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Jo Sprague
San Jose State University

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Special Forum on the Philosophy of Teaching: A Synthesis and Response

Jo Sprague

The ways that an individual professor, a department, or a campus talks about the basic communication course can be arrayed along a broad spectrum of attitudes. At one end of a continuum are those who look at the course with a blend of intellectual contempt and embarrassment (Burgoon, 1989) or who believe that an assignment to teach such a course counts as penance or banishment. For many or most of our colleagues the characterizations fall in a more positive central zone, construing the course as a rich source of student enrollment or a fertile recruiting ground for majors. The authors of these papers fall far at the other end of the continuum. In different but related ways, each essay celebrates our experience as basic course instructors as a special opportunity, laden with theoretical, social, political and ethical implications. In response to the editor's call to address issues of philosophy of teaching these authors did not ascend to the highest levels of conceptual abstraction or delve into the painstaking splitting of verbal and conceptual hairs. Instead, and fortunately I think, each presented a passionate statement about an original and provocative way to approach the course. What qualifies these papers as "philosophical" is not so much that they talk about ends rather than means, since much of the fine work in this *Annual*

and at Basic Course conferences addresses course objectives as well as teaching strategies. Rather, they look a bit more deeply at the goals behind the objectives. Put differently, they draw our attention to the second and third levels of the question “why?” We engage in certain activities to achieve a particular objective such as developing a valid causal argument. But why do we want our students to master that objective? To become better critical thinkers, perhaps. But why do we want them to become better critical thinkers? Moving in this direction draws us into more explicit discussions of how the particular choices we make about textbooks, assignments, evaluation, classroom climate, and teacher student relationships bundle together into a larger stance toward what we are about. When our decision-making is imbued with a deep awareness of larger purpose and long-range goals, there is a coherence to our instruction. Students sense when a professor is on a mission, not just delivering instruction but, well, professing. They know that the class they are taking is called basic not because it is trivial but because it is profoundly important.

Because I have had the opportunity to read these essays many times, I hope to help the appreciative first time reader think about them collectively, comparatively and productively. Specifically, my response addresses these questions: What are they all saying? What differentiates each article's approach? How can we use these insights to enhance the basic course? What don't they say? What sort of practical questions and research agendas do they illuminate?

WHAT ARE THEY ALL SAYING?

Starting from a position that the basic communication course is highly consequential to students and society, all the essays make problematic the notion of communicative competence as the acquisition of knowledge and skills. They speak of deeper transformative changes in students' attitudes, values, and even identities. They would agree with Hart's statement (1993) "teachers make people." Along with this they all write about educational practice in its broader sense, seeing the teacher as a model, not a dispenser of information, the learners as active co-creators of knowledge, not recipients, and the curriculum as layered and partially hidden, not a just a list of topics to be covered. Inherent in these positions is an attention to the existential dimensions of instruction. A key theme of each paper is the risk that both teachers and students must take for real educational change to occur. Moreover Modaff explicitly and all the authors implicitly note the other set of risks that come from allowing oneself to go on autopilot and teach in ways that are comfortable and familiar. In light of persistent pressures to dumb down our classes or to foreground students' short term sense of "feeling good" above all other outcomes, it is heartening to read four quite different accounts of how classes can be challenging, demanding, and rigorous while still engaging students. It is a risk in itself for teachers to push students to be courageous, to introduce material that may be unfamiliar or discomfoting, to care enough about students to give honest critiques of their work.

HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

In exploring these common themes, the authors differed along several dimensions. I was interested in the general locus of concern in each essay. Modaff centers his attention in the individual. The four virtues he explains, though originating within a culture and confirmed in interpersonal encounters, are talked about primarily as they pertain to individuals. Speaking of virtues casts an interesting light on individual qualities. A virtue is more than a value, since it clearly implies a pattern of action not just a belief about goodness or evil. Yet virtues are not enduring and immutable traits. A virtue is a blend of valuing a way of being, choosing to adopt that way of being and then acting in ways that over time come to define the individual. There is a clear implication that virtues are acquired, presumably taught. I like the notion of educational experiences that call out to a student's higher self and name the qualities that can be developed by incremental choices and a series of actions. In a culture that too often valorizes self over community, the material over the spiritual, the quick and easy over the hard earned, students need to hear their professors speak unabashedly of virtues like bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom. The community of learners is important in Modaff's analysis in that relatedness gives rise to all the Sioux virtues. Pedagogically, though, he emphasizes individual learning; fellow learners are addressed primarily as a sort of supportive cohort group who shares a quest trust.

Rawlins, too, shows courage in his exploration of the controversial terrain of friendship in education. His fo-

cus seems less on the student as an individual and more on relationships. Implicitly, he constructs the classroom environment as a set of dyadic friendships between the instructor and each student. Many of his points about dialogue, praxis and political space reveal a connection between his ideas and the collectivity of the classroom, but the essence of his discussion relates to the teacher student relationship. Like Modaff, he is to be commended for his willingness to talk seriously about the intangible and important factors that make education so powerful. I have a special affinity for scholarship that frames topics as tensions or dialectics because this way of talking captures the complex and contingent nature of communication as it unfolds from moment to moment.

LaWare chooses as her unit of analysis the entire classroom group, exposing the potential it has to prepare students for public life. The well documented "withering of the public sphere" is perhaps the greatest challenge to democratic institutions, made more daunting by all the emerging forms of pseudo public life that disguise the severity of this problem. I heartily endorse her ambitious project. When colleagues from professional programs want to make efficient use of student credit hours by turning the basic course into a series of "communication for engineers, communication for nurses, communication for managers, " my apoplectic reaction is not because of the enrollment that could be lost to communication departments, but because I believe that the context specific communication demands of various professions can as well be studied later or even after college. Where, but in a basic course that is drawn from a cross section of a university will engineers have a chance to practice talking to nurses and violin-

ists to accountants about the social and political issues we must all work through together in our civic life? What is intriguing, maybe troubling, about LaWare's analysis is that she seems to frame the issues almost exclusively in terms of individual student empowerment. She lays out nicely her position that a public space exists and that some voices have more access to it or more power in it than others. Her goal, then, is to help each individual student maximize his or her ability to move into that sphere. It is assumed that students, especially those from marginalized groups, will find entry into the public sphere intimidating, perhaps assaultive to their identities, and therefore the role of the educational system is to provide safe, free, open environments in which they can practice. One key way to help them experience their own potential for power in this public space is to de-emphasize the power differential between themselves and the dominant authority figures. A teacher who voluntarily gives up some power or gracefully shares power makes a space for students to explore their own power.

This makes perfect sense as far as it goes. Certainly feminist pedagogy has been making this point for decades, long enough to have unmasked the paradoxical messages teachers often send when they attempt to give up power (Lather, 1991). The deprivileging of assigned leaders, whether in the T group tradition or feminist consciousness raising groups has tremendous impact in getting learners to think differently. I am less convinced that it is the key to social and political transformation. Specifically, students could feel greatly empowered in a privatized learning environment such as a distance education class where they can work at their own pace, set

priorities for learning and even create a kind of public space in cyber space. Such an environment may help the individual student but it does not contribute to solving the broader political problem of a citizenry that is unprepared to communicate in public life. Darling (1991) has advanced a critique of the way many introductory texts and basic courses define public, unproblematically, as "not private." Students learn the norms of public communication so that they will be credible and effective. She argues that the Deweyan notion of education for the public sphere requires more than *entering the public*, and involves knowing how *make a public* where one did not exist. The latter necessitates a radical redefinition of the kinds of assignments, readings, and evaluation procedures one would find in a basic course (Darling & Scott, 1993).

In this same vein, Edwards and Shepherds direct their attention to the collective group as the site of learning. The pragmatic educational metaphysic they advocate is deeply congruent with contemporary communication theory. Perhaps in the current decade retrieving the philosophical use of word pragmatic is unfortunate, grating against the popular use of the term that is too often used to justify communicating for short-term utility. Dewey's pragmatism is close to Habermas' practical interest of discourse. In contrast to the technical interest that helps a group or individual sustain control over others, practical discourse is directed toward a level of understanding that can craft consensus within a community. Edwards and Shepherd are maintaining that our basic courses can serve such an interest "where individuals of diverse demographics and backgrounds have the too rare opportunity of coming together to form

conjoint experiences.” Individual students do not just learn private lessons in a shared time and place; the very nature of their learning depends on their practice of coordinated making of meaning.

LaWare’s and Edwards’ and Shepherds’ positions on public life are not necessarily inconsistent but differ in emphasis and may relate to students at different developmental levels. LaWare’s seems suited for students who feel excluded from public life or lack confidence to participate. Edwards and Shepard address those students who are squarely in the public arena, but who don’t know what it means to participate in associated living, how to refer one’s own action to that of others. I find the second task more difficult to address. I think we know more about how to make a class welcoming and safe than about how to get students steeped in individualized and psychologized worldviews to move into the difficult realm of genuine social being. As I will argue later, the Edwards and Shepherd essay pushes hardest against the grain of current practice.

HOW CAN WE USE THESE?

Acknowledging the important resonances among these four pieces and some intriguing differences, I wonder how they, taken together, can be incorporated into how we approach the basic course. I offer three possibilities, in ascending order of challenge to us as instructors. (Later I will propose a fourth way of reading these that goes beyond what is said into what they invite us to consider next.)

1. *Thinking about these philosophical themes identifies additional educational values our course can provide.* If the basic communication course is designed primarily to help students master certain basic knowledge and skills, and if there are several possible effective ways to achieve those ends, why not choose an approach (even if it is challenging to students and professor) that will also enhance students' civic attitudes and personal virtues? This is the most modest reading of the pieces and a sufficient contribution in itself. Each author takes some pains to say that their recommendations can be used within existing course contexts. Given the bureaucratic enmeshment of our course on many campuses, radical change may be unrealistic. If some of the spirit of these articles invigorates a course to the extent that a reader tries out one new assignment or one different way of talking about its impact on personal growth and political life, then instruction has been enriched.

2. *Thinking about these philosophical themes identifies educational practices that will make teaching and learning more effective.* Though there are many ways to teach a basic course effectively, the approaches described here are more likely to engage students in deep ways and provide a meaningful context for use of the knowledge and skills they acquire. This reading also preserves the essential content of existing courses, but asks instructors to make their classes more dialogic, more socially relevant, more connected to personal growth. It also challenges instructors to bring more of themselves into the class by being willing to relinquish their role as the primary source of knowledge, becoming more vulnerable, entering into more authentic relationships with students, and sharing power with them. Still,

these changes are seen as means of enhancing instruction in current classes, not as radical revision of curriculum.

3. *Thinking about philosophical themes forces us to confront inconsistencies we may be perpetuating.* If an instructor of the basic communication course took seriously many of the ideas offered in these essays, it might lead to reconsidering both how and what we teach. This way of reading the essays is the most intellectually taxing and inconvenient but potentially quite exciting. First, the many discussions of modeling and risk taking require us to look closely at whether how we teach reinforces what we teach. If we really believe that communication is contingent, emergent, embodied, socially constructed, habitual and politically charged, it becomes hard to justify transmissive teaching, prescriptive formulations, or generic evaluation rubrics for example. Less obvious and more significantly, these authors are all challenging the relationship between theory and practice that we inadvertently perpetuate. In this journal, Spano (1996) argued that this false dichotomy is particularly insidious in our basic course and advances “practical communication theory” as a way to reunite abstract propositional forms of knowledge with a firm grounding in the concrete world of lived, contextualized, embodied experience. This move is not just important for teaching and for practice but for the integrity of theory. Our basic course becomes the crucible in which our idealized theories are tested, refined and elaborated (Leff, 1994). Particularly when our students are more culturally diverse, technologically savvy, and more in touch with many aspects of contemporary life than our theory builders, authentic classroom conversations can

push back against the scholarly inclination toward elegant, totalizing but incomplete representations.

Any and all of these ways of reading the articles hold great value for basic course instructors. I would go so far as to recommend that groups of colleagues who now meet to discuss problems and strategies try meeting in a sort of book club format to discuss a particular short reading with philosophical implications. They might start with these essays, revisit the exchange between Spano and Hickson (1996), and proceed to reading others from these reference lists, starting with Dewey.

WHAT DON'T THEY SAY?

When Scott Titsworth invited me to comment on these essays, he suggested that perhaps I would like to measure them against the criteria I set forth over a decade ago (Sprague, 1993) for a discipline specific pedagogy. I approached them with that notion in mind and was pleased that authors outside the usual pedagogical fold were represented, happy to note reference lists containing such favorites as Arendt, Bakhtin, Dewey, hooks, Freire, and Palmer, delighted to read such well written and thoughtful work embracing the complexity of our task. However, I concluded that though these articles are featured in a venue that is not only discipline specific but course specific, they strike me as more representative of communication education's sister sub-discipline of instructional communication. About eighty percent of the recommendations could apply as well to classes in Women's Studies, psychology, sociology, or political science. At least half of the advice can be easily

translated even to courses in science or math. Along with others, I have argued (most recently, Sprague 2002) that despite some obvious connections, the two main branches of pedagogical work in our field are distinct. Because they address different goals for different audiences, the credibility and utility of each is best served by being clear about the distinction. When I compare these essays to the bulk of the dominant literature in instructional communication I find them less simplistic, more consistent with the communication literature, more peer-oriented, and more ideologically palatable to me personally. Still, none moves much toward a discipline specific pedagogy. Maybe philosophical work, because it deals with “big issues” is intrinsically more generalizable. It is probably not fair to be critical of these authors for offering us ideas that are valuable across too many contexts. But, I cannot conclude without renewing a call to bring our best theorizing to bear on the very concrete contexts of each area of our curriculum exploring the particular questions about teaching and learning in communication that only we can frame and answer. Thus, I invite these authors and the strong community of basic course directors and teachers who read this journal to think about the implications of these essays in a fourth way.

4. Thinking about these philosophical themes helps us set important goals for our course and apply our scholarship to discovering how best to meet those goals. That is, must we be limited to seeing civic participation, virtue, and friendship as supplemental to our courses or as enabling to our instruction? Despite the different philosophical trapping, is that really so much different than exhorting teachers to be immediate and use affin-

ity-seeking techniques? What would it mean if the key ideas of each manuscript were taken as important content in communication education? How can we actually teach students to engage in public life? What works? How do we help students master the dialogic techniques that are part of the pragmatic educational metaphysic? How are the virtues of the Sioux and the characteristics of friendship enacted communicatively? When we say a person is courageous or strikes a workable balance between affection and instrumentality presumably we base this on something the person has said or done, not on some impression or self reported trait. So, are these--arguably communicative--behaviors teachable? If so, how might we go about actively fostering them? And how will we know if we have succeeded? To maintain the momentum of the intriguing themes of these essays, I am advocating that we not settle for applying them in ways that are peripheral to the basic course. Instead, they suggest ideas for core instructional units and invite a host of concrete research projects, using a range of methodologies and approaches. The underlying message of this special forum is that by engaging philosophical issues in close concert with the practical issues of the basic course, we all benefit: faculty members who need intellectual recharging, Teaching Assistants who are forming habits of mind that they will carry forth into their professorial careers, and most important, our students who deserve our best collective thinking if they are function effectively in their civic and personal lives.

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