
2023

Ontological Inquiry in an Undergraduate Communication Course

William B. Strean

University of Alberta, Wstrean@ualberta.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/joie>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Strean, William B. (2023) "Ontological Inquiry in an Undergraduate Communication Course," *Turning Toward Being: The Journal of Ontological Inquiry in Education*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/joie/vol1/iss2/6>

This Notes from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by the Rowan University Journals at Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Turning Toward Being: The Journal of Ontological Inquiry in Education by an authorized editor of Rowan Digital Works.

Ontological Inquiry in an Undergraduate Communication Course

William B. Strean, University of Alberta

Abstract: This essay explores how ontological and somatic approaches were applied in an undergraduate communication course. Beginning by contrasting the assumptions of traditional knowledge and skills-based approaches with the shift to a focus on being within ontological methods, the author expands to show specifically how somatics informed the learning activities and students' development in communication. After providing examples of the core content of public speaking and interpersonal communication and shares students' learning and feedback, the author concludes by considering broader possibilities for ontological inquiry and transformative education.

Keywords: Communication, ontology, somatics, being, education

Introduction

Tracey stands in front of twenty three other students and her instructor, all seated facing her in a U-shape, in a university course called “Communication Skills and Strategies.” Her voice trembles. She averts her eyes. On the first day of class, during an icebreaker exercise, Tracey had listed one of five qualities about herself as “extremely shy.” In a standard communication course, the only thing that might support Tracey in her development might be to follow the core factors of speech design, apply information about vocal variety, and remember the importance of eye contact. None of these standard approaches, however, address her sense of herself as extremely shy.

The typical approach to communication is akin to the seemingly vast array of education and development programs. The assumption is that if we give you more information so you know and *have* it, you will be able to apply that knowledge and *do* the task, and then you might *be* effective or happy or experience some other desirable or useful result. Such a sequence is so taken-for-granted that the folly of its dysfunction tends to remain invisible. However counterintuitive it might appear to be, knowing simply does not alter behaviour--consider for a moment the multitude of times when knowing better did not make a difference toward taking effective action. Hundreds of years of educational orthodoxy have perpetuated a dualistic view that privileges knowing and diminishes or ignores being. The notion that there even exists an alternative may remain beyond the imagination. We operate as if our *raison d'être* as professors is our vast knowledge – and its accumulation and dissemination. Our graduate school experiences tend to train us to do half our job: we learn how to conduct research and create knowledge, but we typically leave unequipped with pedagogical skills, particularly those that enable us to **be** effective with students and alter their being or behaviour effectively, rather than merely imparting knowledge.

The Prospect of an Ontological Model

What else is possible? What might make the difference for Tracey and other students who enter a communication course with their personal embodied history that has barriers to their freedom and self-expression?

Early on the first day of class, I offer this evasive assertion with a slide: “The theme of this course is the BE-ing of communication.” As I unpack the point, the conclusion becomes obvious: whether you are having a one-on-one conversation or you are presenting to hundreds of people, who you are **being** is decisive. Stated as such, it can seem like jargon. It seems like common sense that communication is a matter of putting together the most appropriate things to say to a particular audience; it tends to be like how much of life seems – a matter of doing it right. Yet, when asked to reflect on their own experiences, students readily relate to the idea consistent with a line frequently attributed to Emerson: “Your actions [alternatively “Who you are”] speak[s] so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying.” It turns out that what he may have actually said, more poetically and powerfully from my standpoint is, “Don’t say things. What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary” (Bloch 2013). Students can connect to the notion that how someone shows up as a human being makes all the difference. They can think about teachers or bosses who were easy to listen to. They can resonate with the view that there is a “leadership presence” that influences whether we are likely to listen and follow or distrust and resist. As frequently attributed to Maya Angelou, they accept that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Students seem to hold some disbelief, yet be somewhat fascinated that the “tips and tricks” of crafting and delivering a speech will ultimately be hollow without a foundation of dealing with who is doing the speaking. I light-heartedly deliver the idea that we all grew up hearing a lot of “if I *had* more time,” or “if I *had* more money” then I would be able to *do* the things I want to do, and then (only then) will I *be* happy. It is an easy sell that life is somewhat difficult this way. What if – we consider – that “the appropriate flow of life” is to focus first on our *being*, then on our *doing*, and then our *having* might be relatively easy?

Because of my history as an athlete with an academic and applied background in sport and performance psychology, coupled with many years of training toward becoming a Master Somatic Coach, it is profoundly evident to me that an ounce of altering one’s being is worth a pound of technical training. Getting students to buy into and experience the power of this path is the journey upon which we embark. Seeing may be believing. Being is eminently more convincing.

Assumptions of Ontological Inquiry in Communication

I am aware of the large extent to which I am asking students to deviate from almost everything they know about what it takes to be a student and to be successful. I recognize that they have been sufficiently successful in a largely “telling and testing” game during K-12 to have the opportunity to attend post-secondary education – a game we perpetuate in higher education as well. I understand that it is nearly impossible to be in a state of learning, growth, and development while being in a state of fear and threat. I see the series of dangers lurking for them:

the fears of looking bad, being wrong, performing poorly, being pushed out of the herd, losing opportunities, jeopardizing their grade point averages, and future prospects, among others.

A good learning environment has got to balance a strong enough foundation of safety and civility with sufficient challenge and risk. To engage fully in the ontological inquiry of what it is personally for each of them to be an effective speaker and communicator, they appreciate my mantra: “You’ve got this, and I’ve got your back.” I am inviting them to set aside their success formula from the world of telling and testing. I am encouraging them to try things they have never done before and certainly not in a classroom and certainly not while being observed.¹ I am asking them to believe that memorization is irrelevant here. I am suggesting that steps and checklists make nice icing, but that they, the students, *are* themselves the cake.

It is said that the audience already formulates a considerable degree of assessment as speakers make their way to the platform and utter their first few words. It is not the content that drives the evaluations. It is presence, not pithiness, that rules the day. Similarly, and to clarify one of the most misrepresented research studies ever (Mehrabian 1971), whether in interpersonal communication or public speaking, the degree to which others will like and trust a person is based largely on non-verbal clues. Presented as facts, these ideas may likely resonate, but they make little difference. When students truly explore their own experiences, they can discover for themselves that how they show up as human beings with other human beings-- being in the world with others--is the “secret sauce” of effective communication. Access to effective communication may arise in the most obvious of places: the body.

The Relation of Somatics to Ontology

The term *somatics* comes from the word *soma*—the body in its wholeness. A somatic perspective proposes that we cannot distinguish the self from the body. The components that constitute the self (emotions, actions, beliefs, interactions, perception, ethics, morals, and drive for dignity) all arise from the physical form (Strozzi-Heckler 2003, 2007). Somatics eschews the notion that there is a disembodied, self-contained self that is separate from the life of one’s body. Plainly, the somatic perspective departs significantly from the pervasive Cartesian paradigm that has dominated in many academic and applied settings to postulate a determinable, objective reality that is disconnected from subjective experience (Strean & Strozzi-Heckler 2009). The worldview resulting from Descartes’ dualism dismisses the somatic perspective and carries its own logical conclusion: since I have a distorted connection with my body and with the realities of my ordinary life, I can be deluded about any of them (Johnson 1983).

If what matters is being embodied, the path becomes one of building a self, altering a shape, practicing a body, that will best ground and represent intended communications. The first trial/challenge/quest/practice is centering. I introduce the practice (as taught to me by Richard Strozzi-Heckler; see Strean & Strozzi-Heckler 2009) as a way to become more present, open, and connected and as a method to prepare to perform. The practice involves paying attention respectively to one’s length, width, depth, and center, while allowing breath to drop more to the belly. Having worked with a panoply of techniques to help athletes and performers toward optimal states, I am thoroughly convinced that this is an exceptionally useful foundation. In a

¹ Foucauldians might have a field day viewing what the public speaker faces through the lens of the panopticon.

simple sense, much of what makes public speaking many people's biggest fear can be tied to not being present (i.e., being embroiled in internal dialogue, concerns, and worries). It appears that what is often debilitating is that past failures are not forgotten or left behind, but projected into the imagined future where one is about to perform. Trying *not to* think or feel anything tends to be counter-productive, as resistance causes persistence. Letting go of or reducing attention on thoughts and attuning to the life of the body assists in being more present in the moment of performance. Feeling and sensing more reduces the "noise" in one's head. As a standard practice, centering allows students to be open to possibilities and more connected to themselves and what they care about: we begin each class session with centering.

What follows here is a sample of a basic script of how to lead a centering practice: *This is a simple centering exercise. Stand comfortably. Align your knees over your ankles; pelvis over your knees; shoulders over your pelvis; the back of your head aligned more or less with the back of your pelvis. You can allow your bones to do most of the work. You are both settling and straightening. Allow your breath to drop toward your belly. Let your jaw go. Let your shoulders drop. Feel the length of your body. Pay attention without feeling like you have to stretch yourself. Feel your feet on the ground. Notice the length of the long bones of your legs, your spine, all the way to the top of your head. Simply become aware of the dimension of length.*

Now, pay attention to the width of the body: across the collarbone, the pelvis, from side to side. Simply feel the distance and space.

Next, attend to depth. You can't see the back of your head, down the back, or the back of the legs, but you can feel them. You can feel the front of your face and torso and legs, and you can feel or notice the distance from the front to the back. We exist in the dimension of depth. You can also think of having your past behind you, your future in front of you, and from the back to the front of the body is the present.

We also have a center. There is a physical center. It's like an organizing principle. If you go to your bellybutton and go 2 inches down and 2 inches in, that's your center. It may help to put two fingers on the spot 2 inches below your belly button, feel 2 inches behind your fingers; that's your center. Now, feel your breath going in to your center. As you're breathing in, think "I'm breathing in," and, as you're breathing out, think "I'm breathing out." If your attention is on breathing in when you're breathing in and if your attention is on breathing out when you're breathing out, then you're present. You're present, open, and connected. Present in this moment, open to possibility, and connected to yourself and what you care about. This is a very simple exercise yet very powerful.

Another set of somatic concepts and practices helps to undergird our development in communication and students can see the relevance whether engaging with one other person or an audience. Beginning with **centering** as a commitment to self-awareness, students learn a progression of **facing, entering, extending, and blending**. **Facing** is the first step of creating an intention to engage and to connect with other(s): it means literally: to face. **Entering** is the first action toward creating conversation; we read our counterpart or the audience for an openness to step in. **Extending** is moving energy/self toward other(s), seeking to foster a deeper connection as we assess how much is too much and how much is not enough, and we notice our impact and we stay present with ourselves. **Blending** is balancing extension and reception with cycles of reciprocity, facilitating a functional dynamic, and monitoring to create harmony with others'

energy. These concepts become embodied with partner practices such as two-step with a partner and mirroring exercises. They can then be applied in interpersonal and public speaking contexts.

Core Content

Public speaking. The majority of the term work involves students presenting progressively longer speeches and receiving assessments from the instructor and peers. Whereas we include traditional components such as organization, vocal variety, eye contact, and language, we pay considerable attention to the life of the body both as experienced by the presenter and audience (e.g., centered presence).

Interpersonal communication. In both this realm and as it relates to public speaking, I make the point that this may look like a course that focuses on what you are saying and how you are saying it, but you can quickly notice you have about 24 more times the opportunities to practice listening (based on the number of other students) than you do speaking. I make the case that listening is the most important communication skill. Not surprisingly, we focus extensively on what we may call “the being of listening.” Again, although there are skills to develop, the awareness and cultivation of self or being is foundational. We do address concepts like “levels of listening” (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl and Whitworth 2018) as accessible ways to build self-awareness to move one’s attention from self to other(s). Yet, we delve into how one arrives as a human being both with internal processes and as perceived by others. A particularly powerful concept in this regard is “already-always listening” (e.g., Hyde and Kopp 2019), an ontological perceptual constraint, the roots of which can be found in the work of Derrida, Althusser, and Heidegger. Students awaken to a confronting realization that we do not listen as empty vessels, but we bring a rich array of opinions, views, judgments, etc., into every situation.

Students’ Learning and Feedback

Tracey became something of a folk hero in our class. Some students who had known her from earlier in their undergraduate careers marvelled at her transformation. In her final speech, Tracey made eye contact around the room, she had students laughing, and we were inspired. I cannot recall another time in my career when so many students mentioned another student by name in their final reflections, consistently remarking on the exceptional growth and development they witnessed. More broadly, students speak to the benefits of an ontological approach to their education (not surprisingly not naming it as such) and how they have not simply acquired more information, but they have shifted who they are able to be in their personal conversations and when they are presenting in front of a room of people. They lauded the merit of centering and seemed consistently surprised at how “getting out of their own way” and really listening to others is based on a fundamental shift in being made available, in part, by the centering practice.

Broader Possibilities for Ontological Inquiry and Transformative Education

I recall a colleague saying that with the exception of the church, no institution has changed less over the past several centuries than higher education. Early in my career, when the technological shift of the day was from the overhead projector to PowerPoint, one of my senior colleagues made a remark that I have cited frequently, “I don’t know what the big deal is, most professors

haven't adapted their teaching to the technology of the printing press." He aptly identified that the core mode of teaching was still the lecture, which was predicated on the instructor having the only book in town. We have clung to an antiquated approach that is captured in the phrase "telling and testing." This approach has not been educationally viable for painfully too long and likely only remains institutionally viable because of the credentials that we give to students who endure the slog through courses adherent to this approach.

Especially in fields like kinesiology, where the body and being are so fundamental to our inquiry and the professional practice for which we seek to prepare students, it is incumbent upon us to let go of antiquated orthodoxies and to explore new approaches that provide important access to what really matters for learning and effective contribution to clients and communities.

Students are facing a dynamic and demanding world in which they must navigate a dramatically greater rate of change than ever before, including unprecedented challenges in health, social justice, and environmental sustainability. To provide students with a contemporary education that is responsive to these challenges, we yearn for a new model. If all we amount to are brokers of information, students have every right to replace us with the devices they can pull from their pockets. To forge a new paradigm of what it is to be human, we must begin with engaging students in deep questions about what it is for them to be human. By facilitating their ontological development, we will have met the essential demand for what higher education can and should be.

Ω

Billy Strean is Professor Emeritus and 3M National Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta. He has an academic background in philosophy, education, and sport and exercise psychology and is a Master Somatic Coach (Strozzi Institute), Registered Yoga Teacher-500, and Certified Professional Co-active Coach. Dr. Strean brought his eclectic background to developing courses on critical thinking, play, and the communication course, which is the focus of this chapter. Billy lives on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada.

Works Cited

- Bloch, R. (2013, July 22). "What you do speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying." Retrieved from <https://medium.com/golden-eggs/what-you-do-speaks-so-loudly-i-cannot-hear-what-you-are-saying-92fbfdf52472>.
- Hyde, B. & Kopp, D. (2019). *Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger and a new possibility of being human*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.
- Johnson, D. (1983). *Body*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kimsey-House, H., Kimsey-House, K., Sandahl, P., & Whitworth, W. (2018). *Co-Active coaching: The proven framework for transformative conversations at work and in life*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

- Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent messages*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Strean, W. B., & Mills, J. P. (2012). "The body and performance." In S. Murphy (Ed.) *Oxford handbook of sport and performance psychology*. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731763.013.0031
- Strean W. B., & Strozzi-Heckler, R. (2009). "(The) Body (of) Knowledge: Somatic contributions to sport psychology." *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. 21.1: 91–98.
- Strozzi-Heckler, R. (2003). *Being human at work: Bringing somatic intelligence into your professional life*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Strozzi-Heckler, R. (2007). *The leadership dojo: Build your foundation as an exemplary leader*. Berkeley, CA: Frog Books.