people who hold opposing positions on an issue for the purpose of achieving dialogue.

The "dialogue circle" method used by the Public Conversations Project has been in existence since 1989 and has focused extensively on the issue of abortion. Ground rules or "agreements" are established at the beginning of a dialogue circle as a way of achieving agreement and maintaining confidentiality. Participants are encouraged to use respectful language, avoid interruptions and, perhaps most importantly, allow each other to decline speaking without explanation. Facilitators then ask the following questions in sequence: What is something in your personal history that brought you to the issue? What is at the heart of the matter for you concerning the issue? What value conflicts or mixed feelings do you have about the issue? Participants in the next stage ask each other questions, and are encouraged to do so out of a position of genuine curiosity. After a final debriefing segment, a follow-up interview is conducted a few weeks later.

The Kaleidoscope Project is another attempt to improve public discourse by creating new patterns of conversation. Although it has evolved through various formats since its inception in 1985, the current incarnation of Kaleidoscope involves two disputants, each representing different sides of the social issue in question, a moderator, a team of about four people who serve as a reflecting team, a floor manager, and an audience. A complete Kaleidoscope session lasts approximately 90 minutes.

A typical Kaleidoscope session begins with a brief introduction by the floor manager who orients the participants to the "unconventional" format of the event. This is followed by three interrelated yet distinct phases. The first phase consists of the moderator interviewing one of the disputants using circular questioning. During this phase the other disputant takes a third-party perspective by moving off stage and joining the audience. Next, the floor manager coordinates questions and comments from the audience. This is followed by the reflecting team, who comment in the form of "hypotheses" about what the disputant has said. The disputant is then given an opportunity to respond to the reflecting team. In the second phase, the process is repeated with the second disputant while the first joins the audience. In the final phase, both disputants join the moderator on stage to engage in the process again, only this time they are given the opportunity to address each other.

The goal of a Kaleidoscope session is not necessarily to change the participants' positions on issues, although this is one possible outcome. Rather, the goal is to alter the pattern of communication so that participants have new ways of talking about social issues. Recent Kaleidoscope sessions have been conducted at San Jose State University and De Anza College dealing with the issues of funding intercollegiate athletics and affirmative action.

THE CHANGING PUBLIC SPHERE

It seems that at the very time that the vitality of the public sphere is most in doubt, significant progress is already being made on many fronts to improve the quality of public discourse. The efforts we have just considered signal a move away from "expert" democracy toward participatory democracy. Thus, in considering the changing public sphere, it is important to emphasize this force for change, this sense of urgency to restore the public sphere.

Inherent in the very concept of participatory democracy is quality public discourse. This relationship is not lost on those of us in the field of communication. Colleagues in both speech communication and journalism in the U.S. have been leaders in these efforts. The 1996 convention of the International Communication Association held in Chicago in May took "Democracy at the Crossroads" as its theme. To have lasting influence, this disciplinary concern must capture our attention at the departmental level. Departments can be structured to support educational and research efforts dealing with the problems of participative democracy. We can favor this theme in our local professional conversations.

DEPARTMENTAL EMPHASIS ON PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

In our department, we decided to stand with those encouraging this change in the public sphere by making the study of the intersection of communication and democracy a major departmental emphasis. This emphasis has been formally stated in various ways that reflect the department's relationship with the rest of the university. While these efforts are somewhat specific to the Communication Studies Department at SJSU, they should nevertheless provide other departments with some concrete ideas for institutionalizing a communication and democracy emphasis.

The Department of Communication Studies "Five Year Plan" explicitly acknowledges a focus on "democracy, diversity, and technology."

The institution requires a five year plan that anticipates everything from resource needs to anticipated changes in curriculum. We used the process to forge a consensus that we should emphasize participatory democracy. Specifically, we outlined the theoretical and practical issues associated with the transformation of communication and democracy in contemporary society, and suggested ways for our department to pursue these issues as part of our curriculum development and research orientation.

We began with an overview of the communication and democracy theme by highlighting the kinds of questions the theme raises. These questions were intended to give shape and focus to the theme as well as pique the interest of administrators and others who were likely to read the planning document. Some of the questions included: How is democracy changing as a result of society becoming more culturally diverse? How is that change manifested at local, national, and international levels? How have communications technologies changed the way people deliberate issues within democratic institutions? What influence has the move toward globalization had on democracy? How can the intellectual traditions of the Speech Communication discipline be adapted to the transformation of democracy? How can we, as communication teachers and scholars, help others to understand the chang-

ing face of democracy? How can the Communication Studies Department help people in the local community to negotiate the transformation of democracy?

After addressing questions associated with the theme, we then identified some of the opportunities the theme opens up for the department. The first advantage we noted was that a departmental emphasis on democracy would provide a unique perspective on multicultural communication and issues of social diversity. Beginning in the classical period, the study of communication, or rhetoric, has traditionally dealt with democratic processes and various political practices. While this focus continues to be viable today, we are convinced of the need to examine how communication and democracy are changing in response to social, cultural, and technological forces. By looking specifically at the transformation of democracy, we can narrow cultural communication and diversity issues and thus focus teaching, research, and community outreach efforts.

Another advantage of the theme is that it addresses the growing importance of communications technology. The origins of democratic processes in ancient Greek society were essentially dependent on oral, face-to-face communication. Given the complexities of contemporary society, it is critical that we now focus on how these processes have been altered by networks of information sharing. It is our view that the future of technology, in this country and across the world, raises questions not merely about technical innovation, but also how citizens in a democratic society are to participate in public discussions and make political decisions that are increasingly dependent on electronic information dissemination.

A third advantage of the communication and democracy theme is that it puts the department in a position to solve practical problems in the community. The department recognizes the need to use our communication knowledge and abilities in the service of society. By focusing on the role of democratic communication in a diverse society we believe that we will be better able to meet that need. We will discuss below the creation of a Public Dialogue Consortium and a partnership with the city of Cupertino. This is one example of how the communication and democracy theme can be used to promote community outreach efforts.

Finally, we noted that the communication and democracy theme captures a number of developments that are already happening in the department. For example, the research interests of some faculty in the department either directly or indirectly address democratic communication processes. A number of course offerings also play to the communication and democracy theme, particularly in our rhetorical theory and oral communication courses. The fact that we already had in place a number of research and curricular activities not only made it easier to embrace the theme, it also served to draw departmental members together around a common focus. It certainly helped that the emphasis on communication and democracy evolved naturally from faculty interests and that no additional resources were necessary to bring the theme to fruition.

A graduate seminar on the topic "Democracy and Communication" was initiated to create a "space" for faculty and students to pursue semester-long investigations of democratic communication.

One obvious way for departments to institute a communication and democracy emphasis is by developing new courses. In our case, we scheduled a seminar during the noon hour three days a week, a time usually reserved for committee work and faculty meetings, in order to accommodate as many faculty members as possible. Faculty, as well as students, were invited to present papers on the new departmental focus as it impinges upon their particular interests within the field of communication. Faculty, as well as students, were urged to attend all meetings. Faculty from cognate fields, were invited. In this way, the seminar time served as a classroom, as well as an opportunity for collaboration on research projects.

Among the books assigned for common study were Tocqueville's (1984) famous 19th century investigation of American democracy, Cmiel's (1990) *Democratic Eloquence*, and Lasch's (1995) *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. The seminar was led by Michael Sproule whose own book on the subject, *Propaganda and Democracy*, was recently published by Cambridge University Press (1997).

Department representatives encouraged the university's Board of General Studies to put the "public" back in "public speaking."

In other words, this required general education course stresses citizenship training over career communication skills.

Public speaking has long been a popular course in many American colleges and universities. What is the rationale for the course? It can not only help to prepare citizens to participate effectively in the public forum, it can also help managers give effective presentations to their superiors which can boost their careers. To some extent, of course, education in public speaking can do both at the same time. Effective communication skills can be applied in a multiplicity of settings. However, the two reasons for the course are often in conflict. For example, does the instructor replicate business settings in the classroom in order to satisfy the careerist impulses of the student, do the course assignments require thoughtful analysis of public issues, or do you attempt to do both in the same course? These questions reoccur in every instructional decision in the course from choice of textbook to approval of speech topics. Although we allow considerable instructor autonomy, in our department we decided that our primary duty was to citizenship education. This choice is consistent with long-standing traditions in the field of speech communication (see Eisenstadt, 1959). It also has some very practical consequences in situations where public speaking is a general education requirement, as in all 22 campuses of the California State University. If university colleagues can see that the purpose of the course is the preparation of citizens, they are less likely to allow substitutions that are blatantly careerist, such as courses called "Presentational Speaking for Allied Health Professionals," or "Presentational Speaking for Engineers." Even nurses and engineers need to learn to grapple with public issues.

The following statement was written primarily by Jo Sprague and Michael Sproule, from our department. It is included in the report of the General Education Advisory Panel on Oral Communication (Elliott, et al., 1991) to the university's Board of General Studies:

> We approach this review process as an opportunity to present the philosophy underlying these courses to the university community in a way that emphasizes the central role of public speaking in empowering our students to find effective voices in an increasingly multicultural and technological society. We take pride in the practical skills orientation of our courses, but we emphasize the importance of situating the development of skills in the context of intellectual and ethical principles. Moreover, we insist that the specific skills of speech preparation and delivery must be integrated into intellectually demanding speech assignments presented to real audiences under the conditions of public discourse. Informal discussions and skill building exercises are useful primarily as enabling activities to prepare students for a few challenging culminating public speech assignments. Finally, we believe that the courses that meet the oral communication requirement should prepare students for public life in the broadest possible human community. Skills for technical presentations or various exercises in self-expression are limited to the discourse conventions of certain limited groups. Students need to learn to discuss socially significant topics with audiences representative of the

> entire university. If they can master the skills of discovering shared values and creating meaningful messages in that setting, they can easily master the speaking demands of more specialized contexts they may encounter later.

Most sections of this general education course are taught in our department. Each instructor is guided by this language. It keeps the focus clearly on citizenship preparation.

In the interest of community outreach, some faculty participated in the founding of the Public Dialogue Consortium which promotes interventions and research to improve public discourse.

Three years ago Shawn Spano worked with colleagues Barnett Pearce, Stephen Littlejohn, and Kim Walters, from other universities, to form the Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC). This group consists of teachers, practitioners, and researchers who employ communication techniques to help improve the quality of public discourse. One of the methods used by the PDC to help resolve political conflict is the Kaleidoscope project discussed earlier. This theoretical approach developed by the PDC bridges interpersonal communication theory and public discourse. The approach also works toward a distinct practical orientation in that it can be used as an interventionist technique to alter "real" patterns of political conflict.

The infrastructure for these practices is derived from the coordinated management of meaning theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) and associated ideas from systems theory, ordinary language philosophy, family therapy, and mediation. The goal is to take what we know about conversation, dialogue, and deliberation and apply it to public discourse.

The distinct "practical" orientation of the approach (Cronen, 1995) implies that theorizing is an action carried out with others in complex communication practices. This further suggests that communication theorists are practitioners who, in the case of public discourse, join with others to help facilitate a more productive and healthy conversation on issues that are socially and politically meaningful. The method that comes out of this approach involves a set of skills and techniques that are designed specifically to facilitate discourse that is contentious, polarizing, and politically charged.

A number of intervention skills have been developed for public discourse, with circular questioning (Penn, 1982) being one of the more important ones. Circular questioning is used as a way for participants in a conflict to acknowledge perceptions of difference, perhaps leading them to information which they had not previously been aware. The information derived from perceptions of difference is vital because it focuses attention on patterns of relationship among people and how these patterns are constructed and maintained in communication. Applied to political conflict, circular questioning prompts the disputants to reflect on the patterns of interaction which dominate the conflict and how those patterns are embedded within larger social systems.

This has led to partnerships with the cities of Cupertino and Santa Clara, as well as DeAnza College, to work on local public discourse issues.

The communication practices used by the PDC both benefit and are benefitted by empirical research studies. This has allowed members of the PDC to conduct scholarly research that serves the needs of the larger community. For example, the PDC is currently working with the city of Cupertino, California to develop forms of communication that give citizens greater access and influence in city government. The project, titled "Creating Voices and Visions in Cupertino," has thus far consisted of a series of focus group and public meetings where citizens discussed issues facing the community and explored ways of solving them. A number of community themes were identified from the meetings using qualita-

tive discourse analysis. These themes will serve as topics for the next stage of the project, which will consist of public deliberations beginning next Fall. This further illustrates how departments can use a communication and democracy emphasis to improve community relations and enhance "real world" public discourse.

BENEFITS TO THE DEPARTMENT

Several benefits have followed. One that was not foreseen was the improvement of relationships with faculty colleagues from other departments. Almost three years ago our campus recruited a new President and Provost. The new President decided that a major academic restructuring should occur. The process caused each college and department to rethink its position in the university structure. Having agreed upon this general departmental goal, we can see more clearly our connection to other departments (e.g., departments within our own College of Social Sciences that are interested in the study of democracy, departments like Journalism, Library and Information Sciences, and Art), which are united by a concern for freedom of speech issues. An *ad hoc* "vision" committee met voluntarily each week this past summer with members of other departments to talk about such connections and possible realignments. A "position paper" that describes the centrality of communication study, its changing nature due to technology, and the importance of considering the democratic and ethical implications of these changes has been jointly written and used in these restructuring discussions. The faculty's successful attainment of consensus in this matter can be traced, in part, to our previous consensus about the importance of studying communication and participatory democracy.

The communication and democracy theme has improved our pedagogical and research efforts by sharpening our focus. The most obvious example is the development of the new seminar described above. Further, in courses we have long taught, course outlines are more explicit in emphasizing a concern for democracy. We quoted above from our Board of General Studies guidelines for the public speaking course.

Another example of the relevance of this emphasis is the discussion/ small group communication course. In Gerry Philipsen's (1995) colloquium paper, "The Invention of Discussion," he traces to Sheffield the invention of "a social form and communicative practice which has come to be understood as a *sine qua non* of democratic life."

One might ask why "democracy" was so consistently stated as a rationale for the study of group discussion in the first half of the century and why that same rationale was sometimes omitted from later textbooks. Interestingly, Philipsen uses the word only once in his study of the origins of the discussion course although he was explicitly studying "cultural keywords and other such cultural phenomena [that have] played an important role in uncovering the distinctive discursive consciousness that has developed in the invention of discussion." In a sense, the emphasis on "decision science" in discussion overrode the, not contradictory, emphasis on discussion as democracy in our recent disciplinary history just as it did in Philipsen's study. "Democracy" is another "cultural key word" that could profitably be included in a study using Philipsen's research method.

Perhaps we have isolated Dewey's concerns about *How We Think* from his larger concerns about participative democracy. Such concerns were important as many Americans watched the successes of fascism in Europe in the years prior to World War II, and it is precisely in this fearful historical context that group discussion was seen as a way to bolster grass-roots democratic processes in America. The course gained in popularity in adult education offerings as well as in college and university curricula.

In light of our concern about the changing public sphere, the citizenship education rationale for the course makes as much sense now as it did then. It could be explicit in our

curricular statements and course outlines. This follows naturally if the department has agreed upon such a focus.

Student theses and faculty collaborations have also resulted. The theoretical and methodological techniques used by the Public Dialogue Consortium have not only led to faculty research (see Spano & Calcagno, 1996), they have also created research opportunities for graduate students. One student is finishing a Master's Thesis that comes out of the work of the PDC and addresses the department's communication and democracy theme. The student, Claire Calcagno, is investigating how systemic communication practices, such as circular questioning, can be integrated into an argumentation and advocacy course. The goal is to develop pedagogical tools that teach students how to engage in argument that is more deliberative and less polarizing.

Topics as seemingly diverse as propaganda (Sproule, 1996, 1994), classroom power and pedagogy (Sprague, 1995), public conversation (Spano & Calcagno, 1996), and organizational dissent (Hegstrom, 1995) will now stand under a common umbrella, communication and democracy. Several student theses have followed on these topics. More faculty collaboration and student work is anticipated.

SUMMARY

We have highlighted some of the projects to enhance participative democracy in order to show one direction in which the public sphere seems to be changing. Academic departments of speech communication can do much to accommodate this change by focusing more on the relationship between communication and democracy. This intention can be formally stated in university planning documents, course titles and outlines, general education guidelines, the establishment of research and consulting consortia, and in partnerships with external institutions. Benefits to the department include clarity of purpose, which can lead to collaboration within the department and with other departments, as well as enhanced educational and research agendas.

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