

2004

Native Virtues: Traditional Sioux Philosophy and the Contemporary Basic Communication Course

Daniel P. Modaff
Ohio University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Modaff, Daniel P. (2004) "Native Virtues: Traditional Sioux Philosophy and the Contemporary Basic Communication Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 16 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol16/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Native Virtues: Traditional Sioux Philosophy and the Contemporary Basic Communication Course

Daniel P. Modaff

“When you see a new trail, or a footprint you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing.”

Uncheedah, the grandmother of Ohiyesa
(Nerburn, 1993)

As a basic course instructor I have often struggled with the routine nature of the course. While I am completely committed to its mission, theoretical scope, and performance opportunities, I have found it difficult at times to break frame and rethink how I approach the material, the students, and what we are doing together. The standardization of texts, written assignments, performances, and examinations, while necessary for consistency across sections, has contributed to a personal sense of pedagogical stagnation that, at times, has limited my engagement with the material and my students. I know from conversations with colleagues across the country that I am not alone in this feeling. We express to each other our angst, and try to remind ourselves just how special this course is and how deserving our students are of an experience that has the potential to be transformative. The basic communication course provides the opportunity for students and instructors alike to practice new skills, challenge assumptions, and de-

Volume 16, 2004

velop meaningful relationships, but sometimes as instructors we need to be mentally reinvigorated as the routine begins to invade our optimism.

How, though, do we create a space for this renewal? Many of us are overwhelmed with the demands of the academic life—teaching, research, and service—not to mention family, friends, and recreation. Finding time and energy during the academic year to alter our practices or make major shifts in our philosophy can be difficult if not impossible. Dedicating oneself to a major switch in philosophy and practice can require significant time and energy. The challenges of such a transformation, while beneficial, can be overwhelming.

Reinvigoration, however, does not mean that we must engage in wholesale changes of philosophy or practice. Sometimes examining our current approach through the language and principles of a different context is exactly what we need to spur our imagination and creativity. For example, I am currently engaged in a line of research regarding how traditional Sioux organizing practices may inform contemporary organizational communication philosophy. One area that has fascinated me is the virtues of the Sioux. As the traditional Sioux attempted to manage the challenges of their daily lives, they drew strength from four virtues that every member of the tribe aspired to achieve: bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom. As I read more about these virtues I started to make connections to the classroom, and found myself searching for ways to incorporate them into my teaching, evaluation, and relationships with students. They became something for which to strive and a common lexicon for my students and I to use as we discussed our day-to-day interactions in the

classroom. I soon found myself and my students reinvigorated as we worked together to uphold our version of the four virtues. As a nervous student would get up to give a speech it was not uncommon to hear another say “be brave,” or when others would do something kind their peers would thank them for their generosity. While my teaching practices did not undergo any major changes, how I thought about the course material and the relationships with the students was transformed.

In this article I discuss the four virtues of the Sioux, and make connections to instruction in the basic communication course. My intention is to offer a set of ideas that may equip the reader with an alternative way to think about course material, pedagogical practices, and classroom interrelationships. This is not to be confused with a fully articulated teaching philosophy that affords unique or particular classroom practices. My research efforts and pedagogical experimentation have not yet led me to that level of development. Instead, the following pages will raise as many questions about what we currently do as they provide suggestions for new or innovative practices. I begin with a brief discussion of the social structure of the Sioux, which is followed by an articulation of the four virtues and their connection to the basic course. The essay concludes with the limitations of and concerns with using these virtues to inform our pedagogical practices.

Before I provide a brief overview of the social structure of the traditional Sioux, I need to qualify two points. First, I am not a member of the Sioux tribe, nor do I teach in an institution that has many (if any) Sioux students. My understanding of these issues is based on my current line of research (as I noted earlier), which is

itself still in the formative stages. I am by no means an authority on Sioux life, but I am an eager student ready to apply what I have learned to my areas of interest. Second, the following discussion is offered in the spirit of discovery and good faith, and is not intended to reduce thousands of years of Sioux culture(s) to a few basic elements and their applications in the classroom. Researching the virtues has provided me with a fresh mindset with which to approach teaching, and my hope is that the reader finds similar rewards. The side-effect of this is that the remaining pages will not read like a how-to manual for translating the virtues into a list of teaching practices. Instead, I offer suggestions where possible, but do not want to limit the opportunities for the reader to discover connections for him/herself.

While a complete description of Siouan social structure and practices is not warranted here, a very brief sketch may provide a useful context for understanding the four virtues (for in-depth discussions of traditional Sioux culture see Deloria, 1998; Gibbon, 2003; Hassrick, 1964; Walker, 1982). Prior to the coming of the Europeans to North America, the Sioux occupied large portions of present day Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as the Northern Plains (what is today South Dakota and portions of North Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming). The Sioux can be distinguished as Lakota, Nakota, or Dakota; all are Sioux, but the different terms refer to dialect differences and distinct geographical location.

The social structure that allowed the Sioux to live communally in harmony with one another and nature was the kinship system (Hassrick, 1964). The kinship system, complex and multifaceted, connected each member in a “great relationship that was theoretically

all-inclusive and co-extensive” (Deloria, 1998, p. 24), thus making relevant the phrase *mitakuye oyasin* (translated “we are all related” or “all my relatives”). To treat others as relatives (versus mere acquaintances) was to be kind, generous, courteous, and unselfish to them all. Since “relatives” implied a group of people much larger than direct blood relations, the Sioux were constantly focused on maintaining these relations.

Developing and maintaining kinship relations and the consequential aspects of Sioux culture was a matter of oral communication; the Sioux did not rely on written materials to document their history or educate their young. Social lessons and historical activities were passed on through stories from the elders, which “very directly enabled an entire culture to survive because they carried the culture within them” (Marshall, 2001, p. xiii). Tales and allegories, as they were told and re-told, instructed the young and reminded the old of appropriate practices, behaviors, beliefs, and perhaps most importantly of the four virtues of bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom. These four virtues were the bedrock of Sioux culture, and the behaviors connected to them made it possible for the kinship system to function effectively and efficiently.

As we begin to examine our practices and relationships in the classroom in light of the four virtues, two overarching points regarding the nature of education emerge. First, the process and product of education can be (re)conceived to emphasize a concern for the community. Education, from this perspective, is not only intended as a means of self-improvement, but as a way to strengthen the community as it faces the challenges of its environment. Community, in this case, refers to both

the classroom community and the broader communities with which the members are affiliated. Palmer (1998), in *The Courage to Teach*, talked of teaching as creating “a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (p. 90). Palmer wants us to conceive of community not as creating intimacy (as in a therapeutic model of community), but instead in terms of public mutuality, which embraces the sharing of resources, space, conflicts, problems, and ideas. The Sioux enacted community in much the same way as Palmer outlined it for instruction. Community, for the Sioux, was developed as a means to confront the challenges of and embrace the gifts from their environment. Survival was predicated on cooperation, sharing of information and natural resources, and respect and concern for the welfare of others in the community.

Second, knowledge is an *active* process. The Sioux recognized that the behaviors and actions that facilitated the production and maintenance of community were not imbued at birth; they had to be learned. That learning was a matter of constant and consistent repetition of messages (e.g., stories, tales, allegories, directives) until the culturally preferred actions became a normal part of the individual’s mental processes. As indicated in the opening quote from Uncheedah--“When you see a new trail, or a footprint you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing”—education is a process of discovery that involves personal energy, dedication, and a commitment to learning. Both teacher and student must be willing to take risks in the pursuit of knowledge, which brings us to the first virtue—bravery.

BRAVERY (WOOHITIKE)

The Lakota word for bravery, *woohitike*, means “having or showing courage” (Marshall, 2001, p. 141). For the traditional Sioux, bravery certainly applied during battle, but the virtue was not limited to warriors or times of physical confrontation. Marshall (2001) argued that bravery needs to be taken in context; there are many times during life’s circumstances where bravery is necessary. “Bravery is a requisite virtue because life demands it...Any challenge is also an invitation, a standing invitation” (Marshall, 2001, p. 155). Charles Eastman (a native born Sioux) posited that bravery, as practiced by the Sioux in everyday life, referred to the degree of risk involved with a particular activity, and with risk came honor (as cited in Nerburn, 1993).

Bravery, while relevant to most every instructional situation, is particularly important to the basic communication course given the heavy performance component coupled with the well-documented fear of public speaking that many students have. One typical approach used by many basic course instructors to help students confront their fear is to let them know that they are not alone—that the majority of Americans fear public speaking as well. From my experience, this tactic has never been particularly successful. Despite my best attempts to follow this statistic with evidence that instruction and practice will help reduce their fear, few students believe me. They have already left on a mental trip saying to themselves “if that many people are afraid of public speaking, there must be a good reason for it!” However, fostering the virtue of bravery seems to have a

more significant and long-lasting effect. Students can see the performance assignments as opportunities to exhibit bravery rather than situations to “just get through.” This cognitive switch from fear to bravery is not automatic; the instructor must help facilitate the process by explicating and modeling bravery.

I have found that describing bravery as a concept is fairly simple to do, but modeling it is a bit more difficult. In my experience, students tend to be riveted by stories of traditional Native American life, and are eager to hear how the virtue of bravery was embodied. I have described the virtue to them much as I have in the first paragraph of this section, and then followed the description with short depictions of bravery, such as in the movie *Dances with Wolves*. I then ask students to talk about bravery of all types that they have experienced in their lives. Students seem to appreciate the connection between the Sioux embodiment of the virtue and how they have lived it. Modeling bravery, however, is more complicated because by definition it involves personal risk. I have attempted to model bravery for my students in several ways. For example, if I am trying a particular assignment, lecture, or exercise for the first time about which I am unsure of how it will go, I will tell them this and let them know that I am going forward with it, despite the possibility of failure, because of the value associated with the risk. Another example of modeling bravery is doing an impromptu speech with them. I pick a topic from the hat just as they do, so that they can see that I am willing to take the same risks that I am asking them to take. While these are relatively simple examples, they do make the point to the students that bravery is relevant to them in the basic course.

Regarding our own need for bravery as instructors, Palmer (1998) argued that we must confront and understand our fears as teachers. Far too often we are consumed and paralyzed by the fear of not being liked, popular, or funny, and the result is a diminished self-concept and a decreased level of effectiveness. We need to be brave enough to try new or different instructional techniques, exercises, or assignments in the classroom without fear of failure. The honor, and the reward, is in the risk.

Assuming that our students are not interested in being intellectually challenged and hence unwilling to take risks will certainly lead them to feel that way, and will definitely compel us to teach in ways that reinforce their passivity (Palmer, 1998). However, if we model bravery in our approach to the basic communication course, our students will be more likely to reciprocate. It is bravery that will provide them with the courage to give their first public speech, to critique their own performance and the performances of their peers rigorously, and to follow that unknown trail to the point of knowing. Bravery will compel them, and us, to do what is in the best interest of learning and the community.

I would like to end this section with an extended quotation from Marshall, as he discussed how we can teach and learn bravery:

If you don't think you know how to be brave, look around; you'll find someone who does know. Follow him or her. If you follow long enough, you'll learn to have courage, or the courage within you will rise to the top. When that happens, turn around, and don't be surprised if someone is following you. (2001, p. 158)

GENEROSITY (CONTEYUKE)

The Lakota word for generosity, *conteyuke*, means “to give, to share, to have a heart” (Marshall, 2001, p.180). For the Sioux, possession of excess material goods was only useful to the extent that they could be shared with the community. It was believed that “the love of possessions [was] a weakness to be overcome” (Eastman, as cited in Nerburn, 1993, p. 28). This sensibility is best captured through a paraphrase of an ancient sentiment: “The Earth Mother gives us all that she has. We must do the same” (Marshall, 2001, p. 190). The Earth Mother served as the ultimate role model for the Sioux, giving everything she had for the sake of her people.

The Sioux would enact this virtue in many ways in everyday life, but perhaps none more noteworthy than the giveaway. Giveaways were done as a way of honoring someone in the family (e.g., a loved one who had recently passed away). The members of the sponsoring family would quite literally give everything away that they owned—*tipi*, horses, utensils, and even the clothes on their backs. All of this was done to honor the individual. There was no greater way to honor someone than to be generous to the community.

So what does generosity look like in the basic communication course? As instructors we should consider what we have to give—time, knowledge, kindness, compassion, patience—and give as much as we can. This generosity of mental and physical resources should be bestowed not out of contractual obligation, but out of desire to strengthen the community. Generosity should not be determined by the minimum requirements of a

promotion and tenure document, or in comparison to the generosity of our colleagues around campus. Our level of generosity with our time and talents will be directly proportional to the ability of our individual students to learn, grow, and be generous in return. The literature on instructor immediacy and supportive communication in the classroom would seem to support this claim (see for example, McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2002; Teven, 2001).

I think it is safe to say that most instructors already understand and embody the virtue of generosity to some extent. This profession and the communication discipline in particular tend to draw people with this sensibility. Basic course instructors in particular can demonstrate generosity in a variety of ways including: providing several draft opportunities for written and performance-oriented work, holding individual meetings with students in which audio/video recordings of their performances are reviewed in-depth, and volunteering their time and energy to train members of the university or local community on effective communication skills.

Students, however, may not be as prepared to execute this virtue in the classroom, not because they are unwilling or unable, but because they might not have been challenged to do so. We need to make this virtue explicit instead of hoping that generosity will occur automatically, and we need to show the breadth of what generosity means in the classroom. For example, we can show that giving a public speech can be a generous act if appropriate care is taken in preparation and delivery. What greater an opportunity to be generous to the community than to research a topic of interest and

importance to the class, develop a suitable structure, work fastidiously in rehearsal, and present to everyone an insightful speech designed specifically to improve their lives. Additionally, we can encourage audience members to give thoughtful and meaningful critiques of their peers' performances so that they might improve their skills for the future. Generosity, for instructor and student, demands that we all think in terms of "us" instead of "me."

FORTITUDE (CANTEWASAKE)

With fortitude we begin to see the conceptual and practical overlap among the virtues. Cantewasake, the Lakota word for fortitude, means "strength of heart and mind" (Marshall, 2001, p. 159). Fortitude, while akin to bravery, refers more to internal strength than to external acts of courage. Marshall referred to fortitude among the Sioux as "quiet strength" that comes with flexibility (2001, p. 173). To demonstrate the relationship between flexibility and fortitude, Marshall tells the story of walking with his grandfather near a river bottom when a great wind arose. A sandbar willow tree bent in the mighty wind but did not break, while a tall oak, rigid and strong, snapped in several places. Fortitude, as the story teaches us, does not come from physical strength, but from flexibility and the ability to remain mentally strong in the face of adversity.

Perhaps in no other class is fortitude as relevant for both instructor and student as in the basic communication course. Because our ability to communicate is so intimately tied to our sense of self, critiquing it and

having it critiqued by others tests our internal strength. For instructors this means two things. First, call on your fortitude to help you provide the necessary and often times difficult critiques that your students need of their communication performances. Without fortitude, we may be less rigorous in our evaluations, opting instead to spare our students' sense of confidence and our own angst. Remember, however, that a lack of rigor does not serve the community. Developing members with excellent communication skills serves the greater purpose of community development. Second, do not forget, though, that your students' fortitude may not be as developed as yours. Fortitude, as with wisdom, comes with experience and surviving the tests that life gives us. As you provide your students with critiques, do so in a way that recognizes that their internal strength is still developing.

WISDOM (WOKSAPE)

Due to its intangible nature, wisdom was considered the most difficult of the four virtues to attain for the traditional Sioux (Hassrick, 1964). The Lakota word for wisdom, woksape, means "to understand what is right and true, to use knowledge wisely" (Marshall, 2001, p. 196). For the Sioux, having wisdom meant understanding not only what to say and do, but what not to say and do (Marshall, 2001). With that understanding of wisdom, we can see the close connection this virtue has with communication. Hassrick extended this connection when he stated that "Wisdom meant, in part, getting on

well with people, and as a leader, inspiring others” (1964, p. 39).

While wisdom was often attributed to the Sioux elders, it was not reserved only for them. A person with extensive experience who was able to demonstrate an understanding of the proper use of knowledge could be considered wise. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about wisdom, however, was that those who possessed it were valued for their ability to help the community make informed decisions.

There are many applications of the virtue of wisdom to the basic course, most of which are obvious, but let me discuss two of the less obvious. First, the Sioux understanding of wisdom demonstrated their belief in the connection between speech and thought that Dance (2002) suggested we reinstate in our courses. The Sioux understood that wisdom was a cognitive as well as a behavioral phenomenon; thought and speech could not be separated. The lesson for the basic communication course, then, is to continue the momentum toward integrating critical thinking with our performance activities. Perhaps the Sioux — an oral tradition society — could see that connection more easily because of the primacy of communication in their lives.

Second, the virtue of wisdom implies that the one who is wise is worthy of our attention. I believe that this legitimates our attention to developing competent public speakers through individual-based performance assignments, as well as the oft derided pedagogical practice of lecture as a useful pedagogical tool. Granted, public speeches and lectures can be done poorly, but finely crafted, relevant presentations can allow the community to benefit from the wisdom of the presenter.

This does not mean, however, that the presenter is granted full license to ignore the thoughts and ideas of his/her audience. In fact, it means quite the opposite. Wisdom is gained through exposure to ideas and differences, which can only be garnered if all members of the community are considered to have voices worthy of being heard, and they are allowed and encouraged to participate actively in the teaching and learning process.

We certainly have no shortage of viable philosophies of teaching for the basic communication course, so this essay is not intended as an argument against or an alternative to them, but as a friendly addition. Feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, learning communities, and other philosophies are all valuable standpoints from which to operate in the basic course. I offered the four virtues of the traditional Sioux as another way of informing relationships and instruction in the basic course. Some may even find these virtues as particularly relevant to their existing philosophy.

As with any perspective on teaching, certain limitations and concerns accompany the ideas I have forwarded here. To conclude this essay, I would like to discuss three of these issues. First, adoption of the Sioux virtues as I have described here should not be confused with infusing the basic course with the cultural assumptions and values of the tribe. One consequence of forwarding the ideas I have in this essay is the belief that their adoption means the adoption of an alternative form of pedagogy. While the current discussion celebrates the virtues of the Sioux, it falls well short of advocating a Sioux-based pedagogy. This form of pedagogy would look dramatically different, especially with regard to our instruction on appropriate communication

patterns, forms of proof, structure of argument, types of assignments, and classroom relationships. For example, given the importance of storytelling in Sioux culture, issues of time constraints, outlining, and adequate support would have to be changed dramatically, as would the value placed on consistent eye contact and appropriate vocal variation.

Second, emphasizing the virtues focuses attention on the relationship between the individual and the community as it is related to education. Attending to bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom in the classroom shifts the process and product of education from self-improvement to self-improvement for the greater good of the community. While this cognitive shift has obvious altruistic benefits, it is called into question by American ideals of individualism and consumerism (see McMillan & Cheney, 1996 for a discussion of the consumerism metaphor). Education in our society has long been promoted as a means of improving one's own lot in life, and the recent shift to thinking of the student-as-consumer has reinforced this idea. Students who have been raised to think of education in this way will more than likely have a difficult time thinking of their education any differently. I have noticed that students are intrigued by the virtues, try to abide by them as best as possible, but find it difficult to commit to them completely because the notion of individual labor for the promotion of the community is foreign to them. It is difficult for the instructor as well, given the time, energy, and dedication to individual and community development demanded by this orientation.

Finally, misappropriation of the virtue of wisdom may lead to a pedagogy that unjustly privileges the

voice of the instructor, while devaluing the voice of the student. Honoring the virtue of wisdom means that experience and history are valued, and those possessing wisdom should be given the appropriate license to share it. As noted earlier, I believe that this legitimates both the practice of lecture and our focus on developing competent public speakers. Abuse of this concept, however, would lead to a classroom governed solely by the instructor, for the good of the instructor, which is antithetical to the cultural context from which this notion was borrowed. It is important to remember that traditional Sioux society was not a dictatorship; open discussions were commonplace, and many voices were valued. Therefore, as Palmer (1998) has encouraged us to remember, we must engage in multiple forms of instruction to honor the contributions of our students. The virtue of wisdom celebrates individual voice, but does not privilege it over community well-being.

REFERENCES

- Dance, F.E.X. (2002). Speech and thought: A renewal. *Communication Education*, 51, 355-359.
- Deloria, E. (1998). *Speaking of Indians*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gibbon, G. (2003). *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hassrick, R.B. (1964). *The Sioux*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

- Marshall III, J.M. (2001). *The Lakota way: Stories and lessons for living*. NY: Viking Press.
- McCroskey, L.L., Richmond, V.P., & McCroskey, J.C. (2002). The scholarship of teaching and learning: Contributions from the discipline of Communication. *Communication Education*, 51, 383-391.
- McMillan, J.J., & Cheney, G. (1996). The student as consumer: The implications and limitations of a metaphor. *Communication Education*, 45, 1-13.
- Nerburn, K. (Ed.) (1993). *The soul of an Indian: And other writings from Ohiyesa (Charles Alexander Eastman)*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Palmer, P.J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Teven, J.J. (2001). The relationships among teacher characteristics and perceived caring. *Communication Education*, 50, 159-169.
- Walker, J.R. (1982). *Lakota belief and ritual*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.